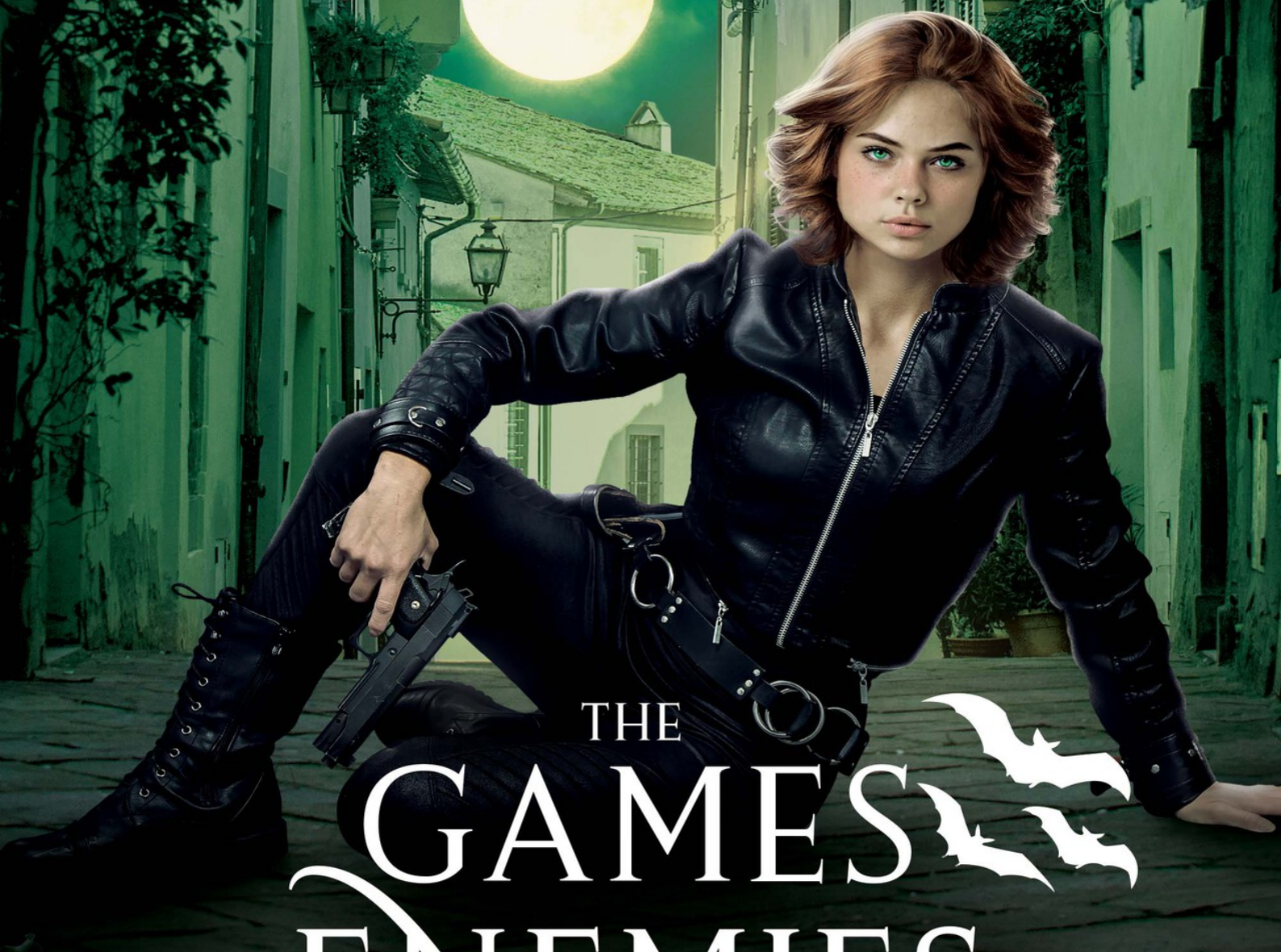



MAGIC ON MAIN STREET BOOK TWO



THE  
GAMES   
OF ENEMIES AND  
ALLIES

MAGIFORD SUPERNATURAL CITY

K.M. SHEA

# **THE GAMES OF ENEMIES AND ALLIES**

MAGIC ON MAIN STREET BOOK 2

**K. M. SHEA**

## THE GAMES OF ENEMIES AND ALLIES

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## CHAPTER

## ONE

*Jad  
e*

“**B**y the scenery in this café, am I to assume you have aspirations to become what the humans refer to as a *cat lady* in your dotage?” Connor’s rich voice floated over the top of a bookcase.

I looked up from the cat I was petting—a beautiful, pristine white feline who was stretched out on a plush bed arranged in a nook of the second to lowest shelf on the bookcase—and stood up. “I like the cats, but don’t forget we’re here for *you*. You said you had to have a blood pack, and this was the nearest location that sold them. You got one?”

Connor was so tall even his shoulders were visible over the bookshelves, so he kept eye contact with me—his vampire-red eyes were hypnotic in the low light of the café/bookstore that was Cat Tails—as he strolled around it. When he was on my side of the case, he held up the snack-sized pouch of blood he’d purchased. “Consider me satiated.”

Instead of using the straw that was stuck to the blood pouch, Connor pierced the package with a fang tooth. Then he folded the pouch over to the spot he’d pierced and sucked it out with more finesse than was fair considering that I would have spilled my drink everywhere if I’d tried something similar.

“Did you want anything?” Connor looked back at the small counter.

“Nah, I still have my smoothie.” I held up the travel mug that contained today’s green sludge-like smoothie. The flavor was peach-carrot. (I was not the best cook. Or any kind of cook. But I had mastered the art of making smoothies for survival.)

Connor made a gagging noise. “That dreck hardly counts as edible.”

I took another swig—it was a little gritty since my blender had failed to pulverize all the shredded carrots. “It doesn’t taste so bad. I added honey today, so I can’t even taste the spinach.”

“Oh yeah, that’s really selling it.” Connor managed to look ridiculously handsome even while scoffing—a vampire trait. Being good looking, I mean, not scoffing. “Do you want anything that is actually *pleasant* to consume?”

I glanced at the chalkboard menu, considering the offer.

Cat Tails only sold the basics—coffee, lots of tea for fae, and water, with a few bakery items, salads, and sandwiches. The food was good, and it was the closest supernatural-focused eating place to the Curia Cloisters, so it was popular with wizards—and more recently, fae.

It was more bookstore than café, but I still loved it for the papery smell of new books, the maze-like arrangement of stuffed bookshelves and cat towers/beds, the dramatic gold and green striped wallpaper, and—admittedly—the cats.

“I’m good,” I said. “I’m going to wait here. I got a text while you were ordering. Sunshine—a friend from work—is going to stop by and walk with me to the Cloisters for work.”

Connor placed a hand over his heart and staggered backwards in dramatized shock. “*You* actually have work friends?”

I nodded. “Miracles do happen. Sunshine has the patience of a saint. She was willing to listen as I stammered my way through our first few conversations together until I got to

know her. It's tough work for both parties, but I can make friends."

"I was aware of that." Connor sucked down the last of the blood in his snack pack, then crumpled the packaging in one hand. "You have *me* after all. In all possible ways."

I cocked my head and squinted, trying to make sense of him. "I assume that's your vampire need for mystery that's making you talk oddly?"

"It's true," Connor said. "As time passes, we vampires don't age. Instead, we grow insipid or raving mad." He slipped a hand into the pocket of his navy-blue trench coat.

With his black dress pants and white undershirt, his perpetual five-o'clock shadow, and his olive-toned skin, he looked more like somebody who would get scouted by a street photographer than a vampire.

Vampires usually favored fashion from past eras, spanning everything from petticoat breeches à la Europe in the 1600s to the wide-legged pants and the red colored handkerchief of historic gauchos in Argentina. (You could tell a lot about a vamp based on the kind of clothes they favored, which was why I'd spent multiple years learning historical fashion from my family as part of my slayer training.)

It was Connor's clothing choices and his relatively modern way of speaking that marked him as a newer vampire—which was surprising, considering he lived in my human-owned apartment building, and young vampires were rarely allowed outside their Families since it was so hard to turn humans and create new vampires these days.

"It's not nice to criticize your elders," I said. "Do you want to stick around and meet her or do you have to head out?"

Connor's dark hair was so luxurious it seemed to shine under the bookstore's fluorescent lighting. "As much as it pains me to admit it, I should be going. There are boring people to meet and greet, when I wish they'd just skip off. Have fun at work." He chuckled, amused at some private joke I didn't get—he'd been doing that a lot lately, which did make



me wonder if the typical vampire bewilderment of social niceties was starting to set in.

I gave the white cat one last appreciative pet, her white fur silky soft on my fingertips, then followed Connor as he made his way through the maze of bookshelves heading toward the front of the store.

“Have a good night,” I said. “I hope you enjoyed the boardwalk?”

“Every moment.” Connor’s smile was extra big as he tossed his empty blood pack into a garbage can.

Earlier in the afternoon I’d dragged Connor onto the wooden walkway that cradled a good portion of the two lakes that squashed against Main Street.

As he was a vampire, it had been asking quite a bit of him since that meant we were out and about while the sun shone—the sun drastically weakened vampires, which was why they were nocturnal creatures.

“Goodbye, Snack.” Another smirk and Connor leaned in, briefly wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

My slayer senses sounded the alarm that a vampire was so close but Connor was my friend, so I brushed the concern off. Besides, by the time I raised a hand to pat his back, Connor was already slipping away sauntering out the door and disappearing into the cool, gusty afternoon.

*Yeah, he definitely still has the vampire propensity for dramatics.*

I took another swig of my smoothie, finishing it off, then wandered toward one of the high-top tables to wait for Sunshine.

When I sat down at the table, easing into the tall, wooden seat, I picked up the day-old newspaper a previous customer had left behind.

It was the Magiford daily newspaper—which was human run and focused, though they occasionally published articles about supernatural events that affected the city.

I'd never been interviewed—something that pleased me to no end because I'd probably choke and die on my own spit under the pressure. But Sarge, the leader of my squad, had been interviewed for an article the newspaper had written about Orrin, the fae who was responsible for releasing a number of fae creatures on Goldstein Street—a business district that mostly housed human office buildings and banks with the biggest supernatural business being Tutu's Crypta & Custodia.

The newspaper's front-page spread was mostly about the progress of the construction of the new clocktower that had broken ground in late summer. It looked like they were going to finish earlier than estimated—whoever was funding the project had to be *pouring* money into it at the pace they were going.

I was about to flip to a new page, when I spotted an article at the bottom of the paper about the damage from the thunderstorm we'd had two days ago. The headline boasted: *Wizards Aid in Storm Damage Control*.

I frowned—I'd heard nothing at work about supernaturals helping during the windstorm. I hadn't thought the storm was bad enough to do more than strip some leaves off trees—and rotated my grasp on the paper so I could read the article.

It detailed the damage—all of it had been centered on one human neighborhood, apparently the rest of the city hadn't been nearly as bad—before going into the wizard part of the story.

*—storm hit six trees in the neighborhood and started a fire before six wizards from the venerated wizard House Tellier arrived on the scene and used their elemental powers to quell the lightning and growing flames.*

Venerated? “House Tellier is anything but venerated,” I grumbled.

House Tellier had been involved in a big scandal about two years ago when it tried to meddle in the succession of another wizard House.

Since the rightful heir of the House had regained control, the Telliers were socially shunned and had gotten smacked on the wrist by the Cloisters for their actions. (Since I wasn't a wizard I didn't typically keep up on wizard politics, but I did try to keep aware of all incidences over the past couple years that the Cloisters had gotten involved in as the information could be useful to know for the sake of future cases.)

I studied the color printed picture, which showed wizards wearing jackets designed with the House Tellier colors of orange and yellow. "And I thought they didn't like humans..."

Maybe they were changing to crawl back into the Cloister's good graces? Connor and I had attended the Supernatural Fall Festival in September, and the Telliers had sponsored a fireworks show for the event so it seemed possible.

*But why, then, aren't they doing all these things in front of Supernaturals? Unless they think the humans will be an easier target?*

"My precious jewel of Jade—hello!"

Sunshine—a willowy limbed brownie with brown hair, brown eyes, and brown skin—burst into Cat Tails. She was wearing a white coat and a coral-colored sweater that brought out the warm tones of her hair and skin and had to scoot around the bookcases to see me since, being a brownie—a kind of fae—she was under four feet tall.

"Hi, Sunshine." I slipped off the chair and bent over to hug her. "Did you have a good day off?"

"Off? Hah! My family spent the entire day cleaning out our garden from all the dead plants except the pumpkins and gourds, and then scrubbed the floors until they shone like a mirror. Chores, ugh." She made a face, crinkling the tip of her button nose, then leaned back on her heels and rotated so she looked out at the bookshelves. "Do we have a minute? I need to grab a new sudoku or crossword puzzle book."

"Yeah, for sure. My shift doesn't start for almost an hour." I started to follow Sunshine but my phone buzzed. I checked it

to see a text from my oldest brother, Jasper.

JASPER

Heads up, Dad knows you used the slayer database.

I grimaced—I'd expected that he'd noticed, but a part of me had hoped I'd lucked out. I slapped on a smile for Sunshine's sake. "Why don't you go ahead and pick out whatever book you want—I gotta answer this text."

"I'm on it!" She winked at me, then disappeared behind a shelf.

I took a deep breath to clear my mind and tapped out a quick reply to Jasper.

Is he mad?

I held my breath as I waited.

I was on shaky ground with my family. It wasn't that my parents were angry that I wasn't working as a slayer—my mom's entire family were slayers, too, but they were semi-retired and now owned a very successful construction company.

No, they were upset that I'd moved away from the family—something unfathomable to them—and that I was still working in a combat-based position, without them.

My parents and I didn't fight. It was more like our conversations were heated and my dad was—in general—loud and growly.

My phone beeped as Jasper's reply came in.

JASPER

No, but he's wondering why you had to look up elder vampires.

All the air I'd been holding in leaked out, and I slumped with relief.

He hadn't noticed my perusal of the file we slayers had on one particular vampire, good!

I'd used the database to pinpoint the identity of Ruin, the mysterious vampire that had claimed downtown Magiford as his territory in early September. I knew Ruin was old, but it wasn't until I saw him *turn into a bat* that I'd realized he must have been turned in the BC timeline.

Turns out, Ruin was most likely Considine Maledictus—one of the oldest and most powerful vampires still alive, and one we slayers had labeled as someone to be avoided at all costs.

If Dad realized Considine Maledictus was in Magiford, he would bust out one of the family's more expensive methods of transport usually reserved for work, pack me up, and drag me back home no matter what I wanted.

Thankfully, it seemed like I was safe. For now.

I looked up from my phone tilting my head as I instinctively tried to pinpoint Sunshine's movements through the store—a cat's happy meow of greeting tattled on her: she was in the heart of the maze.

Sunshine secured; I peered down at my cellphone again mulling over all possible responses I could give before constructing a reply. Jasper wouldn't tattle to Dad if I told him about Ruin, however, I couldn't risk him figuring out that Ruin was Considine or he'd be the one driving out to get me.

I was trying to remember the sire of a vampire Family, and we have better records than the Cloisters.

JASPER

Naturally. The Cloisters couldn't find a vampire in a blood bank.

I rolled my eyes but let the insult at my employer go—my family would always be convinced the Cloisters were less efficient and skilled than vampire slayers—and put my phone away.

Sunshine paid for her new puzzle book—a collection of crossword puzzles—then marched through the store, clutching it to her chest. “Everything okay?”

“Yep! It was just my brother checking in on me,” I said.

I hadn’t told Sunshine or anyone at work about Considine. Yet. I’d have to tell Sarge or Captain Reese eventually, only I wasn’t sure how to spill the news.

“Aww, that’s sweet,” Sunshine said. “I got my crossword book, so I’m ready to head to the Cloisters!”

“Okay—are you sure you don’t want to hang out here for a bit? I still have time. I mean, I appreciate that we can hang out for even this little bit. I don’t want to drag you to work on your day off.”

Sunshine flashed me a smile that was as warm and bright as her name. “You’re too sweet—I’m the one that should be apologizing. I’d be able to hang out at better times if my family wasn’t always so busy. But! I was planning to stop by the front desk tonight anyway. Emi texted me to let me know she was going to leave the bread loaf pan I lent her at the front desk. Oh—I almost forgot! She said she also found another Cloister manual she’d leave for you. She thought it might be useful for your paper.”

Ahh yes, my paper.

I’d upset Sarge the previous week when I’d lured a giant snake to Ruin’s territory by myself, leading it away from my injured squadmates but risking my life in the process. Now that I knew Ruin’s identity, I’d be upset with me, too.

As a result of the mess, Sarge had given me an assignment to write a paper about the culture and design of the Magical Response Task Force. He told me it would make me understand why my slayer training that dictated self-sacrifice for the sake of the mission and the good of the team was not



the standard within the Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement.

“Great. I’ll have to thank her.” I rattled my empty smoothie thermos. “I need every resource I can get. All these employee handbooks and manuals Emi keeps finding are lifesaving.”

Sunshine’s smile dimmed, and she suspiciously peered up at me. “You *are* working on your paper then?”

“Yes.”

“Are you beginning to understand why your boss was so upset with you?” There was a hint of steel in Sunshine’s voice that made me flinch.

The night I’d lured the snake downtown, Sunshine had warned me that she thought something dangerous was coming and that she wanted me to be safe.

She had not been...*happy* when she met up with me after learning what I’d done.

“I don’t understand yet,” I confessed. “But I’m trying. The paper has been harder to write than I expected.”

Sunshine made a noise in the back of her throat. “The task force’s expectations are practically the opposite of your slayer training, so I imagine it will take time for you to pick it apart and understand. I guess I should just be thankful you’re so diligent that you’re genuinely trying to research and learn for the sake of your paper instead of writing a fluff piece. But I’m *still* upset with you, Jade, for breaking your word.”

*Ooh, it is not good that she’s using my actual name instead of my nickname.*

“Understood.” I bumped the door open, my senses sharpening with the cool breeze that was sweeping through the city filling the air with the musty smell of dead leaves and fresh air.

Sunshine eyed me, but her stance relaxed when she wrapped her knit scarf around her neck. “Brrr. I regret not

buying a hot drink. Think the werewolves will finally swap to the task force's winter uniform with sleeves?"

"Not unless Captain Reese makes them," I said.

Sunshine laughed and I put on a smile as we strolled down the sidewalk. But there was a part of me that still worried—about my family, about the case of Orrin and the monsters, and especially about Considine Maledictus and his decision to sniff around Magiford.

## CHAPTER

## TWO

*Consider  
e*

I roamed down a luxuriously furnished hallway mulling over the unfortunate circumstances that had brought me here, to Drake Hall.

I didn't encounter a single vampire on my prowl—which was unusual. Usually, the place was crawling with vampires—Killian Drake was the Midwest Eminence, marking him as the leader of all the vampires in the region, so he was hilariously popular.

But since I'd arrived in Magiford for my "vacation" in early September, I'd seen far less of his Drake Family vampires than I'd expected.

*He must be missing at least a third of his forces—what?*

I paused, turned, and stared at a framed photograph that hung from the wall.

The priceless vases, antique busts, and gold filigree wallpaper hadn't caught my attention, but this cheap, mass-produced, black frame stuck out *because* of its cheapness and the color photo encased within it.

It was a poorly taken photograph of a crowd of people—a number of them Drake vampires given that they were all wearing well fitted suits. It looked like the other half were

wizards based on their coats and the smudgy crests emblazoned over their coat pockets.

Standing at the center of the photo was—I suspected but couldn't know for sure due to the poor quality of the photo—Killian and a short blonde haired human woman wearing a wedding dress.

*Is this his wizard, then? His One that he's been desperately hiding from me since I arrived?*

Given our long lives, love was a fleeting thing for vampires. Relationships—particularly ones in which you were supposed to be affectionate—took work and effort to maintain and opened you up to a plethora of weaknesses. When the bleak possibility of centuries upon centuries stretched out in front of you, it was often easier to just fall into something easy like bitterness or hatred.

A vampire's One, however, was the person they declared as the being they'd love for the rest of their days. Even after the One died and months, years, and eventually centuries passed.

It wasn't something stated easily, and often vampires died when their "One" did.

Killian, the most competent and sly of the Dracos children, would have been the last vampire I'd expect to make such an insane decision. But here we were.

I leaned closer to the photograph trying to make out the blonde's pixelated face. She was short but her smile was big and full of all the hope only humans—wizards included—were oblivious enough to have.

"Considine." Killian called from farther down the hallway.

I wasn't surprised by the sudden appearance—he seemed to have a sixth sense whenever I stumbled upon anything to do with his One.

I straightened up, tucked my hands into the pockets of the suitcoat I'd swapped to after leaving Jade at that odd book shop, then smiled—something I knew Killian would find annoying.

“Killian, you finally greet me. How delightful.”

Killian scowled as he stalked up to me. “You slipped past my guards and didn’t announce your presence.”

“I was testing them for you,” I said, filling my voice with false humility. “I know you train them so, and that you’re obsessed with making them into warriors. I thought I’d made it through unnoticed, but it seems one of them must have caught on?”

“My First and Second Knight saw you on a camera,” Killian said.

I sighed. “Alas, I’m losing my touch. It’s the old age that eventually gets you.”

“You say that, except you *waved* to the camera.” Killian’s frown grew deeper and a touch sour, as if my presence was putting him out.

*Boo-hoo for him.*

Killian continued, “My siblings have gathered in a sitting room.” He looked down the hallway, his disgust still in place, which probably meant I wasn’t the only one responsible for his dour mood. “Are you ready to face them?”

“I didn’t think I could avoid it any longer,” I said. “Who came?” I started my stroll again, and Killian waited to fall in line with me—keeping his pace as slow as mine.

“Margarida, the twins, and Baldwin.”

“*Baldwin?*” I asked. “What is he doing here? I bankrupted him and cleared out all his personal funds less than five years ago. He shouldn’t have two coins to rub together.”

Maybe I really was losing my touch.

“The twins brought him,” Killian said. “In their private jet.”

I groaned. “Of course, they did.”

“You haven’t visited the twins in a while. Maybe they’re about due.” Killian stopped outside a wooden door.

“Nice try. You won’t be getting rid of me that easily.” I eyed the door. “This is it?”

“It is.”

I adjusted the gold ring ornamented with a red garnet that I wore on my index finger. The ring had belonged to Ambrose Dracos, Killian’s long dead sire. “Right, then. Let’s get this over with.”

Killian opened the door and stepped inside first, prowling like a jaguar. I took my time, swaggering because I knew that would annoy the snake-brats.

“Hello, children!” I smiled wide. “Uncle Maledictus is here! And I’m-oh-so-touched you all came here to see me.”

Margarida—the youngest female of the Dracos line—stood up from where she was perched on an embroidered armchair.

Today, she was wearing the traditional clothing of her home country of Portugal with a thick bright red skirt adorned with thin stripes, a white chemise with blue embroidery serving as a blouse, and a red and black bodice that had even more embroidery.

Her dark Brunette hair was pulled back and partially covered by her red headscarf, and the bright ensemble matched her big smile—Margarida was also the best tempered of the snake-brats, which was why she was possibly my second favorite after the competent Killian.

I still had to drag her out of the occasional slump—she insisted on getting attached to humans and then went into a depressive spiral whenever any of her favorites died—but in general she was good humored and needed far less...*help* than the rest of her siblings. Killian excluded, of course.

“Sire!” Margarida declared.

Killian exploded into a coughing fit that sounded too close to amusement for my taste. Behind Margarida, seated together on a fainting couch, the twins—Auberi and Amée—scoffed.



“Margarida, you overstep,” Amée said, her voice as severe as her hairline. “Considine is *not* our Sire.”

Margarida rolled her eyes and stopped approaching me long enough to look back at her siblings. “Please. I’ve known Considine for twice the years I knew Ambrose Dracos, and he’s been the guardian of our little Family for so many years now that you can’t deny he’s due credit for the role.”

“Guardian, or torturer?” Auberi muttered into his chalice of blood.

Margarida had taken another few steps closer to me, but she scowled back at her older brother.

“I’m afraid I agree,” I said. “It’s a sweet sentiment, Margarida, but my blood curdles at the thought of being related to such a Family.”

Killian suspiciously coughed again—probably to cover laughter—while Margarida looked crestfallen.

Amée merely looked icy—as was her custom—while her biological twin tried to adopt a similar expression but failed and looked afraid.

Amée and Auberi mirrored each other, each possessing radiant blonde hair and an extra paleness that I personally thought made them more closely resemble sickly Victorian children addled with arsenic poisoning than vampires.

Amée had her hair pulled back in a bun so tight it looked painful, and she was—*shockingly*—wearing a modern, navy-blue pantsuit and heels. Auberi was also in a navy-blue suit, which he had probably been forced into by Amée as she didn’t want Killian’s Drake Family to look down on them.

(For all their incompetence, all the snake-brats except for Margarida had something of a complex over Killian’s vastly superior minions in comparison to their own. Margarida was spared from this as she mostly cuddled her underlings and didn’t want anything more than for them to be ‘*happy*’. I said she wasn’t trouble. I never said she was apt.)

“Considine? A father-figure? Hah!” This came from somewhere behind the twins’ fainting couch where Baldwin

was hiding, lying down on a couch so plush it engulfed him.

I scooped up Margarida's right hand so I could pat it—if I didn't show *some* sign of affection she'd try to hug me—then sauntered up to the twins' chosen settee so I could look over it and see Baldwin-the-broke.

He was dressed in Rococo fashion with breeches and white stockings, and an undecorated black jacket that was left open to display a lavish waistcoat. He'd even gone so far as to bring a white wig with tight curls, but it looked distinctly flat and sad from where he'd tossed it on an ottoman.

His real hair—a boring mix of blonde and brunette that matched his beige personality—was plastered to his forehead, and he wore his accustomed dour look that inspired me to make a mental note to call his Second later tonight and inquire just how much was in his bank account, so I would know the precise amount to drain.

“Hello, Baldwin. I must say I'm shocked to see you here—living off Auberi's and Amée's generosity, are you?”

Baldwin cranked his body into a sitting position, his scowl deepening. “I wouldn't have to if it weren't for you!”

“Please.” I made a show of getting out my cellphone and looking at the screen. “Your incompetence is hardly my fault.”

Baldwin stood up, his red eyes blazing. “You drained all of my accounts—investments and savings and lost it *gambling!*”

“Well, you should have had more in savings and then I wouldn't have needed to drain it all for my wager.” That would have been enough to get Baldwin, but I couldn't help acidly adding in the truth of the situation—something the Dracos children excelled at ignoring. “Or maybe you should have been more self-aware. Your Drache Family's gambling habit—which you refused to address between your naps—was eventually going to put you in bankruptcy. I just hastened the effect.”

Baldwin sputtered, breaking off into shouts of old German that I couldn't quite remember—I'd learned a great many

languages over the centuries, but I never used any of the old ones so they'd slipped through the cracks of my memory.

I watched Baldwin turn red in the face with interest for a few moments until I realized he was just going to growl and postulate.

*It's unfortunate I promised Ambrose I'd watch his wretched family.*

Ambrose—who had been my friend and brethren for millennium—had caught me in a moment of weak affection for him when he'd dragged the promise from me.

Now, having experienced this thankless task for centuries, if I had the chance to do it again, I'd tell my old friend to survive the death of his One and watch his offspring himself.

If I didn't have to be responsible for this wretched Family, I could be amusing myself more with Jade, my naïve neighbor, who was a slayer and hilariously unaware that I—one of the oldest vampires still conscious—lived next door to her.

Or even better. If I hadn't been forced into the guardianship of a bunch of snot-nosed vampire brats, I'd be sleeping just like every other world-weary vampire.

*But no. Instead, I'm stuck here. With them as my punishment.*

Baldwin started walking in a circle, gesturing emphatically. I pivoted so I faced Killian. "It looks like Baldwin is about to lose it like a mad werewolf. Surely he'll ruin something in this room. Why don't you call one of your underlings to knock him out and put us out of his misery?"

Killian raised an imperious eyebrow at me. "I am *not* taking responsibility for Baldwin."

"Why not?" I asked. "You've been relentlessly sending out your Drake vampires to look for me, when—as far as you know—I'm piously living in peace. Baldwin is annoying even when he's merely breathing."

Margarida scurried past me stretching her arms out and setting them on Baldwin's shoulders. "Peace, Baldwin. Elder

Maledictus is just concerned for you.”

I frowned. “What mistake did I make to lead you to that conclusion?”

Margarida ignored me and instead set about straightening Baldwin’s jacket for him when he quieted under her attention. “We need to focus. Don’t you remember why we’re here?”

Baldwin took a deep breath, then nodded.

“Ah, yes. That is the crux of the matter,” I said. “Why *are* you here?”

Margarida made a sweeping turn that flared her skirts out, then looked at me with red eyes that glittered with worry. “For you, of course.”

“Yes, I guessed as much,” I said. “But why?”

“We’re concerned, of course.” Margarida said.

I stared at her, dumbstruck.

*I can’t have heard that correctly.*

“You,” I said haltingly. “Are concerned for me?”

Margarida nodded.

I shook my head, unable to comprehend what I was hearing. “You lot,” I repeated. “And by you I mean Broke Baldwin, Professional Mourner Margarida, and the ice twins allergic to all fun and happiness, who I have so far pretended not to know are sleeping more and more these days, but allow me to assure you that pretense is evaporating as we speak—are concerned for *me*?”

Margarida’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. “Yes,” she said.

I turned to look at Killian.

He held his hands up. “As usual, I am not with them, just an unfortunate bystander as you’ve chosen my city to hole up in.”

*Well. At least that’s something.*

“Margarida is concerned for you.” Amée stood, tugging on her suitcoat, then turned to me. “She thinks you might be lonely, or something equally as stupid.”

“Because he must be—besides us he has no Family,” Margarida objected. She tried to hug me but centuries of experience had me sidestepping her before she could reach me.

*Perhaps I was mistaken. Margarida isn't almost my second favorite Dracos offspring,*

“Then share, Amée,” I drawled. “What has brought you here? Illuminate me.”

Amée turned to Auberi, staring at him until he hastily stood and joined her so they were shoulder to shoulder. Amée then nodded and turned to me. “Concern for ourselves, that you are planning something.”

“Uh-huh.” I looked back and forth between the twins as I strolled closer to them. “And what if I am? Do you really think *you* can stop me?” I settled my gaze on Auberi first, then Amée as I let a little of my power loose.

Auberi swallowed sharply, his Adam's apple bobbing, and Amée looked away.

I patted them on the cheeks, purposely making the motion gentle and light so it gave them goosebumps. “Stop wasting your time.” I ducked around them heading for the door. “Instead, I suggest you head home—before you annoy Killian and he forcibly expels you from his mansion.” I made it to the door and reached for the door handle.

“No.”

I slowly turned around to see Baldwin scowling at me, his shoulders hunched up, while Margarida patted his side in a show of comradery.

“What?” I asked, my voice low and dangerous.

Baldwin wilted, but he balled his hands into fists. “No,” he said. “We will be staying here.”

He must have been dimly aware that the statement not only challenged me but Killian, because he glanced at his younger brother.

Killian was unbothered—he'd tuned out a while ago and was texting someone with his cellphone. Without looking up from the screen, he waved a hand in the air signaling his indifference.

Baldwin stiffly nodded then returned my gaze, his mulish expression back.

I rolled my eyes. "Do whatever you want," I said. "Just remember your responsibility to your own Family, who you chose to take on. The Dracos *do not* abandon their offspring."

*Unlike their foolish, idealist, and disappointing Sire.*

I yanked the door open and swept out of the room, irritation settling on me like an old cloak.

*It doesn't matter,* I thought as I prowled the hallways of Drake Hall—I needed to get far out of the range of the manor's cameras before I used my powers to transform into a bat. There was no sense tipping my hand to Killian in how I'd been evading his Family's notice. *The Dracos offspring are annoying, but they'll just sit around and mewl as they always have. Eventually, Killian will boot them out, and they'll go home returning to their typical selfish ways.*

In the end, it was always up to me to pick up after them and shake them awake whenever needed. It was a task I grew weary of, but it was unfortunately one I wouldn't ever be able to escape.

*Sometimes, I despise you, Ambrose.*



# CHAPTER

# THREE

*Jad*  
*e*

“**W**e don’t mean you any harm, but you seem uncomfortable.” I tried to make my voice soothing but I sounded as warm as cardboard. “Can we escort you to a part of the city that you would enjoy more?”

The two werewolves I was addressing whined and licked their chops.

The larger one was almost all black with a brush of red and gray worked into his undercoat. The smaller one was wider through the chest, and her coat was white swirled with gray.

She glanced at the building next to us—a human club that blasted music so loudly I could feel it thrum in my feet.

Meanwhile the male werewolf sneezed and looked beyond me, where my teammates—Tetiana and Grove—were holding back a crowd of humans.

The crowd—filled with people who I expected were at least slightly intoxicated—was loud, and even I could smell the perfumes and body sprays they’d liberally dosed themselves with, which was probably making the werewolves sick to their stomachs with their sensitive olfactory systems.

“Magiford is holding a local festival this weekend called *Octoberfest*,” I said. “So even though it’s only Thursday,

there's more humans out than usual," I tried to explain to the over stimulated wolves.

*They aren't going to hurt anyone, but if they bolt, the humans will freak. I need to keep everyone calm.*

Crowd control wasn't usually my responsibility when my slayer family stalked a target, but I knew the basics.

Behind me, a human shrilly laughed and the flash of several dozen cellphone cameras illuminated the area making the werewolves' pupils shrink.

I slowly held my hands up and did my best to keep my breathing deep and even, and my heartbeat regular.

*This would work better if I took off my mask so they could see my face, but I don't think I can do that without scaring them.*

I was wearing the traditional slayer mask, which hid my identity and hooked into the special hood I'd added onto my task force uniform.

Slayers weren't very popular among vampires. I'd been wearing the mask since joining the Magical Response Task Force to hide my true identity so that I didn't need to worry about my apartment getting staked out by vengeful vampires.

The wolves, however, didn't fear me like a vampire naturally would but they were big into body language, so not seeing my face likely bothered them.

The almost entirely black werewolf yawned hugely, whining slightly in the process—which I was pretty sure meant he was stressed.

The smaller white and gray werewolf cautiously sniffed the air, the angle of her ears uncertain.

*I never thought that summer I spent with a werewolf Pack would be so helpful.*

My parents had sent me there, in exchange for agreeing to cover my expenses while I went to school and went through an apprenticeship to be an electrician.

I'd been taught about werewolves and shifters as a kid—the demand for slayer work in hunting and killing vampires had shrunk over the last century, so most slayer families had expanded to do work against the occasional werewolf, shifter, or even wizard.

But living with werewolves had given me personal experience, which was a help now since I frequently dealt with them as a member of the Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement.

The female werewolf tucked her tail and curved her rear, which was not a good sign.

“Hey-o, Blood. How are our friends looking?” Grove popped out from behind me to peer at the werewolves.

It was too much for the pair, who took off running, disappearing down an alleyway that reeked of trash.

*Well, at least that will keep the humans from following them.*

We'd intercepted the humans, who had backed the pair against a wall and were taking photos of them.

Without humans trailing them, they'd probably be fine but I still wanted to follow them and check.

One of the things I liked best about my position is that we didn't just exist to fight, but to protect—it had been what attracted me to the position.

“Oh, off they go,” Tetiana said, raising her hand just in time to block a young woman who was attempting to record the werewolves and ruining the shot. “At least that's settled! Away with you, humans. Go back to your partying.”

The crowd dispersed, most of them stomping into the loud club.

Tetiana shooed off a trio who were peering down the alleyway with interest. “Shoo!” Her Ukrainian accent thickened as she planted her fists on her hips. “Leave the poor beasts be and get on with your night.”

I waited until the trio disappeared into the club before I announced, “I want to follow after the werewolves.”

Tetiana checked the braid her glossy hair was pulled back into. “You think they’re upset enough to do something stupid?”

“No.” I started down the alleyway at a brisk walk, stepping over a fallen trashcan. “I’m just worried they might accidentally wander into something worse than curious humans when they’re already stressed out.”

Normally, I wasn’t quite so verbose with my teammates—I had social anxiety, which was partially why it was so hard for me to make friends. But my work ethic would run down even my worst bouts of anxiety, so I had no problem talking about our job. It was only when I tried to be friendly that I got tongue-tied.

“Huh. I didn’t know werewolves were that sensitive, but okay.” Grove started after me and patted his leather satchel—which was supposed to be filled with healing potions, but he had a thing for poisons so it was anyone’s guess what he actually carried.

Tetiana pinched her nose shut with her thumb and forefinger as she followed after.

I popped out of the end of the alleyway first, looking up and down the street to get my bearings. “There.” I pointed as the white and gray wolf disappeared around the corner of a street. “They’re heading south.”

Grove saluted me. “Lead on, Ma’am!”

“Should we run?” Tetiana asked as she walked side by side with Grove, both of them staying behind me.

“No,” I said. “That will scare them. We should be loud and sound friendly—so they know we’re following them but aren’t angry.”

Werewolves didn’t lose their humanity when they took on their wolf form, but they couldn’t talk back to us, so I wasn’t sure I was making the best choices to help them.

*Maybe I should call on the radio for Brody...*

Brody was a member of our squad and was a werewolf from one of the local Packs that lived on the outskirts of Magiford.

Behind me, Tetiana and Grove gossiped unconcerned by the situation.

“You’re in a good mood,” Tetiana observed.

“That’s because my new book came in at Book Nookery,” Grove said, naming the twenty-four-hour bookstore that catered to supernaturals and humans alike.

“Let me guess,” Tetiana said. “It’s about—”

“Poisons!” Grove announced in a sing-song voice.

“Of course,” Tetiana sighed.

Grove kicked a loose rock as we crossed the street. “What has you all tense tonight?”

*Tetiana is tense?* I hadn’t noticed—maybe this was why my teammates didn’t involve me in a lot of conversations. I didn’t notice important emotional subtexts.

I caught sight of the werewolf pair.

They were still heading south—and occasionally looked back at us—but their pace was slowing down.

*Well. At least I know some body language cues.*

“It’s nothing,” Tetiana said. “Things are tense among the vampire community. Several very old and respected Elders recently arrived in Magiford.”

*Really?* I would have turned around and asked for more information but as Tetiana was a vampire, if I asked anything about the Elders I’d probably spook her.

I still hadn’t said a word to anyone about Considine Maledictus, but maybe I should if other powerful vampires were gathering in the area.

“Are they stirring up trouble?” Grove asked. “Or is it just annoying to have more fuss-budgets skulking around the

city?”

“No one knows what has brought them to Magiford,” Tetiana said. “But it seems like the Eminence is handling them,” she said, referring to the vampire in charge of all the vampires in the Midwest, Killian Drake.

*I hope my family doesn't get wind of this.*

Silence fell, and we continued to trek after the werewolves, who were leading us out of the downtown area—which was best for them—and more into the financial district of the city, where a bunch of human offices and banks were located along with one very famous supernatural business, Tutu's Crypta & Custodia.

*Now is the perfect chance to try a casual conversation. Tetiana and Grove are both friendly; they're very receptive.*

I tried to screw up my courage as I kept my eyes on the werewolves, who were slowing down to a pace that meant we'd catch up with them in a block or two.

*But what do I talk about? They're not going to want to hear about all my failed baking attempts. Should I go with work? That's a safe topic we're all familiar with. But what about work can we actually talk about?*

“Have either of you finished your investigation report about Orrin and the monsters?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“Yes, Ma'am!” Grove said, plenty loud, but his voice was a little stiff—kind of like the way he talked to our squad leader, Sarge. “I gave a recorded testimony, too!”

“As have I,” Tetiana said, her voice respectful.

Both responses were pleasant enough, but they still made my shoulders hunch.

*They don't see me as a friend. I don't think they even see me as a comrade. They treat me like an official.*

They weren't unfriendly, but there was some kind of layer between us. Sunshine called it respect, and maybe it was, but it was an awfully lonely place to be when everyone was considerate but wouldn't socially engage with me.



*Sunshine claims it's because they're impressed by my abilities and training as a vampire slayer. Does that mean they don't see me as a civilian?*

I'd always considered my life normal. In hindsight, it probably *wasn't* normal to grow up with emergency practices at 4 AM where we had to practice climbing in and out of the house with a rope, but as a kid I'd assumed everyone did that.

We were almost on the werewolves, so I shoved my social anxieties aside—I'd consider them when I wasn't on the clock—and cleared my throat. “Hello, again,” I greeted the werewolves, who had stopped on the lawn—which was dry and crunchy as the weather was changing—of a human bank. “We just wanted to check on you and make sure you felt comfortable.”

Tetiana squinted in the light of the flickering streetlight positioned over us. “Why wouldn't they feel comfortable?”

“Downtown—the smells, the humans—all those lights,” I reminded her.

Tetiana stared at me, still puzzled.

“That's a lot of stimulation for a werewolf's sensitive senses,” I said.

“Ooh,” Tetiana snapped her fingers and nodded. “I forgot about that!”

“We work with a werewolf,” Grove said. “How can you forget about that?”

“Brody is too good tempered,” Tetiana said. “He doesn't complain half as much as most whiny werewolves. No offense,” Tetiana waved to the werewolves, who were cocking their heads at us. “I mean, if I smelled human BO any stronger than I do already, I'd probably complain a lot, too.”

I turned away from my coworkers and held my hands out in front of me—again showing that I was unarmed. “The humans didn't follow us, so you should be left alone in this part of town. Downtown will be busy for quite a few more hours. Do you need us to call anyone for you?”

If the wolves had anything to say back it would take them a minute to change forms, so the trick was to ask them yes or no questions.

The werewolves looked at each other for a moment, then simultaneously shook their heads.

“Is there any other way we can help you?” I asked.

The wolves shook their heads again.

I shifted my weight as I tried to get a read on their body language. “But you both are feeling comfortable again?”

The female wolf wagged her tail back and forth, then approached me to rest her giant head on my outstretched hands.

I took the invitation and rubbed behind her ears—which made her wag her tail some more—before she backed up.

The male wolf gave me a friendly “*Awoo!*” before he started down the street, his friend hurrying after him.

“Aww,” Grove said. “That was downright adorable. Makes you want to snuggle with them, right?”

“Not particularly,” Tetiana said. “I don’t like to cuddle things with teeth like theirs. But they are charmingly cute when they wish to be.”

Grove pirouetted swinging his arms at his side. “When we get back to the Cloisters tonight, we should ask Binx to change into her cougar form. Her fur is so soft!”

Tetiana trailed after him, pointing us back to downtown where we were due to patrol for another hour. “Perhaps, but if you say that to her face she’ll claw you.”

I moved to follow after them, but did a quick scan of the area, pausing when I caught sight of someone standing across the street next to the brick building with quaint red trim that was Tutu’s Crypta & Custodia.

I had pretty decent night vision as a vampire slayer—one of the perks—so when the person turned around I recognized

the long purple hair that marked Gisila, a dragon shifter who was temporarily visiting Magiford.

“Hold up,” I called to my squadmates in a hushed voice.

“Hmm?” Tetiana turned back to me. She followed my gaze and instantly lost her casual air. “Grove.”

Grove had his radio out in a second. “This is Team Blood calling in from Goldstein Street. We’ve got some company down here that we’re going to check out. If my eyes don’t deceive me I believe it’s Lady Gisila.” His voice was loud—loud enough that Gisila would hear him across the street and know we’d reported her presence to our department.

I’d like to say we were always this on it with investigations, but Orrin—the fae I’d been asking Tetiana and Grove about—had been a plague on the squad for most of September, releasing various monsters on Goldstein Street.

The department was fairly certain he’d been targeting Tutu’s since it was the only supernatural building on the street, and I personally suspected he’d been working under the direction of his boss—Gisila—but I didn’t have any proof.

I looked both ways before crossing the empty street—while downtown was busy, all the businesses here had been closed for hours. “Good evening, Ma’am.”

Gisila smiled, flashing a bright smile that felt just a touch aggressive to me. “Ahh, if it isn’t the task force out patrolling this fine evening.”

“Is there something wrong, Lady Gisila?” Tetiana asked as she glanced from Gisila to Tutu’s.

“No, not at all. I’m out here at the request of my sister.” Gisila motioned to the sign that spelled out in golden letters *Tutu’s Crypta & Custodia*. “Tutu is my sister.”

“Did Tutu ask you to check on the building?” I asked. “Was some kind of alarm triggered?”

“No,” Gisila said. “Nothing of the sort. There was just some...concern.”

“Oh, because of Orrin?” Grove asked. “Don’t worry about it—he’s secured. The force has Tutu’s contact info, so we can call her back for you and reassure her!”

I eyed Grove—his comment might seem innocent, but he was a fae—the trickiest of supernaturals—so he had to have known his words were practically a threat that we’d check in with Tutu to see if Gisila’s story checked out.

*Does he also think she could be involved?* I’d shared my suspicions with Sarge and Captain Reese, but neither seemed sold on the idea that Gisila had been involved with Orrin’s monster-releasing-activities.

Gisila shook her head, making her silky curtain of purple hair bounce over her shoulders. “Oh, no, Tutu is very certain of her businesses’ safeguards. It is merely that since it was *my* assistant who terrorized Goldstein Street, I feel that I owe it to my sister to check upon her business since I remain within the city.”

*I’m so sure you’re doing this for her sake.* Glad my mask hid my face, I frowned.

“I suppose my actions are unnecessary,” Gisila continued, her beautiful smile back on. “As Magiford has the brave task force out on patrol, keeping things safe.”

“Yes,” I said. “We make it a point to frequently patrol this street.”

Gisila laughed. “How perfect. Tutu will be very glad to hear that, I’m sure.”

A car cruised down the street rolling to a stop at the curb directly next to us.

“Ah—my driver is here,” Gisila said. “I shall be on my way. Have a delightful evening!” She waved, then opened the passenger door and slid in.

The car’s interior lights turned on briefly lighting up the “driver.” He was a werewolf—had to be between his vivid blue eyes and his excessive muscles upon muscles that popped through his beige t-shirt.

Gisila nodded back to us, then pulled the car door shut. The driver revved the engine before pulling back onto the dead street and driving away.

“If that werewolf was just a driver, then I’m a vegetarian,” Tetiana declared, her voice flat.

“Yeah, he looked more like a bodyguard.” Grove rocked back and forth from the tips of his toes to his heels.

“Did she have a driver before?” I asked.

Tetiana narrowed her eyes as she peered up at the sky. “I don’t think so? I’m pretty sure Orrin made all arrangements for her transportation.”

“A muscled werewolf who looks like a tank is kind of a weird choice to replace Orrin as a personal assistant, don’t you think?” Grove asked.

“Yes.” I checked my gun, secured in my shoulder holster—my senses were starting to prickle, which made me uneasy. “We should make note of it in our reports.”

Tetiana started to nod until she glanced at me. “Is something wrong?”

My vampire senses kicked in, cluing me into the presence of another vampire in the area “I’m not picking up on anything solid, but it feels like there’s another vampire around.”

Tetiana’s frown sharpened. “Well, at least it can’t be Ruin. He doesn’t hang around these parts.”

“I don’t,” a smooth, caramelly voice said from the shadows.

My senses ignited, as Ruin—the vampire who had claimed the downtown area as his territory and had meted out justice however he saw fit, the vampire who I had discovered was actually *Considine Maledictus*, one of the oldest vampires alive and awake—stepped into the halo of light cast by a streetlight. “But I followed your procession on a lark, and here we are.”

# CHAPTER

# FOUR

*Consider  
e*

“Hello, Slayer.” I put a smile—which Jade couldn’t see compliments of my enchanted hood—into my voice and was rewarded when the vampire slayer stiffened.

Jade minutely shifted, taking one step forward that was just enough to place herself between me and her squadmates. “What do you want?” Her hand, I noticed, lingering near her gun.

“That’s hardly the greeting I expected,” I said. “After we defeated that fae snake together—fighting back-to-back?”

“I was—and continue to be thankful for your help,” Jade said, her voice guarded. “But as you have attacked me more than you have helped me, I will continue to be careful in your presence.”

I tilted my head, listening to the beat of her heart—not that it helped me much. Slayers usually trained to keep their heartbeat even and after I’d realized Jade O’Neil was the task force slayer, I’d investigated the O’Neils as a slayer family and discovered they were considered elites in North America.

*Regardless, she seems a touch more... defensive than before. How very odd.*

“I see.” I folded my arms across my chest, then looked up and down the street.

“You’re not going to even pretend to be hurt?” The fae with the bag of sketchy potions asked, his expression more thoughtful than I ever liked seeing on a fae face.

“No,” I said. “If she wasn’t still guarded, I’d be disappointed in her.”

Jade—unreadable with her slayer mask in place—didn’t react.

Had she figured out I was her neighbor? No, she hadn’t been any different during our daytime interactions when I pretended to be Connor, even as she had avoided the downtown area while working at night.

*Most likely she’s realized my night alias is older than she initially thought and is increasing her guard as a response.*

I didn’t think she saw me turn into a bat—that power I’d managed to keep hidden for a good century or two. But it was possible she’d noticed some other detail that hinted I was older than the Curia Cloisters estimated. She was a slayer, after all.

*Regardless, that won’t matter. She probably thinks I’m five centuries now instead of a measly one. That still isn’t dangerous enough for the task force to escalate the situation.*

It was fine to poke the Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement if they didn’t take the matter to the Regional Committee of Magic where Killian would hear of it.

“So, you followed us from downtown when we followed the werewolves,” Jade said, her work voice so steely it was no wonder I hadn’t recognized the slayer in comparison to her much warmer—if awkward—daytime way of speaking. “Why?”

“Tonight was the first time you’ve ventured downtown since we fought together,” I said. “But I *am* a professional. I won’t get in the way of your work.”

“You *only* get in the way of my work,” Jade flatly said. “You’ve attacked me in the middle of an investigation!”

“That was the old me,” I said. “Before we bonded over the dead snake. I’m turning over a new leaf. I’m more thoughtful.”

Jade made a scoffing noise that said she didn't believe me—her distrust making the whole thing even funnier than it was before.

*Oh yeah, she doesn't have a clue that I'm Connor.*

I didn't think she'd catch on—it had taken me a whole month to stumble on the realization, after all. No, my biggest concern in all my nighttime activities was that I didn't want Killian getting a hint of it.

Thankfully he lived out of town, and while I ruled over the vampires in the area, it was unlikely they'd complain about me to him—I'd kept my movements small enough that, at most, the scant vampires I'd disciplined would snivel about me to their half-mad elders. There was almost no chance the vampires would motivate themselves enough to tell Killian. The Curia Cloisters was the larger risk of informing him.

I took a step closer to Jade.

She, in response, pulled her gun from her shoulder holster and thumbed the weapon's safety off.

“Come now, slayer,” I purred. “I haven't even done anything. Yet.”

Tapping my vampire speed, I tried to pluck the gun from her grip.

She yanked her hands free and pointed the gun down at the road—always a stickler for gun safety—but moved into my space, using her free arm to elbow me in the throat and force me back.

I ducked around her elbow with a chuckle trying to sneak around to her back, but she pivoted and must have realized I was aiming to stand between her squadmates because she rammed me, knocking us both into the road and well past her clueless comrades.

“RUIN ON GOLDSTEIN STREET,” the blonde vampire shouted at top volume into her radio, blasting the announcement through Jade's and the fae's radios.

*Okay, maybe not quite as clueless as I assumed.*



“I feel so included that I have my own code name,” I announced, holding up both hands as I backed away from Jade.

“It’s not the compliment you think it is,” Jade said. “We named you for the same reason humans name serial killers.”

I held a hand to my chest. “Ouch. Slayer, you’re so spicy even though we fought together!”

“You’re gonna milk that forever, aren’t you?” the fae scratched his jaw. “You’re just as bad as a fae.”

“Maybe I’m in love with the slayer,” I said, impressing even myself with my ability to sound serious and not break into laughter at the sheer ridiculousness of the idea.

Jade—as both herself and her slayer identity—had opened my mind to the reluctant possibility that humans could serve as half decent entertainment. But growing attached to one?

That was pointless. Humans lived to die.

The fae’s mouth dropped open and his eyes bulged. The blonde vampire was less convinced—as a vampire she was aware of all the bad blood between slayers and vampires—and instead she narrowed her eyes into slits and clutched her radio in a way that suggested she’d be shouting into it again if I stuck around much longer.

Jade, as expected, didn’t react at all. Her heartbeat didn’t even speed up.

Instead, she racked her gun—but kept it pointed at the street. “Go back to your territory, Ruin.”

“Fine, fine. This area is dead boring anyway.” I spun in a circle, feeling remarkably better.

*It was the right idea to ditch the Dracos children for some fun.*

I stopped moving when I was pointed north—towards downtown—and looked back at Jade. “However. I expect, Slayer, that you’ll be returning to your regular patrols now?”

“Yes,” Jade said.

“Good.” I nodded in satisfaction, then sauntered off. “I’ll see you around!”

I walked a block down the center of the road before peeling off and stepping into the shadows, pleased with the experience.

Based on the actions of the blonde vampire, the task force was wary of me but not to the point where I needed to be concerned.

It seemed that the greatest risk to blowing my cover was if those who had met me as Considine Maledictus happened to catch sight of me at night.

That was why I’d stayed in the shadows when the Slayer and her team had postured at the dragon shifter. I’d met Gisila as Considine in September, and I wasn’t interested in testing just how keen a dragon shifter’s senses really were.

*But for now, I am safe. I can bait Jade at night and simper at her during the day, and she’ll never know.*

It was going to be fun—and a welcome escape from all the irritation the Dracos children represented.

Hopefully, they’d leave soon, and I would be free to entertain myself in obscurity for a few months, maybe even a year or two, before I’d have to leave and drag Ambrose’s sorry offspring from their impending doom.

My good mood soured at the reminder that time was relentless and, eventually, I’d have to go back to my droll existence.

*For now—at least—things are different.*

## CHAPTER

## FIVE

*Jad*  
*e*

*Would you like a cookie? They're chocolate chunks, and they taste amazing—wait, I need to say first thing that I bought them from the grocery store bakery so it doesn't seem like I'm trying to pass it off as my work. Not that any of my neighbors could make that mistake...*

I clutched the white, wax, paper bag that contained half a dozen cookies as I rounded a turn in the staircase.

While I hadn't given up on the idea of using baked goods to soften up my human neighbors in my apartment building, I'd changed tactics by purchasing them since my own attempts at baking had been coming out inedible.

*Would you like a cookie? I bought them from the grocery store bakery—they're still warm!*

There—that sounded more sincere...didn't it?

I groaned and my head sagged forward with my exhaustion.

The run in with Ruin/Considine Maledictus had put me on high alert for the rest of the night, and I still hadn't found a way to tell Sarge about it.

*Maybe I should wait to approach my neighbors until after I get some sleep. Then I'd be thinking more clearly, and I*

wouldn't be any more tongue-tied than usual. But the cookies wouldn't be warm...

I staggered onto my floor, teetering, until I realized one of the neighbors I'd been targeting—Shelby, she was a young mom who lived across the hallway—was standing in front of her door, locking it.

“Shelby!” I said a little louder than was socially acceptable in my surprise.

Shelby turned in my direction and smiled. “Hello, Jade. How are you?”

“Great. I'm great,” I said, hoping I didn't sound robotic as my heart thumped painfully in my chest.

I desperately thrust my white paper bag out in front of me. “Cookies—from a grocery store bakery. Would you like some?” I didn't realize until the words were out of my mouth that I'd been clutching the wax bag so hard I'd crumpled the top, and the words came out way more jumbled than I meant for them to.

But Shelby still hadn't refused me as she slipped her purse strap over her shoulder, so I rushed to add, “They're fresh—still warm!”

“That's very sweet of you, but no thank you.” Shelby smiled and rested a hand on her massive purse.

“W-would Mia like one?” I could hardly hear my own voice over the pounding of my heart in my ears.

“She's actually at my parents' place for the next few nights but thank you for thinking of her.” Shelby glanced from the bag to my face. “You said you bought them from a bakery?”

“Yes. They're delicious.” I lowered the bag—this time taking pains so I didn't clutch it and accidentally rip it apart.

“I hope that doesn't mean that you're giving up baking?” Shelby asked.

Even my general fear of coming off as awkward wasn't enough to stop my grimace. “I don't know that I ever succeeded enough to call what I did *baking*. But yes.”

Shelby's eyes were warm with sympathy. "Really? That's sad. I thought it was so sweet that you were trying to reproduce family recipes—it's so heartwarming."

"Oh," I said, not quite sure how to respond to the compliment.

"You know, to tell you the truth, I'm really bad at baking." Shelby laughed. "I gave up on ever learning, so I thought it was really neat that you kept trying, every week."

"Yeah, baking is rough. And I've learned family recipes usually don't have all the directions on them," I said, trying not to let too much bitterness leak through. (On more than one occasion I'd followed a recipe to the letter, only to find out later from my mom or grandmother that there were a few very important directions that weren't on the recipe card.)

Shelby laughed. "I've learned that too."

A door opened and my vampire senses kicked in, so when I peered back over my shoulder I wasn't too surprised to see Connor—he was the only vampire within a block radius in this part of town.

Connor raised his eyebrows at me but I wasn't trying to bribe him with baked goods, so I whipped back around to face Shelby.

"Either way, I really hope you don't give up baking for good," Shelby continued. "I always enjoy our chats about food."

"Oh," I said, sounding as dazed as I felt. "Thanks, Shelby."

Shelby smiled. "Of course. Have a good morning!"

"You too," I called as Shelby slipped past me and started down the staircase.

I stood rooted where I was even as Shelby's footsteps grew quieter and disappeared.

"Well." Connor strolled closer. "It seems you have been rejected again—"

I grabbed Connor by the wrist. “Did you hear that? She complimented me!”

Connor jumped, surprised by my enthusiasm. “Er...yes?”

“We had an actual conversation! And since she remembered that I’m trying to bake—even that I’m bad at it—that means she bothered to remember something about *me*. So, she’s not uninterested in being friends, right?”

“I suppose?” Connor said.

“Yes!” I let go of Connor and pumped a free hand in the air. “I’m making progress.”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t know that any of our neighbors dislike you—they just lead a busy existence. Humans are forever running around involving themselves in unnecessary work,” Connor said, sounding jaded and old.

“Ah-ah! No!” I spun around to face him and wildly shook my head. “You’re not going to insult our neighbors-who-aren’t-yet-friends-but-one-day-will-be!”

“Fine, I see how it is.” Connor leaned into my personal space, a smile curving across his lips and faintly lighting up his red eyes. “Congratulations on successfully speaking to another neighbor.”

I tucked one of my bright red curls behind my ear, feeling oddly bashful. “Thanks, Connor. For all your help and encouragement.”

He tipped his head. “Based on that, am I to assume that you are going to keep baking and that I shall continue to be your built-in fan for your fire alarm?”

“Yes, please!” I said. “Want a cookie? They’re still warm! From the bakery!”

“I was standing at my door when I heard you make your pitch, but no thank you.” Connor settled his hands on my shoulders, his smile smug for some reason. “You just got off work, didn’t you? You should head to bed.”

I glanced at the door to my apartment. “Yeah, probably. But I might be too excited to sleep. I think I’ll have a cookie

and one of my smoothies.”

Connor shuddered. “Ahh yes, those vile green concoctions. Well. I don’t want a cookie—or one of your *drinks*—but I shall accompany you to celebrate. Though I am hurt—you didn’t celebrate this much when we became friends.”

“That’s because you’re different. You’re a supernatural,” I said.

Connor—his hands still on my shoulders—steered me towards my apartment door. “Which somehow makes me easier to befriend, despite the fact that you’re a regular human?” Connor said.

*Oops.* It was a bit of a slip up—of course I was more comfortable around Connor. I knew everything about vampires. “It’s my work,” I said. “It got me used to supernaturals.”

“I’m so sure,” Connor said. “Now, open the door. You look like you’re about to collapse. I don’t want to have to go rummaging through your pockets to find your key.”

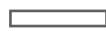
I turned in Connor’s grasp making his hands fall away so I could give him a loose side hug. “Thanks, Connor. You’re a good friend.”

I peeled myself away, and juggled my bag as I pulled my keys out of my pocket. When I found them, I glanced over at Connor—who had gone strangely quiet.

He was watching me with an emotion I couldn’t quite place.

“You okay?” I asked.

Connor smiled wildly. “Oh, I’m more than okay. I’m splendid.”



DESPITE RIDING HIGH on my interaction with Shelby, my encounter with Gisila when my team had followed the overstimulated werewolves bothered me. So two days later, I waited outside the office the Curia Cloisters had converted into a holding cell of sorts for Orrin.

The Curia Cloisters didn't usually "hold" criminals. Punishment was usually doled out immediately and violently among supernaturals. There was one supernatural prison, Ghast. But truthfully, Orrin hadn't done enough damage to warrant being sent there. (No humans had been injured in his attacks and despite how much we suspected Tutu's was the target, we still didn't have proof.)

Gisila had already renounced him, so he was jobless. When Captain Reese had contacted the fae Court he was allied with, they'd disowned him—so his future was in shambles.

The real problem was that his creatures had done some pretty significant damage to public property—mostly streets—and a couple cars. This meant the humans were involved, so the upper echelon was trying to figure out a proper punishment that could actually be communicated to the mayor's office. (So far there had been talks of a huge fine that would be passed on to his children and children's children but that had raised a few human eyebrows, so the idea had been temporarily sidelined.)

"Captain Reese called ahead to say you were coming and that you had permission to enter. Are you sure you want to talk to him?" The werewolf guard asked—I recognized her as a member of the daytime squad. "He hasn't said a word to anyone. That geas of his is strong."

The reason why I was suspicious of Gisila, but had no proof, was because Orrin had been put under a geas—a powerful magic that outlined a contract, which we knew nothing about because a common clause in a geas is magically-induced silence.

Even if Orrin wanted to talk to us—which he didn't—he wouldn't be able to speak about the contents of his geas.

"Yes." I checked to make sure my slayer mask was secured. "I have a few questions, and I'd rather try than assume."

The werewolf shrugged; her powerful biceps accented by the tight sleeve of her uniform. "You're approved to visit by Captain Reese, so it's your time you're wasting." She



unlocked the door and pushed it open, stepping aside so I could enter.

I took a deep breath. *This is probably not going to be worth it... but I can't just sit and wait for Gisila to strike.*

With that thought to urge me on, I slipped into Orrin's holding room, and the werewolf closed the door behind me.

The office—which was conveniently attached to the werewolf/shifter department, so no fae could reach Orrin to help/sabotage him—was a plain eggshell white color, but if you looked closely you could see patched spots in the wall. (Werewolves and their supernatural strength could be rather hard on buildings.)

A cot was positioned on the far side of the wall with meticulously folded blankets.

Orrin was seated on a solid wooden chair—werewolves had the best made furniture in the building out of necessity—holding a to-go paper coffee cup of steaming water, which he had apparently made with the coffee machine that was plugged into the wall.

“Hello, Orrin.”

Orrin looked up from his hot water. “Ah, the vampire slayer who fights back-to-back with vampires.” He then rapidly blinked—I think he was upset with himself for talking, but I find fae really hard to read compared to other supernaturals.

“Yes,” I said. “It's necessary for good teamwork.” I paused, considering if he'd heard of Considine/Ruin and I teaming up to defeat his snake monster. “And to minimize damage.”

Orrin stared at me, then took a long sip of his hot water. His gold hair was tidy, but he didn't seem as sparkly and eye catching as usual.

I saw a flash of metal around his wrists—he was wearing magic-canceling cuffs as a precaution—and he was in the same clothes I'd arrested him in. It seemed that was by choice as there was a set of sweatpants and a t-shirt that had the logo

of a werewolf-owned gym printed on the chest folded up and placed on the cot with his blankets.

He was getting fed: a tray that contained a plate with some crumbs and an empty glass of water balanced precariously on a boxy end table.

*What's with the hot water, though? That can't be fun to drink.*

I awkwardly stood—there were no other chairs, and I definitely wasn't going to sit on his bed.

“I have a few questions about your job with Gisila,” I said.

Orrin folded his legs at the ankles and dropped his eyes to his hot water, ignoring me.

“What kind of boss was she?” I asked.

Orrin sipped his water.

I scratched my elbow, unbothered by his silence—with my people skills, I *lived* in perpetual awkwardness. But if I was hoping for even a scrap of info to show for this, I needed to be sneaky.

“Hmm, so you can't talk about her? The geas must cover her, too,” I said. “That's good to know.”

“I am under no obligation to answer your question, vampire-slayer-who-fights-with-vampires,” Orrin said, his voice full of derision. “You have nothing magical that can force me to speak—unless you intend to use physical means?”

*Hmm. Just because he responded doesn't mean his geas doesn't cover Gisila...he might have spoken to remove doubt.*

This is why I found fae difficult—you would be forever thinking in circles if you tried to get ahead of one. Fae couldn't lie, but they could wordsmith and rule-monger, and they used that to their advantage.

“No,” I said. “That's not really my style.”

Orrin finally looked at me again—probably because that was the only way he could properly show me the scorn in his

eyes and the way it made his lip delicately curl in a sneer. “A vampire slayer...whose style is *not* to use physical means?”

“Not to get answers, no,” I said.

Orrin narrowed his eyes. “Are you squeamish, then? Is that why the Curia Cloisters hired you, because you couldn’t make it as a true slayer?”

“No.” I tugged at my uniform, feeling uncomfortably bare—the one requirement Captain Reese had for my visiting was that I couldn’t carry any weapons into the room. It was understandable, but I didn’t like being without any means of defense. “I just don’t like using violence if no one is in danger.”

Orrin blinked once and then returned to his usual conduct of staring at his steaming cup of water, which was now only half full.

I fidgeted, then asked. “How long have you worked for Gisila?”

Orrin didn’t move.

“And how did you come to work for her?” I asked.

Nothing.

*Maybe I’m trying to punch above my level. There’s no way I can uncover something when Sarge couldn’t get anything out of Orrin.*

Disappointed with the possible dead end, I started to turn away.

When I reached for the doorknob and brushed it with my gloved fingers, Orrin finally stirred. “Why do you want to know?”

I paused, mentally reviewing my position in the room and his, just in case he was planning to attempt a sneak attack. “What do you mean?”

Orrin shrugged. “You surely have all that information in a file. Why bother asking me for it?”

“Because we might have missed something you purposely revealed,” I said.

Orrin’s scorn was back, this time accompanied by his eyebrows crawling up toward his hairline. “You think I would purposely give you a *clue*?”

“Maybe,” I said. “If you were doing everything against your will.”

Orrin laughed so hard he made the water in his cup slosh. “Against my will? You are unbelievably naïve for a vampire slayer. Do you really think I would do all that you lot have accused me of against my will?”

“Yes,” I said. “Because there’s a lot of power imbalance in the supernatural world.”

Orrin’s laughter cut off and his face twisted with disgust. “Oh, how awful. You’re one of those, are you—the hopeful humans who are so out of touch with reality that you are determined to see good where there is none?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m out of touch.” I tilted my head back and forth. “Because if you tried something, I’d beat you until you were concussed.”

His expression cleared. “Now that sounds more like a true slayer, I suppose.” He leaned back in his chair and looked away, all emotion in his eyes shuttering, so he was once again passive and unmoving.

I hesitated for a moment, then opened the door and slipped out.

The werewolf guard looked me over from head to toe, her nose twitching as she scented me out. “Any problems?”

“No,” I said. “But I didn’t learn anything, either.”

The werewolf shrugged before she relocked the door. “Don’t take it too hard—he’s an ornery one. At least he’s no trouble.”

“Thanks.” I hesitated, but the werewolf must have considered our conversation over because she snapped a nod at

me, rolled her shoulders back, then took up her spot in front of the door again.

I slowly turned on my heels and made my way back to the Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement, waiting until I was behind our secured doors to take off my slayer mask and reclaim my weapons from my locker.

*I don't think I learned anything about Gisila or the case... but I get the feeling Orrin is bored.*

If I was smarter, I would figure out a way to exploit that, but Orrin was right: I was better at physical stuff, and while my family trained to battle all types of supernaturals, we spent the least amount of time on fae as it was our family policy to not do business with them—no matter how well they paid.

I navigated my way through the department, heading to the meeting room my squad mustered in every night before we headed out for our patrols.

*Thankfully, I'm part of a team, and someone is bound to understand more than me.*

Sarge, a naiad which made him a fae, was my best bet. But if I screwed up enough courage, maybe I could ask Grove or Medium-Sized Robert for help.

I made it to our meeting room and slipped inside. Like everything in our department, it was modeled after human police procedurals shows in television and movies. The walls were made of floor to ceiling windows, thin blue and gold carpeting covered the floor, and a sea of tables and chairs that were usually occupied with similar supernatural species clumped together.

I glanced at my teammates expecting to see the same groups I always saw: wizards April and Juggernaut playing some kind of card game together, vampires Tetiana and Clarence off to the side at their own table, while werewolf Brody and cat shifter Binx deigned to sit together and exchange growls, and Grove—a fae—chatted happily with Medium-Sized Robert, our team's resident heavy weight hitter and troll.

Today, however, April and Juggernaut were seated at a table playing a card game with Tetiana—who had started playing with them a week or two ago—and, this was the shocking part, *Binx*.

I slowly entered the room clutching my mask as I watched the game.

“Juggernaut, do you have any... old maids?” Binx asked.

“Binx,” Tetiana said. “You don’t *want* the old maid, so you shouldn’t ask for her.”

“But I’d rather have a maid no matter what her age is than a card with a number on it,” Binx said. “Unless the numbers mean higher points?”

“No,” Juggernaut straightened out the fan his cards were spread out in. “You get one point for each pair of cards you have no matter the number on the card. And go fish.”

“Why are humans so illogical? Not all prey is equal in value, and we are supposed to be emulating fishing, aren’t we?” Binx released a hissed breath, eyed the deck of cards placed in the center of their group, and reluctantly selected the top card.

“Are you playing go fish?” I asked, naming the human card game I’d played with my siblings and cousins. (We either practiced our knife work or played card games whenever long travel times were involved in a case.)

“Sort of.” April nodded to me in greeting. “Or at least, that was the idea. But Tetiana liked the old maid card too much, so she made us include it in the deck.”

“I like how suspicious she looks,” Tetiana announced. “Also, I can understand her. When I am feeling particularly old, I also feel like killing.”

“I’ve told you every single game: the old maid doesn’t kill you.” Juggernaut set his cards down so he could mash his fingers against his eyes. “You just lose the game if you end up with her card!”

“Lose the round, get killed, it’s all the same in games,” Tetiana said. “Besides, saying she kills you is far more fun and interesting.”

“It does add something,” April tapped a finger on the table.

“April,” Juggernaut groaned. “Please don’t make this worse.”

Despite his complaints, the game seemed fun. Plus, I’d never seen the mini-groups within the squad interact so casually—that Binx had joined was huge.

*I wonder if I could join in...*

I didn’t remember all the rules of go fish—I’d have to brush up before daring to ask.

April studied her cards. “Tetiana, do you have any jacks?”

Tetiana made a face, then passed over the jack of spades. “Can we use more names besides *Jack*? It would also add more interest.”

“Jack isn’t the name, it’s a position,” Juggernaut said.

“I didn’t know that,” April said.

“See!” Tetiana triumphantly beamed at Juggernaut. “April is a human and she also didn’t know. Let’s change it—I vote for Clive.”

“If we’re going to change something, I’d like to vote for fewer numbers,” Binx grumbled. “They’re less aesthetically pleasing to collect.”

“Nobody is changing anything!” Juggernaut declared.

I watched for another minute, and after internally vowing to check the internet for the rules, I headed for my usual spot.

April, Juggernaut, Tetiana, and Binx continued with their game, while Brody downed what looked like a protein smoothie. (His back was once again decorated with pawprints—his Pack must have given him an exuberant sendoff tonight.)

Clarence was sitting by himself, fixing the complex knot he'd tied his usual white cravat into, while Grove and Medium-Sized Robert were seated together with Medium-Sized Robert watching as Grove carefully arranged rows of glass bottles filled with multi-colored potions on their table.

I paused at my seat, placing my mask on the table.

*Now is as good a time to ask Grove and Medium-Sized Robert as ever...*

The thought made my fingers feel clammy in my gloves, but if Sunshine was right and my team didn't really hate me, they wouldn't mind the question.

*It's practice. Just like chatting with my neighbors.*

Still—I didn't like it. If I really screwed up, I could make things awkward for the team.

And with that pleasant thought, I made myself shuffle across the room to pause by Grove and Medium-Sized Robert.

Medium-Sized Robert looked up first, jumping in surprise when he noticed me so his stool—made specially for him and the other larger supernaturals—slid a little across the floor.

He offered me a nod, then elbowed Grove—who was adjusting a vial filled with a fizzy green liquid.

“See, when they're all lined up you can *clearly* tell which ones are poisons. They have a pearlescent swirl—what?” Grove looked up, then also jumped slightly when he noticed I was standing in front of him. “Blood! You're too quiet, did you know that?”

“Sorry,” I said.

Grove shrugged. “I suppose you can't help it. Did you need a potion?”

“No,” I firmly said, glancing down at the bottles. “I, I have a question. For both of you.”

Grove and Medium-Sized Robert exchanged looks.

“Ask away,” Grove said.



# CHAPTER SIX

*Jad  
e*

I flexed my fingers and ignored the itch in my elbow, which was more than likely my nerves based on how sweaty I was getting. “Is there a reason for why a fae would drink hot water?” I asked. “Is he, maybe, afraid of poisons or something?”

“What’s the situation?” Grove asked.

“I visited Orrin—with Captain Reese’s permission,” I rushed to add.

Grove and Medium-Sized Robert stared at me for a moment.

“And?” Medium-Sized Robert finally added in his rumbly voice.

“He was drinking hot water from a paper cup.”

“Ah.” Grove leaned back in his chair. “Yeah, he probably wants tea.”

I paused, trying to follow the deduction. “Pardon?”

“Fae are big into tea, you know?” Grove said.

“Yes,” I slowly said—I vaguely knew fae loved tea. All the places that catered to them carried tea. “But I thought that was more of a preference thing—liking tea over coffee.”

Medium-Sized Robert shook his head. “No, Ma’am,” he said. “It’s a cultural custom. Fae view tea as necessary for life—almost as necessary as a connection with the fae realm.”

“Oh,” I said—it was all I could think to say. “I didn’t know that.”

“Did you see any mugs or cups anywhere?” Grove asked.

I shook my head.

“Yeah, then he definitely wants tea,” Grove said.

“He’s being held by werewolves, yes?” Medium-Sized Robert asked. “They probably didn’t think to ask him, and there’s no way he will risk asking for tea when it’s possible it could be construed as a favor.”

“That would put him in their debt,” Grove added for my benefit.

“And debts are bad?” I asked.

“In fae culture? Oh yeah. It’s the worst.” Grove nodded so hard he rocked his entire body, and his arms—resting on the edge of the table—made the table shake, so the potions in their glass vials wobbled dangerously. “Fae want to avoid being in someone’s debt—it gives them power over you. You will eventually have to pay them back, and you probably won’t like the way they make you return the favor.”

*Wow, yeah, I was punching way above my level.* I scratched the back of my neck. “Okay. Thank you. That’s very helpful.”

Grove saluted me—which made me want to sink through the floor in embarrassment. “Of course. But, in warning, Blood, be careful you don’t say thank you to Orrin—a really sneaky fae would use that as a toehold and say you owe them.”

I grimaced. “Of course. I’ll work on that—I need to do more research.”

Grove nodded, then went back to his bottles, but Medium-Sized Robert studied me a moment longer.

“You know a lot about vampires, wizards, and even shifters, but not fae,” he said.

“I grew up studying vampires and wizards,” I said.

“And the shifters?” Medium-Sized Robert asked.

“I trained with werewolves,” I said. I debated if I should tell him about my experience with summer camp but it took me too long to think it over, so Medium-Sized Robert nodded, then lowered his gaze to Grove’s poison/potion collection before I had a chance to speak.

With the obvious end to our conversation, I judged it was best to not make things awkward and wandered back to my spot.

*So. Orrin wants tea, but he won’t risk asking for it. Hmm...*

“I win—I don’t have any cards in my hand,” April said as the human-vampire-shifter card game continued.

“Ugh—in that case, I have lost. The old maid has struck—I perished,” Tetiana declared.

“The old maid doesn’t kill you,” Juggernaut repeated as he collected the cards and started shuffling.

I sat down at my spot, then felt my phone buzz. Technically, my shift still hadn’t started, so I pulled my cellphone out to see that I’d gotten a text from Paddy, my paternal grandfather.

PADDY

Haven’t heard from you, so thought we should check in.

I glanced at the clock, then tapped out and sent a reply.

I’m fine—I’ll call you tomorrow. I want to pick out another family recipe to try making.

PADDY

Good for you wee one! Have a good shift at work tonight. Nan sends her love with mine.

I had just enough time to tap out a similar reply before the door swung open and Sarge strode inside, heading for the wooden podium placed at the front of the room.

I slipped my phone back into place, then picked up my slayer mask and settled in to listen.



“WHY ARE humans so obsessed with water?” Grove leaned over the wooden railing of the boardwalk, peering into the inky darkness that was Lake Fairy. The black water reflected the silvery chunk of moon that hung in the sky, and the streetlamps posted on the opposite side of the boardwalk.

I paused next to Grove but kept a watchful eye on Brody, who was about a car length in front of us leading our patrol along the shores of two lakes that marked out the northern border of Magiford’s downtown area.

“Humans use bodies of water for entertainment purposes.” I checked the daggers on my belt. “Fishing, boating, swimming,” I recited. “Don’t fae do that?”

“Nope. We’re more likely to sit on the water’s edge and enjoy its beauty while taking tea. In the fae realm, you have no idea what could be lurking under the water’s surface.” With that cheerfully ominous thought, Grove crouched down and slipped his arm through the railing. “Did you ever do stuff on lakes?”

I was surprised, then excited—Grove was asking me a question about myself! This was an opportunity I could use to build our friendship instead of responding in the stiff way most of the team talked to me that was maybe respect. “Occasionally,” I said. “The nature of our work meant we usually stuck to urban areas. However, my family—including

my extended family—had get togethers on a certain lake every couple years to take a break.”

“Wow,” Grove said. “I don’t know if I’m more surprised that a family of what is obviously a bunch of workaholics—considering they produced you—actually took the occasional vacation, or happy for you because I kind of thought you didn’t have a childhood.” Grove pressed closer to the railings. I think he was trying to touch the lake, but this late at night the lake was eerie because you couldn’t quite tell where the water surface was or see into it. Even when he stretched, he didn’t touch the water. Instead, his satchel slipped off his side and nearly slammed him into the railing.

I caught him by the shoulders, steadying him, as I tried to come up with a coherent response to his estimation of my childhood. *I had a great childhood, but how do I say that without sounding defensive?* I belatedly realized that I was possibly overstepping his boundaries by touching him, and I froze.

Before I had time to spiral in my doubt, Grove regained his balance. “Woops, thanks, Blood.”

I let him go and backed up to give him space. “Sure.”

Ahead of us, Brody tipped his head back sniffing the air. “One of the bars has a new special this month—deep fried pickles,” he announced.

“Does it smell good?” Grove dusted himself off, then trotted up to the werewolf.

“Pretty good, yeah,” Brody said.

I followed the pair, stiffening when my slayer abilities kicked in and I felt the wispy presence of a vamp. “Vampire,” I called, keeping my voice soft.

“Aww, now that takes all the fun out of sneaking up on you,” Considine said, his voice coming from directly behind me.

I swung around, pulling a dagger from my belt while simultaneously backing up towards Grove and Brody.

Considine cocked his head, and I briefly saw a bright flash of teeth as he smiled, everything but his lips and chin shadowed by the spell woven into his hooded jacket. “What, no greeting? I’m hurt.”

*There’s no harm in being polite to him. Vampire elders are usually sticklers for that kind of thing.*

“Good evening, Ruin,” I said.

“There we go—good evening, Slayer.” Considine rolled his shoulders back. “Out on patrol with the dog and the poisonous fae, I see?”

“Yes,” I said. “If you’ll excuse us, we should keep moving—so we can maintain our schedule.”

“No worries,” Considine said—he sounded weirdly modern for a vampire who had been turned in BC times. “I’ll just come along!”

“Uhhh,” I said, my brain scrambling to process what he said—because there’s no way he’d actually just said what I heard.

Ruin, unbothered, strolled past me and paused next to Grove and Brody. “You two—to the back.”

“Blood always brings up the rear,” Brody said.

“How lucky for you, but not tonight. Go.” Considine pointed back behind me.

Grove shrugged and marched down the boardwalk, circling behind me.

“Grove,” I called, my awkwardness falling away as I switched into work mode. “He’s not with the department—you don’t follow his orders!”

“You don’t have to,” Grove said. “But I do. My self-preservation is way too good to take on a vamp of his caliber.”

“We don’t even know what caliber he is,” I protested.

“I know he’s enough to make you nervous, which means Brody and I should probably be squealing like dryads who’ve seen a chainsaw,” Grove said.

Giving up on Grove, I took a few big steps forward so I stood shoulder to shoulder with Brody, shoring him up. “You’re not coming on our patrol—it would be a conflict of interest, and incredibly unprofessional.”

“Fine.” Considine shrugged. “How about a quick five-minute fight as a consolation prize?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Considine said. “Is it because you don’t think you have the advantage? I’ll refrain from using my right hand during the fight—at least until I need to. How about that?”

“Good evening, Ruin.” I nudged Brody, steering him away from the boardwalk and back towards the businesses that lined the lakeshore. Grove followed so closely he stepped on Brody’s heels, and the silence of the lakefront was ruined only by the muffled laughter of humans on Main Street and the lap of water brushing the lakeshore.

“Come on—I won’t hurt you. Much,” Considine complained as he strolled along behind us. “I’ve said it before—you’re too much fun to risk killing. And I’ll have you know I am feeling more than a little peeved that I put myself out for you to kill that stupid serpent, and you still are wary of me.”

*He’s Considine Maledictus, I reminded myself. No matter how casual and charming he acts, he’s a vampire who is over two thousand years old. I can’t doubt these facts or he’s going to pull me into his speed.*

Ruin/Considine’s friendliness was probably the best weapon he had. He was an elder vampire: he could use his pheromones to daze Brody or Grove, but instead he cajoled me and spouted witty remarks.

“I have thanked you several times for helping with the snake.” As we entered an artistically decorated alleyway covered with wooden trellises dotted with dying vines, I adjusted my hold on my dagger and considered pulling out my radio, until I saw Grove was reaching for his.

*Bless Grove. He might one day kill me with his poisons, but he’s always on top of using his radio.*

“But you treat me like I have the plague,” Considine complained—he was still following us.

We exited the alleyway, popping out on Main Street, as I heard a firetruck—which was far enough away that I mostly heard echoes of its siren. “We treat you with the degree of concern you deserve,” I said.

Considine tapped his vampire speed, zooming around us so he stood in front of me. “See, that sounds like a compliment, but you treat me so coldly that it’s hurtful.” He reached for me, and I raised my dagger.

Considine made a show of keeping one hand up in the air and then patted me on the shoulder with his other, before he took a few steps backwards.

I warily watched him as the siren of another firetruck faintly registered on my senses.

*Elder vampires don’t hang out on streets like this. He’s got to have some angle—I just can’t figure out what it is.*

A honk echoed through the quiet city, and I heard another wail of sirens.

I stiffened. “That’s the third firetruck we’ve heard in the last few minutes. Something is wrong.”

Brody stiffened, tilting his head from side to side.

“Do you smell anything?” Grove asked.

“No—wherever those fire trucks are going, it’s not in the downtown area,” Brody said.

Keeping an eye on Considine—I didn’t want him attacking me just for kicks when he thought my guard was lowered—I pulled out my radio.

“This is Team Blood. We’ve heard three firetrucks in the last couple of minutes heading away from downtown,” I said.

Grove yanked out his own radio and added, “Also, we’ve got *Ruin* hanging around making eyes at Blood.”

I paused, then realized my error—Grove was right, we should report Considine’s presence. I nodded but with my



hood up and mask hooked into place, I think it might have looked more like I was bobbing my head.

“*Checking in with homebase,*” Sarge announced over the radio.

Considine clasped his hands behind his back, all too casual.

Just as I was considering whether I should swap my dagger for my gun, I heard the wail of a fourth firetruck.

“Should we tell Sarge?” Brody asked.

I hesitated, and then our radios crackled when Sarge shouted over the line. “*There’s a fire at the public library—Team Blood and Team Yellow, head over there, immediately!*”

I sheathed my dagger and hooked my radio on my belt. “Let’s go!” I kicked into a run.

“Please tell me we’re going to pick up the car!” Grove moaned as he followed.

“Yes, but we’re *running* to the car!” I shouted.

When I risked looking back, Grove and Brody were following and Considine had seemingly given up.

He waved to me, then turned around and strolled up the street, uninterested in the news that the library was on *fire*.

*It’s a good thing, I told myself. He’s a massive liability. Fighting together once doesn’t make him safe.*

“Brody, you’re driving—you have the keys,” I shouted as we reached the car.

“Got it!” Brody unlocked the car and we piled in.

Five minutes and several traffic violations later, we arrived at the library pulling our car into a back corner of the parking lot, so we’d leave the road and area closest to the library free for firetrucks.

I burst out of the car, my hand on my radio as I assessed the situation.

Everything glowed orange from the flames. The smell of smoke tickled my nose as it hung overhead in a giant cloud, blotting out the sky and reflecting back the light of the fire.

The fire was big but from what I could tell, it was focused on the front lawn—a large garden-like area that I knew from previous visits housed several statues depicting scenes from famous kids' books. The garden was nestled into the side of the library, not the actual building itself.

Nothing was left of the colorful flowers and shrubbery except for ash and even though there were four firetrucks dosing the ground, the flames weren't going out.

However, they also weren't spreading. They just seemed to be eating up the already scorched ground.

*Fire doesn't normally behave like this.*

I didn't know a lot about elements, but I did know it wasn't good that the flames were growing taller—almost as tall as the building. The air was biting hot despite the chill of the night air and the sole tree inside the library garden creaked alarmingly, little more than a black husk from the raging inferno.

“We need to offer to help,” I said.

“Gotcha. Here—this way.” Grove led us up to an EMS worker, who was standing with her truck, observing. “We're supernaturals.” Grove motioned to the patch on our uniforms. “Can we help?”

The EMS worker pushed a strand of hair out of her face. “I don't suppose any of you are wizards?”

Brody sneezed—the smoke must be bothering his sensitive nose. “No, sorry,” he said.

I scanned the parking lot, which crawled with sweating firefighters. Because of the poisonous properties of my blood, I was clothed from head to toe. But I could feel that my mask was starting to heat up, and my eyes felt dry from the heat of the fire.

“Then I don’t think you can do anything,” the EMS worker said. “The library was closed for the night and the cleaners already came through and left hours ago, so there’s no danger.” She grimaced. “Except if they don’t get the fire under control and it spreads to the actual building, it might wreck some of the collection. But these flames just won’t go out!”

I turned around to study the blaze again, disturbed that my observation had been right.

*Flames that don’t go out...could they be fueled by magic?* I started to unwind my senses to check but before I could even get my bearings, a shout boomed over the roar of the flames.

“House Tellier is here to help!” Five wizards—all wearing jackets in Tellier colors of orange and yellow—zigzagged around the fire trucks, their chests puffed up, and wearing smiles so practiced they were almost grimaces.

*What?*

# CHAPTER

# SEVEN

*Jad*  
*e*

The House Tellier wizards held their hands up. Their wizard tattoos emerged on the skin of their faces, splashing across one cheek and stretching down to graze their chins. Their hands glowed and orange hued water appeared over their heads, which they then shot at the flames.

Wizards had elemental magic—water, fire, earth, lightning, that kind of thing. But they still had limits that depended on their powerbase. They couldn't create a waterfall of water—they didn't have enough power for that. Instead, it was more like a small river.

Unlike the firemen, who were pumping water at the ground trying to put out the source of the flames, the wizards sprayed their water straight into the flames producing a loud hiss as the water hit the flames and evaporated, turning into steam.

*This isn't going to work. They can't pump water out at the rate the firemen are, it's not going to—what?*

The flames diminished, growing smaller.

The House Tellier wizards laughed—it was a canned sound, like from the television sitcoms Nan and Paddy loved. Then they moved forward using their magic to pour more water on the flames, which continued to shrink.

Grove peered around me, getting a look at the wizards. “Woah. That’s not something you see every day—wizards actually being helpful.”

“Don’t say that to April. Or Juggernaut,” Brody said.

“Does this seem odd to you?” I asked, motioning to the fire—which was about half out now.

“What part of it?” Brody asked.

“Their magic seems to be working a little too well,” I said. “Considering the firemen were struggling while using more water.”

Grove tugged on his satchel of potions. “Maybe, but even weirder is why are they here?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Let me rephrase it: what were a bunch of wizards doing out this late at night?” Grove asked. “Wizards aren’t stupid. They know they’re the weakest supernaturals. There’s lots of things that would love to pounce on them that play in the night. So, what brought them here?”

I frowned as the flames grew even smaller. “That is a very valid question.”

“Blood!”

It took me a moment to recognize the voice as April.

I turned around and waved when I spotted her—with Binx and Tetiana—picking their way through the crowd.

“What happened?” Tetiana’s eyebrows knit together in concern as she looked from me to the blaze.

“It looks like something in the gardens caught fire. The building is empty, but it seemed like the fire was going to spread there until five wizards from House Tellier showed up. They contained the blaze and are in the process of snuffing it out.” I paused while waiting for someone—anyone—to add to my debriefing.

No one said anything.

“Does anyone recognize any of the wizards?” I asked. “They are identifiable as House Tellier wizards by their colors, but that’s all I could pick out.”

“The big guy—the one built like a gorilla? That’s Gideon Tellier, Heir of House Tellier,” April said.

Heir was the title given to the child of the main family in a wizarding House—the family the House was named after—who would eventually inherit and lead the House as the Adept.

I studied the wizard April had pointed out and recognized him despite the orange haze cast by the firelight.

Brody whistled. “The Heir? That’s convenient.”

“Yeah...” April narrowed her eyes as she studied Gideon Tellier—who, if I had to guess, was probably in his mid to late twenties.

The team fell silent.

I glanced from member to member waiting for someone to take the lead.

To my horror, all of them were staring at *me*.

“What’s the gameplan, Blood?” Tetiana asked.

“I’m not familiar with wizard magic,” I said. “I don’t think I should be the one to make the decision.

“Your orders, Blood,” Binx growled, her expression unrelenting.

Brody nodded, while Grove fussed with his satchel, so it looked like nobody was going to argue against me.

*I guess this is undeniable proof that Sunshine is right. They respect me, which is why I get stuck making decisions in situations like this. But why does respect mean they won’t talk to me?!*

“April, would you go help the firemen with the House Tellier wizards and use water on the flames?” I finally asked. “And...would you check for any foreign sparks of magic? I didn’t have time before House Tellier arrived.”

April's expression tightened. "Understood." She eyed House Tellier like a hungry tiger, then sauntered off in their direction.

Binx watched her with a thoughtful expression. "Was it just two years ago that there was a clash between House Medeis and House Tellier, or three?"

*Shoot. I forgot about that—that was before my time.*

"Doesn't matter," Brody said. "April can outmaneuver any of those dolts. If they pick a fight, she'll handle it."

"No fights," I said. "Not in front of the humans."

Grove gave me a thumbs up. "So, you're saying we should drag them downtown and let Ruin beat them up for us. Got it."

*I'm not going to touch that.*

"Brody, Binx, could you sniff around the library?" I asked. "I know it's going to mostly smell like smoke and wizard magic now, but if you can find anything odd that would be helpful."

"You think there's something more to this fire?" Tetiana pushed her blonde hair—which was more of a golden color from the orange light cast by the fire—up into a ponytail. "Maybe a magical aspect?"

"I don't know enough about the fire to know for certain," I said honestly. "The fact that the blaze didn't subside until the wizards helped with less water and manpower than the fire department has is... odd. Regardless, we'll need to write a report up on what we witnessed, and Sarge will want us to look into it using all our available resources."

"Excellent! So, I should test for poison!" Grove declared.

"No," I said. "You need to see if you can sense any other kind of magic, too."

Grove made a face. "Can't you do that?"

"I'm not good enough," I said plainly. "My senses are more homed in on vampires. You're a better choice."

Grove pressed his lips together, then nodded. “You’ll come with me?”

“Yes,” I said. “Tetiana, I want you with April so we’re all in pairs despite being scattered.”

Brody frowned. “Why? You think someone might attack us?”

“No.” I shifted uncomfortably. “It’s just a standard operation within my family.”

I thought this revelation would make Tetiana grimace or make everyone uncomfortable, but my teammates just nodded.

“We’re off,” Binx announced before she sauntered towards the edge of the parking lot, probably planning to walk the perimeter.

“Hey, Binx, wait up!” Brody called as he hurried after her.

“I’ll hang with April and scare those House Tellier wizards if any of them say anything to her.” Tetiana smiled extra wide, flashing her pointed fang teeth.

Grove looked up at me. “You’re not worried she’ll pick a fight?”

I’d turned away from the shrinking fire—I’d intended to lead Grove behind the library to begin our search back there—but I paused and looked back at the blaze.

The House Tellier wizards were still laughing cheesily as they pumped water onto the fire.

“No, I don’t think there will be any problems,” I said. “House Tellier is too occupied with their own bravery.”

“Accurate.” Grove said. “So, are you gonna try and sense magic, too?”

“Yes.” We made it around the edge of the building, which took us out of reach of the heat from the fire and left me so cold my teeth almost chattered. “After I radio Sarge.”

“Understood, Ma’am!”





I STARED at Connor's door, and debated whether I should try texting him instead of knocking.

*It's good practice for approaching the neighbors. Here I go!*

I gave a business-like rap on the door, which made my knuckles smart, then took a step back and waited.

I couldn't hear anything from within the apartment and enough time passed that I wondered if it was possible to knock in a friendly manner, and if that was a skill I should pursue in my spare time.

The door opened, and I stood straighter locking my arms behind my back. "Connor, Hi. You're here."

Connor ran a hand through his dark hair and raised an eyebrow. "Why would you knock at a door and not expect an answer?"

"I kind of assumed you'd be gone," I said. "But on the chance you were here, I was hoping to invite you over for coffee or tea."

Connor braced his forearm against the door frame and looked back. "Unfortunately, I have a few things I need to take care of..." He trailed off, and his face was expressionless for a moment, until a decadent smile twitched on his lips. "How about *you* bring your coffee or what have you over to *my* apartment?"

*Why did he use such weird inflection?*

I stared at him while trying to sort through possible social patterns and explanations, but I was coming up with nothing.

*Must be something I don't get.*

"Okay," I agreed. "Let me go grab my mug. I'll be right back."

I shuffled down the hallway to my apartment and darted in, leaving the door open behind me.

"The door will be unlocked," Connor called after me.

“Got it,” I called as I picked up my steaming mug of coffee. The mug was a gift from my older brother, Alex, and had a cartoon tabby cat with fur the same red color as my hair and a little cartoon bat—who had x’s for eyes—hanging from her mouth painted on the side. (Slayer humor is weird.)

I started for the door, paused, then backtracked and grabbed the communication book I’d purchased from Book Nookery when Connor and I visited the bookstore in October.

*If Connor’s busy, I’ll need something to do or it could feel awkward.*

I tucked the book under my arm, grabbed my keys—my phone was already in my jeans pocket—and locked my door before heading over to Connor’s apartment and hesitantly nudging the door open.

“I’m back,” I called, pausing in the doorway. An awkward feeling that I hadn’t ever felt before with Connor sat on my chest, and I was pretty sure a blush was heating up my pale complexion.

Connor hadn’t invited me over to his place before. In fact, Sunshine was my only Magiford friend whose house I’d seen. Since the invitation was so rare, it felt extra personal.

“Welcome.” Connor stood by a fancy, wooden table, smirking into a wineglass of red liquid, which the prickling feeling in my teeth told me was blood.

His smirk returned my sense of normalcy, so while I bumped his apartment door shut with my hip and looked around, the awkwardness started to fade.

Since he had a corner apartment, his windows were bigger and lined not only the back of the apartment, but the entire outer wall as well. I could see that his patio was also bigger and wrapped around both sides of the building, and he had a bistro set that was currently wet from some rain we’d had earlier in the day.

His kitchen was larger and had nicer cupboards and appliances, and there was a large dedicated dining area—not to mention, unlike my cramped entertainment space that barely

had room for my TV and couch, his living room area was light and airy with lots of room since his apartment was much wider.

There was a darkened, full-sized bathroom right by the doorway where I stood, and three wooden doors—all of them closed—lined the other wall.

*Does he have three bedrooms? I didn't know this building even had three-bedroom apartments!*

“Wow,” I said. “You have a really nice place.”

“You sound surprised.” Connor took a seat at his fancy table and adjusted the thin, sleek laptop he must have been working on before I interrupted him.

“I am,” I said. “I didn't know the building had such a great apartment.”

Connor looked up from the laptop's screen. “I had some minor remodeling done before I moved in.”

“Yeah.” I took extra care to hold my coffee mug without jostling it when I walked across the expensive Turkish carpet rolled out over the apartment's cheap carpet. “I can see that.” I paused by the cluster of comfortable furniture angled to take advantage of the view given by the apartment's many windows. “Is it okay if I actually sit on any of this?”

Connor sat with his back to the wall, so he could watch me without having to turn. “Of course, why wouldn't it be?”

“Because one furniture piece looks like it costs what I make in a month,” I said.

“They're for sitting in.”

“Are you sure about that? They look... decorative.” I stared at the leather couches and armchairs—at least they were modern and didn't look like antiques.

Connor's smirk was back. “Sit.”

I reluctantly chose one of the leather armchairs and sat, my shoulders stiffening when I sank deeper into the chair than expected.

I took a gulp of my coffee, which nearly scalded my mouth, but it was too close to being overfull and I didn't want to spill on Connor's stuff, especially on my first visit.

"Did you bring a *book*?" Connor asked.

I held it up for inspection.

"Why did you bring a book when you're here for coffee?" Connor asked.

I took another noisy sip of my coffee. "I thought you'd be busy with work, so I'd need something to do."

"It's not work," Connor said. "It's my soul-sucking, hatred-inspiring reason for existence. And if you brought over something to do, what's the point of being here?"

"Companionship," I said. "My apartment seemed extra quiet today."

Which was true, but I had also been hoping that hanging out with Connor would help me shake off the nagging feeling that there was something off about the library fire and the House Tellier wizards. The idea had plagued me all night, and while I wasn't giving up that line of thinking, I'd have to wait until muster tonight to find out what the Curia Cloisters thought of the issue. Connor was my distraction in the meantime.

"I see. In that case, I'm delighted you wished to come see me." Connor looked even more satisfied with himself than usual as he swirled his wineglass of blood. Since he wasn't looking at his laptop, I judged that I had enough time to ask a follow up question.

"So... you don't work?"

"*That's* what you took out of all of that? Not that I have a soul-sucking problem, but that I don't have a job?" Connor asked.

"You're a vampire," I pointed out. "You have a natural flair for drama. If it was really that bad you wouldn't have said that. You don't work?"

"I'm a vampire," Connor quoted back at me.

“You don’t magically become independently wealthy as soon as you’re turned.” I nestled down in the leather chair, which loudly squeaked whenever I moved.

“I’ve had time,” Connor said.

“How much time?” I naturally asked, then jostled my mug when I realized how pushy the question was. “Sorry—you don’t have to share.” The professional in me pushed to know more about Connor, but he was a friend—something rare and incredibly valuable for me. I wasn’t about to let my sense of professionalism push me into stepping over his personal boundaries.

Connor smirked as he set his wineglass down on the table. “Time enough so that I don’t have to work.”

That seemed about right.

I took another sip of my coffee and struggled to open my book with one hand without losing my bookmark’s spot.

Connor watched me for a moment, amused. His smile fell away when he looked back at his laptop, and he furrowed his brows in concentration.

*Even if he doesn’t work in the traditional sense of the meaning, whatever it is that he’s going over must be important to him. I wonder what his background is that he can afford to live alone and isn’t worried about money...what Family is he from?*

I’d asked him before, and he’d cut me off. Clearly his vampire origin wasn’t something he wanted to discuss—not that I blamed him. As an unclaimed—a vampire who had no Family—he’d likely experienced something traumatic to make him choose such a dangerous life.

*The best thing I can do is respect his boundaries and wait for him to feel comfortable enough to eventually tell me. I value our friendship too much for anything else.*

I studied him for another second while I sipped my coffee before I settled down and read my book. Soon the only noises in the apartment were the clicking sounds from Connor using the keyboard and wireless mouse, the occasional shuffle when

I turned a page, and the consistent tick-tock from the old-fashioned grandfather clock pushed against the far wall.

Time passed—the bright light cast by afternoon sun turned into a subdued gold color and I finished my coffee while Connor downed the last of his blood drink. When I checked my phone, I saw an hour had passed.

Connor pushed his laptop screen down, shutting it, with a single finger.

“All done?” I stretched—flexing my limbs before I muffled a yawn.

“For now. Do you have to leave for work?” He stood up and sauntered over to me, coming to a stop behind my chair.

“Not yet—I’ve got well over an hour before I need to leave.” I put my bookmark in place, then shut my book and peered up at him. “Unless I’m in your way? I can head out.”

Connor, gazing at his windows, shook his head. “You’re fine.” When he lowered his gaze to me his eyes seemed darker than usual. “But it is downright hilarious you’re so comfortable in my apartment.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I asked.

He rested his forearms on the back of my seat and a low laugh I could feel through the chair escaped from his chest. “No reason.” He slid his right hand down the side of my armchair, then reached out and coiled one of my short, red curls around his index finger, winding it just above the gold ring he frequently wore.

The moment made my heart thump oddly in my chest. I would have blamed it on his vampire pheromones, but those didn’t work on slayers. Most likely, it was that I was used to being affronted by handsome supernaturals but not at such a close range.

“Is there a reason why you’ve been more physically affectionate recently?” I asked, genuinely curious. “Are we at a new level of friendship that introduced it?”

Connor lost his usual confident grin, his expression turning blank as he stared down at me. “What?”

“You’ve been touching me a lot more,” I pointed out. “Arms over the shoulder, touching my hair, that kind of thing.”

He kept on staring at me, not replying.

“I don’t mind it,” I said. “But is this some kind of vampire tradition I don’t know about?”

It wasn’t. At least, as far as slayers knew it wasn’t. But I didn’t think it was some secret tradition—werewolves were the touchy-feely bunch out of supernaturals. A good number of vampires were still scandalized if you flashed your bare ankle.

“Does it matter?” Connor asked, his voice coming out like a purr as he sauntered around my chair, keeping his right hand tucked in my curls, then crouched down in front of me.

“It does if you want me to reciprocate,” I said.

Connor burst into laughter so deep, he had to let go of my hair so he could stay standing without losing his balance.

I waited for some of his laughter to subside before I asked. “Was the idea really so funny?”

Connor plucked my book from my fingers and set it down on the coffee table where I’d left my mug. “It was logical, which I should have expected from you.” He slipped his hands into mine and tugged me into a standing position. “I’m not sure if I should be relieved that you don’t think I’m attempting to seduce you or offended that I am apparently not up to the level you require for romantic entanglements.”

We were so close we almost bumped into each other, which could create a possible accident that, worst case scenario, could end with me getting scratched and bleeding—something to avoid at all costs. So, I let Connor keep ownership of my hands, but crabwalked sideways to put some distance between us.

“I told you before, my focus is on making friends, not starting a romance,” I said.

*Besides, as flighty as Connor is, I doubt he'd be good backup in most fights. He'd probably spend most of the time verbally raking his opponent over hot coals.*

Being good backup was my base requirement for a serious relationship. Not that it mattered. I seriously needed friends, first. Case in point: Connor meant more to me than any prior dating relationship I'd had.

Connor squeezed both my hands—bringing me back to the moment—before he released them and casually strolled to his kitchen. “Do you require a refreshment, Snack?”

I scratched my side, thinking. “Do you have anything besides blood?”

“No.”

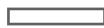
“Then no, I don't.”

Connor rolled his eyes. “Such attitude. It's not like you keep pouches of blood around for me.”

I pressed my lips together. “You know, that's a good point...”

Connor swiped a chilled blood pack from his fridge, then strolled back to where I stood. “So, tell me—or perhaps warn me: What will be your next baking attempt?”

I almost clapped my hands in glee. “I haven't decided yet—I need to look over my family recipes. Do you want to help me pick?”



“THERE HAVE BEEN...DISAGREEMENTS between wizard Houses here at the Curia Cloisters during a recent meeting of the Wizard Council.” Sarge rested his hands on the podium, his eyes sweeping across the meeting room. “Nothing has broken into a physical disagreement and I don't expect trouble given all of the Curia Cloister's defensive measures, but it's best to be aware.” Sarge straightened his pile of papers, his silvery scales—which were normally barely noticeable—gleamed on his cheekbones under the overhead light.



I played with my smoothie travel mug as I studied the whiteboard at the front of the room, which was mostly empty except for a few scrawled notes of warring Packs/Families/Houses, and a photograph of the missing human woman the police had given us a month ago.

*There haven't been many disturbances since we captured Orrin. I'm not sure if that's a sign I was wrong about Gisila, or if she's just biding her time...*

“Additionally,” Sarge continued. “The day squad interrupted a fight between two warring werewolf factions at four o'clock this afternoon. All the werewolves were warned —”

Which was polite speak for the day squad had beaten the fight out of them until the wolves actually listened and stopped snarling.

“But I want you to keep an eye out for werewolf violence tonight as it's probable the Packs might try to finish what they started earlier this afternoon. With any luck, they'll choose to do so outside city limits, away from humans.” Sarge concluded.

I glanced at Brody wondering if he'd be offended, but he was scowling and trying to wipe dusty paw prints off his black pants, curtesy of his Pack.

My gaze strayed to Clarence and Tetiana. Tetiana had taken possession of the deck of cards she, April, Binx, and Juggernaut used, and it sat neatly in its box in front of her. Clarence had joined them today, and he'd spent every moment of it sweating like crazy. Even now, he was still tugging on his cravat.

*He was nervous, but it didn't seem like Tetiana forced him to play...*

I took one last swig of tonight's smoothie—a strawberry red bell pepper concoction that tasted better than I'd expected—finishing it off.

I'd been playing with the idea of coming extra early some day and asking Tetiana and the wizards if I could join the

game, but I wouldn't do that if Clarence wanted to play—he was terrified of me.

“Tonight, I want Team Blood—which is Blood, April, and Binx—to follow up with the library fire. Talk to the librarians and check the premises—you'll need to do it as soon as we break as the library will be closing soon. Once finished, return to your regular patrol pattern.”

# CHAPTER

# EIGHT

*Jad*  
*e*

I blinked in surprise. *He wants us to check out the library? Why? It's not on the whiteboard, so they can't consider it a crime.*

I'd left a notation in my report that I thought it was suspicious House Tellier swooped in, but while the supernatural community avoided flashing magic around in front of humans—we didn't want them realizing just how powerful and dangerous supernaturals really were—helping put out the fire with magic wasn't actually a crime.

Sarge turned to the last page in his packet, and it seemed like he was already moving on, so I raised my hand. "Sir?"

Sarge glanced up, his steely eyes settling on me. "Yes, Blood?"

I hesitated, and carefully chose my words. "May I ask why you want us to check in on the library?"

Sarge nodded. "Captain Reese and I went over the case notes. The movement of the fire is suspicious, and the convenient involvement of House Tellier has raised some questions. As a result, it merits a second look. Officially, however, we're using this as an opportunity to build rapport with the humans—something we need since Orrin dealt a fair amount of damage to public property."

I traced the rim of my slayer mask with my thumb. “Is there something specific you want us to watch for?”

Sarge met my gaze. “I’ll leave that up to your discretion, Blood.”

*Woah. That’s something I’ve never heard before.*

I wasn’t quite sure what to make of it, either. He was Sarge: he was supposed to tell me what to do. I wasn’t in a position to make calls.

*Either way, he wants us to dig, so we’ll dig.*

The meeting room was suffocatingly silent until Sarge cleared his throat. “The division for the two remaining teams is as follows.”

He continued listing out names, but I picked up my mask and started fastening it into place.

*We’ll start with the library as instructed. Hopefully, we’ll get a chance to find out what House Tellier was doing near the library that late at night...*



IT WAS dark and drizzling by the time Binx, April, and I arrived at the library.

Rain spattered us as we elbowed our way through gusts of wind, staggering into the library.

The book drop off station was directly to our right, and crammed next to it was the circulation desk.

I studied the librarians standing at their stations—an older woman with thick, bottle cap glasses wearing a brightly colored mumu despite the cold weather, and a younger woman who seemed to be compensating for her coworker by wearing two thick knit sweaters.

I glanced from the librarians to April and Binx. “April, do you want to take point on speaking to them?”

April blinked at me. “No.”

“No?” I repeated back.

“You’re the team lead,” April said. “You should be the one to speak to them.”

“We don’t have team leads,” I said.

“We’re named Team Blood, aren’t we?” April asked.

*Yes, but that’s because whatever team I’m on is called Team Blood for reasons I’ve never been told!*

“I’m wearing a mask,” I said. “I’ll scare them.”

April shook her head. “Sarge told you to investigate it. We’re following your lead.”

*Okay, there’s just one problem: I am not a people person.*

Somehow, I didn’t think that excuse would fly with April, who was staring at me with a stubbornness I hadn’t seen her previously display.

I turned to look at Binx, whose scowly face was darker than usual—she hated getting rained on—as she flicked water off her task force uniform. (She’d given in and changed to the long-sleeved winter uniform despite being a shifter and running hot.)

*I’m a bad choice, but even I’m more of a people person than Binx unless she’s in her cat form. So, I guess there’s only one choice...*

“Okay,” I finally said. “But if they refuse to give me information due to fear, I want you to take over. We need to talk to them.”

April shrugged. “Sure.”

I turned to face the librarians again and started sweating like crazy.

Both of them looked like perfectly nice people. The older woman in the mumu smiled and waved to every patron who passed by the desk and while her companion looked small and pale in her layers of sweaters, she laughed kindly at a joke a teenager told her.

*I can handle this. They’re librarians. They’re not tricky fae or dangerously charismatic like Ruin. I just have to ask if there*

*was anyone present last night who is currently working. I can do this.*

I took a deep breath, then strode up to the desk.

The older librarian stared at my mask, then took in my uniform and April and Binx flanking me. “Can we help you?” she asked.

I stared at her, my mind freezing up as my anxiety got the better of me.

*Nope. I can't do this.*

I would have turned around, but my body refused to move.

The younger librarian—the one wearing all the sweaters—joined her coworker. “Oh—you’re supernaturals?”

“Yes,” I managed to croak out. “We’re with the Curia Cloisters. We were here yesterday—during the fire.” Encouraged that I’d managed to say two whole sentences, I took a deep breath.

*It's okay—this is for work. I can do a lot if it's for work.*

“I was wondering if we could speak to someone from the library staff about the f-fire?” I had to consciously push my shoulders down so I didn’t hunch up like a turtle.

“Oh, of course. I’ll get Gail—she’s the head of the circ staff. You just hold on one moment, sweetie.” The older librarian smiled at me and sashayed off, her mumu swinging with each step until she disappeared down a corridor that took her into a walled off office area.

The sweater clad junior librarian smiled at us. “Gail told us about the fire at a circ staff meeting this afternoon—it sounded terrifying.” She shivered. “My heart would have stopped seeing the flames so close to our building!”

Her inviting smile told me it was my turn to say something, and this was a good opportunity to start digging.

“I’m aware the fire was put out before it spread to the building, but I hope it didn’t cause any structural damage?” I

gripped my belt with my hands—I figured that was better than wringing them like I wanted to.

“Nope.” The librarian shook her head. “The city already had a contractor come out and check on the wall—no damage. You can go look out—well, maybe wait until the day, I don’t know that you’ll be able to see anything now that it’s dark outside. But there’s a clear line—the fire stopped a foot or two short of the building.”

“How lucky,” I said.

“Here we are—Gail! These are the folks from the Curia Cloisters,” the older librarian proclaimed as she led a shorter woman, who was maybe in her mid-fifties, with short brown hair and friendly brown eyes.

“Yes, we’re here to do a follow up on last night’s fire,” I said. “My team and I were in the neighborhood at the time so we followed the firetrucks to the fire. My supervisor instructed me to check in. Tonight,” I awkwardly added.

The new librarian—Gail—didn’t mind my awkwardness. She ducked out around the circulation counter, greeting us as if we were old friends.

“Hello—welcome back to the Magiford Public Library! I’m glad this time it’s for a happier occasion.”

“Yes. Um.” I shifted awkwardly. “We were sorry to see the damage to your landscape yesterday.”

“Ahhh, yes,” Gail agreed. “Our entire peace garden is gone—which is a shame. We’d just added all the plants this year after a fundraising push, and we’d worked with a landscaper to focus on native plants that would be beneficial for local wildlife—particularly butterflies. It was quite difficult as many native flora that the butterflies prefer are plants traditionally considered weeds—oh, sorry, I’m rattling on! It’s an occupational hazard.”

Gail smiled brightly at us—I was just glad she didn’t seem spooked by my mask. “The gardens may be gone but at least the building and the collection wasn’t harmed, and almost all the statues survived!”

She seemed to expect a reply, so I hurried to chime in. “Right. Absolutely.”

I looked back to see if April or Binx looked at all inclined to add to the conversation. Binx’s eyebrows were still lowered with unhappiness, and April wore a mild smile and wouldn’t look at me.

*That’s a no.*

I hurriedly turned back to Gail. “I was wondering if I could ask a few questions about the fire.”

“Certainly—here, follow me. If we go back through the shelves, there’s a cozy spot where we can sit and talk.” Gail beckoned, then led the way through a well-organized formation of tall bookshelves—all of which stretched taller than I could reach.

Binx and April fell in line behind me. The deeper we went into the shelves, the quieter the library got. The occasional beep from the machines used to check out books grew muffled, replaced with a hushed silence of reverence that was interrupted occasionally by the sound of a book being pulled off a shelf or the crinkle of a page turning.

Gail led us out of the stacks and along a wall, pausing when we reached a hexagonal shaped room that was molded around an enormous gas fireplace and stone mantel.

It was their periodical room with racks of newspapers and magazines pressed against the wall and plush green couches arranged in the center. A man wearing bright blue robes was splayed out over one of the couches, a newspaper tented over his head. The newspaper hid his face so I couldn’t see much besides gray hair and the bottom of what had to be a very long gray beard. The paper rattled as the reader inhaled and then exhaled the loudest snore I’d ever heard. His hands resting on his chest were knobby and skinny.

Gail smiled fondly at the snorer wearing the newspaper. “Ah—I forgot, one of our faithful patrons who frequents this room is here tonight. No matter—there’s another spot we can use!”



She led us off through the shelves again, zig zagging to the opposite side of the library. She stopped at a giant bay window—which showed the inky night—and sat down on a blue overstuffed chair.

There was a couch, a matching chair to the one Gail had taken, and a coffee table arranged between the three.

Binx and April immediately claimed the couch, leaving the chair for me, but I didn't like the idea of sitting down even if this was for a casual interview. (Occupational hazard from my slayer days.)

Instead, I awkwardly stood at the open end of the coffee table.

“There we are! Now, ask me whatever you like,” Gail said.

“Do you mind if I take some notes?” I pulled my cellphone out of a pocket.

“Not at all. Go right ahead!”

“T-thank you.” I opened my notes app, and felt my awkwardness fade away as my work mode switched on. “I know the building was closed, but do you have any idea how the fire started?”

“None.” Gail shook her head, making her oversized dangly earrings—stacks of books shaped out of clay—bob. “We have security cameras, but they're all pointed at the entrance and emergency exits. We reviewed the footage this morning, and you can see when the fire starts—it casts light on the dimmed entrance—but that's it.”

*It must have caught on fire fast for there to be a visible difference... unless that was just when the fire got big enough to notice?*

“How was the fire department notified?” I asked.

“A patron who lives close enough to see the library from his house got up to let his dog outside and saw the fire, so he called the fire department. I shudder to think what would have happened if he hadn't seen it!” Gail theatrically shivered, but the worry that clouded her kind brown eyes was real.

I tapped away on my cellphone. “Nobody reported seeing anything else?”

“No.” Gail said. “At least no one has said anything yet. It’s possible someone might come forward since the newspaper did an article about the fire today. Unless... did the supernaturals hear something?” Her gaze flickered from me to Binx and April.

*Oh, I think that means I screwed up by going straight to the serious questions. I am not good with interviews!*

Binx was looking around but April gave me an encouraging smile, so I was still on interview duty despite the blunder.

“No,” I said. “I was instructed to check in with you by my supervisor—to follow up so we can have the complete story in our notes.”

“The Wizards at House Tellier won’t get in trouble for helping us, will they?” Gail asked.

“No,” I said. “Supernaturals are allowed to use magic if it means saving someone—libraries included,” I said.

*Wait, that didn’t make any sense—libraries aren’t people.*

Gail was delighted by my blunder. She laughed and some of the worry seeped out as she sat more comfortably in her chair. “Indeed—libraries are practically persons on their own! They have the thoughts and writings of generations.” Her smile faded, and she added. “But I am glad for House Tellier’s assistance.” I was puzzled—she didn’t sound quite as happy and joyous as she had a moment ago, then she added, “It’s the second time they have helped the library.”

I paused, my fingers hovering over my phone. “Oh?”

“Yes. They donated a statue to the library to put in the peace gardens.”

April stirred on the couch. “When was this?”

I swear it was like the skies opened up and angels wept in relief—I wasn’t the only one responsible for the questions anymore!

“In the beginning of summer—it was right as we were finishing the fundraising push,” Gail said. “The statue was destroyed in the fire, unfortunately. Thankfully, all our other statues survived.”

“What was it a statue of?” I asked.

“It was a large cube with deep cracks within it—about the size of this coffee table,” Gail said. “It was called *Creativity* and was supposed to represent a bursting imagination, filled so full the cube—which represented the restraints we put upon it—was cracking.”

“Did they *say* what it was supposed to represent?” April asked.

Based on the jagged tone to her voice, I was starting to suspect her questions were coming from her House’s hatred of House Tellier.

*Oh, well. She’s still thinking of good questions.*

“No... now that you mention it, I don’t believe they did.” Gail paused, her eyes crinkling around the edges.

*She’s uncomfortable with House Tellier, and I don’t think it’s just because they’re wizards as she seems fine with us.*

“How did they give you the statue?” I asked.

Once again I didn’t realize I hadn’t done the best job phrasing my question until it popped out of my mouth. Even Binx raised an eyebrow at this one.

Thankfully, Gail settled back in her chair. “It was very... sudden,” she said. “They showed up with the statue in the bed of a truck and dropped it off the day before we ended the fundraising.”

“Wait, they didn’t tell you about it beforehand?” April asked.

Gail shook her head. “No. We weren’t aware they were planning to give us a donation until they arrived and asked to place the statue in a prominent place inside the garden.”

*That’s suspicious.*

It was especially odd considering House Tellier had been vocal in its beliefs that humans were unimportant.

They weren't anti-human, but they didn't care about them. Supposedly, they used to give Elite Bellus—the wizard leader of the Midwest—a lot more grief about his desire to work with humans.

*Then Adept Medeis became his protegee, and they magically shut up. Adept Medeis probably forced their hand after they failed in their bid to help a different member of House Medeis become the Adept.*

It had been a huge scandal as House inheritance was never meddled with. Wizard Houses were somewhat sentient and had their own magic—and ideas.

*If the wizards of House Tellier were stupid enough to mess around in the inheritance of an entirely different House, just what kind of sketchy behavior are they capable of pulling?*

I exchanged looks with April—or rather, I tried to, but she couldn't see me giving her a look with my mask on.

“That was very kind of you to take the statue even though they hadn't asked you about it,” April said.

Gail smiled. “It is rather rare for supernaturals to be involved in human matters. No supernaturals have helped the library before.” Her kind expression froze, and even though I didn't have vampire-hearing I was pretty sure her heart sped up. “I'm so sorry, I've misspoke! We do occasionally receive monetary donations from the Curia Cloisters, which we are very thankful for!”

Gail looked from me, to April, to Binx. Binx's expression had relaxed enough that she gave the librarian a little nod, which seemed to reassure Gail enough that she leaned back in her chair. “What I meant to say is *individual* supernaturals aren't donating to the library—which they don't need to feel obligated to do as I imagine you all contribute to the sums the Cloisters donate. We are very honored whenever supernaturals choose to use the library—we actually have a few wizards on staff.”

*She's saying they took the donation because it was the first time individual supernaturals donated anything—even if it was a weird statue.*

“You said the statue burned in the fire?” I asked. “What stone was it made of?”

“I’m afraid I’m not certain what kind of material it was,” Gail said. “I do know it was hollow—that was why they could carry it with just a few wizards. Unfortunately, that’s also probably why the statue was so easily destroyed. Between the artistic cracks and the hollow core, it seems like the fire devoured it. Perhaps it was made of marble—you know it was discovered in Rome that ancient statues were often broken and then burned in a lime-kiln to make lime—oh, there I go spouting facts again! I do beg your pardon.” Gail laughed breezily, and her book earrings clattered with the happy sound.

I picked at a detail that bothered me. “It was the only statue destroyed in the fire?”

“Correct. The other sculptures in the garden were bronze-cast statues that were donated when the library was built,” Gail said. “They’re made of real bronze, so they are very durable.”

“I see.” I glanced at April, but she seemed to be stewing and wasn’t inclined to ask any more questions. “Then—I know it’s dark and we might not be able to see anything—do you mind if we take a look around the wreckage?”

“By all means, please do.” Gail stood up, a wrinkle of worry connecting her eyebrows. “I hope you’ll tell us if you find anything. The firemen said they found no proof of arson, so we have virtually no idea how the fire started.”

“Yes.” I nodded as I tucked my hands behind my back. “We will.”

*It's not very likely, though, given that Brody and Binx smelled all over the place last night, but I suppose Binx might pick something up with the fire out and less smoke in the area.*

Binx must have sensed my thoughts as she eyed me as she rocked to her feet, then peered at the librarian and sighed. “I’m

a shifter,” she gruffly volunteered. “I’ll see if I can smell anything. If a shifter can’t, then there was nothing there.”

This seemed to reassure Gail, whose shoulders dropped. “Thank you. I hate to think the fire was started for any nefarious reason—and I deeply doubt such a thing would happen. But it is delightful to have supernaturals extend so much help for this incident.”

I shifted my feet, feeling more than a little unchivalrous—supernaturals were only involved because the whole thing was sketchy, and we didn’t want humans fearing us.

*It’s self-serving. And I can’t even offer my help as a normal citizen since I’m hiding the fact that I’m a vampire slayer.*

The intercom speaker system in the library briefly buzzed before a mechanical voice announced, “The library will be closing in thirty minutes.”

“We will head outside to check the garden, then.” I awkwardly felt along my belt, finding the tiny pouch that had some business cards with the task force’s contact information on it. “Here. If something new happens, contact us.”

“I will.” Gail took the card and smiled. “Thank you so much. Have a good evening—and I hope to see you here again, as a patron.”

We said our goodbyes before trekking outside to the ruined garden.

The drizzle had let up, but it left puddles in the dips in the asphalt.

Between the parking lot lights and the spotlights, the gardens were decently lit up, but my night vision still made it easier to see as I checked over the ruin. All plant life had been burnt to ash. When I set a booted foot on some crispy-fried-grass, it set off a little plume of ash twirling through the air despite the dampness, and the smell of smoke was still so overwhelming it made my eyes water.

“Brody and I didn’t smell anything besides wizard magic last night.” Binx followed behind me. “But even after the fire was out, the firefighters wouldn’t let us close to the

wreckage.” She paused, then added, her voice low and rough, “My sense of smell isn’t nearly as good as his, so even if there is something here I might not catch it.”

I headed deeper into the garden, noting the damage so I could add it into my report. The patches of grass would grow back, but I was pretty sure the burnt husks that had once been bushes were dead, though maybe the beds of burnt flowers would return next year. “It’s fine.” I said in response to Binx’s statement.

Her sense of smell wasn’t as good as a werewolf’s, but it was still enormously better than a typical human’s, and it would surely be enough to scent the place out.

We passed by one of the bronze statues that had survived the fire. It looked gloomy and kind of scary with all the shadows the invasive darkness of night had cast on it. I studied it—looking for signs of damage—then I glanced back at Binx and April.

April was looking around, but Binx was staring at the ground and had her arms wrapped around her waist.

*Okay, that’s not her regular look, or her ‘working’ expression. She’s reacting to my ‘it’s fine.’ I must have messed up. Maybe I need to say more about what I was thinking. Binx isn’t usually a talker, so the fact that she even said something is an indication she was feeling...something.*

“Your sense of smell is still vastly superior even if it’s not on par with a werewolf’s. If there are any trace scents that haven’t been overpowered by smoke, you’ll catch them. And...” I leaned backwards so I could speak to my teammates in a lowered voice. “I’m more concerned about House Tellier’s actions.”

“Yep,” April immediately chimed in. “They’re up to something.”

Binx relaxed, dropping her arms. “Well...I can probably still scent out wizard magic. But the overwhelming smoke smell is going to make it hard to tell if they dropped by before the fire started. You can follow a scent trail by the way it fades

—that’s how you know if something is fresh or older, by following the stronger scent.”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to pick it up,” April said, her voice warm with confidence.

“Yeah,” I lamely added, not sure what else I should say.

Binx nodded, then abruptly peeled off from us lifting her nose into the air.

I followed the charred paths—you could kind of see the paths that had previously been marked out by woodchips as some blackened woodchips still dotted them.

April followed me, and we stopped when we reached a charred empty pedestal.

“This must have been where the statue that House Tellier donated was placed,” April said.

I nodded, then—remembering I needed to keep practicing—added a belated, “Yes.” I paused. “I didn’t know stone statues can burn.”

“Fire can damage some stone, but only if the fire gets hot enough.” April squatted down and frowned at the pedestal that gleamed with leftover rain. “The problem is that I don’t know if the fire was hot enough because how did the stone pedestal make it through?”

*She’s right. If the fire was so hot that it burnt the statue to a crisp so nothing was left—unlikely—the pedestal would be gone, and I think everything except the bronze statues would have disintegrated.*

*Was the statue designed to burn? There’d be no point to that...unless it somehow started the fire? Why would House Tellier want to start a fire at the human library?*

I watched April inspect the area as I attempted to sift through my disorganized thoughts. “Could the statue have started the fire?” I paused, trying to figure out a better way to phrase my question. “I mean, could...could the statue have been used to start the fire?”



“It’s possible.” April tapped the char marks on the pedestal stone. “Gail said it was hollow and there were obvious cracks in it. It’s possible they could have stuck a fae charm in it to set it off but I didn’t pick up any trace of fae magic at the fire, and I’m not feeling any now.”

“Couldn’t they have used wizard magic?” I asked. “If the statue was hollow, they could have manifested flames inside it, creating an oven of sorts.”

“Yeah,” April agreed. “It’d be easier since you’d be working in a smaller space. It would take a couple of wizards to pour enough magic in to get it hot enough to destroy the stone and burst out.”

Thinking back to the fire, I narrowed my eyes. “Would five wizards be enough to do it?”

April nodded. “Yep.”

*How convenient that House Tellier had five wizards show up to put the fire out. But I still don’t get what they’d gain by starting and then putting out a fire.*

They had to be working some kind of angle. Even if we ignored the fire, I’d witnessed some odd behavior from House Tellier wizards over the last few weeks.

My mind busy, my fingers automatically checked over my weapons, the pads of my gloved fingers tracing across my belt. “Do wizard Houses usually have a lot of money?”

## CHAPTER

## NINE

*Jad*  
*e*

April stood up and wiped her hands off on the thighs of her navy-blue pants. “As a House? Not really. We all must pay some basic dues for house upkeep—for fixes and replacements around the House. The House can repurpose some things, but it still needs to be fed materials to do it, and sometimes professionals need to be brought in.”

“But...um.” I paused, then blurted out, “Are wizards rich?”

“No,” April said. “Why?”

“How did House Tellier have enough money for this?” I pointed to the empty pedestal.

April frowned. “I don’t know. But it was just a one-time thing...”

I shook my head. “Last month House Tellier also sponsored a fireworks display at the supernatural fall market. They’re throwing around money—for the sake of humans. I didn’t think as a House they particularly liked humans?”

“No.” April planted a hand on the ground.

The sensation of heat followed by ice brushed my mind—my mental impression of wizard magic—before April’s black wizard tattoo surfaced on her skin and blue fire wrapped around her fingertips.

“In general, wizards don’t hate humans—we’re too closely related to them for that,” April explained. “But House Tellier doesn’t really care for them—they’re more focused on wizards. They are obsessed with maintaining power despite magic dying out—that’s why they picked a fight with the Adept of my House years ago.”

“Ahhhh,” I said.

Magic was dying—all supernatural society knew it.

Fewer werewolves and even smaller numbers of vampires survived the transformation from human to supernatural. The fae realm was shrinking, and wizards’ magical power was dwindling more and more with each generation.

Slayers weren’t terribly affected by the change—we didn’t have usable magic, so our family lines weren’t bothered. Possibly the one way it touched us was that with fewer newly turned vampires—who were often very dangerous because they didn’t understand their limits—we didn’t have as many pro-bono cases. We’d also been forced to expand so that we now offered our services to shifters, wizards, and pretty much all supernaturals except for fae.

But in general, I’d been isolated from the panic until I’d come to Magiford and seen the desperation in person.

*This means House Tellier’s actions are even more off brand than I thought.*

“So... House Tellier is spending money wizards don’t usually have on humans—who they as a House don’t usually pay attention to,” I summarized.

April held her hand out, using the blue flames to shed light on the ashy ground. “It sounds like it.”

I nodded, mentally filing the fact away.

*I also saw a House Tellier member meeting with a vampire. That’s too many suspicious behaviors for them to be innocent.*

“They seem to also have suspiciously perfect timing,” April said.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Since they seem to be suddenly flush with cash...do you think they’ve been paying an oracle?”

Oracles were a subset of wizards, who—like slayers—didn’t have control over elemental magic. Instead, they could—in limited and specific ways—tell the future.

It was a rare power—and one that had inspired a lot of bloodshed within the supernatural community over the centuries. As a result, oracles were guarded and protected but if you had the right connections—and enough money—you could purchase a prediction from one. There was no guarantee it’d be helpful or even understandable, but it was an option available to the upper echelon of supernaturals.

“There’s no way,” April said, dismissing the idea. “Even if they’re suddenly spending more money, the funds needed to purchase a prediction are astronomical. Not to mention, there’s no way they’d have the proper connections.”

I nodded my agreement.

*The convenient timing is still odd. There must be something to it.*

Aloud, I said, “I’m going to walk the perimeter.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” April said.

I paused awkwardly in the middle of turning around. April was older than I was, so there was no reason for her to call me ma’am unless she meant it out of respect. It seemed Sunshine was right and that my team held me with respect, but how was I supposed to react to that when I was just their teammate? Since I didn’t know what to say, I concluded it was better to let it go and slipped off.

I edged around the garden’s perimeter finding plenty of charred remains of plants, but I didn’t find anything unexpected. I was going to smell so strongly of smoke that I’d need to shower before I went home—a vampire’s sense of smell was nothing compared to a shifters, but I wasn’t going to risk Connor asking why I smelled like I’d been cleaning chimneys.

I paced up and down the rectangular plot that had been burned, and the dampness from the rain made a layer of moisture on my boots that the ash clung to. Besides the garden, a few patches of lawn had burnt up—the fire had definitely spread out from the garden.

*But it didn't jump to the building... was it because the library is made of brick? Or did House Tellier control the fire to prevent it spreading?*

If the fire was made of their flames, they could have magically controlled it. But then someone would have been able to sense the use of wizard magic. Not me, but as a fae Grove would be sensitive to magic and Brody should have smelled it.

*Except we were focused on the fire, and when House Tellier showed up they used their magic fast, so the area brimmed with wizard magic shortly after our arrival.*

When I got to the wall of the library, I could see a line that demarked where the fire had stopped burning.

Staring at the obvious border, I shook my head. *There's no way that's natural.*

I turned and peered out over the burnt gardens and the parking lot that extended beyond it.

The garden—which was a pretty small plot given it had to be wedged into a pre-existing space instead of being designed when the library was constructed years ago—was somewhat sheltered by the library itself, so there was only one direction anyone could have witnessed the fire from and the blaze had started fairly late at night.

*This could all be a coincidence, but the chances seem low. I just don't get why House Tellier would choose to burn down a garden.*

Binx joined me, rubbing her nose. “I’m not smelling much—the stink of smoke and wizard magic is about all I can get.” She squinted for a moment, then sneezed into her elbow.

I stared at the ground—it was easier to talk when I wasn’t looking my teammates in the face. “All wizard magic smells

the same to you, correct?”

“Yeah. I can’t smell a difference between April’s magic and the magic House Tellier used to put the fire out.” She paused, then added, “Except the scent of House Tellier’s magic is almost gone. Brody and I both smelled it last night.”

Mentally reviewing the facts we’d put together for the case notes, I nodded. “And you only smelled wizard magic? No fae magic?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t get here until House Tellier was already using their magic.” Binx turned so she could watch April as the wizard picked her way around burned shrubbery making her way towards us with her magical flames bobbing around her.

“Brody would have smelled wizard magic if it had been used in the fire when we arrived,” I muttered to myself.

“Maybe, but maybe not,” Binx said. “The humans refused to let us within the perimeter last night, and smoke is a potent scent. He might not have been able to smell it if he didn’t think to look for it.”

“But what about Grove?” I asked. “As a fae, he should have sensed it if House Tellier was controlling the fire.”

April clenched her fingers in a fist, putting her blue flames out, and her black wizard tattoo faded. “He would have had a very narrow window of time to think to check into it given that House Tellier arrived at the scene on your heels and immediately busted out their magic.” She checked to make sure her light brown hair hadn’t slipped from the neat bun she’d pulled it into for the night and glanced at me out of the corner of her eyes. “Do you think House Tellier is responsible for this?”

“There’s no proof,” I said. “Yet.”

“Okay, then what’s next?” Binx started to put her hands in the pockets of her pants, but the sky dropped a few leftover raindrops on her head, so she hunched her shoulders up in displeasure first.

I cocked my head, confused.

“You said yet,” Binx said. “That means you still think there’s a chance we could get some.”

I stared at Binx, simultaneously impressed that Binx had picked up on that detail and touched that she knew me so well that she was able to make such an accurate prediction.

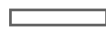
*She cares enough to pick up on my habits—that means a lot. I’ve got to figure out how to get everyone to stop with the ma’am thing, then we could be friends!*

“Blood?” April asked.

“Yes.” I shook my head, clearing my mind and focusing. “I’m going to radio Sarge and ask for clearance to visit an additional location.”

“Oh?” Binx’s eyes gleamed in the low light. “What location?”

I rolled my shoulders back. “I’d like to visit House Tellier.”



TWENTY MINUTES later I stood on the sidewalk of a human neighborhood, studying the mismatched building that was House Tellier. The magical abode could best be described as “farmhouse meets American colonial architecture,” and it stood out with its orange and yellow trim—House Tellier colors.

It had a fence—a rustic, wooden thing that only was about hip high—and a gravel driveway, with stone pavers that branched off from the public sidewalk and led up to the House’s front doors.

*Is the House going to be okay with us approaching?*

I hadn’t dealt much with wizard Houses, but I knew the basics: they were sentient and the wizards living within were all sworn to it and in return received magical protection granted by the House.

Houses were protective of their wizards, so I wasn’t sure House Tellier was going to like me—a member of a

supernatural race whose entire existence was based on violence—prancing up to it.

“So.” April said, standing next to me and awkwardly playing with the braid she’d plaited her light brown hair into. “I didn’t say this before because I didn’t want Sarge to refuse your request, but I can’t set foot on House Tellier land.”

I swiveled to face her. “Sorry?”

April dropped the braid of her hair. “There’s bad blood between House Tellier and House Medeis, and if I walk up there, there’s a pretty good chance they’ll somehow misconstrue it and it’ll cause a wizard war.”

“They couldn’t do that if you’re here for work... could they?” Binx cracked her knuckles as she contemplatively studied the House.

“Maybe not, but I don’t want to take the chance. If Blood is right about House Tellier, we need to do everything by the book so they can’t complain and wriggle their way out of punishment. Again.” April stared at the House, unemotional, but the way she squeezed her fingers into a tight fist said maybe she wasn’t as calm as she looked.

I pressed my lips together as I weighed out the situation. “Okay.”

April relaxed, the tight lines around her mouth easing. “So I’ll stay here, and you and Binx will go in?”

I contemplatively studied the House, which was painted white and had bright orange shutters. “No.”

Now it was April’s turn to abruptly turn in my direction. “No?”

“It would be smartest for me to approach the House alone,” I said.

Binx folded her arms across her chest and stared at me.

“Why?” April asked for both of them. “The night of the fire you wanted us to go out in pairs.”



“Yes, which is why if things are that bad between House Medeis and House Tellier, you shouldn’t be alone when we’re this close to their territory,” I pointed out. “Should the worst happen, we’ll need a second testimony to verify yours so House Tellier couldn’t claim you’re prejudiced.”

Binx raised her hand. “Question. Do we think House Tellier is a bunch of murderers?”

“No,” I said.

Binx once again crossed her arms over her chest. “Then why do you think there’s even a *worst* in this possible scenario?”

I adjusted the gloves on my hands. “Habit?”

Binx squinted—as I was learning was her tell that she was confused. “From your slayer days?”

“Er...yes.”

“Hmmm.” Binx turned to look at House Tellier.

April checked her shoulder holster—identical to my own; she was the only other squad member who carried a gun. “If you are that concerned, perhaps we should call for backup and wait until another team comes before approaching.”

“Not necessary,” I said. “I’m just approaching them to ask a few questions about the fire. I will remain on the front porch, even if they invite me in. I will remain within eyesight. If the interview raises any questions, Sarge will want to talk to them in a more official capacity.”

“Uh-huh.” That came from Binx, who was now squinting at the House. “So only you get to plan for the *worst-case scenario*. Got it.”

“House Tellier isn’t likely to do anything to me,” I pointed out. “I’m a slayer with the task force. But there is a much higher risk that a House Tellier wizard returning home would see April alone and take offense to her presence.”

April and Binx exchanged looks.

“Fine,” April said. “But we’ll be waiting on standby. Anything suspicious and we’re calling it in before we join you, guns blazing.”

“Understood.” I took a step toward the pavers that would lead me up to the front door.

*I’d like to be better briefed on wizard behavior, but the risks are low that they’d attack a Curia Cloister’s employee. Wait—I should try to even the chances that I’ll actually get useful information!*

I paused and looked back at April. “Is there anything you suggest saying to make them lower their guard?”

“Oh.” April slightly relaxed and adjusted the scarf she had tied around her neck to ward off the autumn chill. “Say something about admiring their heroics yesterday. The Tellier Heir is arrogant beyond belief. He—and the rest of the wizards in the House—will eat that up.”

I nodded. “Understood. Thanks.”

“Sure.” April waved, and for a moment I felt the weird space that the team’s so-called respect for me created waver. She wasn’t as formal, and—for a change of pace—I wasn’t the one left feeling awkward!

*Hmm, asking for advice does something. I need to remember that.*

I stepped onto the House Tellier property and paused with both feet on the first paver.

Nothing happened.

The House radiated wizard magic, but the magic didn’t flare. The house also hadn’t used the shrubbery to ensnare me or dropped the pavers through the ground to trip me—things I’d heard Houses were capable of.

*So, the House doesn’t think I’m a threat? That’s a great start.*

I strode up to the front door, keeping my stride even and unhurried—trying to further communicate that I wasn’t a

threat, and I wasn't nervous—which might make the House *think* I was a threat.

The familiarity of the situation—measuring out danger and watching for signs of a threat—made my work mode settle effortlessly over me, so hopefully I'd be able to speak smoothly.

I climbed the steps of the front porch, and although the wooden structure creaked under my boots, I still didn't feel any change in magic. I made it to the front door and pressed the doorbell. A second passed before I heard the corresponding deep toll of a church bell rattle the front door.

The door flew open, and a wizard—wearing a gray jacket that was trimmed with House Tellier colors in yellow and orange and bore a patch of the House insignia on the coat's breast pocket—emerged. She leaned against the doorframe and yawned. “Whaddayawant?” She paused when she took in first my mask, and then my uniform. “Woah. A slayer? With the Curia Cloisters?”

“Yes.” I clasped my hands behind my back—another attempt to show I was relaxed and didn't have my hands in an ideal spot to pull any of my weapons. “I'm with the Magic Response Task Force. I—”

The door slammed shut in my face.

I blinked. *I guess it's not just House Medeis they don't get along with. I didn't even get a chance to screw up.*

Raised voices leaked through the door, but they were muted so I couldn't make out any specific words. They sounded frightened, which was very interesting.

I rang the doorbell again.

There were several loud thuds, and this time when the door opened a male wizard held the door. He was built like an ox—wide through the shoulders, and surprisingly muscular for a wizard—and his eyes had a sharpness I didn't like.

I recognized him from the fire—he was Gideon Tellier.

*Woah—they went and got someone high up in the pecking order, but why? I didn't even have a chance to tell them why I'm here.*

It was probably best if I pretended that I didn't recognize him—I wanted him to underestimate me and my abilities.

“Hello. I'm with the Curia Cloister's Magic Response Task Force. May I ask who I'm speaking with?” My slayer training that had focused on fooling and distracting vampires kicked in, and my voice came out much smoother than when I'd talked to Gail the librarian.

The wizard looked me up and down, wariness oozing off him. “I'm Gideon Tellier—Heir to House Tellier.”

Internally, I was chuffed. This was a unique opportunity to enact April's advice and, hopefully, lower Gideon's guard. Externally, I kept my body language bland and unconcerned.

“Heir Gideon,” I began, keeping my voice light. “I wanted to thank you for your heroic actions at the fire by the Magiford Public Library last night.”

Gideon leaned against the doorframe, scrunching his mouth shut like a drawstring bag, but I saw his eyes widen with something like greed. “Oh? Yeah, we were pretty awesome.”

*April was right!*

“I happened to be there with several members of my team,” I said, pitching my voice higher as I settled into my role. “It was so impressive to see how the House Tellier wizards worked together to control the fire.”

It was almost annoying that I could settle into a role so easily and how smoothly I could talk if it was for work, while in my normal life I was as good at communicating as a burnt-out lightbulb.

Gideon's chest swelled, and he grinned—smiling so big I could see his gums. “Yeah, House Tellier wizards are just that strong and talented,” he said. “Saving the library was no big deal.”

“How did you hear about the fire?” Since I was wearing my mask, I had to put a lot of awe in my voice to make up for the lack of facial expression.

I was worried I had overdone it, but Gideon just held a hand over his heart. “We heard the firetrucks and decided to follow in case we could help. As wizards, we have domain over fire. If there was a fire, they’d need our help.”

“Oh, wow—so it was an impulse decision? How brave of you!” I paused for a second, trying to pick out the best way to phrase my second question so Gideon wouldn’t realize I was questioning him. “Where were you when you heard the trucks? You arrived so quickly, I hate to think what would have happened if you’d been far away and hadn’t arrived in time!”

“Oh, we were just a few blocks away. There’s a park near the library—I was hanging out with my friends there.”

“That’s lucky,” I said.

*And illegal. All the city parks close at sunset. But that’s a human law, and not something that concerns the task force.*

What bothered me most was the timeline. I knew the park they were talking about. There was no possible way it had taken House Tellier wizards more time to get from that park to the library than it had taken my team to go from downtown to the library.

“Did you have to do anything special to put out the fire?” I asked. “It must have taken a lot of power since the human firemen couldn’t contain it!”

Up went Gideon’s chin as I got to watch him visibly inflate with his ego. “Oh, no, nothing special. We House Tellier wizards are just that skilled. I happen to be particularly good with understanding fire, and I have *a lot* of magic.”

The size of his wizard’s tattoo said otherwise but with him rattling on and so deeply immersed in his own greatness, I could take a risk and look back at the sidewalk.

Binx and April were still there—leaning against our car as they watched. I was touched to see Binx had her radio out and

ready, and I thought April was holding her cellphone. I couldn't look long enough to confirm as I had to make sure the Heir thought he had my total attention and admiration.

I whipped back around to face Gideon again, hoping he hadn't noticed my peek. "Wow," I said, dragging the word out for emphasis.

Gideon started gesturing with his hands as he kept talking. "Human capabilities can't possibly measure up to House Tellier, so it's no surprise it wasn't until we arrived to help that the fire was put out. I suppose you could say it was a lucky thing for the humans we're that skilled!"

*Yeah, there's no way a wizard who was genuinely concerned about humans would talk like this. This whole thing is sketchier than my baking, which raises a few more questions about their recent activities.*

My vampire slayer abilities kicked in, sputtering to life as I felt the presence of a vampire.

The sensation was close enough that I tried to casually look around the porch and even glance back at the street again, but I didn't see anyone there besides Binx and April.

*Maybe a vampire is passing through a nearby street? Vamps don't usually hang out in this part of town, though.*

While I did my visual check, I made sure to compliment Gideon. "That's so cool. You're so great." I sounded like an inspirational poster, but Gideon was so full of it that he didn't even notice how fake my praise was.

"I am great," Gideon acknowledged, nodding sagely.

Binx was probably gagging back on the sidewalk—able to hear thanks to her shifter hearing—but I wanted to extra butter Gideon up before I risked asking my next question.

"You know, I was at the supernatural fall market in September," I said. "I saw the House Tellier wizards use their magic to put out the burning fireworks display."

"Really?" Gideon asked, his chin came down so he could study me. "You were there?"

*Ah, so he's not as stupid as he might come off because this made him wary.*

“Yeah,” I said. “Everyone was panicking—it could have turned into a stampede. The humans were lucky House Tellier was there to put the fire out.”

“Yes.” Gideon nodded, and some of the tension in his stance melted away. He was relaxed, but that sharpness was back in his eyes—I’d touched a nerve somehow. “That was a little trickier since it involved explosives instead of a regular fire.”

“But you wizards handled it in minutes. It was very impressive.” Although my voice was adoring, I watched Gideon with an intensity he hopefully didn’t feel since my face was hidden by my mask. I took in the steadiness of his breath, the way he casually leaned against the door, and the way he looked back inside his House.

*He's growing bored. I'm going to lose him soon. I better wrap this up fast.*

I could still also faintly feel the vampiric presence, which I wanted to check out.

“I saw the fireworks were sponsored by House Tellier—that was so generous!” I chattered, squeezing my words tight so I could get more out. “The library also mentioned House Tellier donated a statue to the library earlier in the season—when they were fundraising for the garden. That was really kind of House Tellier, and it set such a great example for supernaturals. The generosity is absolutely inspiring!”

I didn’t know what to expect—maybe more puffed-up pride about House Tellier’s apparent wealth or maybe some posturing about humans needing all kinds of help, including financial, because they were so helpless. What I got, however, was a frown and furrowed brows.

“Yeah.” The word was clipped, and Gideon eyed me again.

“It’s great that House Tellier is so successful,” I said.

“It is,” Gideon said. “Is that all you wanted?”

“Well...” I paused, trying to wrack my brain for something else to say, when I felt a stir of magic.

*That’s wizard magic. Is it Gideon or the House?*

The House could be picking up on Gideon’s emotions and regard me as a threat—I wasn’t sure I’d be able to tell a difference between the two.

Gideon briefly turned to look back behind him, and I saw a wizard—the woman who had initially answered the door—peering down the hallway. Orange colored fire burned in her palms, and the stark black of the wizard tattoo stuck out against the paleness of her cheek.

*Oh—that’s not good.*

Whatever I’d stumbled on, it was bad enough to make the wizards raise their magic.

“I guess that is everything,” I said. “I just wanted to thank you for your service, so I’ll get going.” I took a step away, doing my best to rapidly disengage without raising any more suspicion—which would have been easier if I knew just what it was that I’d said to set them off in the first place!

The female wizard hurried down the hallway and stood at Gideon’s back, still holding a ball of fire as she peered past him to watch me.

“Thanks again!” I waved to them as I backed up, unwilling to put my back to them.

Gideon stepped outside the House—not a good sign. “Hey, what did you say your name was?”

“Oh.” I wasn’t panicked—I’d been drilled too much to panic over something like this—but I did start bracing myself for a fight as I kept backing up. “I didn’t say my name—it’s slayer practice not to.”

*Hopefully, Binx is hearing this and has made the call for backup.*

“I think you should share it.” Gideon held up his hand.



I made it to the stairs of the porch. “No,” I said. “I really don’t think I should.”

Fire engulfed Gideon’s fist and his wizard tattoo—which was spikey and more of a brown color than the typical black—spread across his cheek. “Let me put it this way, you *will* be making an exception.”

“Now that absolutely was a threat. I think it would be well within your rights to pull your gun and shoot him, Slayer.”

*No.*

I recognized that voice, that dark, smug, *dangerous* voice.

*But how did he get here?*

## CHAPTER

## TEN

*Jad*  
*e*

I turned in the direction of the voice and, sure enough, Ruin, aka Considine Maledictus, was seated on a wooden rocking chair positioned on the left side of the porch. His hood was pulled up and he had his legs crossed at the ankles as he lounged in the rocker, the image of deadly sophistication.

Considine lazily waved to me, and his chair creaked when he rocked.

Terror twisted my heart—not terror of Considine, but worse. Terror, because the second I saw Considine something in me eased.

*He's not backup! I can't let my guard down!*

“Who are you?” Gideon barked as he and his friend left the doorway to stalk in Considine’s direction.

Considine stood—he towered over the wizard. “I’m not your concern. Consider me an audience member, who is very much looking forward to watching you be humbled by the slayer. Unless...” Considine cocked his head, and his voice turned a shade darker and more dangerous. “Were you planning on using your House magic? That’d certainly make things more interesting.”

“You,” Gideon fishmouthed. “Vampire?”

“Wow. You’re slow.” Considine turned to me. “Explain to me: why not pull a weapon? He’s got his magic—weak as it is—out.”

“I’m not trying to arrest him, yet” I said.

“Why not? He’s obviously criminally stupid. There must be some kind of charge for that.” Considine strolled over to me—something my instincts warred over responding to because being closer meant better defense, but it was *Considine Maledictus!*

“There’s not,” I said.

“Well. That’s disappointing,” Considine said. “And very shortsighted.”

Fire spread to both of Gideon’s hands, further proving he was the idiot Considine thought he was. “Are you with the Drakes? You’re here on behalf of Adept Medeis, aren’t you?” Gideon said several unrepeatable insults about the Adept that made me glad April had remained on the sidewalk or there would have been violence for sure.

“I am here on behalf of myself,” Considine said. “Because I’m bored, and you’ve been occupying my one consistent source of entertainment in this city. But I’m not opposed to a brief moment of fun if you want to push things.” He tipped his head back and forth, his teeth briefly flashing in a startlingly white smile. “What do you think, Slayer: would he last five seconds or one before he started mewling with pain?”

“Ruin,” I warned him.

Gideon stormed inside the House, almost running over the female wizard. Once safely cowering in House Tellier, he turned around and gripped the edge of the door. “Whatever—leave! I rescind your invitation to stand here as Heir. House! Get rid of them!”

“I apologize. We’re going.” I started down the porch stairs.

“Must we?” Considine turned towards his abandoned rocking chair again. “I’ve been wondering how I’d hold up against a House. Finding out would be interesting.”

I charged back up the stairs—ignoring all my finely honed slayer instincts—and grabbed Considine by the wrist. I then turned around and hurried back across the porch, dragging him after me. “We’re going,” I repeated before tucking tail and rushing down the steps.

Considine sighed but followed me as I hurried across the pavers intent on getting back on the public sidewalk, out of reach of House Tellier.

“What happened?” April asked once we reached the public sidewalk. “Binx didn’t catch the entire conversation, but she said it was going downhill.”

I held a finger up to my teammate—a silent request to give me a moment—then turned around to face Considine—who had now replaced House Tellier as the biggest threat since we were on public property. “What was that?”

“That was Gideon Tellier acting shady,” Considine said. “I’m saying it now so I can say I told you so later: you are going to regret not shooting him.”

“No, why are you here?” I asked.

“Oh. I already said why: I was bored.” Considine effortlessly tugged his arm from my grasp, then slipped his hands into his pants pockets. “I figured you had to be somewhere around this city, so I roamed. When I found you, I must say I was quite scandalized that the Curia Cloisters is either chintzy with their backup or incompetent in threat assessment.”

*Was he... worried about me? Considine Maledictus was concerned for me, a slayer?*

The idea felt crazy and maybe I was giving myself too much credit. From the first time I met him, Considine had said he found me entertaining. He was probably preserving me just for chuckles.

I pointed my face towards April and Binx—keeping the rest of my body homed in on Considine. “Did you see him arrive?”

“No,” April said.

“I didn’t know he was there until he spoke,” Binx said. “I didn’t catch his scent.”

“I should hope not,” Considine said. “It’d be a dark day before I get caught out by a mere wizard and a shifter so young she’s practically a kitten.”

“No offense taken,” Binx said.

“That’s a shame,” Considine said. “I very much meant to be offensive. Are the lot of you task force people all so no nonsense and unflappable or is it just the ones that work with Slayer?”

“Just the ones that work with Blood. Since she’s always stuck being a team lead, Sarge gives her the best team he can manage,” April said.

“Don’t tell him stuff like that,” I said. “Also, we *still* don’t have team leads.”

This was the first time I was hearing this—that Sarge was cherry picking who I worked with.

I’d thought I never worked with Clarence because he was afraid of me, and my stealthier fighting style wasn’t a great match with Medium-Sized Robert. Now that I thought of it, I rarely worked with Juggernaut, too, and he was a wild card in our team.

I actually worked most often with Grove. While an outsider might think Grove was useless, he was our team’s only medic. Despite his obsession with poisons, he brewed potent healing potions.

“Team leads are totally a thing, that’s why your team is always named after you,” April said.

“Makes sense,” Considine said. “So, you’re finished with the wizards, right? Entertain me.”

*Yep. Entertainment is absolutely why he decided he was my self-appointed backup. Not that I’m complaining—that was handy. Perhaps it’s even a sign that he won’t randomly attack me?*

He hadn't hurt me since we fought together to take down the giant snake in September. Not that I trusted this cease arms or him. But this was surprising proof that he was decent—if not choosy—backup.

“I'm working,” I said, careful to keep my voice flat. “And now I have to make a report about everything Gideon said.”

Considine sighed. “You know, your job is very inconvenient for me.”

“I apologize,” I said—I didn't even have to work at my acidic tone this time since I really felt it. “I understand that as an independently wealthy vampire, who spends most of his time stalking entertainment sources, it's a struggle.”

“You make me sound like a degenerate who knows nothing of society,” Considine complained.

“Yes,” I said, which was probably not a great response for my self-preservation, but I got the impression Considine didn't mind.

He opened his mouth to respond, but his cellphone chimed, and he pulled it out to study the screen. I could see just enough of his jawline to notice that a muscle twitched—with irritation, maybe—and he immediately started tapping out a reply to whatever message he'd received.

Since he didn't seem inclined towards violence tonight, I took a risk and turned my back to him so I could address April and Binx. “House Tellier must be involved with the fire. Gideon's official story for the timeline was that he and the other wizards who came to the library were hanging out in the park nearest the library. When they realized how many firetrucks were going to the library, they decided to act.”

“And they got there *after* you, when you were coming from downtown?” April asked.

“Yes. The story didn't match the timeline.” I paused, then added, “Strangely, even when I picked at his timeline Gideon didn't seem to mind. He didn't get violent until I asked him about his House's sudden bend towards donations for humans.”

April frowned. “That was the part he reacted to?”

“Yes.”

“Weird,” Binx said.

“At least it seems like there’s enough inconsistencies for Sarge to launch an official investigation,” April said. “We should call it in—he might want us to get back to the Cloisters instead of continuing on our patrol.”

I pressed my lips together struggling to voice what had made me so uneasy.

House Tellier was up to something, but Gideon hadn’t been on guard until I asked about funds.

*It seems misplaced considering the situation.*

“It is to my greatest sorrow that I must leave,” Considine abruptly announced.

I started to turn back towards him, then froze when he snaked his arms around me and pulled my back flush against his chest in what was a much closer embrace than I’d experienced probably since I moved to Magiford.

I was so shocked, my defensive training didn’t immediately kick in. Instead, I stood there like an idiot, confused.

Considine was taller than me, so he had to bend over a little to curl around me and rest his chin on top of my hood-covered head. “I regret that we didn’t have the chance to play tonight—your job is an utter time-suck, you know.” He squeezed me—not painfully, most likely he was trying to feel for any hidden weapons I might have.

What bothered me about the experience was that my danger instincts weren’t activating. Yes, I was freaked out by it all, but he’d moved in so fast that it should have lit every nerve in my body on fire.

*What is going on?*

I felt when he adjusted the position of his chin on my head, but it wasn’t until I sensed his fingers play with the edges of

my gloves that my instincts finally flared to life.

“Off.” I stepped out of his embrace and pulled my gun with the same movement.

“Easy, Slayer.” Considine held his hands up as he took a step backwards. “You might hurt me.” He laughed at the ridiculous idea and then—ignoring my gun—nonchalantly turned around and swaggered off into the darkness.

I hesitated for a moment, wondering if it was wise, until my good manners kicked in. “Ruin.”

“Hm?”

“Thank you.”

Considine swung around to face me again, his already tall frame straightening in a way that said he was surprised. “For?”

*Please don't regret this. Please!*

I took a deep breath. “For being my backup.”

Considine was unnaturally still for several heartbeats until he cracked a smile that I could barely see through the shadows of his hood. “It was my pleasure, Slayer,” he purred. He set off again at a saunter. When he got a block down he waved a hand, then disappeared around the corner.

Only then did I reluctantly holster my gun.

“What was that?” Binx asked.

“Thanking him?” I asked.

“No, him self-appointing himself to cover your back.”

“I don't know,” I honestly said. “But it was very... odd.”

“He seems like he's growing fond of you, but there is something else underneath it,” April said. “I hang out with vampires fairly often, and he's way too... something.”

I checked my gloves but while he'd fiddled with them he hadn't tugged them off my hands or revealed any of my skin, and I didn't sense anything magical so he couldn't have planted a charm. “He's amused,” I said, my certainty making it



easier to talk. “It’s like there’s a good joke and only he knows it.”

“Yeah,” Binx agreed.

“He’s too happy to be thinking emotionally of you,” April agreed. “Vampires—long lived ones—don’t like it when they start getting attached to people. It gives them a weakness.”

“Yes,” I slowly said, reviewing Considine’s conduct.

April was right. Old vampires typically only cared about other vampires and lost interest in humans who they knew they’d lose fast. Considine wasn’t just old, he was *legendary*. There was no way he’d randomly taken a liking to me.

*Which means there’s something to this that I don’t know. But is it something to do with vampires or is he just playing a cat and mouse game with me?*

Conversely, I wasn’t sure if I should be more concerned about him or that my instincts didn’t necessarily see him as a threat anymore. How had that even happened?

Binx eyed the wizard. “You sound like the voice of experience.”

“Not me,” April said. “But my Adept.”

Binx shrugged. “Vampires are weird. They’re not as twisty as fae, but they make everything overly complex and dramatic.” She turned towards me and looked me over from head to toe. “You gonna be okay, Blood?”

“Yes,” I said with a confidence I didn’t have.

*This confirms that I should tell Sarge and Captain Reese about Ruin. It might mean I get booted from the force, but with Considine acting like this, I could become a liability to the team.*

“Are you sure? This is dangerous,” April said. “I can ask my vampire friends—they might have a few ideas about what’s going on.”

The concern in her voice was enough to break my focus.

*Wait. I'm actually talking with them. We're having a normal conversation—well, normal for supernaturals. They're worried about me! And they aren't being oddly respectful!*

It wasn't until April widened her stance that I realized I hadn't answered her. "No—I mean, yes! Thank you. I am okay. I should speak to Sarge about the issue—I could become a danger to our team. I appreciate your concern though. Both of your concerns." It was awkwardly close to a babble and I must have said something off because both April and Binx snapped to attention, their stances straighter and their expressions serious.

"Of course," April said. "Let us know if we can do anything to support you."

*Drat. Now they're both back to that weird differential attitude.*

They were respectful—but I didn't warrant respect. I was a fellow team member not their superior, like Sarge. (If I was a *team lead* like they said, surely Sarge would have explained the role to me and all the necessary protocol. As he hadn't, I could only work off the knowledge that no such position existed.)

*Was it because I was awkward? Or was it really something I said?*

I held in the sigh that wanted to leak out of me. "Let's change locations," I said. "We probably shouldn't discuss team issues... here."

Binx looked past me to House Tellier—which, thankfully, hadn't done anything despite Gideon's attempt to sic it on me. "Understood. We'll follow your lead."

Oh, yes. The wall of respect was back in full force.

I wanted to peel my hood off so I could pull at my own hair in frustration. *Why do they keep reverting like this? And why am I so bad at this?!*

I held in a sigh as I headed for the car. "Regardless, I believe we can safely write in our report that we believe House

Tellier is connected to the library fire, if not the culprits behind it.”

“Agreed,” Binx said, her voice flat.

“There’s plenty of indications—between their weird sculpture and the fishy timeline—that we should be able to make a case against them,” April said.

*At least my poor interpersonal skills haven’t affected the investigation. But I don’t like all of this... ignorance I have.*

I couldn’t tell what made my teammates react like this, I didn’t know what twisted joke Considine was plotting to make him so amused all the time, I didn’t know why Gideon got so weird about an innocent question when he’d been almost idiotically confident with my questions about the library, and I *still* didn’t know what Gisila was up to and if Orrin had worked at her order.

Turns out, I hate not knowing things—something I never knew from my straightforward days as a slayer.

*It’s a sign that I’m growing,* I gloomily thought.

When I reached the car, I pulled my radio from my belt and waited for April—our driver for the evening—to unlock it.

*As a person, I’m evolving. I hope. I better be or things are only going to get worse...*



MY CHURNING THOUGHTS CONTINUED. It wasn’t until I was doing my regular daytime training two days later that I started to feel better, more grounded.

I adjusted my padded shoulder straps—slightly changing where my weighted backpack put pressure on my frame—as I jogged down the sidewalk.

It was a crisp fall day. A slight overcast meant the sun was hidden so it was chillier than it had been that morning, and the wind was cold enough that I was wearing a headband to protect my ears, which also worked nicely to keep my short, red hair out of my face.

The cold temperatures meant it was ideal to do some weighted runs—something I'd hated doing all summer because it made me extra sweaty both from the additional effort it took to run with free weights in my backpack and because my black backpack sticking to my back made me sweat like a pig.

My lungs ached a little from the cold air, but I was mentally feeling so much better that I barely noticed as I jogged around the new decorations downtown. The city had secured bunches of dried corn stalks around the bases of lampposts, set out bright orange pumpkins, and an assortment of gourds—some green, some cream colored, some orange and green, some with warty bumps, and others with little lumps that made the gourd look ruffled.

I turned the corner, heading down King's Court Drive. I ran down to a crosswalk and checked both ways before I jogged across the street and into a parking lot.

Connor was waiting there for me, sitting on a bench outside a café called Queen's Court Café, and holding a paper latte cup.

"Ah, there you are, Midnight Snack." Connor checked his cellphone. "You beat your previous lap by thirty-two seconds, well done."

I slowed to a walk and shrugged my weighted backpack off my shoulders, setting it next to Connor on his bench. "Good, thanks for timing it."

"Of course—woah. For all that is holy—you didn't have to put weights in your backpack, you could have merely strapped a medium-sized child to you instead. Why do you train with so much weight?" Connor frowned as he pushed my backpack further down his bench.

"I'm training for a marathon. And hiking," I said.

Connor smirked at me and for a second the curve of his lips was almost predatorial. It was gone so fast, replaced by a smile that had him flashing his pronounced fang teeth, I wondered if I actually saw it. "I'm sure." He picked up my

metal water bottle from where I'd left it on the ground by his feet and passed it up to me. "Are you almost done? You've been running for an hour."

"I just have sprints left." I caught my breath before I risked taking a swig of water. "Those go fast. You got a drink from Queen's Court?"

"Mmhmm." Connor held up his drink for inspection, which had a cup sleeve that was decorated with fall leaves and cute woodland creatures. "It's one of their monthly themed drinks, *The Queen's Free-to-Visit Pumpkin Patch Trip*. Not sure what that's about, but it's pumpkin flavored supposedly. Want a taste?"

I took the cup from him and gave it a suspicious sniff. My teeth ached, and I smelled the faintest hint of blood. "You spiked it with blood."

"Naturally." Connor picked up a half-consumed blood pack and waggled it at me. "Or it wouldn't be worth drinking."

I smiled at a trio of fae who ducked around us to head into the café—Queen's Court was a favorite of local fae. "There's more than half a blood pack in there."

"Correct." Connor studied the label on the blood pack. "I opened this pack first and sampled it. Whatever human donated this blood was low on iron and has a vitamin D deficiency, which makes it taste off. Naturally, I will not consume subpar blood so I sampled a new one. That human was more balanced, so I dumped it in."

I waited for him to set the empty blood pouch down before passing his drink back to him. "You can taste biological factors like that in blood?" I asked.

I knew that, of course, but I wasn't sure if a human who worked at the Cloisters would know that. Vampires weren't as good at sensing biological changes like werewolves, but they were as good as the machines humans used when it came to blood. (At least, older vampires were. Younger vampires typically lacked the finesse and experience.)

“Yes,” Connor took a sip of his drink. “I’m starting to understand the human obsession with pumpkin. The spices combined with blood is delicious.”

I tipped my water bottle back for another swig and managed to spill a bunch, so it ran down my chin and soaked into the neckline of my long-sleeved shirt.

I turned away from Connor to cough and brush off my shirt and noticed a pickup truck pulling into the parking lot out of the corner of my eye.

The driver parked, but he stayed in the truck, cautiously looking around.

His yellow-ish eyes and muscled shoulders marked him as a werewolf, along with his scruffy haircut.

*I wonder what a werewolf is doing here?*

I kept watching the werewolf as I sidestepped so I stood closer to Connor’s bench. “I need another minute or two, and then I’ll head out for my sprints. I’ll be fifteen, maybe twenty minutes tops.”

Any longer and I’d have to reapply my facial sunscreen. It might be October, but I could still burn lobster red if I wasn’t careful with my vampire-pale complexion.

There was a mischievous glint in Connor’s eyes as he looked up at me. “I repeat, why do you train for so long?” He wriggled his eyebrows up and down with a playfulness I didn’t understand in this situation.

“I told you it was going to take a while.” The werewolf was still in the truck, so I risked glancing down at Connor. “You were the one who insisted on tagging along.”

Connor, looking comfortable despite the daylight hour, sipped from his coffee-blood drink. It still surprised me that he wasn’t bothered by the sun. He wore his sunglasses on bright days and generally kept to shade like he was now, but the added weakness bothered most vampires enough to scare them out of emerging before dusk. “I did insist,” he said. “Because I wanted to make sure you didn’t waste the entire afternoon dragging weights around this morbidly cheerful city.”

I checked, but the werewolf was still in his truck.

I twisted the cap back on my water—I didn't want to drink too much; it would slosh around my stomach when I started my sprints—and set it back on the ground. “Fun, right. What are we doing after I finish exercising, then?”

“If we roam around downtown I'm sure we'll find something that will catch your fancy—store or restaurant,” Connor said.

A flash of yellow and orange caught my eye and I peered down the street, watching a House Tellier wizard—wearing the now familiar House jacket—hurry up the sidewalk.

I adjusted one of the pins that I used to pin my bright red hair back, so it didn't bounce in my eyes when I ran. “I'm up for wandering downtown. But I'll need to shower after I finish sprinting.”

I watched as the House Tellier wizard left the sidewalk and hurried into the parking lot.

“No argument here.” Connor rose from the bench with the confidence of a king descending his throne. He took a final sip of his nearly empty coffee cup, then tossed it in a nearby trashcan. “Cuddling when you're sweaty isn't quite as appealing.”

Distracted by the werewolf hopping out of his truck and approaching the wizard, I asked without thinking, “Cuddling?”

“So glad you asked!”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Jad  
e*

I felt Connor swoop in, so I sidestepped him and held my hands up. “Uh-uh! No.”

Connor tilted his head to the left, then the right, and batted his beautiful red eyes at me. “What, you’re not up for a hug?”

“No,” I said. “I smell sweaty.”

Connor stared at me, his expression smoothing into something unrecognizable. “That’s your only reason?”

“Yes.” I said. “Because you’d complain—a lot—about the smell.”

Connor stared at me for a second too long before he broke into a chuckle, which turned into a laugh that was way too deep and long—I’d meant to be funny, but it wasn’t *that* funny.

*There’s something up with him. He’s been acting odd.*

I started to drop my outstretched hand, but Connor abruptly stopped laughing and captured my hand in between his. “That does sound like me.”

“Right.” Ignoring Connor’s weird mood, I turned to look back at the werewolf—who was speaking in a lowered tone to the House Tellier wizard. “Hey, can you hear what they’re saying?”



Connor—still holding my hand—leaned a little closer to me. “Who? The mutt and charlatan?”

I let Connor continue to hold my hand—I’d pull it from him when he asked why I wanted to know what the werewolf and wizard were talking about to distract him—but the scent of his cologne tickled my nose with notes of spices and some kind of woody scent I didn’t recognize. “Nobody uses the word charlatan anymore.”

“Nobody is an uncultured swine and doesn’t appreciate the art of fine words.” Connor carelessly said as he locked his eyes on the werewolf and wizard. “They’re exchanging greetings—the werewolf is saying he needs to visit again... I think he’s referring to House Tellier?”

I watched the werewolf fold his arms across his chest and glare down at the wizard, who vehemently shook his head in obvious refusal.

“Why would a werewolf visit a wizard House?” I asked.

Connor rubbed the top of my hand. “I’m not sure, but the wizard definitely doesn’t want him there.”

The wizard stormed off, and the werewolf strode after him keeping pace with his much longer legs.

“And now they’re out of my hearing range—too much noise in this city.” Connor raised an eyebrow as he glanced down at me—I’d learned in our short friendship that he had very expressive eyebrows. “Might I enquire what caused you to suddenly become so interested in listening in?”

“Just curious what a werewolf and wizard were doing together.” I started to pull my hand from Connor’s grasp as planned, but Connor slid his grasp down to my wrist and placed my hand on his chest. “I’m still wondering what has caused this sudden bout of touchy-feely-ness you’ve been displaying for the past few weeks.”

Connor held my hand flat against his chest—which was cool on my fingers as vampires had naturally low body temperatures. “Loneliness?” he suggested.

“You’re lonely?” I asked.

There was a new mischievous glint in his eyes. “I didn’t say *I* was the lonely one. I’m very concerned about you.”

I’d been busy watching the werewolf and House Tellier wizard—they’d reached Main Street and were joining the flow of traffic. Only half listening, I started to shake my head but stopped and considered it.

I’d moved to Magiford at the beginning of the year, leaving my family—my entire support network—behind. I’d made a few friends, and I was making inroads with my squad—at a very *slow* rate—but if I was focusing on time spent outside of work, I spent the most time with Connor.

My family weren’t huge cuddlers—that was for werewolves—but I did miss Nan’s tight bear hugs, leaning against my dad on the flight home after a night of tracking vampires, and my mom’s gentle fingers when she’d braid my hair for me because I was busy cleaning a gun and it kept getting in my face.

I was lonely—not horribly so—but enough to feel a tiny nag of pain. Connor had filled much of that space, so I hadn’t thought about it in a while, but he was right.

*What does that mean for him? He’s never been interested in any of the humans in our apartment building. He seems to have fewer friends than I do, but I suppose I could be completely off base about that as I have no idea what he does at night.*

“Perhaps you’re right. It is generally believed that people don’t get enough hugs,” I said. “Skinship is very important to general mental health.”

Connor stared at me, then relaxed into a low chuckle. “You do throw me sometimes with how logical you are, Brunch.”

“Thank you,” I said. “You’ve run out of new food terms of endearment, haven’t you?”

He raised his eyebrows at me and looked downright arrogant. “Well, I’m not going to call you Potluck, because you’re just for me and not to be shared.”

“That is very on brand for you,” I acknowledged. “Back to our conversation, I’m very impressed with how emotionally intelligent you are.”

Connor still had possession of my hand and was still holding it pressed against his chest. He shrugged as he relaxed his grip on my wrist and slid his palm up the back of my hand to cover my fingers with his. “It’s not that shocking I’d recognize loneliness. It’s probably the strongest emotion vampires are forced to tangle with.”

“Loneliness? Really?” I asked.

“Living for eternity, doomed to watch everyone around you die or give up—what else would you call it?”

“But you have other vampires,” I pointed out.

“I was referring to the vampires.” Connor seemed overly absorbed as he stared down at my hand that he had pressed to his chest. “Humans die in the blink of an eye—they’re closer to the lifespan of a fish than a dog for us.”

“Okay, but my point still stands—you have other vampires.”

“Who typically don’t make it past a few centuries,” Connor said. “And those who don’t croak are often taken over by the cynical fatigue with life and enter an endless sleep. They may as well be dead. For a longer-lived vampire, there aren’t many who stay.”

I studied Connor’s face, looking for signs of what he was feeling. He was rarely serious, but this seemed like a moment when I was getting a true glimpse of him.

“Long lived vampires are doomed to a painful, lonely future. It’s inevitable,” he concluded.

I studied Connor’s face, my heart squeezing. “Is that what you’ve been feeling? Lonely?”

Connor flicked his eyes in my direction. A heartbeat passed and he grinned, his eyes glowing with humor. “No. I’m too young for such tripe. Why else would I risk spending time

with you?” He winked, then finally pulled my hand off his chest.

There was something about the wording that caught my attention, despite his carefree attitude. *If you're so young that you don't care... why would you call it a risk?*

Connor started to raise my hand to his lips. I knew he wouldn't bite me but with my blood being the strongest poison to vampires on earth, I wasn't going to leave room for any mistake.

I twisted my hand in his grasp so I could squeeze his fingers, then pulled my hand free before his lips could brush me.

“Thanks, Connor.” I smiled, hoping it would show how much I appreciated him even if I wouldn't let his lips touch me jokingly.

“But of course.” Connor stretched, then picked up his half drunken blood pack. “I refuse to eat this subpar offering,” he grumbled before tossing it in the trash.

My conscience prickled as I watched him—Connor never knew just how close he was to death whenever he got close to me.

*I've only known him for a little over a month, so it's too early to tell him about my job yet. But next year, I could risk it after a few more months of knowing him.*

I wasn't stupid. I spent the most time with Connor, but he was still something of a mystery. Besides, my background wasn't only my secret to share, but my family's as well.

“Right. I'll take another sip of water, then start my sprints.” I squatted down and picked up my bottle. The metal squeaked as I unscrewed the lid.

“Yeah, yeah. Your run must continue.” Connor yawned—flashing his pronounced canine teeth. “Why do you have to train for so long?”

I took a sip of water, then screwed the lid back on. “It's important to have a strong foundation for physical health,” I

said. “Which includes running, flexibility, reflexes—”

“Wow—okay. You’re making me tired just listening to you.”

“You’ve forgotten how bad it is because you have vampire agility and senses to count on.” I paused. *I’d asked before and he was cagey, but he didn’t shut me down, so I think I can risk being more blunt...* “How old are you, anyway?”

“Old enough that if I tell you, you’ll probably stop hanging out with me.” Connor sighed mournfully. “You’ll think I’m no longer cool and fashionable, and that my handsome, gorgeous, amazing face is just an empty shell.”

I set my water bottle down, then stood up. “I’d never think that.”

“Thank you.”

“I mean, yes, you’re handsome, but I don’t know that you rank up there with gorgeous and amazing.” I couldn’t help but smile, waiting for his reaction to my ribbing.

Connor laughed—a low, warm sound that curled around me like a blanket. He purposely jostled his shoulder into mine, then he paused—his expression frozen—before he abruptly pivoted so he could gape down at me, his dark red eyes slightly widened.

My grin dimmed as I realized his surprise wasn’t dramatized or faked for the fun of it. He was genuinely surprised. Or maybe surprised wasn’t the right word as much as baffled—which was odd, because what did he have to be baffled about over a joke?

It was almost like his own initial reaction bothered him—unless he was just doing this for effect?

“Connor? Are you okay?”

He blinked and my concern grew, until he spoke. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“It was a joke,” I said.

“That wasn’t a joke. That was striking at every vampire’s weakness: their good looks. That’s it!” Connor declared. “We’re having Humor Camp 101 instead of your next baking attempt. Your sense of humor isn’t just bad, it’s dead. Not dying, but *dead*.”

“Sure, you can give a lecture as long as you hold my cellphone so I can see the recipe card,” I said.

“Whatever.” Connor’s eyebrows flattened as he pulled his cellphone out of a pocket and studied it. “Have a lovely *sprint*, Supper, but I’m afraid I must part with you here.”

“Oh.” My good mood chilled—he was leaving? “Weren’t we going to wander downtown once I finished? Or did you get too bored?” I asked.

Connor wagged his phone at me. “No, something came up.” He glanced down at me and smiled, but it was one of the handsome/friendly ones he used on our human neighbors. “I’ll put your backpack and water bottle in the café. The barista won’t care.”

“Okay, thanks!” I glanced at the Café’s glass door. “Hey, do you know if they sell tea in there?”

“They do—loose leaf because fae are snobs about their weed water.” Connor tilted his head and seemed to momentarily settle back into place. “Don’t tell me you’re leaving coffee for tea?”

“No, but I was going to get some tea for a fae,” I said.

“Ah. Then this store’s tea will be adequate.” Connor started to reach towards me but froze with his arm half outstretched, then dropped it. “See you around, Jade.”

“Bye, Connor.” I waved to him as I walked backwards for a few steps, then turned around so I could check for traffic and cross the street.

I was a little disappointed he was leaving, but it was okay. Now after my run—and purchasing tea—I’d be able to head home and make a protein smoothie and finish out today’s training with a good stretch session.

I looked back one last time. Connor—holding my water and with my backpack slung across his back—waved to me, all smiles and charm once again.

*Yeah...he has something going on.* I was more certain of that now. But I'd gently pushed him for answers, and he'd slithered out of it. I couldn't force it, so I'd just have to wait until he was ready to share.

I waited at a streetlight for the crosswalk sign to light up.

*My time would be better spent trying to pick apart House Tellier's action. A library fire, lots of monetary donations, and meeting up with other supernaturals? None of it makes sense.*

I'd seen another House Tellier wizard meet up with a vampire in September. It probably had nothing to do with their sketchy timeline with the library—unless it did? Maybe they were trying to pull some political maneuvering and were trying to get other races to join them.

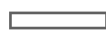
The crosswalk sign blinked to life, but I still looked both ways before jogging across it to reach a new block.

*I've been so focused on the Telliers, I haven't gotten anywhere with figuring out if Gisila is the real culprit behind Orrin's attack on Tutu's or not. There's so much to do, and it feels like I keep scraping at the issues but never get any real proof.*

I shook my head, dislodging my worries as I started regulating my breathing.

I needed to figure those things out, but now it was time to run. I needed to train if I wanted to stay in good enough condition to solve these issues.

I took a deep breath, then started sprinting.



“TRYING AGAIN?” The female werewolf from the dayshift was once again stationed outside Orrin's temporary holding room. “He's still pretty ornery.”

“Yeah.” I uncomfortably held out my paper bag, which was emblazoned with the Queen's Court Café logo. “I have

some tea to give him. Bought it from a café. Sarge cleared it but said you should give it a sniff.” I was speaking too fast—and my sentences were too short. But I was able to give the werewolf a smile that didn’t feel half strangled, so that was something.

“Sure. If it’s enchanted, I’ll be able to smell it. Ma’am,” the werewolf added.

I’d been in the process of handing it over, but at that title of respect I paused and squinted at her through my secured mask.

*What the heck. The day squad is picking up on this respect thing? Why? How?*

The werewolf took the paper bag and opened it. She took a delicate sniff before sticking her face inside the bag and sniffing again.

She abruptly pulled her face free and sneezed twice. “No magic. But it’s lavender and...green tea?”

“Yes,” I said. “I asked the barista to pick out two popular flavors with fae. He said the green tea is one of their best sellers.”

The werewolf twitched her nose before she folded the top of the bag for me. “And the lavender?”

“The barista said he thinks all fae need to drink lavender tea—he implied that fae are hooked on caffeine and need to detox,” I said.

The werewolf nodded, her expression impassive. “I see. Well, they’re cleared—there are only herbs in the mixes. Let me get the door.” She turned, blocking my view as she lowered whatever extra magical defenses were placed on the room, then pushed the door open for me.

“Thank you,” I tried to make my voice what some of my books about communication describe as ‘warmed with a smile’ since she couldn’t see my face with my mask on.

The werewolf didn’t seem to notice. She slightly bowed her head as I ducked past her and slipped into Orrin’s room.



It looked exactly the same as before—eggshell white walls, a cot with precisely folded blankets stacked on it, a boxy end table, and a coffee machine that was plugged into the sole electrical outlet in the room.

Orrin was seated on the only chair, and he once again was drinking what looked like hot water from a paper to go cup.

*Maybe next time I should bring him a thermos—unless that could be counted as a weapon? But they're letting him brew hot water, which seems more dangerous.*

I took a deep breath and tried to tap into my work mode, which would make me feel much less awkward about this. “Hello, Orrin.”

Orrin looked up from his steaming cup. “Vampire-slayer-who-fights-with-vampires.”

I held the paper bag out, which seemed to crinkle extra loud in the tiny, enclosed space. “I brought you some tea.”

Orrin slowly blinked. “What?”

“I got some loose-leaf tea from the Queen’s Court Café.”

Orrin didn’t seem inclined to take the bag, so I set it on the boxy end table in front of him.

“This is a gift—a *human* gift, so you don’t have to pay it back. It’s not a favor,” I clarified. “You don’t have to do anything in return.”

Orrin’s mouth tightened slightly. “You mean to say it’s a bribe? I’m disappointed, Slayer-who-fights-with-vampires. I thought you were smarter than such a paltry trick.”

“It’s not a bribe,” I said. “You have a geas. A little tea isn’t going to make you able to talk over that. It just seems like you could use it.”

Orrin eyed the paper bag as if it were a snake. “Right. I’m sure that’s all you were thinking. That’s why you brought *tea*—one of the only things fae publicly claim to favor.” He pointedly looked away from it and instead picked up his paper cup, resting the bottom on the palm of his left hand and

placing the fingers of his right hand snugly against the cup's right side.

"It wasn't really that deep a thought," I said. "I got tea because one of my fae teammates said you probably weren't being given tea since werewolves were holding you."

Orrin ignored me and sipped his water.

I glanced at his food tray—which once again had some crumbs and an empty cup which I assumed had held water.

*He's getting fed, but there's no way it's as fancy as his fae palate would prefer.*

I folded my arms behind my back, settling into place and studying Orrin as the fae pointedly ignored me.

Orrin looked much the same.

His time in the room didn't appear to have put any strain on him, although he seemed oddly *resigned*.

*He's not causing any trouble, but it doesn't seem like he expects any help.*

I couldn't pretend to guess what his angle was—fae were tricky, and there was no telling how deep the rabbit hole went. Between him, the issue of Gisila, and House Tellier, I'd rather deal with House Tellier.

I watched Orrin sip his hot water, then asked, "Have you been kept appraised of your punishment?"

"I am aware they still have not settled on one. The humans are being difficult," Orrin said.

"By difficult, you mean they reacted negatively when the Curia Cloisters offered to send you to Ghastr prison," I said. "And they already rejected a generational fine."

Orrin shrugged. "Humans," he said in way of explanation. "They suggested community service in addition to a small fine."

"Small," I repeated—when I'd checked, the *small* fine had been several thousand dollars. *He must have some serious money if he considers that small. Couldn't that poke a hole in*

*my theory that he did this at Gisila's bidding? If he's wealthy, she couldn't really hold his job over him.*

“Regardless, the Cloisters will not go for such a small punishment.” Orrin shrugged his shoulders. “It wouldn't set a good precedent for future issues, and I cost them enough money in damages that the cheap, penny-pinching Night Queen heard of it. As she is on the Midwest Regional Committee of Magic, she will not settle for such a light sentence—and she has the power to make it so.”

“Ahh.” I said. “Yeah. The Night Queen is very concerned about budgets.”

The only reason the task force program had expanded as rapidly as it had was because the Night Queen supported the idea. (Personally, I felt her reputation for being cheap was a misrepresentation. Yes, she'd yanked back the spending of the fae offices located within the Curia Cloisters. But I'd heard rumors that before her, the fae offices had a private tea room in the Cloisters and held weekly parties. If that was true, I couldn't blame her.)

I slightly shifted, thinking. “You know, if you—”

“I will not answer any questions nor give any reasons for my actions,” Orrin said.

“...I was going to say if you appeared to be more *sorry*, they might have a better idea of what to do with you,” I said. “You have a geas. I know you can't talk.”

Orrin finally looked at me, his eyes narrowed. “Yes. And you seem very intent on using it as an explanation for why I won't speak.”

I shrugged. “We have no idea how widespread your geas is. If it was required as a term of your employment with Gisila, maybe you can't say anything.”

Orrin frowned, his brow furrowing. “Are you not aware that *you* could get me put in Ghastr prison?”

I tried to follow his thinking through our conversation and failed. “...I'm not following you.”

“You implied the Curia Cloisters doesn’t know what to do with me because I didn’t harm anyone. The fact is *you* were the one most endangered by my actions. You could push the matter and convince your superiors to throw me in prison based off what you experienced.”

“My teammates were more hurt than I was,” I said.

“Hurt, yes, but you were the one whose life was most endangered—you could have died,” Orrin said.

I felt weirdly chastised as Orrin scowled at me. “Maybe, but I had to save my team,” I said.

Orrin gave me a withering look matched with a scoff. “You take too many risks—and it pays off only because you’re a slayer.”

Words couldn’t describe how weird it felt to have Orrin—the fae who’d loosened monsters downtown—lecture me about my fighting habits.

Feeling much like I had when Sarge had given me a similar talk about me taking too many risks, I set my shoulders. “I carefully measure risks when I enter a fight,” I said.

“You measure risks to your surroundings and your team, not to yourself,” Orrin corrected with a careless air.

I watched him, thoroughly confused.

*That he’s judgy about what I did is very weird given he was the reason why I did it. I frowned behind my mask. And why does this feel like he’d understand the paper Sarge wants me to write? If he gets it, just how backward am I?*

Orrin scowled at his steaming cup of hot water, annoyed with something—me, probably—and shook his head in disdain. “I find your presence draining. You should leave.”

Normally I’d maybe stay and try to push it, but my shift would start soon, and I needed to finish the coffee smoothie I’d left in the meeting room or I’d be hungry all night.

I unfolded my arms from where I’d held them behind my back and nodded. “Enjoy the tea.” I waited until I had the door

open to add, “I’ll see you later.”

Orrin puffed up. “There will be *no* late—” I shut the door on his objection.

The werewolf locked it behind me, then nodded in another salute. “I hope it went well?”

“Well enough,” I said.

*I still don’t know what I’m trying to accomplish, but it feels like I got some traction.*

As I walked away from the shifter offices, I mentally reviewed the conversation and my observations—I’d need to write it down for notes.

The one thing that stuck out was Orrin’s labeling my actions to save my teammates as reckless.

*Maybe...maybe he didn’t hurt any humans by design. I assumed he attacked at night because that would be the best time to take a crack at Tutu’s. But maybe his goal was more personal and less nefarious. If Tutu’s was his target, why would he—or, possibly, Gisila—want to attack it? It’s impenetrable, and Tutu is Gisila’s sister!*

The investigative end of this was mind bogglingly difficult—it was far too easy to jump to conclusions. Maybe I needed to add some police procedural books to my research on social rules?

When I was almost to the meeting room, I started unsnapping my mask so I could take it off to drink my smoothie. I’d removed all the hooks from the left side when my cellphone rang.

I pulled my cellphone up, smiling when I saw it was Nan. I swiped to accept the call, then slipped the phone between my hood and the unfastened part of my mask and held it up to my ear. “Hi, Nan!”

“*Good evening, Lass!*” Nan’s familiar voice leaked from my cellphone speaker sparking memories of hugs, which always smelled of the saddle soap we used to clean all our

leather gear and the soothing scent of gunpowder. *“I know you’re about to start your shift, so I won’t keep you long.”*

“What’s up?” I moved to the side of the hallway so I wouldn’t block anybody and leaned against the wall.

*“I was just calling to make sure you’re doing well. I know no news is good news, but I do fret.”*

I smiled at Nan’s familiar love of American proverbs. “Sorry. The last few days have been... interesting. There was a fire at the public library, and I had to question some wizards as part of the investigation,” I said.

*“Oh my. Well, as it is said, hope for the best, but prepare for the worst!”*

I locked my legs and pressed my back harder against the wall. “Yeah, I’m just being cautious about it. I don’t want to miss anything.”

*“You needn’t fret,”* Nan said. *“You’ve got a good head on your shoulders, I’m sure you’re doing right.”*

“Thanks. Um, how is everyone?” I asked.

*“Let me think... Fergus is out on a mission with John and Mack,”* she said, listing my Dad, uncle, and cousin. *“Your mother got a new dagger sharpening kit and is as smitten as a kitten. Oh! Your brother created a new practice drill for loading a gun while blindfolded. He’s going to record it and send it to you.”*

“Which brother?” I asked. I had three of them, all older, and all obsessed with training and improving. I was the easy-going member of the family.

*“Peridot,”* Nan said. *“He’s been getting sloppy with his gunwork lately, but practice makes perfect!”*

“How’s Paddy?”

*“He’s as happy as a clam! Stephen and Joe are coming out to help him with a few projects.”*

“Uncle Stephen and Uncle Joe?” I asked, naming two of my Mom’s many brothers.

“Yes!”

“Are they coming for house or vampire projects?” I asked.

Everyone in my mom’s family had taken up a trade in addition to being trained as vampire slayers. My mom did landscape design and installation before she married Dad. Uncle Stephen did roofing and siding, while Uncle Joe was a plumber. (Both families were delighted when Mom and Dad got married. Mom’s family, the Carters, were able to semi-retire as slayers—they just acted like reserves for the O’Neils, and instead did construction full time, and usually patched up anything we O’Neils destroyed in the process of a mission for super cheap.)

“*House projects,*” Nan said. “*It was supposed to be just a few simple fixes—change out a water faucet, check all the toilets since I think we have one that won’t stop running, and replace a few shingles on the roof. But your Uncle Stephen had to open his mouth and say that the roof could use a gun mount, and that got them all harebrained.*” Nan grunted her displeasure. “*I’ve tried stuffing their mouths with food to keep them preoccupied from getting more ideas, but I’m not sure it’s working. The proof of the pudding is in its eating, I suppose. How’s that little friend of yours?*”

I paused. *Friend? I didn’t tell her about Connor, did I?*

My family wasn’t anti-vampire, but not even my mom’s family would be thrilled at the idea of me living next to a vampire.

“*What was her name...Sunshine?*”

“Sunshine is good,” I said. “I got a text from her this morning—she’s been doing a lot of yard cleanup with her folks. I’m hoping to get her opinion on the wizard thing.”

“*That sounds wise. She is one smart cookie; I’m sure she’ll have a new perspective.*”

“Yeah. I’m still trying to wrap up a few things with a previous case—the one where the fae loosed several rounds of fae monsters in Magiford,” I said. I told Nan about most of my cases—just nothing about Considine/Ruin—but I didn’t share

if it wasn't public. Orrin's case was considered solved, so it was fine for me to talk about it. "She might be able to give me a few insights on fae culture."

*"As a brownie herself, I imagine she might have a few tips and tricks to share!"*

"Yeah." I glanced up and down the hallway. It had been mostly abandoned before, but more task force members were passing through as we got closer to the shift change. "I should probably go—I still have to eat before muster. Thanks for calling, Nan!"

*"Of course! Love you, Lass! Take care—and remember to stab first and ask questions later!"*

I laughed, and my phone clicked as Nan hung up.

My heart lighter, it only took a minute to get to the team's meeting room.

I opened the meeting room door and stepped in, expecting the usual quite atmosphere.

Instead, I was greeted with Tetiana wailing.



# CHAPTER

# TWELVE

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“**Y**ou cannot take my fae queen. I have the Night Queen—you can only have her if you have the Night King!” Tetiana glared at Juggernaut across the table.

It took me a moment to realize that she was referring to the cards fanned out in her hand.

*Oh, they're playing cards again. They must have gotten here really early.*

Today Binx, April, Juggernaut, Tetiana, and Clarence were all playing. They were the only ones in the meeting room this early, and they nodded to me as I slunk deeper into the room.

Juggernaut rearranged his cards in his hand. “She’s not the Night Queen, she’s the queen of spades,” he said to Tetiana. “And the king of spades isn’t a match—she needs to be matched with other queens!”

“You said I could call her the Night Queen,” Tetiana stubbornly said.

Juggernaut set his cards face down so he could rub his eyes. “I said you could call her whatever you want! And Clarence, don’t think I haven’t noticed that you are cheating somehow! You’ve won the last four games in a row!”

I sat down at my table—where my smoothie was waiting—and finished removing my mask so I could take a sip.

The beige drink was still thick even though I'd left it out for a while. I'd made it with coffee I'd frozen in ice cube trays, frozen carrots, half and half, and a dash of cocoa and sugar.

April rearranged her hand of cards. "You started it all, Juggernaut. You were the one who drew House Bellus's wizard insignia on all the aces' cards."

"As a joke," Juggernaut grumbled. "If I'd known that meant we were going to personalize all the cards I wouldn't have done it. Tetiana, hand over the queen."

"Show me that you have the Night King," Tetiana demanded.

"Look, I'll agree that the Night Queen has to match with the Night King," Juggernaut said. "But whether I have the Night King or not doesn't matter, it's go fish! I asked and you have it, so you have to hand it over!"

I was about halfway through my smoothie when the door swung open, and Brody stuck his head in. He usually talked with Binx before meetings, but since she was absorbed in the game he sat down at an empty table and watched.

"Fear not, Tetiana." Clarence innocently smiled over the top of his cards. I noticed that he hadn't gone with his usual white cravat tonight, instead he wore one that was navy-blue with golden fleurs to match our uniform. "Juggernaut doesn't have the Night King, so you can get the Night Queen back on your next turn."

Juggernaut leaned back, holding his cards flush against his chest. "That's it, I *knew* you were cheating!"

*Clarence, cheating? He's a vampire so he has the abilities to manage it, but it's unexpected for Clarence. He doesn't have the strongest constitution.* I eyed Clarence with new appreciation before I tipped my cup back, finishing the last of my gritty smoothie.

Tetiana settled back into her chair. "True. Fine—here, you scavenger. Take the Night Queen." Tetiana flicked a card at Juggernaut so it landed on the table directly in front of him.

Juggernaut picked it up and added it to his hand. “Thanks.” He glanced over at Binx. “I don’t suppose you’ve figured out how Clarence is cheating?”

Binx wordlessly adjusted her cards.

“She’s not going to tell you, Juggernaut,” April said. “Because she’s using the same method. Clarence, give me your Jack card.”

The door opened again and Grove and Medium-Sized Robert entered—Medium-Sized Robert shuffling sideways and hunching down so he could fit through the door. They were murmuring to each other and ignored the card game as they sat at a table at the back of the room.

*If I want to practice communication, I should go thank Grove for his insight about Orrin and giving him tea—or I should thank him without thanking him, as he told me last time.*

Clarence shuffled his cards, picked one out, and passed it over to April. “Have we come up with a new name for the Jack cards yet?”

“It should be a shifter,” Binx said. “Since we already have fae and wizards.”

I took a deep breath of air to fortify myself, then stood up and headed towards Grove’s and Medium-Sized Robert’s table—going extra slow so I wouldn’t alarm them.

Behind me, the conversation over the card game continued. “How about a werewolf?” Brody suggested.

“Hmm?” Clarence said.

Just when I reached Grove and Medium-Sized Robert, Brody got up and approached the game. “A werewolf—you guys need a werewolf.”

“This is go fish. There shouldn’t be a werewolf,” Juggernaut said.

April set her matching jacks down on the table. “Give up—you let the old maid in, this is no longer go fish.”

Grove shifted in his seat, drawing my attention back to the fae. “Heya, Blood.”

“Hello Grove, Medium-Sized Robert.” I started to stand at attention, then realized that wouldn’t match my efforts to make this a casual conversation. “I appreciate what you said about fae and tea.”

Grove scratched his jaw. “Oh? Does that mean you gave some tea to Orrin?”

I nodded. “I don’t know if he’ll use it but I’m pretty sure you’re right, he was missing tea.”

Grove and Medium-Sized Robert exchanged looks.

“He’ll use it,” Medium-Sized Robert rumbled.

“Yeah, he’s been holed up for how many days? I’m impressed he didn’t break and ask the werewolves for some—though maybe he thought they’d hold it over his head so he didn’t bother to ask.” Grove shook his head. “For a fae, he doesn’t take as much advantage of other races’ ignorance as he could.”

Medium-Sized Robert nodded, and then the duo stared at me.

*Am I supposed to say something back? Are we at that part of the conversation?*

“Maybe,” I blurted out. “It occurred to me tonight that I thought he was trying to limit how fast he’d get caught by attacking in the middle of the night, but maybe he was trying to minimize damage.”

Grove shrugged. “If you think about it, they’re the same thing, aren’t they? Avoid detection by minimizing damage, and if you minimize damage you avoid detection.”

“His goal may have been both,” Medium-Sized Robert rumbled. “It’s possible he took the damage into account in case he did get caught—so he wouldn’t face severe charges.”

Grove set his leather satchel on the table with a thump. “We fae do like to think in layers.”

Medium-Sized Robert raised a hairy eyebrow at him. “Does that mean you have multiple reasons for your obsession with poisons?”

Grove widened his eyes and slapped a hand on his satchel. “Can’t I just appreciate the toxic beauty of poisons and the promise of everything they can do for me?”

“No,” Medium-Sized Robert said.

The door opened and Sarge stuck his head in. He scanned our team, his eyes landing on me. “Blood. Here.”

I started across the room, then paused at the table. “Do I need my mask?”

Sarge shook his head. He waited until I passed through the door before closing it. “Your message said you wanted to see me before the shift started?”

“Yes.” Already my heart was buzzing in my chest, so I took a deep, calming breath—I needed to be clear minded when I told him about Considine.

“Very well.” Sarge motioned for me to follow him, then led me to the big open room that houses our odd formation of desks.

I assumed we would stop at the small office at the edge of the room, instead he led me beyond his desk to the row of larger offices used by the captains.

Sarge opened the door to Captain Reese’s office, wafting the scent of wood varnish that filled the Captain’s office at me, then motioned for me to step in first.

I’d thought maybe he was borrowing Captain Reese’s office for privacy, but no. Captain Reese was seated at her desk, which was sturdy, wooden, and rustic compared to the modern desks we used.

She had her prosthetic leg off and was using a can of compressed air to clean out a part of the joint. Her steely blonde hair was back in an orderly braid, and today she was dressed in uniform. She looked up when Sarge nudged me deeper into the office and smiled. “Ahh, Blood! Here you are.”

Just one moment and I'll be done—I was down at one of the beaches today to look into an incident; the sand is killer on the joints of my prosthetic.”

“Of course,” I said, confused. I looked from Sarge to Captain Reese, then back at Sarge, trying to make sense of the meeting.

“In your text you said that you were requesting a meeting to inform me about something having to do with Ruin,” Sarge said. “I thought Captain Reese should be included in the conversation.”

Captain Reese nodded as she set the can of compressed air down on her desk. “Any news about Ruin is... well ... ruinous?” She laughed at her play on words as she removed her prosthetic from her desk and set it on her lap.

I shifted uncomfortably. “Wouldn't it be best to follow the chain of command and—if you think whatever information I have is important—you take it to Captain Reese?”

“That's how the humans do it on their shows, but that's not very efficient,” Captain Reese rolled her eyes as she picked up a glass of water that was leaving a ring of moisture on a paper and put it on a wooden coaster.

Sarge acknowledged Captain Reese's words with a nod but set his eyes on me. “I wanted to bring Captain Reese in on the conversation because it was safe to assume the information is important—you don't lightly broach topics. Now. Tell us.”

Sarge stood with his hands behind his back, his shoulders squared, his feet spread hip width apart.

I automatically started to mirror him, then realized I was facing him and not our commanding officer so I awkwardly turned to face Captain Reese.

She pointed to a sturdy chair. “Sit.”

I shifted uncomfortably.

“Or stand,” Captain Reese amended. “It makes no difference to me! Do whatever feels best—personally, I'd rather be running around in a park than stuck in a stuffy

office.” She made a face, then switched back to her warm infectious smile. “So, what’s going on, Blood? Did Ruin do something to you?”

“April and Binx both included notes on your interaction with Ruin last night,” Sarge said. “Is there something they missed?”

“No.” I hesitated and wondered just how I could phrase this without 1) making them angry that I’d waited to tell them and 2) keeping anyone from getting upset that I’d used vampire slayer resources for an open case.

*Ruin technically isn’t a case. He hasn’t done anything we can investigate since, strictly speaking, we don’t care if he beats other supernaturals unconscious as long as he doesn’t involve humans.*

I bit my lip, then belatedly remembered I wasn’t wearing my mask so Sarge and Captain Reese could see my expressions.

*I better just start talking—I’ve been practicing at home. I can do this.*

I took a deep breath and stared at the wall behind Captain Reese, which was painted a soothing forest green color and was covered with framed photos of her Pack. “I believe Ruin is actually the vampire elder Considine Maledictus.”

Sarge and Captain Reese stared at me.

“Okay,” Captain Reese eventually said. “I guess that’s good to know.”

I gaped at them, and I’m ashamed to admit I questioned their reaction for a moment, until it occurred to me that Sarge was a naiad and Captain Reese was a werewolf so it was perfectly normal that neither of them would recognize the name of what was basically the vampire bogey man, who hadn’t been officially sighted by slayers in decades.

“Considine Maledictus is one of the oldest vampires alive,” I said. “He was changed in the Archaic or Classical period of Greece, though we don’t know precisely when—he changed his name multiple times.”

“Oh.” Captain Reese grimaced with the news. “That does change things.”

Sarge pressed his lips together. “We?”

“Vampire slayers,” I supplied. “I used a slayer resource to research Ruin after he helped me kill the fae snake. He showed off a skill that only the oldest of vampires have. That significantly narrowed down who he could be, so I thought I would check with slayer resources and see if I could figure out who he was.”

*There. I avoided revealing we have a searchable database, so even if word gets out, vampires won't know just how good of records we keep.*

Captain Reese rested her hands on her desk. “Where is his Family based?”

I shook my head. “He doesn't have one.”

Sarge scowled, the wrinkles on his forehead multiplying. “He's that old and he hasn't sired a single vampire?”

“Correct,” I said. “The resource clearly stated he has no Family.”

“Could the source material be incorrect?” Captain Reese asked. “I've never heard of a vampire being that old and not having any offspring.”

I shook my head. “There is no chance we slayers would have missed such an important connection.”

Captain Reese nodded and started tapping her fingers on her desk.

Sarge relaxed out of his stance so he could rub his face, his scales shimmering in the florescent lights.

I waited for a few moments, then added. “His best known association was with Ambrose Dracos, another elder vampire who was turned around roughly the same time as Considine.”

Captain Reese frowned. “Does that mean this Ambrose is likely to show up?”



“No,” I said. “Ambrose died centuries ago. But his Family—the Dracos—has survived and become one of the most powerful vampire lines in existence.”

“Then his offspring are still around?” Sarge asked.

“Yes.” I hesitated, then added, “One of the Dracos offspring lives here in Magiford.”

Captain Reese lowered her hands to clutch her prosthetic leg. “What? Wait—it couldn’t be.”

I nodded. “Killian Drake is the youngest of the Dracos line.”

“Dracos, Drake, of course,” Captain Reese muttered.

“As Dracos is Latin for Dragon, all of the Dracos line have taken last names that are offshoots of the term,” I said.

“Could that be why Ruin is here?” Sarge asked. “To see Killian?”

I grimaced. “I’m not sure. While it’s recorded that Considine Maledictus is an associate and closely connected to the Dracos vampires, slayers haven’t sighted him in decades. We have no idea what he’s been up to for at least a hundred years.”

“That’s not reassuring,” Captain Reese sighed.

“Can we take this matter to Killian Drake?” Sarge asked. “Ruin, or Considine, has done enough that we could reasonably take it up the chain.”

*Done enough? He micromanages downtown and he’s outrageously dangerous, but I didn’t even have a clue that he was as powerful as he is until I saw him fight the snake.*

Sarge glanced at me, and there must have been confusion in my expression. “He’s attacked you,” he pointed out. “Multiple times. Since you fought together with the snake it seems he’s less hostile to you, but if he’s as old as you say it’s even more reason to report his actions. He’s drawing you into a game that very few vampires would be able to engage in. It means you are in more danger, not less.”

“But that’s just me,” I pointed out. “He hasn’t done any damage to the city. He’s put down other supernaturals who have made trouble.”

“Don’t make light of your situation, Blood.” Captain Reese leaned back in her chair, making it creak. “You are a member of the task force—we take your safety very seriously. Ruin—Considine, that is—threatens your safety.”

“Indeed,” Sarge said. “The question is, does Killian Drake know what he’s doing and simply doesn’t care?”

“Possibly,” Captain Reese said. “Or maybe he can’t do much given how much older and more powerful Considine is.”

Sarge scratched his jaw. “Then how about we publicly tell him?”

Captain Reese peered up at him. “I’m listening.”

“We could wait until a Regional Committee of Magic meeting and tell all of them.” Sarge gestured with his hand—he must have been upset because I saw the water in the glass sitting on Captain Reese’s desk ripple.

I watched the water until my brain caught up with what he was saying. *Wait, the Regional Committee of Magic? The supernatural leaders of the Midwest, who rule over their species. You want to tattle to them that Considine is here?!*

I opened my mouth to argue, but Sarge was quick to stop me.

“Blood, if you claim that the Committee doesn’t need to hear about this just because of you, I swear on my favorite sea that you will be adding three additional pages to your paper and those pages will be all about the worth of your life to the Cloisters.”

I snapped my mouth shut so hard my teeth hurt.

*Does he have some oracle blood somewhere back in his family lines or is he just that good at reading people?*

Most likely, Sarge really was just that good.

*Maybe I should ask him for help at being a better communicator. But would that be a burden on him?*

“I like the idea,” Captain Reese said. “But I’ll have to take this before the Commissioner. If the Commissioner approves, we’ll take it to the Committee. That unfortunately means we’re looking at a fairly long timeline—likely it will be early to mid-November before we actually tell the Committee.”

I kept my mouth shut because my superiors didn’t need me chiming in.

Sarge thoughtfully frowned. “We’ll have to make it work; I suppose. Times like this make me wish we could find a partner for Blood. It would solve most of my work stress.”

“We’ve exhausted that avenue,” Captain Reese said. “There are no proper candidates—for now. We can only hope someone will show up in the future.”

*What?*

Sarge had mentioned wanting me to work with a partner before, but I didn’t know he was so serious about it that he’d brought the idea up to Captain Reese and they’d actually looked for candidates!

*I thought it was quirky but fine that our department was modeled after human entertainment. Maybe I was wrong, they shouldn’t consider changing the department protocol of sending us out in teams just because of me.*

“Will you get in trouble for sharing this information with us, Blood?” Captain Reese asked. “You used slayer resources for Cloister business.”

I rested my hands on my belt. “Officially? No. The vampires are vaguely aware we have ways of tracking them. However...” I paused.

The only noise in the office was the ticking of the second hand of Captain Reese’s wooden clock that was constructed out of a slab of a tree stump.

“However?” Captain Reese prodded.

“If my family—the O’Neils, the slayers—realize I’ve been facing off with Considine, they’ll come get me.”

Sarge narrowed his eyes, which took on a stormy shimmer. “So, he’s even more dangerous than you’ve let on.”

“Vampire slayers don’t trust elder vampires,” I said. “And as I am the only slayer in Magiford, and vampire-slayer relations have never been great... it would make my family very nervous.”

“Understandably so,” Captain Reese acknowledged.

I nodded, then fell silent as I clenched my hands so I wouldn’t wring them in my nervousness.

“Is there anything else you want to tell us, Blood?” Sarge asked.

I hesitated. “It’s in my report on what happened when my team and I went to House Tellier, but Considine showed up on the House’s front porch and... acted as my backup.”

“That’s right, I did see that in the submitted paperwork.” Captain Reese twisted her spinny chair back and forth. “House Tellier is another conversation we need to have.”

“What is there to say?” Sarge asked. “It’s almost certain they did it.”

“Yes,” Captain Reese agreed, “Except the Wizard Council gets *fussy* about being the ones to dole out punishments, and they’re claiming we don’t have enough hard evidence.”

The Wizard Council was the subcommittee that governed wizards in the Midwest. They were considered below Elite Bellus—the wizard representative on the Midwest Committee of Magic—but while Elite Bellus took care of all big picture items like the wizards’ place within the supernatural community, the wizard board handled more of the day-to-day problems wizards faced like fights between Houses—which almost never happened, until House Tellier and a couple of other wizards had started trouble with House Medeis—April’s wizard House.

“Perhaps,” Sarge said. “But there’s enough circumstantial evidence that they have to agree to let us further investigate things.”

“Nope.” Captain Reese lost her friendly edge, and a growl leaked out of her that sounded as though it came from deep in her chest. “The council is claiming it should be their responsibility and that this is a wizard issue.”

Sarge must have reached a whole new level of irritation because the water in the glass on Captain Reese’s desk sloshed. “How can they claim that when the matter involves *humans*?” Sarge asked, his voice icy.

“They claim it because the wizards are desperate to retain every ounce of power they have, even if it means defending wrong doers.” Captain Reese said.

The Captain and Sergeant both glanced at me seemingly expecting some kind of observation.

*I didn’t think I’d be expected to have thoughts on supernatural politics for this job. Maybe I should start brushing up more if this is a requirement.*

I strained my memory, recalling some of what April had said before. “The board did this same thing—refusing to punish wizard Houses—before, in the case of House Medeis’ inheritance, right?” I waited, hoping one of them would jump in.

They didn’t.

“It seems they’re simply doing it again,” I concluded, wildly hoping that was the right thing to say.

Captain Reese nodded. “You’re right. I’ll see if I can talk to Adept Hazel Medeis,” Captain Reese said, naming the leader of April’s Wizard House, who also happened to be married to Killian Drake. “She might be able to get farther than we can. But that’s not what you were thinking of when you said Considine acted as your backup, is it, Blood?” Her eyes drifted back to me.

*More talking? I just can’t get a break.*

I cleared my throat. “No, Ma’am. It’s just... Considine is a risk because he’s so powerful. But.” I struggled, trying to figure out what I was even attempting to say. “He helped with the fae snake when he didn’t have to,” I finally said. “And he didn’t have to back me up at House Tellier, either.”

“You think that should count for something?” Sarge asked. “Despite all the danger he represents?”

It went against all the experience and training I had as a slayer to say yes. In the end I could only mutely nod.

“I still don’t like it,” Captain Reese grumbled. “House Tellier is nowhere near his regular territory. It’s convenient he decided to help you, but I don’t like how fixated he is on you.”

“Agreed,” I said with true conviction.

“We’ll have to hope Killian Drake will do something,” Sarge concluded.

“Yep.” Captain Reese rested her elbow on her desk. “Well. This is as fun as wrestling with a teething werewolf pup. But we’ll have a couple weeks to formulate a strategy. Straight off, the easiest plan I can think of that would possibly reassure your family is that we could pull you off the night shift and stick you back on the day shift.”

Sarge made a noise in the back of his throat.

Captain Reese held her hands up. “I know, I’d be loath to let that happen, too. If we’re lucky we won’t need to do anything, and the Committee will make Killian Drake take responsibility for Ruin. Er, Considine.”

Sarge reached out and straightened a framed photo of a wolf on Captain Reese’s desk, then glanced at me. “Are you satisfied with this for now?”

*I’d rather we not make a big deal out of it but I have the distinct feeling that if I say that out loud, I’ll be stuck writing a whole, secondary paper so I better keep my mouth shut.*

“As long as I’m warned beforehand of when the issue will be taken before the Committee of Magic, it’s the best I can hope for,” I said.

“Of course,” Sarge said. “I’ll attend the meeting with you.”

“So will I. And the Commissioner—if this plan is actually approved,” Captain Reese said. She glanced at her tree stump clock. “Regardless, I’ll try to brainstorm other alternatives. For now, I had best let you both return to muster.” Captain Reese gripped the edge of her desk so she could balance on one leg, stood up and smiled at us, then extended her hand.

Sarge shook it. “Thank you, Captain.”

I swallowed thickly, then took Captain’s hand when she offered it to me. “Thank you,” I managed to spit out.

Captain Reese smiled broadly. “No, it’s me that should be thanking you, Blood, for sharing this information with us.” She winked at me before the mischief melted from her face. “Have a good evening—both of you. And stay safe.”

Sarge snapped off a nod, then opened the door and slipped out of Captain Reese’s office.

I followed so closely behind him I almost stepped on his heels—there was no way I was going to dawdle in the office of my commanding officer’s commanding officer!

Sarge led the way for a few steps, then paused. It took me a moment to realize he meant for me to walk shoulder to shoulder with him. “Thank you, Blood, for coming forward with this information. We will find a way to keep you safe, and we will help in any way we can to convince your family that your place is here with the task force.”

“Thanks,” I awkwardly said.

Sarge nodded and stormed down the hallway. “You haven’t told Considine you’ve figured out who he is?”

“Correct.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way. With any luck, the committee will force Killian’s hand if he really does know about Considine, and he’ll have to act.”

“Yessir!”

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Consider  
e*

I nodded to the red-haired vampire that opened the door to Drake Hall for me and cast a glance around the grand entrance.

*Nothing looks broken. That's disappointing.*

With four of his siblings staying with him, I thought for sure they'd try Killian's patience and for once I wouldn't be the only one driven crazy by the Dracos Family.

A thud made me look up to see Killian standing on the landing, resting artfully on the double spiral staircase and leaning against the railing.

Dressed in a black perfectly tailored suit, Killian looked as spotless as ever... except for a slight twitch in his left eyebrow. "I give in," he snapped. "You win. What godforsaken hole are you hiding in that I can't find you?!"

I laughed, sliding my hands into the pockets of my black trousers. "What's wrong, Killian? Had enough of your family?"

"I have had my people search the house of every blasted vampire Family within reasonable reach of the city—they even roused some sleeping elders and cracked a few heads in the process. No one was even aware you *weren't* staying with me, much less housing you." Killian clenched the stone



banister of the elaborate staircase. I wondered for a moment if it would crumble in his murderous grasp.

Happily, that show of emotion meant he was unaware his vampires had gotten quite close to finding me. They'd nearly followed me all the way back to my apartment a few days prior—I'd been forced to turn into a bat to escape their detection.

*Of course, I always could have just used my powers, but where's the fun in that?*

As old as I was, I could command nearly every vampire I came across—the Drake vampires included. (I had used it on Killian occasionally to get him to stop asking questions I didn't want to answer, but I'd never given him an outright command. I had an inkling that if I tried, it might not work. Even if it did, when he came out of the command there would be hell to pay.)

"I can't believe you'd even *think* I'd make myself put up with the inane prattle of another vampire Family, when I can barely stand yours," I said.

"You aren't staying with the werewolves, and you think too little of humans and wizards," Killian continued. "I can only imagine you're staying among the fae except my One happens to be good friends with the Night Queen, and she hasn't heard anything—and her paranoid head of security would have sniffed you out if you were among them."

"Ahh, yes. Your One," I said. "How is she? I'm terribly upset you haven't yet introduced us."

"Cut the act, Considine. Where are you hiding?"

"It's cute that you think I'd actually tell you." I tilted my head back to study him from a new angle. "If you're sick of your siblings, why not go stay with your One for a time?"

"As if I could leave the lot of them in my home without any decent supervision. I want them gone. The fastest way to achieve that goal is to find wherever you are hiding, so that I can dump them on your front porch and be done with it." Killian glared at me, but his eyes were such a dark shade of

red that they were almost black. I was fairly certain he wasn't all that angry with me and was more fed up with his siblings.

"I'd apologize, except I'm not sorry," I said. "Rather, it melts my heart to see someone else who is competent deal with them."

"I still don't get why you don't just leave them to their own devices—they'll all be dead or asleep in less than a decade. Tops." Killian sauntered down one of the two stairways, shaking his irritation off with a shudder.

"Ahh, yes. If only I could." I briefly clenched my hands into fists, which made the gold band of Ambrose's ring bite into my finger.

"Whatever." Killian ran a hand through his dark brown hair, then glanced meaningfully at a couple of his vampires, who marched off, visibly armed to the teeth. "I'm more and more certain you only stick around us because of Ambrose."

He was right—obviously because of my promise to Ambrose. But I'd had the recent, unpleasant realization that I no longer could remember what Ambrose's laughter sounded like.

More of my memories of my best friend—the vampire who'd been my comrade for *millennium*—were bound to slip away. His Family—as pesky as they were—would soon be my strongest tie to him.

*But it'll take a lot more of age-imposed mental deterioration for me to admit that to the likes of Killian!*

I planted a hand over my heart and widened my eyes. "You doubt that I do this out of sheer love and devotion to you and your delightful siblings, who are such joys to be around? I'm wounded."

Killian ignored my play acting. "I'm starting to suspect that Ambrose asked something of you pertaining to us, his offspring. But as he's long gone, that makes this entire endeavor foolish. However, that's your business, not mine. So, I would appreciate it if you gathered my siblings and left."

I wasn't surprised Killian was starting to catch on. He knew Ambrose Dracos for the shortest time compared to his siblings, but he'd always been the sharpest and he'd already voiced suspicions that my 'special ministrations' were done to inspire his siblings to stay alive/awake. "That long dead vampire is *your* sire," I reminded him.

"Yes," Killian acknowledged. "And I respect him more now than I did a decade ago. But I do wonder if you've missed the point of whatever promise it was you made after all these years."

I narrowed my eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Ambrose cared a great deal about you."

"Perhaps, but his Family was the apple of his eye."

"He loved all of us, yes. And he treasured his One," Killian said, with none of the scorn I'd heard in his voice in previous years when he'd mentioned his sire, back when he'd claimed he didn't believe a vampire's One was a real thing.

Killian met my eyes, and there was something intense in his gaze. "But I don't think you understand just what your friendship meant to him and how far he'd go for you."

"Oh, he'd go so very far," I said, my voice flat. "So far, in fact, that he'd stick me with babysitting duty for the largest bunch of ungrateful, whiny, and spoiled vampire brats in the world." I closed my eyes and threw my arms out wide. "I can just feel his affection, even now. So powerful. So selfless."

Killian made a noise.

When I opened my eyes, he swiveled to peer up at the second floor of his mansion. "It's not that I don't understand your frustration, but, again, I personally better appreciate my sire's actions."

"Ahhh yes. I'm sure you can," I said. "You're the only one of the Dracos children who is daft enough to get yourself a *One*." I couldn't quite keep the taunt out of my voice, but I could hear recognizable voices echoing down the second-floor hallway, so I shoved my irritation back. "What have they been doing?"

“Mostly lounging around, drinking, eating, and acting like degenerates instead of the powerful vampires they should be.” Killian’s frown twisted into something closer to disgust.

“Start charging them,” I advised. “Baldwin will have to leave soon, then.”

“Not with the twins paying his way,” Killian sourly said. “They apparently took great pains to increase their fortune after you bankrupted him. I believe they’re keenly aware they are likely next on your list.”

“Good,” I said. “If they remain focused on their finances, they won’t be prepared for where I will actually strike.”

Killian raised both his eyebrows—his siblings had to almost be to the stairs. “And that is?”

The snake-brats were so loud and animated—not to mention self-centered—there was no way they could hear us, so I let my smile melt through. “They haven’t been nearly as careful as they should be in their hiring practices.”

Nearly every human on their staff—from their accountant and financial advisor to their blood donors—were on my payroll. A few discreet orders, and the twins would suddenly find themselves charged with tax fraud and their accountant strangely missing or maybe all their historical keepsakes—antique furniture, letters filled with particularly embarrassing personal content, clothes, etc.—would mysteriously appear in public museums. (Museums were the *worst* when it came to getting personal property back.)

*So many possibilities—and I don’t even have to visit them to accomplish it!*

Killian caught on to my very general statement, and he chuckled lowly as his siblings appeared on the second-floor landing.

“Considine! You’re here!” Margarida leaned over the banister and waved to me before she turned a disapproving pout on Killian. “I told you to call us when he got here, Little Killi. Why didn’t you?”

I turned to Killian. “Yes, *Little Killi*, why didn’t you call them?”

Killian gave me a murderous look as Margarida swept down the stairs, wearing a sundress that was covered with bright orange flowers that vaguely reminded me of 70’s fashion.

“Don’t waste your breath, Margarida. Where do you think Killian keeps disappearing off to randomly? They’re obviously in cahoots together.” Baldwin—wearing a suit that didn’t look brand new—which meant it was probably only a year or two old but would be fun to rub in his bankrupt face—grumbled as he followed after his sister, groaning like a teenager and his steps both gangly and pouty.

*Killian’s disappearing? Interesting, that must be when he sneaks off to meet his One.*

I knew he was protective of her, but I didn’t think he’d hide her so carefully from his siblings—none of them would ever lift a finger to do anything to his One. Not only were they inherently lazy, but they were nearly as scared of Killian as they were of me.

“You’ve caught out our scheme, Baldwin!” I cheerfully agreed, if only to throw the lot of them off. “This has all been one good prank. I lured you here to the USA so Killian could attack and secretly take over all your Families, to unite all the Dracos offspring under a single banner.”

Baldwin paused at the last step and hurriedly pulled out his cellphone—likely to start firing off frantic texts.

Margarida just shook her head. “Killian wouldn’t go for that,” she said. “He’d never be able to stand all the additional paperwork it would bring, and additional management over our vampire children,” she wisely—and accurately said. She turned in a dainty half circle, to call up to the landing. “Isn’t that right, you two?”

The twins, Amée and Auberi, had been tapping away on their phones, but seemed pleased with whatever their Family

had reported as they put their phones away and started down the stairs, eyeing me with a mixture of curiosity and fear.

Amée was in an evening gown—one made of pink silk—that hugged her waist and flowed all the way to the floor in a fluid style.

Auberi was in white trousers and suitcoat combo, with a white hat and blue and white striped undershirt.

Together they perhaps looked to be dressed in a more classic style but recalling how much Auberi loved the naval style clothes from the 1930s, it was likely their clothes were *original* outfits from the time and not a modern take.

“Considine,” Amée curtsied. Her brother bowed.

I waved them off. “I’m here—as requested. What did you want?”

“I just wanted you to come to dinner—so we could make it a Family affair,” Margarida said.

“How many times must we say it, Margarida? He’s not our sire,” Amée said.

“Indeed,” Killian checked his phone. “If he were, he never would have put up with the lot of you. Dinner will be in the dining hall. This way.”

Killian led us through the bottom level of his house, taking us to the dining hall—an awkwardly long room that had been built to house a long banquet table that could seat dozens of vampires if you packed them in tight enough.

The room was graced with low lighting, which cast a comfortable feeling on the long table that was covered with silver dishes of steaming food and both heated and chilled mugs of blood.

I sat down at the head of the table—I didn’t want any of the siblings in my space—and selected a frosted glass of blood, ignoring the food. (I’d likely have to eat a few bites the next time I was with Jade. Human food nutritionally didn’t do anything for vampires—the only thing that kept a vampire

from entering a ravenous state was blood—and it didn't taste strongly anymore so I didn't really care for eating it.)

Margarida gave Killian a side hug, which he reluctantly returned as a rare sign of actual affection for his sibling. “Thank you, Killian.” She smiled at him before floating off to a chair.

Killian waved her off. “Of course,” he said. “Though I would like to ask you all when you will be assured that Considine is indeed in good health and is not on the brink of a mental breakdown, so you can leave.”

“I don't think he's having a breakdown; I think he's planning something.” Baldwin violently stabbed a steak on one of the platters and dropped it on his plate with a splat. “I'll leave only when I'm assured that whatever life he's wrecking isn't mine.”

“Good news, then you can leave today,” Killian said. “Because it is most assuredly my existence he is plaguing right now, simply by existing here in Magiford.”

“Careful.” I sipped at my glass of blood, which was pleasantly chilled and had a balanced flavor. “If you talk about me much nicer, I'll think you actually like me, Killian.”

Killian smirked, but the looks of alarm that flickered on Auberi's and Amée's faces reminded me that I usually was more controlled around the other Dracos offspring, and I felt my weariness settle back on me like a cloak.

*Ambrose should have better prepared them for immortal life. The idiot.*

“I heard from Jargal,” Margarida reported, referring to another one of the Dracos siblings. Ambrose had turned Jargal when we were passing through the Mongolian empire in the mid-1200s.

Jargal was the last of the Dracos children that I tolerated. He was decently competent and ran his Luu Family well enough that none of his underlings came bleating to me about it. His only shortcoming was that he unfortunately had a

penchant for falling asleep for long periods if I didn't drop in on him every few years, so he still annoyed me.

"Did he mention if he was feeling particularly sleepy?" I innocently asked.

"No," Margarida said. "He did say that he was matching wits against some particularly murderous fae who are trying to fight him for land rights since their realm is shrinking. He said he was jealous of you, Killian, that the fae in the United States have found a fae empress."

"The Night Queen is not the empress quite yet," Killian said, studying his heated mug of blood. "Although she has recently acquired a deep-seated dislike of incompetent accountants—something about the fae on the East coast being behind with their federal taxes."

Baldwin poured hot sauce onto his steak—some vampires favored spicy foods as we could actually taste the flavors. "*Fascinating*," he sneered.

I set my mug down on the table, flicking my eyes towards the nervous vampire when he flinched. "Perhaps you should learn from her example, Baldwin."

"My problem is not the human's pitiful government, but you!" Baldwin angrily stabbed at his steak, which was red enough to make even Auberi eye him.

"I'm sure I have no idea where all your money went," I said. "I am happy to share, however, I was able to recently purchase new properties in France *and* England, and I definitely used only my money to buy them."

Killian rolled his eyes, but his siblings were quiet. Margarida was oblivious to the tension as she was grazing from the prepared dishes of food, but Baldwin, Auberi, and Amée's expressions all tightened.

Several long moments passed, where the only noise was the clinking of dishes and the rustle of clothes.

"I hear you've been playing house with a wizard, Killian?" Auberi's lip curled before he took a swig of his drink.



Killian didn't visibly react, but I could feel his anger like a sharpened spear pressing at my jugular.

"Oh, yes!" Margarida beamed. "Is she pretty?"

"Beautiful," Killian said without hesitation.

"Please," Baldwin scoffed. "Humans can't match a fae in beauty, much less a vampire."

I considered the thought and disregarded it.

Jade didn't have the waif-like delicate beauty of a typical vampire, but early in my immortal life I'd learned that pretty packaging didn't matter when you wanted to crush what it covered. Jade's strength and—as much as it annoyed and amused me—loyalty made her far more alluring. (And, yes, her curly red hair was not only eye-catching, but beautiful.)

"How have you been able to bear the stench, Killian?" Amée asked.

Wizard blood smelled and tasted rotten to vampires—it was a very basic but very useful method of defense. The only way around the mechanism was if the wizard trusted the vampire and the vampire trusted the wizard, then the flavor changed.

Needless to say, I hadn't met a wizard who didn't positively reek.

*But apparently I can stand slayer blood.* I smiled into my mug as I thought of naïve Jade.

"There is no stench," Killian said, boredly.

"No smell?" Amée frowned. "Don't tell me you actually trust her?"

Killian took a sip of blood from his mug, then set it down, his face flat with boredom. "It's not just her, it's her House and all the wizards with it that I trust—a great deal more than I'd ever trust you," Killian said, his faint British accent thickened with his growing irritation, despite his show of calmness.

Auberi set his mug down with a clack. "You can't be serious. *Wizards?* They're the lowest of supernaturals!"

“They’re not even good for a meal!” Amée added.

Margarida glanced at Killian, worry flashing in her red eyes. “There’s no need for insults,” she said. “I’m sure his wizard is very nice, and Amée, that is a very backwards way at looking at humans. You should be ashamed.”

“Shut up, Margarida,” Amée scoffed. “Not only are you centuries younger, you are also silly and insipid enough that you deeply mourn every human pet you have and don’t stop sniveling until Considine shakes you out of it!”

Some of Margarida’s sweetness wore off and she stiffened, everything about her sharpening. “I mourn my human friends because I *love* them—something you’d never understand since you are a dried-up hag!”

I settled back in my chair and picked up my glass, interested to see how this would pan out.

*Killian will win. He could crush them all. But Margarida getting angry enough to go to war is a rare thing. That might bait the brats into fighting.*

Maybe this night would not be such a loss after all. Especially if someone got stabbed. *That* would be exciting!

“Hag?” Amée’s voice was sharp—like jagged, broken glass.

“Know your place, Margarida.” Auberi narrowed his eyes, offended on behalf of his twin. “Speak so carelessly again, and I will not stay my hand.”

“Careful, brother,” Killian warned, his accent even more pronounced. “I don’t take well to threats uttered in my hall.”

Auberi drew back from the table, then glanced at Amée, doing their bizarro twin thing where they seemed to communicate with expressions.

Baldwin, seated on Auberi’s other side, rolled his eyes. “I don’t get why everyone is so upset by a mere wizard. Give her a few years and she’ll be dead, and this whole conversation will be for naught.”

I would have nodded in agreement if anyone besides Baldwin had said it. *Humans die all too easily—there is no point in getting attached.* It was why Jade was a source of entertainment for me, but she hadn't really settled in my heart.

It had gotten dangerously close a time or two—as exemplified by my porch invasion of House Tellier, when I should have been content to sit back and watch or when she'd been spouting human drivel during her run break and almost got me caught up in her pace. I was old enough to know better, and to sense when my amusement with her was getting dangerously close to an attachment. I backed off whenever necessary.

I held my glass mug up and studied the still frosted rim.

*Though I am thankful to Jade for making this holiday amusing.*

“My wizard will be around for a long time,” Killian said.

Amée took on the condescending tone of an elder. “How? She might be a supernatural, but she's still a fragile human! Anything could kill her.”

“Conversely to what you believe, she is actually quite capable of defending herself.” Killian eyed Amée. “In fact, she's more than capable of squashing you. But it matters not. If there is any threat to her life, I shall remove it. Permanently.” He purred.

Amée, Auberi, and even Baldwin turned as one to look at me.

They obviously wanted a reaction of a sort, so I shrugged and raised my mug in a mock toast. “Love,” I said. “It stalks down even the best of us to drag us into its vile embrace.”

I drank the last of the blood in my mug, and Auberi scowled.

“Why doesn't he get threatened and lectured for a frivolous attachment, when the rest of us would?” he demanded.

I glanced at Killian, studying him. He met my gaze and raised an eyebrow.

“Killian doesn’t get any lectures—yet—because he’s still perfectly capable of taking all of you on,” I said. “I like to endorse a ‘may-the-strong-survive’ type of attitude.”

The trio scowled and exchanged dark looks, but they didn’t question it.

*This is why I’m stuck watching you all. Because you’re so thickheaded. It’s ridiculous.*

Killian wasn’t getting lectured at the moment because his besottedness with his One hadn’t appeared to addle him. After observing him for the past month, I was certain he was going to be fine until she died.

I was also fairly certain Killian was going to try to turn his beloved One, making her a vampire. But young vampires died so easily, nearly as easily as humans, as they tended to be as stupid as puppies when it came to their new powers. Not to mention that with the death of magic, the survival rate of humans being turned into vampires had lowered to the point of becoming statistically insignificant. The likelihood that his One would make it past her first century as a vampire—if, by some miracle, she survived getting turned—was expressed as a percentage in the single digits.

*When she dies, I’ll have to come up with a plan to rattle him back to life. If he survives.* The knowledge gave me no pleasure, but it would have to be done.

“I think it’s romantic,” Margarida said. “And I’m happy for you, Killian.” Her sharpness didn’t fade—she was still too angry—but the smile she gave Killian was real enough.

“It’s silly,” Amée said. “If he was going to love someone, he should have at least gone for another vampire. He could have had his pick.”

“Why bother?” Baldwin snorted as he cut another piece of steak. “Love is such a temporary thing. It’ll fade before his human dies.”

“True, true.” Amée laughed. “You won’t be able to say we didn’t warn you, Killian!” Her laugh was sharp and staccato, and it made Killian narrow his eyes.

I tapped the side of my glass mug as I watched the exchange. *It seems they are rallying for round two. Just how wanton for punishment are they?*

Auberi, as if to prove my point, rested his hands on the edge of his table. “Indeed. I, for one, will look forward to his fall. I’m sure it will be glorious.” He glanced at Killian to see how the barb had landed.

Killian yawned and looked bored.

“Careful, Auberi. He is a Dracos, too,” Amée said, but there was a hint of a cruel smile on her lips. “But I suppose we should have prepared ourselves for this day when he made a play to become the Eminence of this region.” She wrinkled her nose. “Though why would he wish to rule over the *Midwest* of all places, when it has more humans than supernaturals?”

“Maybe that’s why,” Baldwin said into his cup. “Perhaps he’s been weak to humans all along.” Baldwin puffed his chest up, seemingly with confidence. But when Killian shifted in his seat, he flinched in fear.

“Killian is Killian,” Margarida flicked a lock of her dark brown hair over her shoulder. “It goes without saying that he chose the Midwest for a strategic reason he isn’t likely to share.” She smiled, but it still had that sharp feral edge to it. “I think it’s admirable—he’s done more in the past five decades than you’ve done in the entirety of your *much* longer life.”

Amée’s pale face scrunched up in a snarl.

“Human lover,” Auberi declared.

“So?” Margarida demanded.

“Amée, Auberi, once again I suggest you don’t try to pick fights in *my* hall,” Killian blandly suggested. “Not that I mind, but my Family is possibly more protective of humans than I am, so you might not survive your stay.”

Amée scoffed and looked away.

Auberi looked suitably cowed, but for the sake of his pride he pushed on. “Dress it up as you will, humans are only good for their blood.”

That got a scowl out Killian, but Auberi wasn’t done.

“Your One,” he continued, “will never be your equal, and what you feel for her is a farce.”

My indifference evaporated, and I reacted without thinking. “*Enough.*” I put my power into the word, filling the room with my presence.

The Dracos children fell silent—because they *had* to go silent. The power in my word kept their jaws shut.

Margarida was trembling like a leaf, Amée was so pale she looked faint, and even Auberi and Baldwin were shaking in fear.

I exhaled deeply. *That might have been an overreaction.* The sudden burst of anger had surprised even me, and I didn’t want to internally investigate the source of my outburst, though I had a fairly good idea it involved a certain red-haired slayer.

*Perhaps I’m closer to danger than I thought.*

I set my mug down and surveyed the table.

All of them—Margarida, Amée, Auberi, and Baldwin—stared at the table surface as they were unable to look at me. Except, that is, for Killian.

He wore a thoughtful expression—one I didn’t particularly like.

I swatted my power off, though the pressure lingered in the air like an unwanted relative.

“Stop arguing,” I said. “You’re irritating me more than usual, and with so many of you in one room I don’t have much patience for your antics.” It had my usual sardonic tone and it seemed plausible, but Killian’s expression didn’t change.

The smallest hint of a smirk slanted the right corner of his mouth, but his siblings didn’t seem to pick up on his good

mood. They sat quietly in their chairs.

“Yes, Elder Maledictus,” they murmured.

I sighed and stood up. “Next time I drop in, I expect you won’t be arguing like children. If I do, that will make me worry for you. And if I worry, I’ll have to visit you, at your home, with your vampire Family around you, just to reassure myself.”

Baldwin flinched at the threat, and Amée and Auberi gulped in perfect synchronization—even Margarida looked spooked.

Killian stood; his expression cleared. “Allow me to see you out.”

Guessing he wanted to escape his siblings, I shrugged and said nothing when he followed me to the door.

Only once the door closed behind us did I speak. “I hope you’re having fun with them.”

Killian waited until we were farther down the hallway—out of range of their hearing, no doubt. “I haven’t been here—though they think I am. During the day, I stay with my One in her wizard House,” Killian said.

I stopped walking and turned around so I could frown at him.

*Why on earth would he share such a dangerous detail with me? I could use that knowledge for any number of things.*

Killian’s expression was placid—not worried, but not defiant either.

“You said you didn’t want to leave your siblings unsupervised.”

“They sleep most of the day. They never even notice when I leave.”

“I see.” I said when he didn’t say anything else. “I’d congratulate you on escaping, but it’s likely you’ll be paying for property damage at some point. The Dracos line is as destructive as they are melodramatic.” I turned my back to

Killian again and made my way toward the entrance to his little hall.

“We get our destructive tendencies from you,” Killian said, his voice abnormally good-natured sounding. “You’ve modeled it for us for centuries.”

I grunted but didn’t further explore the concept as I was almost free of the hall.

But as Killian placidly followed at my heels, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the declaration had been some sort of test and my reaction had somehow pleased him.

*I don’t like a pleased Killian either. I don’t think it’s any better than smug Killian.*

Whatever. Killian had always played his own game, and I’d be leaving Magiford—and his domain—eventually.

I was jabbed with the thought of Jade and the knowledge that I’d be leaving my greatest form of entertainment behind when I did leave.

*Ahh, well. It is regretful, but inevitable. I shall merely have to focus on enjoying myself as long as I’m here.*

She’d be sad when I left, but she’d make more friends—she was too delightful a person not to—and she’d been careful to mind the boundaries we’d put into place as Connor and Jade. So as desperate as she was for friends, it didn’t seem like she was looking for more from me.

Which was oddly disappointing, but I could blame that on my twisted sense of humor.

We reached the front doors, and one of Killian’s vampires opened it for us so I could walk directly outside to the staircase that led down to the paved—and insanely long—driveway.

I glanced up at the sky. True darkness had settled in, leaving the heavens a sooty mixture of black and blue with a handful of stars to brighten it up.

“I’m still going to have my Family look for you,” Killian said, ruining the moment of silence.



“I would expect nothing less,” I said.

Killian nodded, satisfied. “If you revealed where you were holing up, my siblings might take their leave.”

“I’m uninterested in what would bring your siblings any kind of reassurance or positive feelings,” I said, listening to the rattling of dead leaves as the wind swept through Killian’s front yard.

Killian laughed. “I expect not. But one can always hope. Take care, Considine.”

I lazily waved to him as I descended the stairs. (I needed to get off his property before shifting to my bat form and heading back to Magiford. Killian likely had cameras stuffed in every tree and every bush on the property.)

“You know, humans are worth the heartbreak,” Killian called.

I paused at the base of the stairs, pivoted, and peered up at the obviously insane Killian. “I take back all my earlier defenses of you. You’re starting to lose it.”

Killian shrugged. “You know I’m not as soft hearted as Margarida, and even if we ignore my One...her wizards are delightful enough to make it worthwhile.”

“And when they all die, and you are left with the gaping hole they created in your life?” I skeptically asked.

Killian adjusted the cuffs of his spotless suitcoat. “I haven’t quite figured that part out yet,” he admitted.

“Mhmm,” I said. “Good luck. It’ll only take one time to learn better.” I started to turn away.

“Didn’t we all learn that when we were first turned?” Killian asked. “As we watched our friends and family who were still human grow old and die?”

I tilted my head, listening to an owl hooting in the trees. “Those deaths are your teachers—the moments that make you realize you really are different. The later deaths...” I trailed off, considering what I’d learned in my long life. “They’re wounds you never recover from, a pain that never leaves you

—your only companion in a life that stretches endlessly before you.”

Killian had nothing to say about this so I started down the driveway, a foul mood biting at my heels.

*I played the role of dutiful guardian tonight. I think it's about time I go have some fun.*

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Jad*  
*e*

I studied the charming brick storefront of Tutu's Crypta & Custodia. It seemed like the staff had taken even more precautions than when I'd last dropped by. I was getting a touch more fae magic radiating off the building that seemed new. (The overwhelming sensation, however, continued to be the spicy dragon magic—understandably, considering the owner.)

*Why would Gisila want to break in and steal something? That's equal to outright declaring war against her sister.*

I didn't know enough about dragon shifters to say if family wars were common. What I did know was that in addition to being obsessed with their hoards, dragon shifters were generally loners and didn't care much about or for others.

*But attacking Tutu's would bring her wrath down on Gisila. So, there must really be something Gisila wants... but how could we possibly find out what it is?*

Brody sniffed the air.

"Smell something?" Tetiana asked.

"Nah," Brody said. "Just pizza, wet leaves, and fried food from downtown—we're downwind here."

It was nearing midnight, and there was a strong gusty wind that pulled at the hood of my navy-blue uniform and tugged on

my clothes.

Soon, I'd need to invest in thicker versions of the underclothes I wore beneath my uniform. (I wore layers year-round to limit the risk of bleeding from something like a simple scratch or scrape.)

I glanced at Tetiana and Brody—the cold wouldn't be a problem for them. Tetiana couldn't feel much of it and, as a werewolf, Brody was overheated most of the time. (Werewolves generally loved winter the most out of all supernaturals.)

*"Team Blood. There's an incident on Main Street that I want you to respond to."* Sarge's voice crackled on the radio.

Brody cracked his knuckles, and his blue eyes gleamed in the low light cast by the streetlights. "Who wants to respond to Sarge?" he asked.

"I'll get it!" Tetiana cheerfully pulled her radio from her belt, then yelled. "UNDERSTOOD!"

When my ears stopped ringing, I checked to make sure my mask was in place. "Should we tell him we're still down on Goldstein Street?" I asked.

"Oh, good point." Tetiana sucked in another breath, and Brody blanched.

"Wait," he started. "Tetiana, I'll—"

"WE'RE ON GOLDSTEIN, INCOMING IN FIVE MINUTES. IS THAT ACCEPTABLE?" Tetiana shouted with enough gusto that it made me suspect she better understood how to use the radio than she let on.

Static crackled on the radio for several seconds, until Sarge spoke again. *"Yes. Headquarters got a call—there's a vampire in The Lucky Clover Irish Pub bothering some of the patrons. I want Blood on hand in case there are problems."*

"Makes sense, send the slayer in to scold the vampire," Brody said. "That will put the fear of true death in them."

Tetiana nodded, then pressed the talk button on the radio again. "GOT IT!"

Brody cursed and clamped his hands over his ears. “For crying out loud, Tetiana. You’ve gotten enough remedial lessons on tech; you should be able to handle this!”

Tetiana batted her red eyes at the cross werewolf. “It’s just so confusing!”

“And yet you have somehow figured out how to drive?” Brody asked.

Tetiana winked. “That’s different. That’s like driving a carriage!”

“Not hardly,” Brody grumbled as we headed north, towards Main Street. “But I suppose, your driving isn’t all that good.”

“Hey!”

“Should we move faster?” I asked. “If the vampire is already bothering patrons, they might escalate to something more physical in a short amount of time.”

Tetiana grimaced. “Ah, true. Fine, we can run.” She grumbled some more under her breath but started off at a fast trot.

Brody loped along with her, his stamina helping him keep up, and I brought up the rear, my training making the short run easy.

In no time at all, we reached the Lucky Clover and headed inside.

Brody drew back a little when he opened the door and was blasted with Irish music—fiddles, flutes, drums, and what sounded like a bagpipe to my uncultured ears.

“I’ll lead!” Tetiana offered, plowing past Brody. I waited for Brody to recover and stagger inside, bringing up the rear as usual.

Once I set foot inside the pub, I started taking inventory trying to find the best escape routes so we could block the vamp and eyeing the best places to drag the vampire to if I had to fight.

Despite the low lighting, the Irish pub felt cheerful and full with an elaborately carved bar made of dark wood, matching barstools that boasted the same arched design, and etched glass mugs decorated with shamrocks and Irish musical instruments.

The use of the dark wood and the black and white floor tiling set off the bright green wallpaper that decorated most of the walls—the only exception being the wall the bar was in front of, which was more rustic styled and made of worn brick.

The place was busy, but not crushed, so Tetiana, Brody, and I were all able to stand comfortably in the entrance together.

Brody cringed as he rubbed his ears. “Why do humans insist on blasting music so loud that you can feel it damaging your ear drums?”

I keyed into my senses, trying to track the vamp... but I felt nothing. Tetiana was the only presence.

*That’s weird. Did he leave already?*

Tetiana stood on her tip toes, craning to scan the pub, her eyes lingering on the live musicians standing on a tiny wooden stage. “Okay, I don’t see any obvious candidates for vampirism—no one is wearing visibly historic clothes. Can you tell where the vampire is, Blood?”

“No,” I paused for a moment to double check my senses but besides the loud music, the only other sensation I was picking up on was the distinctive smell of barley and hops from the alcohol and the wood polish the staff must use to clean the place. “I’m not feeling any besides you in the area right now.”

Brody frowned. “Do you think he realized he’d gotten reported and ran?”

I reflexively checked my belt, toying with the sharpened hair stick I used to wear in my hair whenever I was on an undercover mission with my Family. “I don’t know...”

There were two bartenders—a man and a woman—working—both wearing T-shirts with the pub’s logo emblazoned

on them.

The woman glanced in our direction, then paused. “There you are!” At least I think that’s what she said—it was too loud to know for sure.

She ducked out from behind the bar and approached us, slapping her hands on the black apron she wore.

It took me a moment to place her large eyes and nice smile as the human that Brody, Tetiana, and I had saved from a couple of unsavory vampires back in September when they’d used their pheromones to dazzle her. (The vampires gave us the slip, but Considine had gotten to them and beaten them unconscious.)

“Hello, thanks for coming so fast,” she said, flashing us a smile.

“Of course.” Tetiana glanced at Brody but he was still rubbing his ears, so Tetiana pasted on a smile and took over. “Were you the one who called the Curia Cloisters?”

“Yeah.” She nodded, then glanced over her shoulder.

“He’s still here?” Tetiana asked.

The bartender nodded. “Seated at the end of the bar, in the suit. He’s standing with two women—my regulars.”

Tetiana and Brody had to be discreet in looking at the vamp, but I—with my mask hiding my face—had plenty of time to study him.

The suit would have made me assume he was a Drake vampire—most vampires don’t care much for modern clothing, and the Drakes were famous for their dark suits and modern aesthetic. Except the suitcoat was a little baggy—not perfectly tailored like the Drakes wore—and draped across his shoulders instead of a tailored fit.

He was handsome with chiseled features, a fresh crewcut, and a smile that flashed a set of pronounced canines.

But even as I memorized and assessed his looks, my senses were quiet.

*Is there a magic that can erase his presence like this? I don't think so.* Considine was able to sneak around Magiford, and I only realized he was there when he was practically on top of me, but Considine was older than a lot of empires and the likelihood of a second old powerful elder vampire running around in a suit that wasn't of high quality was pretty much nil.

I adjusted my gloves, making certain all my skin was covered—just in case. “What did he do?” I asked.

The bartender nervously wrung her hands. “Um, I might have called you a little prematurely. He isn't doing anything illegal. He's just acting like a bit of a slimeball and pestering a few of our female customers. He hasn't escalated to the point where one of us staff members would tell him to back off just yet, but...” she trailed off and shrugged.

Brody recovered enough that he could put on a smile that showed too much of his teeth. “If there's a problem with a supernatural it's better to call us than to risk trying to handle the matter yourself, even if it seems like it's not a big deal.”

“And there are rules for vampires, put in place to protect... everyone,” Tetiana said, her bright tone covering up the caginess of her words.

There were a lot of rules and regulations that outlined the legal ways vampires could obtain blood and feed, and this was almost certainly breaking a handful of them. (We let the humans know there were guidelines, but we kept the existence of the actual laws quiet because we didn't want humans knowing the laws were even necessary. It would damage the *supernaturals are harmless* vibe we were striving for as a society.)

“Yeah, I just...I don't want any of my customers getting... whatever it was that happened to me.” The way the woman glanced at me confirmed she remembered who I was. “I figured I'd call you guys, and you'd decide if we needed to be worried or not. I trust your judgement.”

“It's our honor to help,” Tetiana said. “And don't worry, if the vampire has done anything wrong, he'll faint at the sight of



our vampire slayer.” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder, pointing to me.

*So, I’m the bogey man this round? Got it.*

I shifted so Brody’s bulk blocked most of me, just in case the vampire happened to look over at us.

Surprise was going to be my best tool in this situation.

The bartender relaxed. “Great. Thank you—for today and that time.”

“Of course.” Although Brody was smiling, his eyes were on the vampire, who was swirling a glass of amber colored alcohol. “We’ll handle this as delicately as possible, but if things get messy, please move your regulars.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I can do that. I’ll get them to move when you talk to him.”

“Fantastic,” Tetiana said.

Brody, his eyes still on the vamp, crowded her. “Let’s move.”

“Okay, then. Good luck.” The bartender waved to us, before she headed for the bar, ducking under the outstretched arm of her fellow bartender, who was passing a basket of seasoned waffle fries over to a customer.

“So, how are we handling this, Blood?” Brody asked.

I’d been watching the vamp, and I startled at the use of my slightly hurtful nickname. “Me?”

“Yeah, what’s the plan?” Tetiana gave me a little salute before she settled in next to Brody.

“I... I thought you were taking point on this?” My voice might have squeaked a little at the end—I didn’t like being smacked down into leadership positions.

“This is your thing, though,” Brody said.

“Yeah, except I’m still not picking up on any vampire presence besides Tetiana,” I said.

Tetiana tapped her chin. “Do you think he could be faking it?”

“He wouldn’t be the first,” Brody said. “Loads of humans pretend to be supernaturals—for the clout. And ‘cause they’re stupid.”

I studied our would-be-vamp again. “He’s got visible fangs, but his clothes and style are all wrong.”

Tetiana tightened the ponytail her long blonde hair was pulled back into. “Like he’s a store brand version of a Drake vampire, yes.”

We fell silent—although it was barely noticeable as the music amped up and with all the patrons laughing and shouting at one another in order to be heard.

*I guess they were serious about me taking the lead.*

I glanced at the store brand vampire, a plan formulating.

“First order, then, should be ascertaining whether or not he really is a vampire. When we approach, you two should go on either side of him, cutting him off from the regulars,” I said, my words coming easier since I’d switched to work mode. “I’ll stand to the side. Be prepared to block him if he tries to run. Question him why he’s here, and why he’s risking breaking supernatural law.”

“To give you time to figure out if he’s a supernatural or not?” Brody asked.

I nodded.

“Understood, Blood!” Tetiana mock saluted me again, then plowed into the crowd.

Between Tetiana’s natural charisma—with her gorgeous appearance and air of sophistication, she was hard not to notice—and Brody’s general size and muscle mass—in the low lighting you couldn’t see the wolf hair his Packmates had left on his legs—the bar patrons edged out of the way.

A couple of them eyed us as they made their way back to their tables or spots at the bar, but Tetiana and Brody ignored them, narrowing in on the maybe-vampire.

He had his back to us so he didn't notice our presence, nor did the woman he was talking to—she seemed intrigued and was rapidly nodding at whatever he was saying.

The woman's friend—the other regular, who was standing at her side as if she'd been handcuffed to her—saw us approach. Her eyes skated over our uniforms, taking in the gold trim and patch, and she relaxed, her expression changing into one of bored nausea.

“Oh yes, I'm very rich,” the maybe-vamp smiled as he scooted his glass around the bar with a melancholic air. “But money has no worth to me—it just doesn't matter anymore. Not when life is so dim and joyless.”

I blinked as I studied him, taking in the patterns to his speech, the cellphone he pulled from a pocket in his trousers, and the smart watch strapped to his left wrist.

“Oh, but the world is such a fun place, filled with little joys everywhere,” the woman earnestly said.

“That's what makes you a treasure.” The probably-not-a-vamp set his hand on her arm and looked soulfully into her eyes. “You can see beauty where before I saw darkness. That's so rare.”

The woman's friend rolled her eyes and took a swig from her etched beer glass.

I agreed with the estimation.

*He sounds like a soap opera version of a vampire—the kind that appeals to particularly romantic minded humans. Sure, vampires are jaded and cynical with life, and they can be melodramatic. But they don't air that out publicly, and definitely not with their lunch.*

I mashed my lips together as I tried to get a good look at his eyes, which was harder than expected due to the pub's low lighting. His eyes were dark, but that didn't mean anything as some vampires had eyes that were such a dark shade of red that they looked black.

The probably-not-a-vamp didn't even notice when Brody stepped up on his left side.

“Excuse me,” Brody murmured to the customer seated there. “I need this seat.”

The customer—a potbellied man—started to scowl, until he looked at Brody—or more correctly looked *up* at Brody and took in his build, which appeared to make him rethink his attitude. “Woah,” he said.

The female bartender appeared behind the bar with a coaxing smile. “Mike—I’ve got a spot for you down here, and a new Guinness with your name on it. Come on.”

Mike didn’t have to be told twice. He abandoned his glass—which just had foam left sticking to the sides—and scooted further down the bar.

The probably-not-a-vampire didn’t notice, too busy trying to charm the regular. (Another mark. Vampires and werewolves didn’t get along great—their cultures were *very* different and neither were particularly tolerant. There’s no way a vampire wouldn’t have realized Brody was standing next to him.)

“You’re so sweet,” the woman said.

The almost-definitely-not-a-vampire released a scoff that was worthy of Hollywood. “Hardly. My hands are stained with blood, I only live to regret the wrongs I have made in my lifetime—what I’ve done to survive.”

Tetiana hadn’t moved in yet; she was smiling at the woman’s friend, but at the definitely-not-a-vampire’s movie-esque drivel, she grimaced in disgust.

Brody leaned back in his newly acquired stool so he could mutter to me, “Does this kind of crap actually work?”

“I don’t think it’s been tried before,” I absently said as I shifted, still trying to get a better look at his eyes. “Vampires are too self-focused to regret anything they’ve done, and they see their way of life as a fact not something bad.”

“I’m sure you only did what was necessary,” the oblivious woman said. “Being a vampire couldn’t be easy.”

The posing-as-a-vampire moodily shrugged his shoulders. “You’re correct, but perhaps I don’t have a right to life if I’m such a monster.”

When he tried to give her a sad smile, I finally got it—his eyes were a dark brown, not a red color, and his pointed fang teeth had a waxy look to them. He was wearing fake teeth.

He wasn’t a vampire; he was a human. (He’d probably only gotten away with it because of the pub’s dim lighting, which would make it impossible for humans to tell. Thank goodness for my improved night vision!)

“Fake,” I said.

Brody gave me a thumbs up, and Tetiana subtly nodded before moving in.

She laughed and patted the fake-vampire on the back. “Goodness, that was a good one,” she said, her Ukrainian accent thickening. “What a joke.”

The man stiffened. “I beg your pardon?”

Tetiana merrily shook her head. “I won’t give you my pardon, but I will share my own joke! Why should you never tell a vampire to get a life?” Tetiana waited for a moment, before her good humor burned away and her eyes glowed an angry red. “Because she might decide to take yours.”

“Um?” the human/fake-vampire blanched.

“We’re with the Magical Response Task Force—under control of the Curia Cloisters.” Brody bumped the human’s shoulders.

The man twisted to face him and gulped.

Brody casually pulled his radio off his belt, but his intense gaze held the guy captive like a frightened rabbit. “Tell me, are you aware it’s illegal to pose as a supernatural?”

“Pose?” the fooled woman stiffened, her voice loud and accusatory enough that the talk around us died down as the pub patrons turned to watch. “Wait, you’re not really a vampire?”

“No, he’s just a human.” Tetiana scoffed.

The woman puffed up, but her friend tugged on her elbow. “Let’s leave this to the professionals—should we order some food?” the friend asked.

A couple of pub patrons sipped their drinks as they looked from the women to the fake-vampire to Brody and Tetiana, their mannerisms as electrified as a correctly installed spotlight.

“No.” The woman shook her head and held her finger up, stabbing it in the fake-vampire’s direction. “No. You, sir, are a crook! You know what—I’m going to post your picture on social media!” She whipped her phone out and snapped a picture before Tetiana or Brody could react.

“Wait!” The man stretched his hand out to his victim. “I didn’t *really* lie! There’s vampire blood in my family!”

“Is that so?” Tetiana asked with too much innocence. “Try telling that to Blood. Our vampire *slayer*.” She put her hands on his shoulders and forcibly turned him in my direction.

I did my best to stand tall and look imposing, but really my mask and weapons did plenty of talking for me—and successfully too, based on his reaction.

All the blood drained from his face. “Is that...is that a *gun*?”

I unhooked a set of cuffs from my belt and dangled them from one of my fingers.

“Sorry! Sorry.” He squeaked first to us, then to the woman he’d been chatting up. “I lied! I’m not a vampire! I was just... just... lonely. I won’t do it again, please let me go!”

“Oh, this is going all over the internet,” the woman growled.

“Okay, but we’re getting out of the possible blood-splash zone.” Her friend bodily hauled her away, dragging her further down the bar.

The patrons who’d been eagerly watching edged away, too, eyeing me with fear.

I tried not to be bothered that they hadn't given Tetiana and Brody the same looks of fear—my outfit was designed to intimidate, after all. Besides, if my presence kept an open circle around us, that would be beneficial if this guy tried to run.

Brody folded his arms across his chest, making his biceps pop in the tight sleeves of his uniform—he still hadn't swapped to the long-sleeved uniform, yet. “I don't think you understand just how dangerous it is to misrepresent yourself.”

“I get it now,” the man garbled. “I swear, I get it.”

“Oh, he'll learn!” His target called, halfway down the bar and still hopping mad. She was aggressively tapping away on her phone. “All of Magiford is going to find out about his little sob story act! Public shame will teach him.”

I scanned the pub. People were starting to get rowdy and as they'd been imbibing in alcohol, I wasn't sold that they could make sound decisions. “We should head out,” I said.

Brody cocked his head. “Bring him with?”

I pivoted so I could watch the pub patrons in case any of them were feeling filled with righteous justice. “Yeah.”

“Got it.” Tetiana peered back over her shoulder, addressing the male bartender hovering nearby. “Is he all squared up—his tab is closed?”

The bartender nodded. “He can go.”

“Great. Come on, *Twilight*,” Brody drawled as he grabbed the fake-vampire by the shoulders and frog marched him towards the door.

I followed, still watching the crowd, and Tetiana strolled along beside me—though she wasn't half as casual as she appeared based on the sharpness in her red eyes. She turned to the bar to nod to the bartender who had called the Cloisters.

The bartender had braced herself against the bar but waved when she saw Tetiana look her way. “Thank you,” she mouthed to us—she wasn't audible over the music and the buzz of the crowd.

We stepped out into the cold night air. When the door swung shut behind us, it cut out most of the noise—I could hear only the faintest chords of music escaping The Lucky Clover.

“P-please let me go,” the fake-vampire said, choked up in his fear and desperation. “I promise I won’t do this again!”

Brody pressed him against the pub’s wall, then turned to look back at me.

I shrugged—despite our act there wasn’t much we could do. Humans breaking supernatural law was usually something the human police handled, and as we’d stopped him before he’d actually done anything I didn’t think they’d be able to charge him.

Brody then turned to Tetiana, who chewed on her lip as she studied the shivering human. To my surprise, she abruptly leaned into my direction, then whispered, “If you don’t mind following my lead, Blood?”

“Have at it,” I said.

Tetiana nodded, then sidled up to Brody’s side. She tilted her head back, lowering her eyes to half-mast so she looked arrogantly down at the human. “We’ll let you go, human, with this warning. If you try this little charade again, the Curia Cloisters will respond to you as the threat you *claim* to be not the threat you actually are. And disobedient vampires are our slayer’s priority. She solves things with bullets and daggers, and she doesn’t stop to ask questions.”

The human’s eyes flickered from Tetiana to me.

Prepared for my role, I plucked two daggers from my belt—one for each hand—and spun them in my fingers. It was a basic party trick, but matched with Tetiana’s words, my blank mask, and the dark night, I looked like I’d stepped out of a human horror flick.

The fake vampire must have thought so, too. He squealed and shook so hard he mashed flat the wax he’d used on his canine teeth to make them look fang-like.



“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” he shrieked, repeating it like a mantra.

“Don’t do this again,” Brody growled. “Understood?”

“Understood, understood, understood,” the fake vampire chanted.

Brody let him go and the guy sprinted down the sidewalk, his baggy suitcoat flopping on his shoulders.

Brody waited until he was almost a block down before turning to Tetiana. “That was fun.”

“It was insulting.” Tetiana frowned and folded her arms across her chest.

“Oh, you mean because he absolutely nailed how whiny vampires are?” Brody asked.

Tetiana rolled her eyes. “He was as convincing as a vampire as a house dog is a werewolf. I cannot believe anyone actually believed him!”

I put my daggers away as I watched the thoroughly terrified human unlock his car and fling himself into it. While I was focused on him, I was still listening to Brody and Tetiana’s exchange.

*I wish I could be so casual, but I get the feeling that if I said anything negative about vampires, it would come off as judgy.*

“And why is it always that people think the most impressive part about being a vampire is our money and air of mystery?” Tetiana continued her rant. “No one ever admires our history chops or our knowledge of historic geography.”

“That’s because what you know is old and outdated,” Brody said.

“Oh, as if you can talk,” Tetiana scoffed. “Werewolves are only known among humans for their rippling muscles and wolf forms.”

“At least that means humans like us for who we are and not for our money,” Brody said.

My slayer senses kicked up, and I felt a vampire enter my range. “Vampire,” I said in a lowered tone. “Just showed up.”

Brody growled. “What’s the likelihood it’s Ruin?”

Tetiana turned in a circle. “Since we’re with Blood, I’d say high.”

I pulled a dagger from my belt, then—after a momentary pause—my hair stick, which I held in my left hand.

*In case he tries to get close.*

I heard a whoosh and whirled around, striking out with my dagger. The blade intercepted the pebble that had been tossed at me, and the small rock bounced off the blade and landed in the street with a clack.

“It’s Ruin,” I said with dead certainty.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Considin  
e*

I watched Jade with interest. While I couldn't see her face because of that blank slayer mask of hers, I could tell by the tiny movements of her head that she was scanning the street looking for any sign of me.

I grinned as I shifted my seat—I was sitting on a raised wall that edged the roof of the Irish Pub, my legs dangling over the side so they hung over Main Street. The building was only three stories tall—the first floor being the pub, with some apartments and offices on the second and third floors.

Jade moved on the sidewalk down below. “Come out, Ruin. I know you're there.”

Unsurprised she'd realized it was me so quickly—of course she was sharp, or I never would have liked her slayer *or* daytime persona—I picked up a bit of mortar that had chipped off the brick building, then tossed it at Jade when she turned her back to me.

Jade spun and again struck out with her dagger, batting the bit of mortar away. She stood, tensed, for a moment, then I saw her head start to tip up.

*Ahh, she's trying to calculate where those throws could have come from.*

I set my palms on the edge of the wall, the roughness of the brick scraping at my fingers.

“What is he playing at?” the blonde vampire who frequently was assigned to Jade’s team wondered. “Usually by now he would have pounced, trying to draw blood.”

She wasn’t wrong. Before I figured out the slayer on the task force was Jade, I had been a bit more...*rough* when playing.

But when I’d first comprehended all the fun I could have knowing Jade’s identities, it occurred to me that the road rash I’d bandaged on Jade had actually been my own doing. There was something vexing about that.

Not that Jade couldn’t handle a bruise or some pain. Her slayer blood gave her increased healing abilities that had likely kicked in and completely healed the road rash and scrapes within hours of my “treating” her.

But I was now doubly invested in Jade—she was my source of entertainment at night *and* by day. So, the less roughshod approach was merely to protect my best interests.

Jade’s head tilted farther back. She was going to see me any second now. I started to lean into my palms, intending to push off, when I caught sight of Ambrose’s gold ring still on my index finger. I’d forgotten to take it off when I’d changed.

*Jade has seen me wear that as Connor; better hide it.*

I slipped the ring off, and I barely had time to slide my hand into a pocket of my trousers before Jade caught sight of me.

At least I assumed she did because she pulled her handgun from her holster, clicked off the safety, racked it, and then pointed it up at me.

*She’s so clever*, I thought, smug with satisfaction. I waved to her, then pushed off the building. I landed on the sidewalk in a crouch so close to Jade that my bent knee brushed hers.

Her teammates jumped at my sudden arrival, both scuttling several meters down the sidewalk.

“Hello, Slayer,” I purred.

“Ruin.” Her voice was much steelier and slightly muffled in her mask compared to the cheerful tone she greeted Connor with during the daylight. “I’m not playing with you tonight.” She lowered her gun so it was pointed at the ground—if Jade had a vice it was that she followed rules to the letter.

“Why not? You had enough time to warn off that looney human.” I abruptly leaned into her.

Fast as lightning, Jade struck with her left hand pausing inches away from my throat so the filed point of the hair stick clenched in her hand barely pricked me. “Warning him off is part of my job.”

I cocked my head. “And I am not included in your work?”

“No,” the blonde vampire drolly said somewhere behind me. “Because you’re above our paygrade.”

“Nonsense. I believe in you, Slayer. We’re definitely on equal levels.” The words reminded me of what the insipid Auberi had said hours earlier—that Killian’s One could never be his equal. I gritted my teeth in irritation but forced a smile and forged ahead, determined not to let that idiot ruin my fun. “Or at least we’re as close to equals as I can get.”

I leaned back—getting out of range of that wicked hair stick of hers—then shifted my weight. I tapped my vampire agility, slipping to her back.

Jade, however, matched my pace and moved with me. This time, when I stopped, she held her gun to my chest.

“See?” I said, delighted.

“Stop wasting my time.” She took a step back, then another, before she lowered her gun and turned to her teammates. “Patrol?” The word came out slightly warbled, and I knew it wasn’t because she was afraid of me.

*Oof. When she’s not locked into battle, she’s just as awkward with her teammates as she is our neighbors. At least she’s consistent.*

The werewolf casually rubbed at his nose, but his eyes were on me. “If you think we can,” he rumbled deep in his chest.

Jade flicked the safety on her gun, but she didn’t holster it. “Yes.”

“We should report to Sarge that we took care of the pretend vampire.” The blonde vampire sounded bright, but she seemed reluctant to put her back to me as she side stepped down the sidewalk, keeping up with Jade.

“I’d say I’m surprised a human had the guts to pretend to be a supernatural.” A tap of my vampire agility and I’d caught up with Jade, occupying the open space on her opposite side. “But I fear this is a side effect of the soft weak image the supernatural community has chosen to foster.”

Jade rested her index finger on her gun’s safety—she really was amazingly trained; no wonder the O’Neils were considered elites among slayers. “You disagree with that decision?”

“No.” I tucked my hands into my pockets and studied the werewolf’s back—he was leading the group, his shoulders hunched up to his neck. “But there will always be downsides to any strategy. This is an example of one of them.”

The werewolf turned around, his blue eyes glowing in the low light of the streets. “Just how much did you see? You weren’t in the pub with us.”

“Correct,” I said. “But you ranted in great detail at the worm before letting him go.” I swooped in, trying to snag the firearm from Jade’s grasp.

She yanked her hand away from me and spun so that her left side faced me. She stabbed her hair stick upwards and I heard the click when she switched her safety off, but I’d already retreated from the range of her hand weapon.

She was so fast—and didn’t hesitate to attack. Unlike the cowardly Dracos offspring, she never backed down. It was absolutely delightful!

“Easy, Slayer. I’m just testing you,” I said.

A part of me itched to peel off her slayer mask—she was probably making an irritated face right now, her nose scrunched up in a way that made the freckles on her pale skin pop.

“Don’t,” Jade warned me before she turned to face the front again and started walking. “Brody, radio. Please.”

I ignored her warning and trailed after the trio. *Auberi is a right fool. Jade is as close to an equal as it gets—I can’t even command her since her slayer powers make her immune.*

Except, I belatedly remembered, Auberi had been criticizing Killian and his wizard One. He hadn’t been talking at all about Jade, and I had no reason to be upset—*I’m not upset.*

I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, barely registering when Jade’s team stopped too.

*I’m not upset, I mentally repeated to myself. It was just that Auberi said something stupid—which he does all the time—and was being an idiot about humans. It didn’t involve me at all.*

The werewolf growled something into his handheld radio, and I didn’t even hear Jade’s footsteps when she ghosted up to me.

“Ruin.”

I fixed another smile on my face. “What’s this, you’re willingly engaging with me now? Don’t tell me you have another giant snake you’re hiding somewhere that you need help killing, so you’re finally speaking to me of your own volition?”

Jade tilted her head to the left, then the right. “Did something happen?”

Whatever I’d been expecting from her, that certainly wasn’t it. “What?” I asked, some of my lightheartedness falling from my voice.

“You’re acting off.” She paused. “Almost as if you’re upset—”

“I’m not upset,” I flatly said.

She bobbed her head twice. “Okay.” She twisted to look back at her teammates. The werewolf was still muttering into the radio, but the vampire was watching us.

Jade gave them a thumbs up, then turned back around to face me. “Is trouble coming? A vampire war or something?”

“No,” I said.

“Then, it’s personal?”

I had to actively force my lips to keep a smile so I wouldn’t frown. “It’s nothing.”

*She’s good with fighting, but how is she so keyed into me that she can tell I’m... off? She doesn’t even like me as Ruin!*

Jade was motionless—which meant she was thinking. I couldn’t have her thinking *too* hard because who knew what she’d figure out. It was time for a distraction.

I invaded her space, moving in close to her. “Is that concern I hear in your voice, Slayer?” I asked.

“I’m always concerned when a vampire of your caliber is... off,” was her dry reply. “Because that means it could potentially harm my city.”

*Ahh, that explains it.*

“I see how it is—you’re concerned for the humans and supernaturals you’re forever endangering yourself to protect.” I had moved so close to her that my arm brushed her shoulder.

“Yeah,” she confirmed.

“You’re not concerned for me?”

She was still again. “Well. I would be, if I thought there was a supernatural that could beat you.”

That made my smile real. “Stop it, Slayer. You’ll make me blush.”

Jade looked back at her teammates again. “Have a good night—please don’t do anything illegal.”



“I never. Rarely.” I thought for a moment. “At least, I never do anything involving humans.”

“Good night, Ruin,” Jade flatly said before she turned away, heading up the street with her team once again. Her long strides matched with her lean, athletic build—the work of her weighted runs and endless workout sessions no doubt—gave her a delightfully deadly air.

I watched for a moment and considered following her, but the interaction had settled my irritation and despite the allure of entertainment, I was still dedicated to maintaining emotional distance.

*Never get attached.* I turned on my heels and slipped my hands into the pockets of my trousers, the ring brushing my finger as a timely reminder. *Losing Ambrose was enough to teach me that.*

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Jad  
e*

The oven dinged and I pulled out the cookie tray, the delicious scent of warm Worcestershire sauce washing over me in a wave of nostalgia.

I set the cookie tray down on the hot pads I had put on my counter, then frowned down at my attempt to recreate my great aunt Patsy’s famous “Party Mix”.

Most of the mix was comprised of corn, wheat, and rice cereal with some pretzels and nuts for added crunch. Worcestershire sauce, a handful of seasonings, and butter were then poured over the top and baked in the oven. It was supposed to come out as a salty snack—one that I particularly remember my Great Aunt Patsy serving my brothers, cousins, and me in the fall when we came to her house for our class about wizards and ways to defeat them, that she taught, and hand-to-hand combat training with her husband, Great Uncle Thomas.

In theory, it was one of my family’s easier recipes. But my Party Mix didn’t look right. The seasonings hadn’t stuck on as well as they should have, and some of the cereal pieces were getting burnt.

“How did it come out?” Connor crowded me, peering over my shoulder. “Woah. All my years of life didn’t prepare me for this surprise: it looks edible! Congratulations, Appetizer.”

I carefully picked up a few hot pieces and ate them. “It’s not right,” I said. “It’s not flavorful enough. I don’t think the garlic and onion powder stuck to it because it doesn’t taste like much besides...cereal.”

“You’re just being too pessimistic,” Connor said. “We should be celebrating this new achievement: edible!”

I flipped the mix with a spatula, as if hoping (in vain) that by stirring it the seasonings would magically stick. “Would you try some?”

“Not on your life.” Connor ambled across my apartment, seating himself on my couch with his legs bumping the coffee table. “While this is the first thing you’ve made that looks decently edible, there’s a good chance there is still something wrong with it, and it’ll end up making me sick.”

I ate another handful of warmed, barely salty cereal. “What happened to ‘being too pessimistic’?”

“I’m not being pessimistic,” Connor informed me. “Just realistic. You do not have a history of winning at baking.”

“You’re not wrong.” I slipped the cookie tray off the severely stained hot pads in hopes it would cool faster. (I may as well call it quits as I didn’t think the cereal would magically pick up more seasonings. If I wanted to pack the snack up, I’d need it to cool first.) I plucked up my phone and shuffled over to the couch.

When I got within an arm’s distance, Connor gently took my hand and yanked me down on the couch to join him.

For a second my instincts warred within me to resist but Connor was my friend, so the impulse cleared in a moment, and I let myself collapse on the couch next to him.

“Cheer up. It’s still an improvement.” Connor held up my clasped hand, rotating it, as if he was admiring the freckles on my arm—though it was possibly my veins visible through my pale skin that had his attention.

“Yeah, I was just hoping if I went for something easy like this, I could share it with our neighbors.” I tugged my hand

from Connor's grasp so I could start a text message to my Great Aunt Patsy.

"I think you can still share it," Connor said. "You just have to choose your audience carefully."

"Who would be the ideal audience?"

"Old people," Connor said without hesitation. "Particularly nice, old people. They'll be touched you took the time to make something and thought of them. Also, they're less likely to notice the lack of flavor."

I pressed my lips together and considered his suggestion. "That might actually work. Give me a second, I'm going to text my aunt to ask her a question about the recipe."

Connor fell back into the couch. "Is your aunt an O'Neil?"

"Yep."

Connor chuckled for some reason—vampires laughed at a lot of things randomly; I suspect it came with the age—but I ignored him and typed away.

Hi Patsy. I have a question about your Party Mix recipe—this is it, right?

I attached the image of the recipe card Nan had sent me when I'd asked her for the recipe last night, then set my phone aside.

"How's work been?" Connor asked, an amused slant in his eyebrows.

"Fine."

"No violent visitors?"

"Nah." I said, trying to keep things vague.

"I never knew desk jobs were so perilous before I met you. Ah—now that's an idea! We should celebrate that you haven't gotten hurt in the line of duty recently." Connor's red eyes glittered with amusement.

"I don't get hurt *that* often." I kept my tone light and unaffected, but I was aware I'd need to change the subject

soon—Connor’s questions were getting a touch too prying.

Thankfully, my phone dinged with a reply from Great Aunt Patsy.

GREAT AUNTIE P.

Ohlass no!

Aunt Patsy’s poor eyesight meant she didn’t always correctly hit the space bar, so it made deciphering her texts a little tricky.

GREAT AUNTIE P.

That’sthe recipe I gave your grandmother! She’d die if I told her the real one. Double the butter and add an extra splash of worcestershire!

If you really want it totasteright, add more than double the butter.

I swiped back to the recipe card Nan had sent me. “Wow. That is a lot of butter.”

“Has the knowledge been successfully passed to the next generation?” Connor asked.

“Yeah. I think so. But I have to get rid of all this Party Mix before I make another attempt.” I scraped myself off the couch and dragged myself back over to my kitchen, pausing to get some plastic bags.

Connor took over the space I’d vacated, stretching his long frame out on my couch. “How unfortunate.”

I tested the mix; it was still a little warm, but in another minute or two I’d be able to bag it. I got a marker out and started labeling my bags.

“Do you want something to drink?” I asked Connor as I wrote *Party Mix* on each bag in big, bold font.

“You’re not going to swindle me into trying one of your health smoothies.” I couldn’t see him from this angle, but Connor’s smooth voice drifted over to me—dripping with disgust.

I shook out one of the bags, testing to see if the marker had dried. “Nah, I bought you some blood packs. Do you want one?”

Connor snapped upright so fast it mussed his dark hair. “You’re keeping blood here? In your apartment?”

“Yeah.” I started labeling another bag.

“For me?”

He looked so surprised I looked up at him. “Yes.”

“You have blood in your fridge, for me.” Connor repeated, as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You?”

“Yeah. But you gave me the idea—you pointed out that I didn’t have any vampire-refreshments the afternoon I hung out at your apartment.”

“But *why?*”

I started to shake out another bag, but this seemed important to him, so I set it back down so I could meet his gaze. “Connor, you’re my friend. I want things on hand that you’d enjoy.” I paused for affect, then added, “Even if you are picky as all get out.” I flashed a smile, pleased with myself that I could tease him.

Connor, however, didn’t react at all the way I thought he would. He didn’t smile or complain about the ribbing. He just stared at me, unblinking.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Connor got off the couch and joined me in the kitchen with an unnatural agility.

The speed made my own slayer reflexes rear to life, and I had my metal spatula in my hand before I realized it. *Stop it. This is Connor.*

I scowled at myself, but Connor finally spoke. “I’m fine.” His voice wasn’t its usual lighthearted tone, but something smoother and richer. “I’d just forgotten that humans could be so... charming. And that you possess redeeming qualities.”

He wasn’t joking; the tone of his voice was too serious. *Is he really okay? He’s not usually this serious.* I looked up from my edible-but-still-incorrect Party Mix and met his gaze.

For a moment, something changed. It wasn’t that his vampire presence grew stronger—it was more subtle than that. There was something about his eyes, about the tired sincerity in his voice.

He wasn’t using vampire pheromones or anything, there was just a tiredness to him—the raw fatigue with life that the guy who’d been pretending to be a vampire had completely lacked.

It was something I’d noticed only in older vampires, and I was surprised to see it in Connor.

He held my gaze for a few long moments, which almost felt like years.

Then, as abruptly as the mood had settled, it was gone, with Connor flashing me a smile. “So, what blood types do you have?”

“You’ll have to check the fridge,” I said. “I only have four or five of them—I’ll get more, though.”

“How exciting—let’s see if I can find them.” Connor opened my fridge door and peered inside, rooting around my boxes of spinach, coffee creamer, tub of fresh apples, and the cartons of eggs for his pouches.

I studied his back—his shoulders were relaxed, his easy good humor was back, and there was no sign of the brief exhaustion he’d shown a flash of.

*I’ve been off about him. He’s old. A lot older than I thought.* I had no idea how he could hide it so well, but it also didn’t matter.

Vampires didn't choose to live alone like Connor. Whatever he'd gone through, he had scars. But he's also made it clear he didn't want to talk about it. I knew firsthand he wasn't harming anyone—there's no way he'd be able to hide it from me if he was illegally feeding on humans.

*He's probably fine. Unless...he couldn't be Considine... could he?*

Considine Maledictus was vampire royalty. There was no way he'd be squatting in a human apartment building with no vampires on hand to cater to his whims.

But I had to consider it—it would be dangerous not to.

*Their voices are a little alike, and they do have similar builds...*

“Ah-hah!” Connor emerged from his expedition in my fridge, triumphantly holding up a blood pouch. “Behold: lunch!”

*There's no way. I thought as I stared at Connor. Absolutely no way. A vampire who was turned thousands of years ago wouldn't act like this. It's impossible.*

He didn't notice my scrutiny, and instead crowded my space.

“Congratulations.” I made myself set down my spatula. “I'm glad it makes you this happy.”

Connor flipped the blood pack around a few times, inspecting it, then jabbed the plastic straw in it. “How did you get these? Usually, you must register to get them—they don't carry them in the supermarket.”

“There's a couple of vending machines at the Curia Cloisters.” I picked up my marker and began labeling the last few bags. “I bought them there. I didn't want to sign up for the delivery service because they only do bulk deliveries, and I'm pretty sure they'd expire before you could drink them all.”

Connor stopped sucking down his blood pack and set it down on the table. “You were thinking that much of me?”



“You, and my wallet,” I said truthfully. “I had to take a cooler to work to transport them home. I figured they needed to be kept cold and it’s getting chilly outside, but it’s not *that* cold.” When I glanced over at Connor, he was staring at his blood pack.

He was clenching his jaw, and there was a slight furrow to his eyebrows. He looked like—as Nan would say—someone in need of some hugs and kisses.

I certainly wasn’t going to do the kisses part—we had a platonic friendship. But I could be brave enough to hug him. Connor was open to invading my space so he wouldn’t mind. I just wanted to make sure I didn’t come off as touchy-feely as Considine/Ruin.

“Do you need a bear hug?” I asked.

Connor blinked and looked up at me. “A *what?*”

“A bear hug—a big squeezing hug.” I slowly stepped towards him, giving him lots of opportunities to back up, then flung my arms around his shoulders and gave him my best imitation of the bear hugs my dad gave—the ones that never failed to make me feel loved and safe.

Connor froze for a moment—which wasn’t the expected reaction, since he had no problem touching me.

His shoulders heaved in a sigh and then he slipped his arms around me, returning the hug.

I was surprised by how nice the hug felt—his arms wrapped tight around my shoulders while I wound my arms around his waist. There was something... secure about it. It was dangerously tempting in that I felt like I could relax, like Connor could take care of it, and I could just *be*.

That was a very dangerous feeling for a slayer—one I needed to be careful with.

Oddly, the hug felt a little *deja vu-ish*, too. As if I had recently experienced a similar embrace.

“You’re a lot of trouble, do you know that?” Connor groused into my hair.

I rested my chin on his shoulder and fought off the instinct to unwind. “I didn’t burn anything this time, you didn’t even have to fan the fire alarm.”

“I wasn’t talking about your questionable cooking.”

Before I could ask what he meant, Connor slid away from me to approach the sink. “Shall we bag up your Party Mix so you can deliver it to your targets?”

“Yeah.” I glanced at the clock. “I still want to get a workout in before I leave for work, so I’ll need to hurry.”

A smile played at Connor’s lips. “Of course.”

While Connor drank his blood pack, I scooped the plain-but-edible Party Mix into individual baggies. I loaded up one of my empty backpacks and then scoured the building for the elderly neighbors that I was comfortable enough with to offer a bag and not die of embarrassment.

I started with the Weston’s apartment—Connor in tow, carrying my backpack for me.

Just as we turned into the hallway, the door to their apartment opened, and out shuffled Mr. and Mrs. Weston along with Ms. Elly—the building gossip.

Mr. and Mrs. Weston were wearing matching outfits. Mr. Weston, who had a short, squat frame, was wearing olive green pants with a navy-blue sweater, while Mrs. Weston, who was tall and willowy, was in a navy-blue, ankle length skirt with an olive green turtleneck and a vest embroidered with smiling dogs.

Ms. Elly was in a long, flowy dress that had skirts poofy enough to make her vaguely resemble a flower and a knit shrug, while tortoise shell glasses hung around her neck on a beaded necklace.

Mr. Weston frantically checked his watch as the two women laughed together, until they spotted me.

“Jade, darling!” Ms. Elly called. “What a marvelous surprise.”

“And a short surprise,” Mr. Weston said. “We need to keep moving—we’re already two minutes late to our bridge club.”

Mrs. Weston patted her husband on the shoulder. “Oh, pish-posh. We can stop and say hello!”

“It’s the neighborly thing to do.” Ms. Elly said. “I see you have your *friend* with you.” She winked and shook her dog-sized handbag at me for emphasis.

“You mean Connor?” I glanced over at Connor, who was politely smiling as he stood next to me holding my backpack.

“Ahh yes, Connor.” Mrs. Weston gave me a conspiratorial wink. “I think it’s quite cute how we only ever see Connor when he’s accompanying you. Such a loyal boyfriend, aren’t you?”

I stared at Mrs. Weston for a moment, completely lost. What was Connor loyal to?

It wasn’t until I noticed Ms. Elly squirming with delight that I realized Mrs. Weston was implying Connor was loyal to *me*.

“Um, that—he’s a great, great friend,” I stammered.

I could have happily kicked myself—of course, *now* my social anxiety chose to kick up, at the most awkwardness-inducing moment.

I steeled myself as I glanced up at Connor, hoping for help.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Jad*  
*e*

No rescue was incoming—he didn’t say a word. Instead, he had a measured smile with no emotion behind it. This was a very different reaction from the time he’d laughed himself sick at The Book Nookery when Ms. Booker had asked if we were dating, which mildly concerned me until I recalled that this seemed to be his default mode whenever interacting with other apartment residents.

*Mrs. Weston does have a point. Connor is faultlessly cordial, but he hasn’t been friendly with anyone in the building besides me. I wonder why he made the exception for me? Is it because I work at the Cloisters?*

“No denials from the man himself? That’s unexpectedly forthright!” Ms. Elly briefly held her tortoise shell glasses up so she could look first at Connor, then me before she dropped them, and they once again dangled from her neck.

Connor’s smile didn’t waver, but he slipped the backpack off his shoulders. There was something about his conduct that tugged at me.

I wasn’t terrifically versed in social exchanges and despite his polite mask, it felt like he didn’t care about anything the older women were saying or what they thought of him.

*He must have been genuinely amused when Ms. Booker asked last month. Does he no longer find the idea funny or is it that he's heard it before so it didn't catch him by surprise? But why wouldn't he find it funny—nothing's changed between us.*

“They’re good together,” Mr. Weston said to his watch. “How lucky we are to have a romance unfolding in our apartment building for everyone to watch. *Now*, we must leave for our bridge club!”

“No, I’m sure they came down here for a reason,” Mrs. Weston said. “Did you need something, dears?”

“Yes, I was going to ask if you’d like some Party Mix.” I unzipped the backpack Connor offered me and pulled out a stuffed bag.

“Party mix—oh! That’s Chex Mix!” Mrs. Weston declared.

Ms. Elly picked up her glasses again so she could peer at the food offering. “Oh my, that actually looks good! Your culinary skills are improving, Jade.”

“Yeah, it came out okay but it’s a little plain because the seasonings didn’t coat the pieces very well.” I put on a smile and held my breath in hope.

“I haven’t had Chex Mix in years!” Mrs. Weston exclaimed.

Mr. Weston, looking very stressed, gave me a strained smile. “It’s very kind of you, Jade. We’ll take two bags and share them with our bridge club for a snack, if you don’t mind. Sound good, Martha?”

Mrs. Weston ignored her husband’s question. “I think I last had Chex Mix in the fall of 1998—at Matilda’s place.”

Ms. Elly dropped her glasses and straightened up. “Matilda Cramer—who lives over on Lake Lane?”

“No, Matilda Dorris—over in Franklin.”

I grinned as I passed two bags of my party mix over to Mr. Weston—who made a pained noise.

“She’s thankful, and excited to start playing cards,” Mr. Weston said. He then stuffed the bags of Party Mix into Mrs. Weston’s handbag, took her hand, and towed her down the hallway.

“You are such a kindhearted dear,” Ms. Elly told me as she side shuffled down the hallway after them. “Maybe next time we can have a good chat. We hope to see you soon—and your friend!” Ms. Elly gave me an expressive eyebrow wriggle before she hurried after her friends, and the trio disappeared down the hallway.

I’d be lying if I didn’t say their exit disappointed me. Oh, I didn’t feel rejected—they were too kind for that, and they’d taken my offering. It was just... discouraging. It felt like no matter how I reached out to the other building residents, they were too busy. Friendly, but their lives were too full to reciprocate.

“I admire their dedication to forms of entertainment,” Connor said.

*Well, not all of them.*

I fixed my posture before I stuffed the Party Mix back in the backpack. “They take card games very seriously.”

“As they should. When you find a form of entertainment, it’s best to guard it jealously.” Connor chuckled lowly as he put the backpack on again. “So, who next? What other potential targets and/or victims do you have in mind?”

“Since I was focusing on a senior audience, I’m all out,” I said. “I don’t know anyone else in the building who might like the Party Mix.” I tucked one of my red curls behind my ear. “Maybe I should try taking it to work?”

“Leave it in some place werewolves frequent,” Connor advised. “Werewolves will eat anything.”

That was a legitimately good tip, but I felt too loyal to Brody to just let the comment go. “It’s because they burn a lot of calories.”

Connor shoved his hands in the pockets of his pants and strolled towards the nearest staircase. “It’s because they have

the same obsession with food as a human's domesticated canine pet.”

“They're not that bad,” I protested as I followed behind him.

Connor snorted. “You will not fool me, Jade O'Neil. You work at the Cloisters; you've seen enough to know better.”

I mashed my lips together.

Connor stopped at the stairs and motioned for me to go up first. “So, you'll be taking it in to work?”

“Yeah.” I started up the stairs, initially going fast like I did for exercising until I remembered I was with someone and slowed my pace. “I'll just have to make sure I leave it where no one recognizes me,” I said.

“Are your cooking skills so poor that you're infamous not only in your own apartment complex, but in the Cloisters—an immense building that has hundreds of visitors every day?” Connor asked.

“Uhhh,” I tensed up. “Maybe?”

Really, I was just pretty sure that no one would want anything I'd cooked. I could agree with Sunshine that my coworkers had a weird kind of respect for me and that made things occasionally awkward... like bringing in food and then seeing no one eat it. (The vampires I could understand given what I was. But Brody wasn't that picky, and he'd refused to eat the cookies I'd bought from a store and brought in for my birthday a couple of months ago.)

I couldn't tell Connor that, so instead I jumped for a new topic of discussion. “Why didn't you laugh when Mrs. Weston suggested we were dating?”

“Why would I laugh?” Connor asked as we passed an apartment floor and kept heading up.

“Because you laughed so hard you nearly cracked a rib in September when Ms. Booker made the same assumption.”

“Oh. You are correct,” Connor said. He sounded genuinely surprised, so I peered back at him over my shoulder. He had a

hand carelessly resting on the banister as we climbed, and his forehead was wrinkled in thought. When he noticed my attention he gave me a roguish grin. “You never know, *Hors d’oeuvre*. Maybe I’ve fallen for you.”

“Never gonna happen,” I said with absolute conviction.

Connor took two steps at a time, so he was shoulder to shoulder with me instead of behind. “You said that so fast, like you didn’t even have to think about it.”

“Because I didn’t.”

“And you spoke with such certainty.”

“Because I am certain,” I said.

Connor wrapped an arm around my shoulder. My protective instincts stayed dormant—it was Connor after all—but I knew better than to take his touchy-feely-ness seriously. “Please. You cannot know my heart—I am the mysterious night!” Connor declared. “What if I’ve fallen madly in love with you for your cute quirks like...your bad cooking skills and odd obsession of running with a weighted backpack?”

“I know you haven’t because you hold back.” I shrugged. “I mean, I do to a certain extent too.”

Connor let his arm slide off my shoulders. “You’re no fun—you could just play along with me for the humor of it.”

*So, he doesn’t deny holding back? That must mean he’s satisfied with our current level of friendship despite his joke.*

That was fine. Connor had always been clear with his boundaries. There was a greedy part of me that was disappointed, but that was hardly surprising considering how much I enjoyed hanging out with him.

Either way, it didn’t matter. I had a few months before I could tell Connor I was a slayer. This was an easier, more comfortable level of friendship to maintain.

It was.

“What if another supernatural came in and swept you off your feet?” Connor asked as we cleared the last few stairs,



reaching the landing to our floor.

I snorted. “No supernatural is ever going to do any sort of sweeping with me, romantic or otherwise.”

“Don’t say that, Meal. That’s a terrible attitude to have.” Connor slipped the backpack off and offered it to me.

I glumly took it. “It doesn’t matter because it won’t happen.”

*Everyone is way too scared of me since I’m a slayer. Not that I can blame them.*

“I’m... too much,” I concluded. “I’ve told you before—I can’t even make new friends; do you *really* think I could launch a successful romantic relationship?”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.” He playfully tugged on one of my red curls, but the teasing lilt had left his voice. “You’re entertaining—which can mean a lot to the right individual.”

For a second—for a moment that passed so fast I almost didn’t catch it myself—I felt sad that Connor—handsome, charismatic and playful—could see me, could see the value in me, and he didn’t want anything more than our easy friendship.

Inwardly scowling, I flicked the wayward feeling aside, disappointed with myself. Connor had set the boundary—and it was one I knew was best for me as I was prioritizing friends and keeping my family secret. I was going to follow the boundary and not waste time wishing on dreams.

Even more important than wasting my time and energy, I was not going to be a bad friend, especially since Connor meant so much to me.

*This is why I need to keep practicing, so I can build more friendships and not be so reliant on the few I have.*

Regaining control over myself, I grinned at my friend. “In that case, isn’t it a good thing, then, that we’re neighbors?”

Connor blinked. “Pardon?”

I fished my keys out of my pocket and opened my apartment door. “Because you find me entertaining?” I reminded him.

“I do find you entertaining. All the time.” His usual smirk returned and he repeated. “*All the time.*”



A FEW DAYS PASSED—I got a weekend off and spent some time working on my paper for Sarge, something I was starting to attack with a frantic energy since November was just around the corner and I had the distinct feeling I was not handling the assignment the way Sarge wanted me to.

Monday night patrols went off without a hitch, we even got time to close out a few cases and clean up some whiteboards when we got back to the Cloisters—though the picture of the missing person the human police sent over in September stayed up.

I stared at the whiteboard that still had the missing woman’s photo.

*Maybe we should follow up with the human police about her. I don’t know much about criminal activity and statistics, but I know enough to know that it’s very bad that so much time has passed without even seeing her.*

Hopefully the police had found her, and they’d just forgotten to tell us. Either way, it was worth asking Sarge about at one of our squad musters.

I glanced back down at my report on the library fire and subsequent investigation. I was supposed to be checking to see if there was a detail I’d forgotten to include. The papers—dry on my fingertips—kept sticking together, and I’d bent more than a few corners as I tried peeling them apart.

Grove stood a few feet away wiping down one of the whiteboards while Tetiana watched, shuffling the deck of cards used for the team’s rousing games of go fish.

“This was a wonderful night,” Grove announced. “It was so quiet!”

April groaned from her desk. “You had to say it.”

Grove set his eraser down and turned towards April. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you’ve doomed us, and now we’re going to have something annoying happen,” April said.

“We have less than an hour of the shift left,” Juggernaut pointed out.

“Doesn’t matter,” April leaned back, the florescent lighting accenting her high cheekbones. “We’re in for a rough ride.”

A door whooshed as it was thrown open and Sarge strode inside, his silvery hair ruffled as if he’d been pulling on it. “Gather up, night squad,” he barked.

The door opened again, and a petite, blonde haired woman entered behind him carrying what looked like a ream’s worth of paper.

I stood up, my desk chair creaking, and joined my squadmates in a cluster by the whiteboards.

Sarge navigated his way through the huddles our desks were pushed into, but stepped aside and bowed to the woman when he reached us. “Night squad, this is Adept Hazel Medeis of House Medeis, protégé of Elite Bellus—the wizard representative on the Midwest Regional Committee of Magic.”

Hazel Medeis flashed a quick smile that was equal parts beauty and sass, and wriggled her fingers in a tiny greeting at April—a member of her wizard House—before her humor faded. “Hello, night shift! I wish we were meeting in better circumstances, but I’m here to deliver some bitter news.”

*Bad news, delivered by an Adept...what are the chances this is about House Tellier and the library fire?*

I already had my arms locked behind my back and my shoulders set, so I took a deep breath to steel myself.

“The Wizard Council has officially decided not to pursue any deeper investigation into House Tellier,” Hazel adjusted the white and blue jacket she was wearing—it was a wizard coat with the crest of House Medeis over the breast pocket. I

saw a familiar flash of black on her belt when her coat moved, which I recognized as a gun holster.

*Makes sense. House Medeis is the only wizard House that trains in firearms—it's why April was also given a gun.*

The training was also not that shocking considering that Hazel Medeis was married to the vampire Eminence Killian Drake, who trained his vampires to the point that I'd consider them all sharpshooters.

“They say there is insufficient evidence, and that Cloister resources would be spent better on issues that are truly a threat to human-supernatural relations,” Hazel continued. “As such, the investigation is closed.”

April, standing next to me, stiffened, her entire frame radiating tension. I also felt shocked followed by a wave of indignation washing through me.

*How could they close the investigation? The fire could have harmed humans, which would bring repercussions down on the entire community. I know when Sarge and Captain Reese spoke of the issue in front of me, they said the Wizard Board doesn't want to lose any Houses as it will mean a loss of power, but they can't be that short sighted, can they?*

Juggernaut jumped as if he'd been zapped. “Wait, so we can't look into it anymore?”

“You can't look into the library incident,” Hazel said. “However. If you find new incidences or, perhaps, evidence shows up that House Tellier has done anything in the past, that would be considered a *new* investigation.”

“Wowee.” Grove clapped his hands like he was applauding a musical performance. “You're as good at bending rules as a fae! Nice job—the future of wizards is bright if you'll one day be the Elite!”

“*Grove.*” Standing behind the Adept, Sarge shook his head and narrowed his eyes at our team's medic.

Hazel laughed. “He's not wrong. But I have a suggestion. If you do find something, pursue it as ruthlessly fast as possible and delay reporting it to the Regional Committee of

Magic until you have House Tellier bagged and tied up. Then the Wizard Council won't be able to complain, and you'll have enough information that you can threaten to take it public if they try to stonewall a charge against them again."

"Spoken like a true fae!" Grove proudly said.

The rest of the team nodded or gave murmured expressions of "understood," except for April.

She pressed her lips flat and furrowed her eyebrows. "Are they really going to get off with no punishment for the library?"

"For now," Hazel cracked a smile. "But they won't get out pain free." She held up her gigantic stack of paper. "I'll bury the Wizard Board and House Tellier in paperwork—noise complaints, a failure to care for the front sidewalk, using magic in public, there's at least a dozen violations we can throw at them between the human government and the Curia Cloisters."

It was something, but I wasn't the type who was clever enough to use paperwork to mete out justice so it still felt hollow to me.

April briefly raised her hand. "Should Blood, Binx, and I lodge a complaint about House Tellier's conduct the night we went to speak to them?"

Hazel tilted her head. "It's not a bad idea, but I'd like to keep House Tellier's ire focused on me, so the task force doesn't experience any hindrances to future investigations."

*So, the Adept plans to become our shield. It's risky, but House Medeis is probably the strongest wizard House in Magiford—stronger, even, than Elite Bellus's House.*

"Any questions?" Sarge asked.

The door Sarge and Adept Hazel Medeis had entered through slammed open.

Sunshine stood braced in the doorway, her forehead damp with sweat as she heaved in gulps of air.

I stared at her, trying to make sense of her presence. She didn't usually come in for the early morning shift—she had closer to a human work schedule, and even then we still had over half an hour left to our shift before the early morning crew took over.

*Something must be wrong.*

“What happened, Sunshine?” I asked, breaking the silence.

Sunshine pushed her glossy brown hair out of her face. “Fae fight, downtown,” she said.

“All units, prepare to mobilize in the teams you went out on patrol in!” Sarge shouted.

We scattered. I just had to grab my mask—I wore all my weapons unless expressively instructed otherwise—so I slunk over to Sunshine, who was leaning against the wall.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Sunshine nodded, scowling when her hair hung in her face again. “Just ran through the Cloisters like crazy to get here. Mom dragged me out of bed early today—one of her brownie friends from the Night Court was hired to cater a brunch for the Spring fae Queen, and she volunteered to help and wanted me to drop her off. We ran into the fight downtown—but they were moving, so I doubt they're still there.”

“Understood, but are you sure you're okay?” I asked.

Sunshine flashed me a smile. “I'm great. But you be careful out there—I mean it, no sacrificing yourself like you did last time. Got it?”

“Understood,” I said.

Sunshine scowled at me, her dark eyebrows flattening over her eyes in disbelief.

“If I didn't, I'm pretty sure Sarge would turn my paper into a dissertation,” I added.

Sunshine cracked a smile. “Good. I hope it wraps up fast, my jewel,” she said, using her nickname for me.

“The team is ready, Blood.” April checked her firearm in her holster as she wove around a clump of desks, heading my way.

I nodded to her, then opened the door, holding it for my team. “Thanks for the heads up, Sunshine.”

Sunshine nodded. “Of course. Now, go pull some hair and restore peace!”



I GRABBED A DRYAD, who tried to throw herself at Grove’s turned back. “No,” I said to her, before I wrapped an arm around her throat and held her in a chokehold.

She clawed at my arm—inefficient, as I was wearing more layers due to the icy night air.

I eyed the trees that surrounded us—my team had found the fae fighting in a small park. It was the perfect place for the fae as they wouldn’t damage the area much, but I didn’t like the advantage a dryad had surrounded by all the greenery.

Right on cue, I felt a brush of fae magic in my mind and the closest tree—a weeping willow—groaned as it stretched, its branches reaching for me. It tried to wrap a whip-like branch around my ankle and pull tight.

*Better stop this before it starts.*

Ignoring the vise-like grip—also not very efficient, yet, thanks to all my layers—I used my free hand to pry the dryad’s mouth open and shoved my hand in, hitting the back of her throat with my fingers. (A fae was the only supernatural I’d risk doing this too—they’d be too offended to even think of seriously biting my hand. If I did this to a werewolf, I’d lose a few fingers in the process.)

The dryad immediately bent over, retching as I triggered her gag reflex. Preoccupied as she was, she dropped all her magic and the willow tree snapped back into its regular position so fast, it swayed from side to side.

I planted a foot on the dryad’s lower back and pushed her flat to the ground, pulling her arms behind her back so I could

slap a pair of cuffs on her.

“Blood—they’ve addled Brody again!” April shouted—she was standing back from the fray, making it easier to wield her magic without getting pulled into the thick of things.

A strand of hair had come out of the pins I used to keep my red hair back tonight, but I didn’t have time to unhook a part of the mask to fix it. “Understood.”

I ducked under a centaur, when he kicked out at me, looking for Brody’s captor.

There was only one fae noble in today’s fight, making her the only one capable of mind-controlling magic—something werewolves and vampires were particularly susceptible to. (The magic didn’t work at all on wizards, and—by proxy—me, as I was a subset of magic humans.)

I scanned the fight. It was a battle between Queen Darina’s forces—all wearing her black teardrop insignia somewhere on their clothes—and King Forgought’s people—who were wearing pins of his symbol of three interlocked golden leaves. Both Courts were Unseelie. As Sunshine had reported, this was another succession battle between monarchs as they were trying to absorb each other’s Courts in order to grow.

I glanced past the knocked out, still smoldering troll—April had taken him out early in the fight with a precise lightning strike. One of the troll’s comrades—a spindly legged brownie—was taking shelter behind the barrier the troll’s body made and was chucking glass vials that were spelled to explode when they hit something.

Grove tossed a potion bottle filled with a questionably brown substance, which shattered and released a small cloud that made the brownie explode in sneezes.

*There!*

I caught a glimpse of the fae noble. Her hair was colored a vibrant hue of orange that glowed in the first light of dawn brightening the horizon, and she was holding a tiny statue carved out of what looked like white marble. Bright orange



magic flowed around her as Brody jerked in front of her like a puppet on strings.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Jad  
e*

I vaulted over the knocked-out troll and held my breath as I sprinted past the sneezing brownie.

Brody—under the control of the fae noble—was choking himself, clawing at his own throat.

*I need to interrupt that spell, and then take away her artifact!* The fae nobles were unable to wield magic without an artifact.

I pulled a dagger from my belt—a small one that wouldn't do much damage if the fae tried to throw it back at me, but would break her concentration—and threw it, aiming for her face.

It sliced across the fae's face, jarring her.

Brody started to slump as the fae pressed her fingers to her face, then studied them. She turned white when she saw a few droplets of blood on the pads of her fingers, and her lovely face twisted. "You!" she screamed at me—too late.

I was already on her.

I grabbed both of her wrists—not normally my first target, but I wanted that carving out of her grasp—then violently shook them until she let go.

Brody collapsed in a heap, and the magic that had been sparkling around the fae snuffed out.

The fae noble screamed, but she must not have been versed in hand-to-hand combat because she almost fell when she tried to kick at me.

With her already that off balance, it took a single hip check from me to send her sprawling to the ground.

I planted a foot on her back, then yanked her hands up and behind her, slapping my second—and last—pair of magic canceling cuffs on her.

The fae noble wriggled, peeling her face off the dead grass. “You wretch!” she screamed.

I kept my foot planted on her back and ignored the insult. “Brody, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Brody shook himself like a dog shaking after a bath. “Ugh, that was horrible.”

Beyond us, the brownie was still sneezing—he had tears streaming down his face as he tripped and staggered. Grove patiently trailed after him.

“We’re good!” Grove waved to Brody and me, then took a single step to catch up to the brownie—who had staggered a step and collapsed with a sneeze that was so big it rattled his entire body.

April had subdued the centaur by singeing his tail with blue fire and had herded him over to the fae we’d already knocked out/apprehended.

Brody rubbed at his throat—which had red marks where he’d half strangled himself. “Should I call it in?”

April exhaled, her breath crystalizing into a visible puff from the icy cold temperatures the night had dropped to. “Go for it.”

He cleared his throat as he pulled his radio off his belt, then spoke into it. “This is Team Blood. The fae fight was successfully put down. What do you want us to do, Sarge, with the perps?”

I stepped off the fae noble so I could retrieve the mini throwing dagger I'd chucked at her and replaced it on my belt.

The fae struggled to stand—falling once on her knees before finally rocking to her feet. She tried to take a step, but I grabbed her by the cuffs and tugged backwards. She fell down hard on her rear.

*“Team Blood, we are in route to your location,”* Sarge said. *“Prepare perps for transport back to the Curia Cloisters. Headquarters intends to make their monarchs come pick them up.”*

And, probably, pay a hefty fine to release them.

The Cloisters didn't usually hold lawbreakers, but the government was starting to make an exception with all the fae fights so they could extort the monarchs for money in return for the time and trouble it took the task force to stamp out fights.

Brody glanced around at our teammates, then answered. “Understood, Sarge.”

I picked up the marble carving and tucked it away in a pouch attached to my belt, then stabilized the fae noble when she tried to stand up again, muttering under her breath.

“Mongrel, low-born, ingrates!” she declared.

I ignored the spat insults. “This way,” I directed, pointing to the subdued centaur.

The fae noble drew up to her full height, her dignity growing even though there was a dead leaf sticking to her orange bangs, and dirt was smeared across the front of her fine dress. “I am a *lady*! You shall address me as such!”

“Then this way, Lady.” Using my grip on her cuffs, I pointed her in the direction I wanted her to go.

“I shall not move!” the lady declared.

I eyed her—she was a little taller than me but had a thin figure and looked light enough. “That's fine,” I said.

She sniffed, raising her nose up so it poked the air. “You will see how you will pay once My King—” she broke off in a horrific squawk when I kicked the back of her knees, making her legs buckle, and helped her sit down again. “Stop! What are you doing?”

I let go of her cuffs and instead grabbed her by the back of the leather chest piece she was wearing. “You don’t want to move, so you don’t have to. Instead, I will move you.” I hauled her backwards, her legs dragging behind her like a rag doll, and her backside collecting frost. Her body left a cleared trail across the lawn, particularly when I dragged her through a pile of brownish-purple leaves.

She kicked her legs and tried to fight it but banged her elbow into a decorative boulder with all the thrashing. She groaned and sagged into my grasp.

“I hope the Cloisters does something about all these succession wars.” April eyed the centaur, who was sitting next to the disgruntled dryad I’d half choked, an unconscious leprechaun that I’d knocked out early in the fight, and an addled faun Brody had handled. “This is getting ridiculous.”

I nodded as I towed the fae up to the pile. The lighter shade of blue on the horizon was now cast with crimson. The sun wasn’t up—this was pre-dawn—but it still felt odd to be in uniform on the streets. Our shift was over but the fae fight had taken nearly an hour to track, and we’d ended up in a residential area north of the lakes.

Brody hooked his radio back onto his belt, then prowled up to our prisoners. He placed a single finger on the murderous-looking dryad who was staring at the trees and, with his werewolf strength, forced her flat on her back. “The fights are getting worse.”

“That’s because the fights are getting more desperate,” Grove said. He technically still hadn’t apprehended the brownie, but as the fae was sneezing so hard he couldn’t see and could only stagger a step at a time, Grove was using his presence to turn the brownie around and had him unknowingly heading back towards us. “Several of the local Courts—Seelie

and Unseelie—were overtaken and absorbed into other Seelie and Unseelie Courts, making them stronger. Now, it’s a fight to see who can get the most territory and subjects first.”

April tossed a ball of blue fire back and forth between her hands. “Why fight in the first place?”

“Fear. Greed.” Grove shrugged. “The larger Courts have settled down thanks to some political moves but that surety hasn’t passed down to the lower Courts yet, and probably won’t until the big fae Courts are stabilized across North America.”

The little brownie he was following gave another gargantuan sneeze that threw him to his knees. The sneeze attack must have stolen the fight from him because he made a tortured mewling sound, then voluntarily crawled on his hands and knees to his comrades.

Grove must have sensed me watching the brownie with growing concern. “It’ll slow down in a minute,” he assured me. “It’ll take some time to completely wear off, though.”

The brownie squeaked out a miserable wail.

I checked that the fae noble was secure, then scanned the area—in case we’d missed any stragglers.

“All of those fae politics sound complicated.” Brody loosened the collar of his uniform. While I was dressed in layers to deal with the below freezing temperatures, as a werewolf he was reveling in the chilly air. “I’m glad werewolf political structures are much easier to understand.”

“You say that, but just wait.” April set her hands on her hips and worked on stretching out her back. “With the way magic is, things are changing. They have to change, or we won’t survive.”

I was staring down the length of the park, watching for any movement, when I heard the subtle hum of a car engine. “Backup’s here,” I announced.

Brody straightened, tapping into his senses—which were stronger than mine. “Nice! That’s Sarge’s car.”

Grove grabbed the strap of his satchel, yanking it so it rested against his thigh where he could rummage around in it, which made the sneezing brownie cower in terror. “How can you be so happy-go-lucky when you were *late* to sense something that should have been easy for you?”

“Because the first person who heard it was Blood,” Brody said, as if that explained it.

It didn’t.

It was just another example of the team’s respect for me, which was frankly much higher than I deserved.

*I think they mean it as a compliment, but it’s starting to get uncomfortable. I’m not infallible, and if they fight believing that I am, eventually it will end badly.*

Maybe that was a point I could argue in my paper for Sarge. Maybe he wouldn’t be so upset about me taking risky moves if he understood I *had* to for the good of the group?

Sarge’s car—a much larger SUV—rolled down the street. It was dark enough that it still needed to have its lights on, which cast beams across the park as Sarge pulled into one of the parking spots on the street.

The engine cut, and Sarge and Clarence got out. Sarge raised his hand to acknowledge us as he crossed the park’s lawn—which was covered with dusty frost—and Clarence skulked along in his shadow. The poor guy was probably starting to get nervous with dawn being so close.

“Medium-Sized Robert is coming with the truck to transport the troll.” Sarge’s silvery eyes seemed to shine in the low light of dawn. “They’re not all cuffed?”

“We didn’t carry enough pairs,” April said.

“Our car has some—including an extra-large pair for the troll and hobbles for the centaur,” I volunteered. “But it didn’t seem wise to separate until backup.”

Sarge nodded his approval. “Good. But with Clarence here, crowd control will be easier.” Sarge set a hand on Clarence’s shoulder. The squat vampire had been

uncomfortably tugging on his cravat—today’s was a dark blue that matched our uniform, with black accents—and squeaked at the contact.

*Interesting...Clarence must be good at using vampire pheromones.*

I didn’t work with Clarence much—my existence terrified him at the best of times—so I hadn’t gotten to see him use his skills very much.

Sarge ignored Clarence’s squeak. “One of you should return to your car to get enough cuffs for them.”

Brody turned around. “Not me,” he said.

April frowned. “Why not?”

He folded his arms across his chest. “We had to park a ways back to avoid detection, and I don’t feel like a morning sprint after this fight.”

“You’re a werewolf,” Grove said. “You’re built for stamina.”

“Don’t wanna,” Brody said.

*The more time we spend discussing this, the more time the fae have to recover while we still haven’t gotten the cuffs.*

“I’ll go.” I double checked that I’d secured all my weapons.

“Here, Blood.” April tossed the car keys at me.

I caught them with my left hand.

“Pull the car around to the street,” Sarge said. “It will make loading them easier.”

“Understood.” I saluted Sarge—who nodded at me without looking away from the pile of disagreeable, groaning (and in the brownie’s case, sneezing) fae.

Instead of following one of the paved paths through the park, I stuck to the shadowy patches—there were plenty as the sun still hadn’t peeked above the horizon. (Staying to a set path was more predictable, and thus dangerous. Which



probably wasn't necessary to think of right now, but I preferred to follow my slayer training to stay sharp.)

The trees were starting to shed their fall colors, leaving piles of crimson-orange, deep red, and brilliant yellow leaves on the frosted park lawn. I had to bat away a few falling leaves that nearly smacked my face as I jogged along, avoiding stepping on any crunchy leaves.

When I reached the end of the park I had to follow the sidewalk, trotting two blocks down and following a street that edged the northern border of one of the lakes.

I reached the car and was just about to press the key fob to unlock it when I caught sight of a clump of people farther up the road.

They were standing on a small bridge, where a tiny tributary river—which was closer to a stream—dumped into the lake.

I frowned, watching them walk up and down the bridge.

I was pretty sure they were humans—I didn't sense any magic—but they were wearing black beanies pulled down low and puffy winter coats.

*It's weird. And it doesn't seem quite right.*

Split between the gut instinct that screamed at me to investigate the issue, and an equally powerful gut instinct that said I needed to get the cuffs and get back to the team, I gritted my teeth.

*Sarge would be upset about me investigating this by myself. I better get the cuffs, move the car, and secure the fae. Then I can ask for backup.*

I touched the driver's door handle, and the car beeped as it unlocked.

This didn't bother the figures on the bridge, so I was probably just overreacting and it was totally innocent.

I shook my head as I slid into the car and turned it on—even the purr of the engine didn't bother the people on the bridge, so I probably was paranoid.

*I'll still tell Sarge, just in case, but he's probably going to dismiss it.*

I buckled my seatbelt, then shifted the car into drive and started down the street. It was so cold my breath turned into snowy puffs even inside the car. I paused at a stop sign to adjust the rearview mirror, then rolled on when I confirmed there was no traffic—it seemed like all the humans were still warm and cozy in their homes and hadn't yet started leaving for work or school.

*I really love this job.*

I blinked in surprise at the sudden thought, but it resonated deep in my heart.

I really did love my job—even if my teammate's confidence in me made me nervous.

The work really mattered, and while I had no qualms in putting down threats, there was something about being a defender, about protecting the city, that I enjoyed so much more than my typical family work.

I was happy. Happy with my job, happy with the few—but special—friendships I'd managed to make.

Getting to this point had involved a lot of nail-biting, and lonely moments, but I could feel it in my blood: Magiford was where I belonged.



THE FOLLOWING EVENING, I arrived at the Curia Cloisters in a good mood. I'd gotten some work done on my paper in the afternoon, and then hung out with Connor for an hour. I'd even had time to make one of my favorite fruit smoothies, which tasted like pineapple ice cream!

I waved hello to Emi as I passed through the Cloister's main chamber—which was crowded with day and nocturnal supernaturals at this hour—and slipped into the employees only lounge, taking the door to the hallway that would lead me to the task force department's area.

When I entered the locker room I found Sunshine, sitting on the bench in front of my locker, doing the crossword puzzle in the Magiford newspaper printed by humans.

“Hey, Jade!” She waved to me with her pen, before writing something in the crossword.

I set my backpack down on the bench next to her. “Hi, Sunshine. How was your shift?” I opened my locker, then stripped off the bulky cable knit sweater that made my top layer, revealing my thin, insulated vest, long-sleeved moisture wicking shirt, and base layer of a short-sleeved shirt.

“Great! It was thankfully way less exciting after your squad dragged everyone from the fight in.”

“If it was less exciting, why are you still here? You started ridiculously early today,” I asked. Sunshine hadn’t bothered to go home today after reporting the fae; she’d stayed in and started her day.

“A fae got busted for illegally selling potions to humans, so I had to test her entire batch to grade how potent they were. It took me all afternoon, until my regular shift ended, so I decided I’d hang around so I could say hello to you.” Sunshine’s smile warmed me from the inside out as she grinned at me.

I put on the long-sleeved shirt of my task force uniform, testing the snug buttons around my cuffs. The test was for the safety of my vampire teammates and because Considine had tugged on them a few times, which made me nervous. “That sounds like your kind of fun.”

Sunshine glanced back down at her newspaper. “Absolutely! I like bagging rats who think they can prey on humans—oh! I got to see Queen Darina when she came to pay the fine for the release of her fae. She was furious! I thought she was going to crack her teeth with how hard she was clenching them. It was great—I was so sad you missed it!”

I laughed as I removed my sneakers and tucked them into my locker, swapping them for my special boots. “Did King Forgought show up?”

“Nope.” Sunshine filled another spot on the crossword puzzle. “I think he’s trying to scrape together the funds. That Court has done some seriously stupid stuff in the past year; he’s got to be almost out of money. It’s probably why Queen Darina is going for him—she thinks he’s a weak target.”

I left on the pair of black leggings I was wearing and slipped on my uniform’s navy-blue trousers over it—one of my favorite things about the colder weather was that I could have extra padding. I just had to be careful I didn’t wear anything that hindered my movements. Consequently, my winter uniform was a size bigger than my summer uniform. “Tricky. Your family is safe despite all this succession fighting, right?”

“Oh yeah.” Sunshine folded up her completed crossword, restoring the newspaper to its regular shape. “We’re part of the Day Court. We had some tense years, but order has been restored, and our King has never been better.”

*I have no idea what she’s talking about. Maybe I should learn more about fae politics—so I can be a better friend. Though I bet it would help my work life, too.*

I pulled my belt from my locker. “Good.” I slipped it through the belt loops, then glanced at Sunshine, frowning when I saw the bold headlines.

*Black Ice on Bayview Bridge Causes Accident.*

Bayview Bridge... it took me a moment to place the name on my mental map of the city, but when I did, I sharply inhaled: it was the bridge I’d seen before dawn, the one with all the humans tottering around it.

“Accident on the bridge?” I asked.

“Hmm?” Sunshine blinked at me, then looked down at the newspaper in her hands. “Yeah—there was black ice on a bridge in a human residential neighborhood this morning because of the low temperatures. No one got hurt, but the ice stuck around well past dawn, when it should have melted. The meddling House Tellier showed up eventually and melted it with magical fire.”

I tested to make sure my extra pouches, cuffs, and the other items on my belt were secure. “We apprehended the fae in a park near that bridge,” I said. “I saw some people on it when I went to get the car.”

“What did Sarge say when you reported it to him?” Sunshine asked.

I’d grabbed my holster from my locker, but I paused to look back at Sunshine, confused. “How did you know I told him?”

“Because it’s you,” Sunshine said. “You’re meticulous. You wouldn’t see something like that and leave it. So, what did he say?”

“He had me do a drive by on the way home, and the people were gone.” I buckled my holster into place on my shoulder. “I didn’t think much of it—though in hindsight I maybe should have stopped the car and checked for magic, except we had the brownie and fae noble from the fight sitting in the back seat, so I’m not sure that would have been the responsible thing to do, either.”

“Well, as I said, no one got hurt.” Sunshine studied the article, her brown eyes solemn. “Though there was some vehicle damage. The worst part about it is that House Tellier got the chance to play hero. Again.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Even if we ignore the fire at the library they likely started, all their heroics are too convenient. This is the...” I paused, trying to add up all the instances. There’s been the library, and this case of black ice, but before then I’d witnessed them put out the fireworks mishap that *they* had sponsored, and there was that article in the newspaper about how they’d helped in the storm. “Fourth time. They’ve been heroes four times—that we know of. That’s way too many. They should have been hauled before the Wizard Council by now for using magic in front of humans that often, even if they did it to save people.”

“All the instances must not be getting reported—which is possible since there’s no way the Telliers are self-reporting to the Cloisters when they’re on such poor terms with House

Medeis.” Sunshine thoughtfully tapped the article. “Do you think this might be your in?”

“My what?”

“Your in. Your way to open another investigation on House Tellier since the Wizard Council closed the library case.”

I squeezed my gloves. “Maybe...” I said, slowly. “I could head out to the bridge during patrol. If they started—or were at least somehow involved—in the library fire, it’s possible they might have set up a few of their other chances for heroism.”

“That sounds likely. House Tellier isn’t known for doing anything that would benefit others.” Sunshine tossed the shiny curtain her brown hair made over her shoulder. “They are *very* unpopular here at the Cloisters. If the Wizard Council wasn’t so desperate to maintain their numbers, they would have slapped the Telliers down by now.”

*The Tellier wizards are unpopular...but I've seen them with a lot of supernaturals. What's up with that?*

There was the werewolf in the parking lot the day I’d gone running and Connor had babysat my stuff, and I’d seen a Tellier wizard with a vampire back in September.

“Sarge probably heard about the accident already, but you should tell him—so you can get permission to investigate it. Do you want the paper to show him the article?” Sunshine held out the paper. “I finished my crossword puzzle, so you can have it.”

“Thanks. Could you set it on the bench? I need to finish getting ready.” I was leaving my gun and daggers in my locker since I was hoping to go visit Orrin, so next I put on my gloves. I didn’t need to use the winter version just yet, but another few frigid nights and I’d make the swap.

“Sure.” Sunshine checked her cellphone. “I was hoping to stay and chat some more, but I should head home—Mom keeps sending me passive aggressive messages about dinner. Are we still on for brunch this Saturday, at your place?”

“Yes. Thanks, Sunshine. Enjoy dinner!” I tucked my gloves under the cuffs of my shirt to make sure no skin was

visible, then flexed my hands, testing the fit of everything.

“Will do! Mom and Dad send their greetings!” Sunshine hopped off the bench and waved.

“Tell them I say hello!” I called after my friend as she disappeared behind a row of lockers.

“You got it!” Sunshine’s voice was bright and cheerful, then I heard the whoosh of air the door made when it was pulled open before her footsteps left the room and the door closed behind her.

Using the mirror in my locker, I slathered gel in my wild red hair and pinned it back out of my face. I then pulled up my hood and started fastening my mask.

Normally I would have left it off, but I was going to quickly drop in on Orrin and see if he wanted more tea.

*I’ll have to phrase it carefully or he’s going to refuse because he’ll think I’m just trying to make him indebted to me.*

Not that I was doing this without any ulterior motive. I was hoping to soften him up. He was our best lead to whatever was going on with Gisila. But I would get him the tea even if it didn’t help.

I didn’t have to be ruthless for my job anymore, so I wouldn’t be.

I finished with my mask, closed my locker, and scooped up the newspaper before making my way to the shifter department within the Cloisters.

When I reached the hallway, I was surprised to see a different werewolf guarding the door—this one was male and so burly I could have comfortably sat on one of his shoulders with room to spare.

He straightened up when he saw me, his nostrils flaring as he scented the air.

I waved and started towards the door, slowing when I felt the spicey zing of dragon magic brush my mind.

I turned around and saw Gisila about twenty feet behind me leaning against the wall.

*She wasn't there when I passed that area.*

She smiled at me—making no effort to hide that she was watching me—and for some reason it made my fighting instincts kick in, as if I was going to be attacked.

I stared at her for several moments, but the feeling stuck with me.

*That can't be good. But I'm not going to avoid checking on Orrin just because she's skulking around here—though maybe this is something I should tell Sarge, and he'll let me further investigate her.*

I turned on my heels ignoring the feeling of her gaze burning my back as I approached the burly werewolf guarding Orrin's cell. He was wearing the task force uniform and had our patch on it and I vaguely remembered seeing him around the department, though I'd never officially met him.

“Hello, I'm...Blood.” I said, reluctantly using my nickname. “I work on the night shift of the task force,” I said.

He nodded. “You're allowed to visit the prisoner, Ma'am.”

*New guard, still ma'am. What the heck.*

My regret was so encompassing, it took a moment for me to realize he was eyeing my folded newspaper.

“It's a human newspaper—do you want me to leave it out here with you?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

I backtracked, setting the newspaper on a thick wooden bench shoved against the wall, then double checked that I'd left my weapons back in my locker.

The burly werewolf scratched the top of his head. “Today you should probably ask the prisoner all the questions you're hoping he'll answer.”

I paused in the middle of patting down my belt for any weapons I'd forgotten to leave behind. “P-Pardon?”



“He’s being moved to Ghast Prison.”

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

*Jad  
e*

My usual awkwardness died as work mode took over. “Did they decide his crimes were that bad?” I strode back towards him, my stride measured.

“Nope.” The werewolf shook his head. “No one’s been able to decide what to do with him. Humans are still campaigning for him to have a fine and do community service, but there’s no one powerful enough to mind him who has the time to waste supervising him. So Pre-Dominant Harka says it’s taking too long to figure out what to do and she’s spent too many werewolf resources guarding him. She wants to ship him out so the shifters are no longer responsible for him.”

“I see.” I mashed my lips together, thinking.

I didn’t blame the werewolves. Even with the task force members doing the guarding, the shifters had been housing Orrin for almost a month now—maybe a little over?

*I’ll have to look at my work calendar to check.*

Either way, with no end in sight, it was reasonable to want to send Orrin somewhere that would have an easier time holding him.

But I couldn’t shake the feeling that if he was sent to Ghost Prison, even temporarily, we’d never get him to crack. With

Gisila's presence in the hallway, it occurred to me she might make it so Orrin never even reached Glast Prison.

I tried to discreetly turn just enough to look back down the hallway.

As the werewolf undid the locks and magic on the door for me, Gisila pushed off the wall, waved to me, and strolled in the opposite direction.

*Well. I really didn't like that.*

"Good luck," the burly werewolf said, redirecting my attention back to him.

My awkwardness returned without my fighting instincts breathing down my neck, so I rubbed my hands together and didn't know what to say. "Um... thanks."

*Focus. This is probably my last shot at Orrin. I can't waste it.*

I took a deep breath, then slipped into Orrin's room.

At first glance, everything was the same. Same cot pressed against the wall with the meticulously folded blankets, same coffee pot, same boxy end table with an empty food tray on it—though this time there was a used coffee filter left on the plate, too, and the same single chair.

Orrin was seated in the single chair but Orrin, however, was *not* the same.

He was still seated with his perfect posture, still holding a steaming cup. But... there was something peaceful about him—like a quiet church—that he radiated. He seemed... shiny, for lack of a better word.

*Is he happy he's getting shipped out because he thinks Gisila will save him?*

Orrin looked up at me. Technically, he was expressionless, but there was something about his smooth forehead and slow movements that lacked the usual calculated edge and instead oozed serenity.

As I gaped at him, Orrin raised his paper to-go cup and took a delicate sip, and I finally realized his usual hot water was a pale amber color.

My nose kicked in, and I recognized the faint scent of lavender—he'd made some of the lavender tea I'd gotten him from Queen's Court Café. He'd probably used the coffee filter to filter it.

His aura of peace had me wondering if the barista had unknowingly sold me charmed tea, but the werewolf guard had sniffed it and said it was fine...

Orrin cradled his cup and eyed me.

"Hi." I awkwardly held my hand up, then yanked it back down and glued it to my side. "I see you're trying the tea. Is it good?"

"All tea is to be appreciated, no matter the quality," Orrin said.

Hidden behind my mask, my forehead puckered as I tried to figure out what he was getting at. "Does that mean it's bad and I overpaid?"

"It means all tea is good. Unless it's poisoned or charmed," Orrin said.

"Ah. Okay." I stood there for a second, caught off-guard by the whole thing. "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

There had been a part of me that assumed he'd just throw it out, even in my most optimistic thoughts I'd never guessed he'd be so happy to just drink tea.

*Yeah, I should ask Grove for help in understanding fae more. None of my training classes ever covered this.*

"You have questions for me today?" Orrin prompted.

"Yeah." I flexed my hands in my gloves to ground myself as I tried to get my thoughts in order. "You heard you're probably going to Ghast Prison for a bit?"

Orrin nodded, maintaining his serene zen. "Indeed."

"You're okay with that?"

Orrin shrugged. “I knew if I was caught there would be consequences for what I did.”

*Huh. Okay...*

I wasn't surprised Ghast didn't seem to bother him—it would probably be on par with this windowless room, since his crime was relatively small for Ghast.

Still, I'd been hoping for some kind of reaction—anything that would give me a hint at how deep this mess went.

“Going to Ghast is a bit over the top considering you did damage to public property, when Ghast is for the worst supernatural criminals,” I said.

“It has been twenty-nine days since I was arrested,” Orrin said. “Eventually the werewolves were bound to tire of me.”

A dig at werewolves seemed very in character for him and still not a reaction. Was there anything I could say to throw him off?

“I saw Gisila outside,” I blurted out.

Orrin jolted, jumping so hard he sloshed the tea in his cup.

I stared at Orrin, wide-eyed.

Orrin stared back at me, also wide-eyed.

Long moments stretched between us as I pondered that obvious reaction and how I could follow up on it.

“I've seen her around Magiford a few times since you were arrested.” I slowly and carefully said.

Orrin set his cup down—which I took to mean this was very serious, but also could have been an attempt at saving his precious tea so he didn't spill it if he jumped again.

Silence stretched between us, I didn't know how to test if Orrin was trying to be helpful or if this was an elaborate performance to mislead me.

*I should have asked Sunshine to come with me. She'd know. Lesson learned.*

I racked my brain for clever ways to ask questions, but the truth was I could barely have a halfway normal conversation the way it was. Maybe I was better off just being upfront?

“Is there anything you want to say?” I asked. “About that? About... Gisila?”

I assumed he wouldn't react, so I was shocked when Orrin set his jaw and drew his head back.

It wasn't a clear yes or no reaction—which I badly needed in order to make sense of this. But maybe he couldn't give me a clear reaction, because of the geas?

I cleared my throat and tried again. “Or is it that there's a lot you want to say, but can't?”

Orrin flicked his eyes to me.

“Is your geas that all-encompassing?” I asked.

Orrin looked away, then belatedly picked up his cup and took another sip of tea as if to give himself something to do.

*It's possible he could be playing me. But he doesn't have a reason to unless he's still working with Gisila, but why would he when she's disowned him? He could be trying to escape being sent to Ghast, I suppose.*

“So—so.” I'd started to apologize, then I remembered Grove's various warnings and changed my words at the last second. “I don't understand fae politics and the way of talking through different meanings, so I'm not catching on if you're trying to say something. Unfortunately.”

“You're a slayer,” Orrin said. “It would be a sad state if you *were* able to catch onto fae trickery and the complexities of our magic.”

The sudden sound of his voice made me twitch—he'd been dead silent. Probably because of the geas. But this...I was confident he'd just used that dig at me to deliver a message his geas wouldn't have normally let him say.

*His words were very specific, but so vague they could apply to anything. I better just memorize it and ask Sarge and*

*Sunshine. Maybe even Grove and Medium-Sized Robert. The more knowledge, the better.*

I wanted to rub my temples—my head was starting to hurt from all the thinking. “It seems like you can’t really say anything about Gisila... anything else you want to say?”

Orrin stared at me.

“Er, anything you want to say about being sent to Ghast?” I tried again.

He shrugged. “As I said before. I’m not surprised—it’s the natural progression.”

“Yeah. It’s been...almost a month since you were arrested,” I said.

“*Twenty-nine days,*” Orrin enunciated, meticulously pronouncing every syllable.

“Twenty-nine days,” I repeated, thinking.

*That’s the second time he’s said that. Is he that fixed on precision or does the day count matter?*

Orrin stared at me, unblinking.

“Does the precise number of days you’ve been here matter?” I asked.

“No,” Orrin said. “It doesn’t matter how long I’ve been here in the Cloisters.”

*He didn’t say the precise number of days didn’t matter, but that the number of days he’d been here. Does that mean the number of days matters after all and, maybe, it even has something to do with his geas?*

“But twenty-nine days does matter?” I asked.

Orrin drank the last of his tea.

*Pretty sure that’s as close to a yes as I can get as long as he’s gagged by his geas. Why the heck would the number of days matter, though? There’s no law about how long the Cloisters can hold people. It must have to deal with Gisila—and his geas.*

My brain felt itchy from all the circular thinking. This was why slayers didn't make deals with fae—we too highly valued being upfront.

I let out a big sigh that made my shoulders go lax. “Okay. Twenty-nine days. I'll try to think about it and ask around.” I backed up and touched the door handle, then started to turn it. “Hopefully, I'll be able to make another visit before you're shipped out—I'll bring more tea.”

Orrin made a noise that sounded like it started at the back of his nose. “Doubtful. You won't need to come anymore, vampire-slayer-who-fights-with-vampires.”

I turned around, confused. “What?”

The werewolf on the other side of the door yanked the door open, effortlessly pulling me towards him with his superior strength as I was still holding the doorknob.

“Step outside, Ma'am. The door can't be left open,” the werewolf said.

“Oh, but...” I turned to look back at Orrin.

He pointedly turned away from me, seemingly occupied with his empty cup.

“Okay...” I stepped through the door and the werewolf shut it behind me, then set about locking it. “Thanks.” I called to him as I retrieved Sunshine's newspaper from the bench.

The werewolf nodded as he took up his position again.

Not knowing what else to do, I lamely waved to him, then started the journey back to my department.

I went back to the locker room to get all the weapons I'd left behind and was following the route I took to our meeting room, contemplating whether I should take off my mask to humanize myself for our muster when I realized Sarge was in front of me, also heading toward the meeting room.

“Sir?” I called.

Sarge whipped around; his silvery eyes intense as he studied me. “Blood,” he greeted in his no-nonsense way.



“Something wrong?”

“Yes—er, sort of?” I struggled to find the right words to evaluate the wizard situation, then gave up and held up the newspaper.

“Ah. Yes. The Telliers’ latest stunt.” Sarge waited until we were shoulder to shoulder before he started walking again, his pace slower. “Once again, they are the heroes of the hour.”

“What,” I licked my lips, struggling to put my thoughts into words. “What if whenever they were heroes...it was because they made the situation?”

Sarge glanced at me—briefly, thankfully, so I didn’t squirm. “Go on.”

“We know between the statue, the sketchy timeline, and the flames that wouldn’t go out that it’s highly likely they messed with the fire, even if they were not responsible for starting it. What if... what if the figures I saw on the bridge early this morning were *them*, and they created the ice so they could swoop in and melt it to show off for the humans?”

Sarge slowed his walking speed as he processed my theory. “They could have taken advantage of the storm earlier this month to raise high gales, and then ‘saved’ the humans by stopping it.”

“They also put out a fire at the supernatural fall market, which started at a fireworks display they sponsored,” I said.

“That’s a pattern,” Sarge calmly said.

As we rounded the corner of the meeting room, we slowed down even more. “Is it a distinct enough pattern that we could bring them in for questioning?” I asked.

Sarge tilted his head. “It’s enough that we can sanction bringing them in for questioning. If we can get evidence out of them, we can immediately take it before an emergency meeting the Regional Committee of Magic is holding tonight.”

“You don’t think we should wait and just gather evidence?” I asked. “Isn’t that what Adept Hazel Medeis suggested?”

Sarge shook his head. “If we can’t get evidence out of the Telliers tonight, we’ll wait. But then, they’d likely be on their guard in the future. Best case scenario is that we nail them tonight and take it to the emergency meeting.”

“If we can get enough evidence of harm to humans...the Regional Committee will be allowed to handle it so the Wizard Council can’t waylay it?” I guessed.

Sarge flashed a rare smile, which was beautiful but also shark-like. “Precisely. Ready?” He tilted his head towards the meeting room.

I started to nod, then remembered my conversation with Orrin. “I spoke to Orrin.”

“Today?” Sarge asked.

*Stupid—I should have known to quantify when I talked to him!*

Words escaped me, so I nodded. “The werewolf guarding him said he was going to be shipped off to Ghast soon since the werewolves are tired of wasting resources on him.”

Sarge nodded. “Sounds about right—werewolves aren’t overly patient supernaturals. Did Orrin say anything?”

I summarized the conversation for him—relaying Orrin’s reaction to the news Gisila was standing outside the office and his notation of ‘twenty-nine days’.

“That is very specific,” Sarge confirmed. “And risky.”

I’d been nodding but paused at Sarge’s judgement. “Risky?”

Sarge nodded. “As we can’t lie, fae don’t like to talk in specifics—it leaves no room for interpretation and thus no way for us to take advantage of miscommunications.”

“So, it’s definitely something, then,” I said.

“Yes,” Sarge agreed. “But what something is it, and why did he tell you? It’s possible he’s trying to use you in some way.”

“Yeah...there are still too many unknowns in the situation,” I agreed.

Sarge snapped off a nod. “Think it over. I’ll inform Captain Reese, but we’ve got to focus on our chance to put pressure on House Tellier tonight.”

Much more comfortable with orders than sifting through fae trickery, I stood straighter. “Understood, sir.”

Sarge opened the door and motioned for me to go through first.

I did and scurried off to my table—which was isolated as usual—as Sarge shut the door.

“There’s been a change in plans, squad.” His silver eyes took on a dangerous light, and when he smiled it made his classic fae good looks turn dark. “We’re going wizard hunting tonight!”



WE TOOK ALL the available vehicles the Curia Cloisters owned to pick up the Telliers. Medium-Sized Robert was carrying a backpack full of magic canceling cuffs just in case they resisted—which would be great for making a case against them, but I had a feeling resistance would mean property damage, and I wasn’t eager to mess with the Tellier’s sentient magical house. So, my nerves were still jumpy as we approached the colonial-esque farmhouse styled House.

“Remember, do *not* set foot on House Tellier land until I get the signal,” Captain Reese said, her voice effortlessly carrying up and down the street so we could all hear her as we approached the sidewalk in front of the magical House.

A chorus of “Yes, Ma’ams,” drifted across the team as we fell in line.

Tetiana—directly next to me—playfully bumped April. “Say, if we finish here in record time, do you think we’ll have a chance to play go fish?”

“Doubtful,” April said. “There’s going to be a lot of paperwork to process tonight no matter what happens.”

“We need to play a new card game,” Juggernaut piped in as he joined the two lethal ladies. “You’re getting too attached to your weird go fish rules.”

“They aren’t weird,” Tetiana said. “They exist because everyone complained the old maid card shouldn’t be the only card with a backstory.”

“None of the cards should have a back story,” Juggernaut complained. “And if they did, they’d need to be more general and not so based on Magiford supernaturals—wait, you’re not pulling me into your disconnect with reality! It’s go fish, the old maid card shouldn’t even be in it!”

I normally would have listened to the card conversation—if I ever got to join the game, I suspected it would do more to break the weird respect barrier than any of my disjointed attempts at small talk—but I had other issues on my mind.

I slowed my stride so I could fall in line with Grove, who was offering a vial of pinkish liquid to Medium-Sized Robert.

“No, thank you,” Medium-Sized Robert rumbled.

“It’s a potion, I’m *positive* this time.” Grove rolled his eyes, then glanced over at me. “Something on your mind, Blood?”

Grove wasn’t exactly friendly, but his open manners instead of the weird respect of our other teammates set me at ease so my shoulders dropped.

“Do the fae have any special abilities or limitations attached to twenty-nine days?” I asked.

“Huh? No. We follow seasonal cycles. Dates matter, number of days don’t. Why?” Grove asked.

“Something Orrin said,” I studied House Tellier—there were a couple of lights on, but all the shades were pulled so I couldn’t see anything beyond shadows. “I was wondering if there was a special meaning.”

“Not that I know of. How about you, Medium-Sized Robert?” Grove looked up at the troll.

Medium-Sized Robert shook his head. “No. Sorry, Ma’am.”

The title of respect made my blood curl, especially with Sarge and Captain Reese with us. “I understand. Thanks.”

“Here, Blood. Take this.” Grove grabbed a large potion bottle from his bag and offered it to me.

“What is it?” I cautiously asked.

“Crowd control potion. Throw it at the wizards, and it’ll help you control the flow of the battle. Just make sure you’re standing far enough away,” Grove said.

“Understood. Thank you.”

Grove winked. “Gotta keep our slayer outfitted!”

As I tucked the potion into an empty pouch attached to my belt, I slowed down even more letting Grove and Medium-Sized Robert pass me so I could find my correct place in our formation.

*Well, that answers that. Maybe Sunshine will know? I’d sent her a text on the drive over, but I hadn’t heard back from her—she was probably still having dinner with her family. (I was hoping that even if Orrin’s precise language had nothing to do with fae magic or customs, she’d know something. She was practically a walking encyclopedia.)*

*I’ll have to think about it later—fighting while distracted will make me sloppy, and I can’t risk any mistakes right now.*

With Captain Reese and her secretary—a lanky vampire who dressed like a pirate *and* carried pirate gear with her outside of the Cloisters, which included a collapsible spyglass and a cutlass—we were a team of twelve.

There were more than twelve wizards in House Tellier, but we were planning to question Gideon Tellier and just a handful of others so we wouldn’t be outnumbered—unless the House decided to attack.

Wizards were considered the weakest of supernaturals, and House Tellier wizards weren’t known for their prowess with magic. On a normal day, I’d be confident we wouldn’t have

any trouble subduing all the wizards of House Tellier. *Except.* We were coming to their magical House.

If the House willed it, it could turn into a fortress, and we'd have to infiltrate it to drag Gideon and his cronies out. *That* would be a much more difficult—and dangerous—thing.

Tetiana whistled as she stepped up onto the sidewalk. “Are all wizard Houses obnoxiously colored, or are the Telliers special?” She pointed to the orange and yellow trim.

April grabbed Brody by the shoulder when he started to lean against the rustic, hip high wooden fence that surrounded House Tellier's property and dragged him backwards. “Maybe *don't* insult the magical House when we need its cooperation, Tetiana. Also, nobody touches the fence or reaches into Tellier property until we *must. Grove.*”

Grove had uncorked a glass vial and was holding it over the fence. “But this is my chance to see if a House can get poisoned!”

“*Grove,*” Sarge growled.

“Yessir!” Grove shoved the cork back in the vial and tossed the vial into his bag.

“Formation,” Captain Reese called.

Our team spread out down the sidewalk so that we made an even line, giving each of us enough space to move and maneuver as necessary.

We hadn't quite gotten into formation when the front door opened, and a man with a jaw so square he looked like his face had gotten smashed into shape with a shovel flung House Tellier's front door open.

“What is the meaning of this!” The man—he looked like he was maybe in his late fifties—snarled as he stalked down the pathway of stone pavers that ran from the House's porch to the sidewalk.

“Adept Tellier.” Captain Reese called. “We're the Magical Response Task Force. We're here to take Heir Gideon Tellier and several other wizards in for questioning.”

I stood next to Captain Reese at the center of our lineup. If the Telliers resisted, I was going to be the first to step on to House Tellier land. (And potentially the first to get buried alive, maimed, and/or injured if the House chose to inflict damage. But with my higher healing and general abilities, I was the best candidate to take the risk.)

Standing next to the captain gave me a perfect view of Adept Tellier's face. His complexion turned ashen and he visibly gulped.

"Questioning?" Adept Tellier sputtered. "Questioning for what?"

Captain Reese's smile turned savage. "For using magic to endanger humans."

Adept Tellier went from pale to red faced with anger. "W-what? How *dare* you accuse us! The Wizard Council cleared us from your baseless accusations regarding the library."

"As it just so happens, we have questions about other instances when Tellier wizards just *happened* to be in the area," Captain Reese said. "Just call out your wife, son, and the top five mages in your House."

"Nonsense!" Adept Tellier stiffened. "We will not submit ourselves to this obvious attack on our illustrious wizard House!"

# CHAPTER TWENTY

*Jad  
e*

**B**ehind him, the front door of House Tellier opened. I recognized the wide shouldered posture of Gideon Tellier as he slouched his way across the porch.

Adept Tellier didn't hear his son's approach as he continued. "The Wizard Council will not stand for this as you are obviously so against us—"

"The Wizard Council has no power to keep us from questioning you over a new potential case," Captain Reese boomed over the Adept. "And our findings tonight will be reported directly to the Regional Committee of Magic.

"Ah—Adept Medeis's handiwork, no doubt!" the Adept thrust a pointer finger into the air and waggled it at us. "This is just another attempt at bullying those who do not share House Medeis's ridiculous ideals! I will not suffer this!"

April—wielding a halberd which she rested, butt down, on the sidewalk—twitched at the insult on her House, but her professional expression held.

"What's going on?" Gideon shoved his hands into the pockets of his House Tellier Jacket, briefly turning around and looking back when the front door opened again and a couple more wizards shuffled out.



“We’re being unrightfully attacked,” Adept Tellier snarled. “Because *Hazel Medeis* is a tyrant who will never stop abusing her power!”

Brody turned up the street, his eyes nearly glowing in the sputtering streetlights. “We’ve got incoming—humans, regular humans. No magic.” His nostrils flared as he scented the breeze.

I leaned back so I could look up our line in the direction he was pointed. Sure enough, I could see a trio of humans strolling down the sidewalk and slowing when they noticed our standoff.

“You aren’t being formally charged yet. This is just for questioning. The Adepts of House Tellier, along with the Heir and the top five wizards, are to present themselves for questioning over the illegal use of magic and endangering humans.” Sarge’s voice echoed across the front lawn.

“Impossible! We’ve never messed with humans!” Gideon Tellier declared, his face turning red like his father’s.

Adept Tellier elbowed him and not so subtly nodded to the humans, who were now close enough that they could hear some of the shouted conversation.

“We, we love humans!” Gideon belatedly added.

“You have endangered humans, actually, on four separate occasions.” Captain Reese’s eyes gleamed in the dimness of the streetlights. “The fireworks at the fall festival, the storm in October, the fire at the library, and most recently the black ice on the bridge in a human neighborhood.”

“We *helped* on those occasions!” Adept Tellier said. “You’re hauling us into the Cloisters for using our magic to *save* humans?” His voice was so loud it bounced off the surrounding houses.

I was pretty sure that was done by design and not just from raw emotions based on the way he glanced at the cluster of humans.

“You used your magic to *design* those dangerous situations,” Captain Reese said. “Recklessly endangering

humans and destroying public property so you could swoop in as the hero of the day.”

“You’ve no proof!” A woman, her bleach blonde hair so perfectly coiffed it didn’t move when she stalked down the pathway, howled. She shared a few facial features with Gideon, so I was willing to bet she was Mrs. Tellier, the other Adept of House Tellier.

The Adept turned around and hissed at the woman “Careful!” he tipped his head towards the humans.

The woman darkly glared at the humans, then pointedly looked away from them. “Regardless, we will *not* be coming to the Cloisters.”

“If you resist, we’ll be forced to enter House Tellier,” Captain Reese warned.

Interestingly, that threat made Adept Tellier turn sheet white.

“Just you *try!*” Gideon puffed up, his anger twisting his face. “House Tellier will protect us!”

“Gideon,” the Adept warned his son before he turned back to my boss. “You do not have permission to enter our domain.”

“We don’t need your permission,” Captain Reese gave a throaty chuckle. “We’re not the human police force, Adept. We’re the Magical Response Task Force.”

A sheen of sweat covered Adept Tellier’s forehead as he glanced from Captain Reese to the small crowd of humans, before he turned to look back at his House.

*He really doesn’t want us to enter House Tellier, but why?*

There was a panicked energy to him that reeked of desperation. Was it just because House Tellier’s abuse of magic was on the cusp of being revealed or was there something more?

My hand strayed to the pouch that contained the crowd control potion Grove had handed me.

“Make up your mind, Adepts,” Captain Reese said. “This is your *final* chance to submit willingly.”

“We will not,” Mrs. Tellier snarled.

“We will wait until the Wizard Council has been informed of this vicious attack before we agree to go to the Cloisters,” Adept Tellier butted in.

*Of course, they’ll try to hide behind the Wizard Council.*

Sarge lowered his chin. “Blood.”

I straightened, my fingers hovering over the pouch as I waited for the orders.

“Go,” Sarge said.

Go was an attack order, so instead of grabbing the potion I pulled a dagger from my thigh bandolier and a set of cuffs from my belt—I would have gone for the gun, but that undoubtedly would have freaked out the humans and probably the House.

Internally bracing, I stepped onto the first paver that marked House Tellier’s property line and walked towards the Adepts and their son without hesitation, even as I waited for retaliation.

“House Tellier!” Gideon shouted. “Stop her!”

The House was still.

“Gideon, stop,” his father said.

“We’ve got nothing to worry about—you *know* we don’t, or we would have been warned!” Gideon shouted back to his father before puffing up in anger. “House Tellier, didn’t you hear me—stop her!”

A board on the porch creaked, but that was it.

I was curious why Gideon was so confident they had nothing to worry about, but it was even more interesting that the House still wasn’t listening to him.

*That’s not good for the Telliers.*

Gideon growled. Orange flames erupted around his fist and his spikey wizard tattoo emerged on his cheek as magic flowed through him.

I dodged when he flung the ball of flames at me, side stepping it and simultaneously moving closer to him.

I slapped one of the cuffs on his outstretched hand, which immediately snuffed out the flames that crackled on his palms.

“How dare you—” Gideon started.

A knee to his gut and he folded in half with a wheeze. Needing both hands for the task, I had to toss my dagger into the air with my free hand so I could grab his other hand and yank it up behind his back. I had just enough time to slap the other cuff on him, completely cutting off his contact with magic, before catching my dagger.

Gideon sucked more air in. His tattoo was gone, but his face was red with rage. “You can’t treat me like this!”

“You’re being taken in for questioning,” I said. “I can do whatever is necessary to get you there.”

“I’m a wizard—and an Heir!”

Gideon tried to stagger away, so I applied a kick to the back of his knees to make him faceplant. “Humans have been harmed.”

“So?” Gideon peeled his head off the ground—a wet, yellow leaf was stuck to his cheek.

“*Heir!*” His father roared. “Shut your mouth!”

“Gideon!” His mother shrieked, her voice so high pitched it made Brody and Binx flinch. She was markedly more upset about my handling of Gideon than his father, which was interesting. “You’ll pay for that!” Her wizard tattoo surfaced on her cheek as she gathered sizzling orange electricity in her hands.

I pivoted to face her, calculating how to limit potential magical damage.

“No—no!” Adept Tellier shouted, waving his hands in the air. “Stop it!”

“Group up!” The other House Tellier wizards who had been dawdling on the porch ran down the steps, hustling in our direction.

*Reinforcements?*

A flash of light accompanied by a roaring growl, and the wizard leading the reinforcements charge was struck by a bolt of blue lightning.

The wizard collapsed, his clothes smoldering.

I risked glancing back at my squad.

April’s black tattoo was glowing around the edges and blue electricity crackled up and down her halberd. She nodded to me, then shifted her gaze to another wizard.

“You hurt my baby!” Mrs. Tellier screeched.

I ducked when she threw a fireball at me, then applied the base of my palm to her nose.

I was careful not to use *too* much power—wizards were more delicate than vampires, after all—but I still heard the crunch of her nose breaking before she screamed in pain, slapping her hands to her face.

The wizards ran past their zapped comrade, but they screamed when a purple fireball sailed towards them, narrowly missing and instead setting a bush on fire.

The House lashed out, one of the timbers on the wooden fence yanking free from the ground so it could smack Juggernaut on the shins.

He hopped in place, but April unflinchingly struck another wizard with her blue lightning. “Message received: Don’t damage the House, and the House won’t retaliate.”

“So it would seem,” Sarge agreed. “Tetiana, Medium-Sized Robert—now.”

I finished cuffing the Tellier matron, ignoring her as she cursed me out for breaking her nose, before I pushed her so

she also fell onto the lawn—her fall cushioned by a pile of dead but wet leaves.

Fixing my hold on my dagger, I turned toward the House as April and Juggernaut made quick work of the two other wizards—who were all that remained of their reinforcements.

“Wait! Wait!” The Adept held his hands up, his face pale with panic as he faced Medium-Sized Robert. “We will submit for questioning!”

“Never!” Gideon barely managed to get to his feet despite having his arms secured behind his back. “You said we could use the humans for our reputation—standing down now will only harm it!” He tumbled and fell when his father ruthlessly kicked the back of his leg.

One of the humans clustered on the sidewalk yelped. “*What did he just say?*”

“Idiot!” Adept Tellier hissed at his son before shouting to the other wizards, “You’re going to ruin everything!”

“I told you it wouldn’t work! Humans are stupid and greedy, but the Cloisters would pick up on it eventually, and now you got our baby hurt!” Mrs. Tellier howled.

*Got ‘em.*

“Stop talking!” Adept Tellier yelled, but he was too late.

The humans’ voices raised to an angry buzz with more of them coming out of their houses to check on the commotion.

“You admit to it, then, that you’ve created accidents to let you conveniently sweep in and save humans.”

I couldn’t place the charming, suave voice. It wasn’t until I looked back at the squad that I realized it was Clarence, his red eyes glittering as he stared the Telliers down, channeling more charisma than I knew he possessed.

“No—we admit to nothing!” The Adept declared.

“It seems the questioning will be very illuminating,” Grove predicted.

“It’s not surprising,” April said, her voice loud so it carried across the lawn. “House Tellier is full of cowards, who won’t take responsibility for themselves and are too weak to maintain any kind of power on their own without employing cheap—and illegal—tricks.”

“House Medeis trash!” Mrs. Tellier spat.

“You’re only powerful because your House has cozied up with *vampires!*” Gideon said. “You can’t be angry when we use humans to our advantage when you do the same thing with vamps!”

*Nice—that’s not a full confession, but it’s more than enough. The Wizard Council won’t be able to wriggle out of punishing them this time!*

The Adept looked around wildly, the whites of his eyes showing as he violently shook his head. “No—no! We do not use humans!”

On the sidewalk, the humans murmured.

“It is odd that there’s been so many *incidences* lately that they’ve ‘fixed.’”

“Yeah, and it’s pretty strange that there was only *one* bridge with black ice on it.”

“—knew they couldn’t be that nice. They always were jerks about trash days!”

“We’re protecting you!” The Adept yelled. “You need us—you’ll break without us!”

“Now he sounds like a cult leader!” an indignant human shouted.

“No!” The Adept spat, spittle flying from his mouth as his eyes burned with hatred. “If we hadn’t melted the ice, more cars would have been damaged!” As the humans buzzed like a beehive, the Adept’s panting grew heavier and a sheen of sweat covered his forehead despite the cool night air. “We controlled the flames so they wouldn’t get to the library, despite the difficulties it posed to us!”

For a moment, the street was unnaturally silent.

“You controlled the flames?” Captain Reese repeated, her voice a growl. “So, you *were* responsible for the library fire.”

The Adept realized his mistake and his skin took on a green hue.

“Just because we controlled the flames doesn’t mean we’re responsible!” Gideon declared. “You can’t prove we started it—or that we caused any of the other issues!”

“Maybe not.” Sarge’s voice was as smooth and frosty as a frozen lake. “But we have enough suspicions that we can enter House Tellier and *look* for proof.”

I didn’t think it was that great of a threat. The Tellier wizards had undoubtedly used their magic to create these incidences. There were no tools for us to find.

*Although maybe we’d find notes. That would be enough.*

“Blood,” Captain Reese drew her shoulders back.

“Yes, Ma’am?” I stood at attention, waiting for the next order.

“No!” Mrs. Tellier finally let go of her nose. “We do not give you permission!”

Captain Reese ignored her and pointed to the House. “Go —”

“Fine! We did it.” Adept Tellier exploded. “We built the statue for the library to be hollow so we could start a fire in it, unseen, and use it to engulf the gardens. We created the ice on the bridge and caused the fireworks malfunction. We did it!”

The Tellier wizards—either fried by fire or by lightning depending on whether Juggernaut or April had gotten them—stopped trying to stand, and meekly sat on the lawn as if hoping the House would suck them back inside.

“I knew it—they wanted to hurt us all along!” A human shouted.

“No—no!” The Adept chopped his hand down, refuting the sentence. “Never! We didn’t seek to injure any humans! We just wanted to reestablish our reputation.” He still reeked



of desperation, but at least he was smart enough to minimize the damage with humans—the more he upset them, the harder the Curia Cloisters would come down on him.

The Adept turned to Captain Reese and spoke through gritted teeth. “After our previous...*encounters* with House Medeis, our reputation and power as a Wizard House has been terrible. All we were seeking was to use the humans to reestablish a positive reputation. We made sure no one was hurt!”

“There was almost a stampede at the fireworks,” Sarge flatly said. “And cars *crashed* because of the ice. You were lucky: the damage could have been huge.”

Captain Reese shook her head at Sarge, then loudly announced. “Wizards of House Tellier. You are under arrest and charged with the crime of using magic to harm humans. We will be taking the Adepts, Heir, and all wizards present into custody, and calling in emergency troops to watch the House. You will stand before the Regional Committee of Magic—*tonight*—to answer for your crimes.”

The Adept cursed under his breath and a couple of the Tellier wizards groaned, but they seemed to accept the charge shockingly well considering how frantic they’d been moments ago.

*The House didn't beat us up when it logically should have given that we are a threat to its wizards. And most obviously, Adept Tellier doesn't want us going inside. What is going on? Is the House rejecting them, and they don't want other wizards to know?*

I watched as Adept Tellier held his arms out in front of him, and waited until Tetiana secured a pair of cuffs on him before putting my dagger away.

Binx and Brody stepped onto the lawn, each of them taking a set of cuffs from Medium-Sized Robert before peeling the burnt wizards off the lawn and slapping cuffs on them.

In less than five minutes, we had the Adepts, Gideon, and the other top wizards of the House cuffed and stashed in our

cars.

The humans that had been watching on the sidewalk were now gossiping with other nonmagical neighbors as they watched the spectacle.

“That resolved a lot easier than I thought it would,” Brody announced as he slammed a car door shut. “I thought we’d have to fight to get them charged with anything, but they practically put a bow on themselves.”

“Yes,” I said, still not satisfied.

“I thought it was plenty hard,” Juggernaut grumbled. “We just lucked out that House Tellier didn’t do more—it could have.”

“Yes,” Sarge agreed as he glanced back at the magical House. “It seems it isn’t on good terms with its current Adepts.”

“Thankfully!” Captain Reese cheerfully said. “Let’s move out! Keep an eye out for any potential attackers en route. Just in case!”

“Yes, Captain!”

“You got it, Captain!”

As the team shouted out their responses, my cellphone buzzed in my pocket.

I checked my messages as I approached the car I’d been assigned to. April had driven, and it was just the two of us for the drive home—probably because Sarge didn’t want to risk the Telliers complaining about House Medeis’s vendetta against them.

Sunshine had gotten back to my text.

SUNSHINE

The only thing I can think of that includes 29 days is the cycle of the moon. A full cycle is technically every 29.5 days. No idea why that would matter to Orrin. Fae magic isn’t dependent on the moon cycle.

Are there any kinds of magic that are?

Before I could even open the passenger door, Sunshine responded.

SUNSHINE

There are elf artifacts and weapons that survived until today that have powers that would wax and wane in power in 29.5 days to model the moon cycle, so it's assumed some elves used magics that operated similarly.

You mean they are most powerful on a full moon or something?

SUNSHINE

Some, but not necessarily only a full or new moon. It was more like they used the lunar cycle to mark a power cycle, so it could be tied to any day within a 29.5-day moon cycle.

I fired off a text to thank Sunshine for her help, then slowly opened the car door while pondering Sunshine's revelation. *Elf artifacts and weapons... Maybe Orrin could have been referring to one? But why?*

During the conversation, Orrin had referenced twenty-nine days, and that he believed I wouldn't need to come back again. Obviously, he'd felt like he'd delivered information I needed to put together... *something*, but what?

Had I missed something else he'd said—or maybe not said?

I eased myself down into the front passenger seat of the car, double checking my weapons on autopilot before I closed the car door.

*The night we captured Orrin, he said he had to finish things that night. We know he'd been testing Tutu's seals with*

*his creatures, so he was attempting to... break in? Blow the place up?*

We'd never found out because of Orrin's geas. And *somehow*, Orrin thought he'd given me enough information to go by.

April opened the car door and hopped in, rocking the car. "Ready, Blood?" she asked as she buckled her seatbelt.

I reached for my seatbelt and absently nodded.

*If Tutu's was the goal—whether breaking into it or trying to damage it—how could that be related to the 29 days thing? Is that why Orrin had said he had to finish it the night we got him? Because of elven magic going through a lunar cycle power up?*

He'd used an elven necklace to make the gates he used to summon fae monsters, but we already knew that necklace had a seven-day power cycle.

Sunshine had mentioned elf artifacts and weapons. I didn't know much about elven magic—as elves had been long dead, they were not on the slayer list of 'foes to learn and be prepared to face'.

However, an elven holy sword had been used in an attack on the Magiford Curia Cloisters about two years ago. It had done major damage, and even I knew that it was just one of the many types of weapons the elves had created.

Tutu's was pretty much the only storage solution for artifacts and weapons like that if the owners didn't want to risk personally holding onto them, and the Magiford branch was the only one in the Midwest. If anyone in the area owned weapons and magic like that, they were stored here.

*Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with what Orrin was trying to steal.*

It was possible the dragon shifter even had elven spells on the place—elven magic could still be purchased on the black market; a few elven spells had recently surfaced in Magiford. Maybe the 29.5 days referred to when the spell was weakest on Tutu's?

*Wait... if Orrin was trying to break in or bust up Tutu's on a specific day in the lunar cycle... and it's been twenty-nine days since then...*

I released my seatbelt and violently kicked my car door open. “Sarge!” I spun in a circle, looking for him.

*I hope I'm not too late!*

He was standing with Captain Reese next to the SUV Captain Reese had arrived in. The pirate-dressed vampire was in the driver's seat and had the car on idle.

“Sarge!” I yelled.

Sarge turned around, his silvery hair gleaming golden from all the car headlights. “Something wrong, Blood?”

“Tutu's—twenty-nine days!” I babbled incoherently, trying to organize my thoughts into the fewest number of words possible as I sprinted down the street towards him.

I skid to a stop just short of the SUV and bowed to both Sarge and Captain Reese. “Sunshine said a lunar cycle is 29.5 days and that some elven magic will use a lunar cycle to model a spell's or artifact's power cycle. It's probable Tutu's either contains artifacts with such a power cycle, or even has protective spells on it that use that kind of magic,” I said, my words coming too fast for me to stumble over them. “The night we arrested Orrin he said he had to finish it. And it's been *twenty-nine days* since we arrested him!”

Sarge rotated to peer at Captain Reese, who was rubbing her chin. “It could be coincidence. Orrin could have meant he had to finish it because Gisila would be leaving. Not to mention this timing is the worst—we've got to get the Telliers hauled in front of the Regional Committee tonight. But...”

“Better to be safe and check on Tutu's?” Sarge guessed.

Captain Reese's wolfish smile was back. “Absolutely.” She turned around to bark at the team. “Tetiana! Brody! You're going on a fieldtrip with April and Blood!”



WHEN APRIL PULLED onto Goldstein Street, the road was empty. No one walked the sidewalks thanks to the late hour, and there wasn't a single car parked on the side of the road. Everything was absolutely still.

*Maybe I was off base, and I've dragged us out here for nothing...*

I waited until April parked the car before I got out, turning in a circle to inspect the street.

It was extra windy tonight, and the icy wind smashed my mask against my face, but at least the sky was clear.

Brody and Tetiana piled out of the car as April shut it off.

Tetiana rested her hands on her hips as she peered at Tutu's quaint brick storefront. "Tutu's looks undisturbed, so that's a promising start."

"The day shift set up surveillance equipment on Tutu's, didn't they?" April climbed out of the car and bumped the door with her hip, shutting it. "Maybe we should check on it."

April and Tetiana started to cross the street, heading towards a large bush planted on a curb where I knew at least one camera was secured.

I studied the skyline, looking for any intruders on the rooftops. "Brody."

Brody had been scratching the back of his neck and staring up at Tutu's, his eyebrows bunching together, but he turned around when I called his name. "Yeah?"

I felt the hot then cold sensation of wizard magic in my mind, but it was just April—she'd created a blue-flamed fireball to cast light on the bush she and Tetiana were rustling around in. I watched for a moment before resuming scanning the rooftops. "Can you scent anything out—any particularly fresh trails?"

"Oh, right!" Brody snapped his fingers, then hopped the curb so he stood on the sidewalk in front of Tutu's. "There's a lot here, but most of it I can tell is from a few hours ago. As

for fresh scents...” He walked back and forth in front of the storefront, his nostrils flaring.

“Bad news—the camera is gone,” April called from across the street. I couldn’t see her through the bush, but I saw the blue light her flames cast.

“Maybe the day shift decided the threat was gone, and they picked it up?” Brody asked.

“Not likely,” April said. “The mount is still in here.”

Tetiana circled the bush, stopping abruptly and squatting in front of it. “I think I see it—or what’s left of it. It’s been shattered into pieces.”

April emerged from the bush. “It must have happened recently. Is its memory card in the wreckage?”

Brody released a bark of laughter. “Don’t bother asking Tetiana—she’d never be able to recognize it!”

“Do you think someone was already here, and left?” I asked April, keeping my voice as low as possible.

April summoned another ball of flames, so she held one in each hand. Her wizard tattoo was a stark mark on her face as the blue light of the flames lit up her facial features. “I don’t know. Maybe Brody should take a sniff—”

“Werewolves,” Brody growled. He stood on the edge of the sidewalk, sniffing the wind. “There’s been a Pack in the area—within the past fifteen minutes.”

“April, Tetiana,” I snapped.

The duo hurried back across the street while April juggled her fireballs so she could grapple with her radio, pulling it from her belt. “This is Team Blood,” she said into her radio. “We’ve got—”

There was a bang, and April’s radio exploded into shrapnel.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*Jad  
e*

April thrust her hand over her head and her flames transformed into a blue, transparent, convex shield.

“We’re under attack!” Tetiana grabbed April’s shoulders and steered her around the car, trying to put it between us and whoever was shooting.

I did the same with Brody while I scanned the sky—trying to see the shooter. “Get in the car!” I shouted. “Brody—you drive. April needs to shield us.”

“We’re leaving?” Tetiana asked.

“It’s more important that we survive and warn headquarters,” I said.

April still held both her arms up over her head, keeping the shield active overhead. It didn’t seem like the bullet that had destroyed her radio had gotten her hand, but the shrapnel had shredded her glove and my teeth ached so she must have gotten a few scratches. “Keys are in my front right pocket.”

Tetiana fished in April’s pocket, then handed the keys to Brody as he wrenched the front passenger door open.

A bullet pinged off April’s shield, but it held.

“Can you keep the shield active over the top of the car while we move?” I asked as Brody climbed into the front seat,



wriggling so he stayed below the window.

April shook her head. “I’m not good enough to pull that off.” She briefly stood up, raising the shield with her so she could look over the top of the car without getting shot. She immediately crouched back down. “They’re coming! I saw shapes emerging across the street.”

I pressed myself against the side of the car and carefully poked my head past the front bumper. “I see two werewolves—in wolf form,” I said. “They’re frontline—incoming first.”

Brody stuck the keys in the ignition, then stupidly risked popping his face up so he could peer through the window. “That’s a mercenary Pack.”

Tetiana crawled into the back seat of the car, huddling down so she was beneath the window. “That’s a thing?”

“Yeah—it’s a way for an entire Pack to make good money, and the Pack bond makes them more formidable to take on,” Brody said. “The most famous groups are trained in guns and stuff. This is probably one of the top Packs.”

“Of course, they are,” April grumbled.

I checked again. The werewolves—their wolf forms were a light gray mixed with white that made them easier to see in the darkness—had made it to the street. “April, get in the car,” I said. “Try to cover Brody inside the car—they’re going to start shooting the windows in a second.”

April paused to adjust, then collapsed her shield so she could dive inside the car. She smashed into Tetiana as she placed her hands next to the back passenger window and created a new shield, this one stretching from the back to the front window.

Seconds later the windows cracked, spiderwebbing as bullets punched through smacking April’s relentless shield.

I slammed April’s car door, then had to crawl awkwardly to get into the front passenger seat.

Tetiana whistled as Brody started the car. “Wizard magic is impressive!”

April gritted her teeth, her face grim with determination as she channeled her magic.

I slammed my car door shut and buckled my seatbelt. “Go!”

Brody wrenched the car into drive, then slammed on the gas pedal.

The tires screeched and we raced down the street, nearly running over the wolves on our way out.

“Drive for the Cloisters—but don’t go downtown,” I directed as I yanked my radio off my belt.

“Got it!” Brody made a sharp right turn—going *way* over the posted speed limit so that we barreled down the road, most likely leaving tire marks—taking us west towards the Cloisters.

“You want to avoid the stoplights?” April asked.

“I want to avoid civilians,” I clarified before I spoke into my radio. “Team Blood, we’ve encountered hostiles at Tutu’s—a mercenary wolf pack. We are en route to—”

“Truck!” Tetiana yelled as a large truck roared out of a connecting street, nearly hitting the side of our car.

It was only Brody’s fast reflexes that had him slamming down on the gas pedal, racing out of reach.

The truck fishtailed, then straightened out. The driver then revved the engine before hurtling after us.

Brody snarled as he made a right turn, taking us north. We careened into the industrial part of town, but if we didn’t go west again soon we’d be hitting the downtown area.

I took a breath in, then resumed over the radio. “En route to Curia Cloisters. We are being followed—by a truck. Unknown number of assailants.” I looked back and saw the truck’s headlights as it turned onto our street.

My words came faster as the truck bore down on us. “Currently in industrial part of town, heading north. Backup

requested. *Lots* of backup—IMPACT!” I shouted before the truck rammed us from behind.

The car flung forward, and I slammed against my seatbelt with the momentum. I heard a tremendous crunch and before our car screeched to a stop, the airbags inflated providing cushion for us.

When the world stopped rolling, I heard the hiss of the airbags deflating. “Anyone injured?” I asked.

April groaned.

“We’re good back here,” Tetiana said.

“Brody?” I asked.

Brody shook himself. “I’m fine, but the front of our car is totaled.”

I unbuckled my seatbelt and had to shove my door to open it. “We’ve got to get out of here. If the car can’t move, the truck will run us over.”

“Got it!” Brody kicked the door so hard it flew open and bent the hinges. He then ripped April’s door open, while I pulled my gun from my shoulder holster, flicked the safety off, and racked it.

We were surrounded by warehouses of various sizes and materials. Our car had rammed into a wrought iron fence that went around one of the warehouse properties. Between damage from the fence and the truck, the car was totaled.

There were fewer streetlights in this section of town, but I could see fine with my night vision—April was the only one of us who would have a harder time with that.

Tetiana growled something in Ukrainian.

She couldn’t get her door open—the back was too busted from the truck ramming us—so she slithered out April’s side while Brody helped April stand.

I heard the roar of a car engine and turned to face the truck.

“April, block their view! Brody—take their windshield out!” I shouted before I raised my handgun. I couldn’t shoot yet; I needed the truck to get closer so my shots would be most accurate.

I heard the crackle of fire before April flung an enormous ball of blue flames at the truck. It smacked the windshield and spread across it, almost like a liquid.

Once the truck was within my range, I shot the front right tire using two bullets. I hit both times, but it would take more time for the wheel to deflate than we had to spare.

Brody, meanwhile, flung a rock the size of my fist at the still burning windshield. I heard the crackle of breaking glass, but it wasn’t until he flung another similar sized rock that the windshield shattered.

The truck swerved towards Brody and April.

Brody split away from us until April grabbed him by the sleeve of his uniform and hauled him towards us. “We can’t split up!” she yelled, before the screech of tires and crunching metal filled the air when the truck struck the same fence we’d hit.

April had a cut on her forehead that was bleeding. There’d been a side airbag, but she must have gotten hurt in the car wreck.

*We have no idea if the truck has backup coming... what’s our best plan?*

I flicked my handgun’s safety on and made a decision. “Run!” I shouted, leading the group north.

Tetiana fell in line after me, but Brody picked April up and flung her over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry before he ran after us.

I briefly slowed my pace so he could catch up. “Brody, how big do mercenary Packs get?” I asked.

Brody shook his head as we sprinted past a stop sign. “Depends; there’s a few with over fifty members.”

“If their objective is to break into Tutu’s, maybe they won’t send many after us?” Tetiana hopefully suggested, her breath coming in pants.

My slayer senses kicked in—I could feel another vampire nearby. I scanned the shadows looking for the potential threat.

*We’re not in Considine’s territory yet... but if he hears the fight, I don’t think he could resist investigating.*

Considine’s presence could be a good thing or a bad thing—but he’d been helpful lately, so I was wavering more towards it being good.

A wolf howled—not behind us, but *in front* of us.

“Sounds like we’re not that lucky,” April grumbled.

I fixed my grip on my gun and adjusted my stride so I could shoot easier. We were able to run another block up—putting us closer to downtown than I wanted. But standing on the westward road we needed to take was a team of three werewolves in their human form—wearing tactical armor and armed with guns—and six werewolves in their wolf form.

They rushed out of the intersection, heading straight for us.

“April, you and I need to take down the human forms. Tetiana, Brody, focus on defense and watch April,” I shouted before I flicked off my safety.

“Understood,” April said. Her tattoo was already glowing as Brody set her on her feet, and blue electricity flashed across her palms.

The human-form werewolves had handguns like me, which wouldn’t kill Tetiana or Brody, but if April or I took a hit from this range, it was going to hurt.

*I just have to make sure they don’t get a chance to shoot.*

I shot first at the tallest of the trio, nailing him in the chest.

His tactical armor meant my bullet didn’t tear a hole in him, but he still felt the force of the bullet hitting so he jolted in surprise. Also, the shot confirmed he was wearing soft armor as the fabric tore—good news for us as it meant the

armor degraded. (Although I didn't exactly have unlimited bullets to work with...)

I immediately switched to the shortest of the trio. I shot him in the chest, and then I *tried* to hit his arm, but I got his handgun instead and the bullet dinged as it ricocheted off.

*That's five bullets used*, I mentally counted—I needed to keep track so I'd know when to change magazines.

Light flickered around the third gunman before a bolt of blue lightning struck him. He yipped and dropped his handgun before falling to the ground, his body armor smoldering.

Brody picked up one of the wolves and tossed it at an incoming one, while Tetiana dodged another wolf who jumped for her and then she struck it on the back of the head when it sailed past her.

*So far, so good.*

I side stepped an incoming werewolf and kicked it in the head, shifting my balance so I could aim at the second gunman.

*Six.*

He toppled. I turned to shoot an incoming wolf who was leaping at April, nailing him in his hindquarters.

*Seven.*

More werewolves howled. As April fried the second gunman with enough electricity to power a house, I kicked a wolf in the gut and then used one of the spare sets of cuffs I'd grabbed from the car to secure one cuff to his front left paw and the other to his back right paw, effectively hobbling him.

While I worked, I saw about twelve more wolves loping up the street.

*Oh, no. Not today.*

“Brody, are we downwind or upwind?” I asked.

Brody paused, holding a howling wolf by the scruff of his neck, and thought for a moment. “Upwind.”

“Great.” I pulled out the crowd control potion I’d gotten from Grove—it was going to be even more effective on the wolves than it would have been on the Telliers—and threw it at the incoming werewolves.

The glass shattered on the asphalt. The potion splashed across the road instantly evaporating into red colored smoke that flowed around the twelve wolves, cloaking them from sight.

It only took a second or two before I heard the howls of pain, which grew louder and more hysterical with each second.

The potion created an effect similar to pepper spray—which would be especially wretched for werewolves with their stronger senses.

“What the heck was that?” Tetiana asked. She and a wolf were eyeing each other. She tapped her vampire speed and got under him, savagely punching his underbelly.

“Crowd control potion,” I said. “Grove,” I added for clarification before I shot the remaining gunman, further shredding his vest and getting a yip of pain out of him while April summoned her lightning. “Stay away from it, Brody.”

“Yeah.” Brody caught another wolf that had been jumping at Tetiana’s back and wrapped his arm around its neck. “I got that.”

More howling tore through the night, bouncing off the large industrial buildings and giving the noise a tinny sound.

“Do you have any more of those potions?” Tetiana asked hopefully.

I shook my head. “Just the one.”

Blue lightning flashed and my ears popped with a deafening clash of thunder as April fried the last gunman. “Then we better pray backup gets here soon,” she grimly said.

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-TWO

*Consider*  
*e*

I watched, somewhat bored, as Jade mowed down the werewolf mercenaries, while orbiting her squadmates and keeping them safe as they focused on their individual fights.

She was efficient, seamlessly moving from one target to the next while effectively keeping the mercenaries back.

The wolves she'd thrown that awful potion at had finally staggered free of the smoke, but they were alternatively coughing and puking from the effects of the cloud. I didn't think they'd recover anytime soon.

I was standing in line with the peppered wolves, but I was far enough away—in the shadow of one of the industrial buildings—so the potion hadn't reached me.

There was a new incoming group, however, of eight that ran in from the east.

*That dragon shifter swerves from extreme to extreme.*

I leaned forward so I could peer down the road.

Gisila was seated in a car. I couldn't make out much more than her fingers tapping on the steering wheel with irritation. She was parked out of sight of Jade's group—I could only see her because I'd positioned myself halfway between the two. I'd figured it was an ideal place to watch the ensuing battle.



I'd wandered down to Goldstein too late to see the initial disturbance—which is what had attracted my attention. But I had arrived in time to watch Gisila, standing in the middle of the road, chew out her hired mercenaries. She ordered them to send more mercenaries after Jade and once Jade and her teammates had evaded the first truck, Gisila had ordered all but a small team after them.

The small team had been left behind for observation purposes, which was weird considering it seemed like Gisila's main goal had been to break into Tutu's.

*Why, then, is she so bent on eradicating Jade's team? It's too late, they already called for backup on their radio. The Cloisters must be acting. A tactical retreat would be the wiser course. So why is she sending in her entire force?*

It wasn't smart.

Granted, I didn't think dragon shifters were particularly smart to begin with. Greedy? Yes. Power hungry? Certainly. Intelligent? Only in particular conditions. *Which apparently does not include instances in which Jade is involved.*

Based on the show of power, it seemed the Magical Response Task Force had bought themselves Gisila's enmity—and a dragon didn't let go of grudges. Ever.

Jade and her crew eliminated the last few wolves from the initial wave, and together turned to face the fresh threat that was the incoming wolves.

Jade swapped out her handgun's magazine with smooth efficiency and shot two wolves leading the charge, while the wizard set another on fire.

I unfolded my arms so I could scratch my jaw, considering the fight.

I would have considered joining the fray, except Gisila was present. I still had no idea what her shifter senses were like, and I wouldn't risk her recognizing me as Considine Maledictus.

She'd likely tell Killian of my nighttime activities, but mostly I didn't want her spreading the stupid—and incorrect—

rumor that I was concerned with a human.

*Jade is entertainment and entertainment only. She must be. But... is that truly all she is to me?*

It was dangerous that I even thought that question. The weight of Ambrose's ring in my pocket was a reminder of the endless loss and emptiness—which resulted in weakness—that an attachment of friendship brought.

That didn't even begin to touch the devastation that came with slowly forgetting him.

I didn't want to repeat that experience.

But the fact was, it annoyed me greatly to watch someone besides myself fight her and it irritated me to see how she outmatched her teammates. I was self-aware enough to know that such emotions meant—on some level—I had entered the danger zone.

I scowled as Jade used her empty magazine to bludgeon a werewolf in the head.

*I should leave Magiford. If I left now this...weakness won't progress. I could go visit Jargal—he needs to be rattled. I'm sure ruining his life for a few months would be amusing. Tiresome, but amusing.*

If I left, life would continue as it had: a dreary, never-ending march I dragged myself through because of a stupid promise.

Gisila had stopped tapping her steering wheel and was now snarling into her cellphone.

Her lovely face was twisted with her anger—which was highly amusing to witness.

*It is almost as much fun to watch Jade thwart others as it is to fight her.*

I lazily looked back to the fight.

Jade's team had clustered together, the vampire and werewolf guarding the wizard so she could chuck fire at incoming wolves. Jade moved around them, shoring up any

weak spots. They were starting to show signs of weariness, but they were holding out admirably.

The task force werewolf didn't even grimace in pain when one of the mercenaries in wolf form bit his arms. He just slammed it into the ground, then flung its lax body at an incoming mercenary.

The vampire streaked forward to kick a werewolf in the side, then stabbed it with a small dagger before she jumped back retreating from claws and teeth.

Jade shot one wolf, dodged another that lunged at her, and then grabbed a dagger from her thigh bandolier and stabbed it.

Behind the wizard, one of the wolves that had remained in human form unsteadily rose to his feet.

*Impressive. The wizard hit him with a hefty lightning bolt. He must be quite strong to be standing. Apparently Gisila doesn't skimp on her soldiers—*

The werewolf pulled a knife from his belt, corrected his balance, then sprinted for the oblivious wizard, his footsteps covered by all the howls of injured wolves, the bangs of Jade's bullets, and the alternative roar of fire and thunder as the wizard wielded her magic.

The wolf drew his arm—and the dagger—back, with the obvious intention of stabbing the wizard in the back.

A bang and he jerked backwards like a puppet dragged by its strings.

Jade had shot him in his frayed vest, stopping him just long enough so that she could move in and intercept him.

She kned him in the groin, so he folded over, then grabbed the hand that he clenched his knife in and yanked a finger back at an angle that could break it. He dropped the knife.

She did this with one hand—she still had her handgun in the other, which proved to be a mistake when the wolf slumped to the ground awkwardly turning as he went down to face up towards Jade.

He yanked his hand free with his superior werewolf strength and scooped up his knife from where it had fallen on the ground next to him, then wildly stabbed at her, slicing through the arm of Jade's uniform.

My teeth prickled—he'd drawn her blood.

I frowned and took a step towards her before I remembered Gisila and looked back at the irate dragon shifter. She'd gotten out of her car to talk with a scruffy looking man, who I assumed was one of the leaders of the mercenaries.

I looked back at Jade just in time to see her kick the wolf, getting her toe under his jaw so his head snapped back and he collapsed on the ground. She then plucked the knife from his grasp and put it in a pouch that hung from her belt.

*She's fine. Her healing powers will close that wound fast. She'll be fine.*

I shifted back and forth, uneasy.

*Jade is far stronger than any of these werewolves, and there can't be many more reinforcements. She'll make it out of this fight just fine.*

As confident as I was, there was an unsettled feeling in my gut that I really didn't like. It made me question if it was really that important to keep Gisila unaware of my nightly alias.

# CHAPTER

## TWENTY-THREE

*Jad*  
*e*

I put the knife, red with my blood, in one of the leather pouches on my vest—bagging it so none of the wolves could use it to threaten Tetiana.

“I’ve shed blood.” I called out.

“Yeah, I got that,” Tetiana growled as she struggled with a werewolf until Brody yanked it away from her. The mercenary must have gotten her—there was a wetness on the right and left legs of her uniform that hadn’t been there the last time I checked. (The smell of blood was so heavy in the air that I couldn’t even sense all the sources anymore.)

I momentarily holstered my handgun so I could use both hands to check my newly acquired wound. It wasn’t a deep cut, so it wouldn’t take too long for my healing powers to kick in and stop the bleeding, but it was long, stretching up a good portion of my forearm.

I jumped backwards to avoid a wolf—which April fried with a lightning bolt—and simultaneously pulled out a roll of vet wrap I kept for situations like this.

I hurriedly wrapped my arm, then tore the wrap free and smoothed the top down to secure it as Brody grabbed two incoming wolves by their scruffs and banged their heads together.

The vet wrap wouldn't do anything to help the wound, but it would contain the bleeding so my blood wouldn't be a risk to Tetiana.

Our radios crackled with static, and Sarge's voice boomed through the speakers.

*“Back up en route. What is your current location, Team Blood?”*

I yanked my radio free. “We're still in the industrial part —”

A snarling wolf made it around Brody and leaped for me. Its teeth twinkled in the low light, and I could feel its hot breath. I jumped backwards but tripped on a fallen mercenary giving the wolf enough time to race after me and lunge at my injured arm.

I had my radio in the wrong hand to pull my gun, and I wasn't sure I could pull a dagger in time, so I followed my instincts and slammed my radio down on the wolf's head.

The wolf yelped, my radio shattered on impact, and I ducked to the side before I pulled out my handgun and shot the wolf in the flank.

*This is bad. I'm starting to get sloppy.*

Rather, the mercenaries were pushing us so hard we didn't ever get even a moment to recover.

I confirmed the wolf was down before pointing myself towards my team. While I'd been focusing on my wound, a mercenary must have reached April—there was a new tear in her uniform. Brody and Tetiana were also looking battered.

*We need help. Or we need to escape.*

But even as the thought registered, a cluster of four mercenaries—all in their human forms—ran at us.

I shot the first two, but they were wearing body armor, so it slowed them down but didn't stop them.

April threw balls of fire at the back two, but one of them dodged it while the second one flung himself to the ground to

roll out the flames.

“Someone needs to get back to Sarge.” I holstered my gun before moving out to meet the werewolves.

I threw a dagger at the mercenary that had dodged April’s fire getting him in the thigh.

He growled and took a swipe at me. I avoided his arm, then kicked him in the throat. That made him stagger to a stop, and another kick that landed on the side of his jaw made him collapse.

Brody was wrestling with the third mercenary, while Tetiana and the last mercenary were circling each other.

Tetiana’s distance from the mercenary would give April plenty of room to work with, so I approached Brody and his enemy crouching low and zig zagging to stay in his mercenary’s blind spot as the two exchanged blows.

The mercenary landed a brutal punch to Brody’s side, leaving himself wide open. I launched myself at him, securing my arms around his neck in a chokehold.

The mercenary tried wedging his fingers under my arm, but he couldn’t find a place.

Brody clenched his fists before he pummeled the mercenary’s stomach. When I released the mercenary, Brody finished him off with a blow to the side of his head while April fried the last mercenary with a lightning bolt.

There were no more incoming mercenaries, but some of the ones we’d knocked out/injured were starting to recover.

*If we don’t get out of here, it’s going to be a blood bath. At least there aren’t any new waves—we must be reaching the end of their numbers.*

“I’ll call Sarge,” April offered.

“Brody, carry her—we’ve got to move out,” I said.

Brody’s breathing was deep and a little strained, but he gave me a thumbs up. “You got it—” The rev of an engine covered whatever else he was going to say.

*No—there's more?*

A truck barreled up the street, its headlights blinding us.

“Get out of the road!” I yelled.

Brody scooped up April, then he and Tetiana followed me as we raced across the street—away from the regrouping mercenaries.

I used three of my bullets on the truck, shooting at the front two tires. I got the first tire with two bullets, but I took too long to switch targets to the other tire and my last shot went wide when I realized I needed to bolt after my teammates or I'd be run down.

We followed the cracked sidewalk, sprinting north. Unfortunately, we were somewhat hedged in by a chain link fence.

“Look out!” Tetiana shouted.

The truck veered, tires screeching. The engine roared as it jumped the curb, cutting across the sidewalk and narrowly missed flattening Brody before it rammed the chain link fence.

The windows were tinted, but there was just enough light that I could make out four silhouettes crammed inside the truck's cab.

We kept running north, while the mercenaries backed the truck up for round two.

“How do they have the funds to purchase all this gear?” Tetiana demanded, her red eyes closer to crimson with her anger.

“Mercenary work, it pays well,” Brody shouted over the growl of the truck's engine when it bounced over the edge of the curb—they were almost finished backing up.

“Better than the task force, apparently,” Tetiana grumbled.

I checked to make sure the vet wrap was staying secured on my arm while we ran, then grimaced when I glanced up and saw that a block up there were fewer industrial buildings, and



the brick and stone buildings that marked out the beginning of downtown were visible. “We need to head west.”

April clung to Brody’s shoulders as she looked back at the truck. “We can’t—we need to get to more substantial buildings!”

I mimicked her and glanced back. The truck had stopped momentarily—the driver was probably changing gears. “We’re already too close to downtown,” I said.

April shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. We’re going to get flattened if we don’t get cover.”

Behind us, the truck revved its engine.

*She’s right. I don’t like it, but she’s right.*

“Fine, then we have to aim for alleyways,” I said. “Something narrow so the truck can’t follow!”

We were to the block that had brick and stone buildings by this point.

The truck’s tires squealed as the driver gunned it. The bullet holes had worked and the front left tire was now flat, but the mercenaries didn’t seem to care as the truck roared down the street towards us. The wheel shredded—flinging bits of tire into the air—and sparks shed from the rim that was now dragging across the road.

“There!” Tetiana pointed to a shadowy space between what appeared to be two apartment buildings. “An alleyway!”

I looked back—the truck was roaring after us again, closing in *fast*.

“Go!” I barked, slowing down to let Tetiana go in first.

She sprinted into the alleyway, and I felt pebbles pelted by the truck hit my back. “Brody!” I pushed him in ahead of me as the truck jumped the curb and hit a cluster of plastic trash bins.

Two of the trash cans hit me. I’d braced myself, except they were heavy with garbage, and they slammed into me with the force of a bulldozer throwing me to the ground.

The truck ran over one of the trashcans, braking just in time to avoid crunching the truck's front bumper into a brick apartment building.

*Bested... by a trashcan! If my brothers find out, they'll never let me live this down.*

I scraped myself off the ground and ran further up the street, making a sharp right turn into the first alleyway I found.

Behind me, I heard truck doors open—the mercenaries were getting out.

I pressed myself against the side of the alleyway and peered around the edge of the building.

All four mercenaries—all wearing soft body armor—were prowling towards the alleyway my teammates had disappeared into. None of them were heading in my direction.

The mercenaries perked up when they heard an ominous, metallic thud that echoed loudly enough I could hear it, and they jogged into the alleyway.

Our enemy's location confirmed, I sprinted up my alleyway dodging around a parked car and more garbage cans. My breathing hitched in worry, and I nearly skid out when I popped out of my alleyway and hit sidewalk again.

I looked up and down the street, but my teammates were nowhere to be seen.

*Our alleyways both ran north, so they must end up on this street. I'm faster, but I had to run farther and I checked on the mercenaries. They should be out by now. Was that slam them hiding?*

I could still sense Tetiana's vampiric presence, but my abilities weren't honed enough to pinpoint it.

*So where are they?*

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-FOUR

*Consider  
e*

When Jade and her team sprinted up the road, I followed. I had to go a round-about way to stay downwind of the mutty wolves.

I shouldn't have moved at all—it was an unnecessary risk. But the scent of Jade's blood—which was so well masqueraded by her abilities that it was almost bland—had me on edge. Whether it be morbid curiosity or something walking the uncomfortable tightrope between entertainment and... *caring*—how foolish—I was spurred on to follow.

I settled into place in the long shadow of an industrial building just in time to see Jade disappear up an alleyway, while the thuggish mercenaries lumbered into the alleyway her team had taken.

I sensed Gisila's presence before she emerged—dragon blood has an unusual sulfur scent that's hard to miss.

She didn't notice me. She strolled up the sidewalk, stopping in front of me so her back faced me—something she'd never risk knowingly.

Her hands were pressed into the pockets of her jacket, and she stayed in the shadows as she watched her mercenaries.

*If I revealed myself... I could stop this.*

My presence alone—or rather, the presence of Considine Maledictus—would be enough to make the dragon shifter back down. I had far more connections than the paltry task force; the dragon shifter couldn't risk stirring things up with me.

Jade likely wouldn't be able to pin the attack on her—Gisila would play dumb and probably had an employee serve as a go-between so it couldn't be proved that she'd hired the mercenaries.

But there was an unpleasant feeling in the pit of my gut that said Jade—for all her skills, weapons, and superior battle strength—was reaching her limit.

I didn't like that unpleasant feeling—I didn't like *feelings* at all. Perhaps it wouldn't be that big a deal to reveal to Gisila that I skulked around town at night.

Yes, there would be plenty of annoyances to it as I'd pondered earlier, but for the sake of preserving my entertainment...

*I'm grappling for an excuse*, I thought—disgusted with myself.

Unfortunately, that disgust couldn't overwhelm my annoying sense of urgency, and I stepped forward taking care to make my footsteps on the pavement audible.

Gisila swung around, her nostrils flaring as she licked her lips.

A moment passed, then two. "Considine Maledictus," she said. "What are you doing here?"

*That confirms her senses are good enough to pick me out. But it's just as well, as that will make this stop that much faster.*

"Curiosity," I said. "Your little team there has raised quite the racket—and made a mess."

Gisila blinked with falsified innocence. "My team? Not hardly. I don't retain any werewolf Packs on my payroll."

"I'm so sure," I said, sarcasm dripping from my words. "Just like that little fae minion of yours was going around

unleashing fae horrors on Magiford without your leave.”

Gisila smiled and ducked her head. “Perhaps I do share a little responsibility there in that I should have been more informed on what my employees choose to do with their down time.” She flicked her eyes up at me, the pupils sharpening. “It seems that I have you to *thank* for correcting his actions. Based on your appearance, you must be the vampire mentioned in whispers that haunts downtown and helped the slayer kill the snake.” She smiled, flashing her teeth like a predator.

*Now that was a very feeble attempt to intimidate me.*

“You’re welcome,” I generously said as I tilted my head listening for any signs that the mercenaries had caught Jade or her teammates.

“I didn’t take you to be the good citizen type,” Gisila said.

“I’m not,” I said. “I just dislike things getting in my way.”

Gisila narrowed her eyes. “Your way? What did Orrin do that could have been construed as being in your way?”

Ahh yes, she was trying to sniff out my weakness—in the most obvious and inefficient way possible. She was seriously giving the Curia Cloisters this much trouble? She had the subtlety of Vigì!

*Not only does she have a grudge on the task force, her obsession with whatever it is she’s trying to get from Tutu’s has reached such heights she’s considering attacking me? I rubbed the sheath of one of my daggers and idly wondered... How big of an annoyance would it be to eliminate her?*

Dragon shifters were strong, but she’d be an easy mark for a vampire of my caliber.

The real irritant would be her family line. Dragons were solo creatures—they were too selfish to be otherwise—and they weren’t particularly loyal...except... all her relatives would pop out of the woodwork for a chance to claim whatever treasure hoard she left behind, and they would attempt to come after me—her executioner—as a way to stake

their claim on her hoard unless she'd managed to disgrace her line. Her actions so far weren't enough to warrant that.

*Taking out a single dragon shifter is a minor nuisance. Having to stamp out any lizards who have more greed than self-preservation is a long-term project I don't want to take on when I'm already picking up after the snake-brats.*

I exhaled in irritation, then glanced at the dragon. "He was in my way because I said he was. Just as you are in my way right now with... this." I gestured to the wolves, then slipped my hands into my pockets. "Not only is it loud and sure to attract human attention, but it is so painfully obvious one can't even pretend not to notice your raid on your sister's business—which is a level of amateurism that suits you, I suppose." I shook my head. "Either the dragon shifters have fallen *low* or in my old age I am misremembering what your kind are actually capable of."

A guttural growl erupted from Gisila. "Watch your words, Considine Maledictus."

I straightened up, hopeful. "Was that a *warning*? Do you mean to threaten me, Lady Gisila?"

If she attacked first, I could hardly be faulted if I ended up accidentally-on-purpose maiming her. As an added bonus, it would also make *me* feel infinitely better and likely get rid of the sick feeling in my gut.

As quickly as Gisila's bravery had come, it burned out. She took a step away from me. "I apologize if my words sounded harsh. I meant to say that I have no connection to this display."

"Right," I said, annoyed once again. "If that's the case, go away. You annoy me."

"How so?" Gisila asked.

I thoughtfully rubbed my chin. "By breathing. And existing. Go—before I make you."

Gisila visibly shivered, but before she could do anything more an eruption of gunshots had us turning towards the alleyway.

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-FIVE

*Jad*  
*e*

I slunk down the sidewalk towards the alleyway my team had taken—opting for stealth over speed. I passed under a fire escape—this particular apartment building had ladders that stretched between platforms outside the apartment windows—then pressed my back against the building’s brick wall and peered around the corner to look down the opening of the alleyway.

It took a moment for my night vision to sharpen before I spotted the four mercenaries searching the area, but I still didn’t see Tetiana, Brody, or April.

*At least it doesn’t seem like there are any more reinforcements. For now.*

Based on the way one of the mercenaries had his head tilted, I was pretty sure he was scenting a trail.

I backed away from the corner and again looked up and down the street, scanning for any sign of my teammates.

Automatically, I reached for my radio, but it wasn’t there—I’d busted it on a wolf’s head.

*The only logical conclusion is that they’ve got to be in that alleyway.*

I crept back to my spot and peered down the alleyway again.

This time two mercenaries were studying the emergency exits of the two apartment buildings that flanked the alleyway. One pulled on a door; it was either locked or barred, as it didn't move. A third mercenary—who was barely more than a blobby shadow since he was farther away—paced back and forth at the mouth of the alleyway, guarding it.

However, it wasn't until I looked past the third mercenary that my heart leaped into my throat and seemed like it might even pop out of my mouth.

Considine Maledictus—with his spelled hood—was casually standing under a streetlight and appeared to be chatting with Lady Gisila.

*Considine? What's he doing with Gisila?*

Gisila was seemingly smiling at him—was she flirting? Were they allies or did she have a death wish?

*Allies doesn't seem likely. He's too upfront to hide something like that, and he's helped me too much over the past month to be Gisila's friend.*

As reluctant as I was to admit it—I felt like a nutcase even pondering it as I was a slayer and he was an elder vampire—but Considine was usually formidable, if mercurial backup.

*Maybe not now, though, as he hasn't stepped in to help me.*

I felt weirdly betrayed by the idea, so I shifted my attention to the final mercenary—the werewolf on the scent trail—who was circling a dumpster, his eyes glowing.

*Later. My team is more important. Is that where they're hiding—in hopes that the garbage would cover their scent?*

If so, they were in a bad spot. What could I do?

Thoughts spilled through my head as I tried to formulate a plan based on what I knew about werewolves, and what kind of advantages I'd need to fight four wolves.

*The best advantage I could use now is height. Wolves aren't big climbers, and they don't usually look up.*



I peered up the apartment wall, and my gaze landed on the fire escape ladder.

It was close enough to the corner that if I leaned over the side, I could still see—and shoot—into the alleyway.

I couldn't see far enough in to aim at any of the mercenaries, but I only needed to draw them out.

I flicked the safety on my gun, holstered it, then boosted myself onto a stone windowsill so I could jump and grab the lowest rung of the ladder.

Swinging from it made my wrapped cut ache, but I was grateful for all my training as I did a chin up and managed to reach for the next rung up. Another chin up and I was able to brace my upper body on the ladder, making it much easier to wiggle up until I had my feet underneath me.

“Hey, I smell something in here,” one of the werewolves called, his voice echoing oddly.

*He must be looking in the dumpster—I have to hurry!*

When I was even with the apartment's second floor, I stopped climbing and pulled my gun out of my holster, my movements as fast and efficient as I could make them.

I hooked my arm around one of the ladder's rails, braced my feet and legs, then leaned over the side to angle my hand around the brick corner.

I didn't like that I was hanging over the side—every inner alarm bell I had was going off. But this was my best plan given the situation.

*Good thing a handgun doesn't have too much recoil!*

“What's that?” one of the werewolves said. “A... shirt?”

I squeezed the trigger and shot a garbage can positioned near the mouth of the alleyway.

*Four bullets left.*

“What was that?” A mercenary growled.

“The slayer, maybe?”

I made sure I took deep even breaths as two of the werewolves hustled out of the alleyway looking up and down the street and sniffing the air.

Aiming, I squeezed the trigger and shot the closest wolf in the thigh—where he wasn't wearing his soft body armor.

The bullet hit the mercenary and he fell with a cry of pain.

I immediately trained my gun on his cohort—I had to move fast. Werewolves healed slower than vampires, but a bullet would only stop them temporarily.

The second werewolf spun in a circle, never thinking to look up.

I waited, hoping he'd move closer but instead he started to back up into the alleyway. Afraid I'd lose my chance, I shot—hitting him in the bicep.

Down that werewolf went—with a howl of pain to accompany him.

“What's wrong?” One of the two remaining wolves shouted from within the alleyway.

“The slayer!” The werewolf I'd gotten in the bicep had his eyes clenched shut with pain—his words were barely audible as he visibly clenched his jaw as well.

The werewolf I'd shot in the thigh released a deep guttural groan. “She's—ugh—she's out h-here.” He was attempting to drag himself back into the alleyway, but the pain was so bad he mashed his face into the ground a couple of times.

I pressed myself against the ladder, holding my breath in hopes they wouldn't notice me.

“Do you have visuals?” one of the hidden mercenaries shouted.

“No! Or we wouldn't have gotten *shot!*” The wolf I'd hit in the bicep snarled.

I heard lowered voices in the alleyway—the mercenaries must be plotting, but my hearing wasn't nearly good enough to pick up anything they said.

The mercenaries crept out of the alleyway with their eyes swinging back and forth, tracing over the street.

I waited until I couldn't miss, then squeezed the trigger.

The wolf closest to me went down—I'd gotten him on the hip.

“Up!” he shouted. “She's up!”

The last werewolf standing swore vigorously as he darted back into the alleyway, and I flicked the safety on my gun before I started climbing down the ladder.

*Cover's blown. Time to get down. Since there's just one enemy left standing, I don't have to be as sneaky. And where is the team?*

I'd been hoping they'd pop out of their cover with most of the threats nullified and get the werewolves from behind, but there'd been no movement in the alleyway—at least none that I could hear.

My feet touched the final rung on the ladder. I glanced at the alleyway before I holstered my gun so I could grip the ladder with both hands.

I was in the process of lowering myself—my feet dangling in the air—when a *bang* ripped through the air and I felt a moment of hot intense pain in my shoulder.

To my shame, the sudden pain made my hands slip and I fell from the ladder. Too unprepared to land with a roll, I hit the asphalt with an aching splat—my side and hip hitting first before I slammed my head into the sidewalk.

*Oh, that hurt.*

My ears rang and the pain in my head radiated so sharply I no longer felt the gunshot wound. Instead, my stomach rolled with nausea.

*That... that's a concussion. Pretty sure.*

The pain rang through my head making my stomach hurt worse, and for a moment I couldn't see—there was just darkness and hot knifing pain.

“*Got her! Bogey down!*” the mercenary’s voice was distorted as if I was hearing him through water.

My thoughts were slow and it was hard to concentrate with the persistent ringing noise, but I managed to turn myself on my side. As my vision started to clear I saw the werewolf—still holding his handgun—stalking towards me.

*Up. I have to get up! I’m a sitting duck like this!*

My fingers twitched—they were numb, but they still responded as I shakily pulled my gun from my holster.

The werewolf was on me before I could raise my gun. He yanked my mask off, using his brutal werewolf strength to rip it off regardless of the fasteners and toss it aside. He then pushed my hood down, revealing my red hair. His left hand was closing around my throat as he held me high enough that my feet dangled over the ground, but close enough that I could smell his acrid breath.

Pain bloomed in my throat and my air was cut off. I had seconds to act before I’d pass out.

“I’m so glad I caught you. I’m going to make you regret all the trouble you gave us.” The werewolf’s smile turned cruel as he dug his fingers into my aching throat.

I squeezed my fingers, confirming he hadn’t bothered to yank my gun from my grasp.

*Sloppy.*

I slammed my pistol upside his head and he dropped me, collapsing to his knees.

I landed on my feet with a stagger, my limbs still numb as I was more and more sure I was suffering from a concussion. *Follow through! Follow. Through.* I had to remind myself as the world twirled around me.

I kicked the wolf on the side of the head. His eyes rolled back and he collapsed—most likely also a member of the Recently Concussed Club.

I flicked my handgun safety off and kept the gun out as I took a deep greedy breath. I could only spare a moment to

brace myself before I dug into a pocket and pulled out my cellphone.

My throat squeezed when I saw the cracked screen—I must have landed on it when I fell from the ladder or maybe even when I rolled to avoid getting hit by the truck. I tried to wake it up, but the screen remained black.

*No contact with anyone. Don't know where my team is. What do I do?*

I tipped back and forth on my feet, nausea making my stomach flop unpleasantly in my gut—but the ringing noise had almost faded, thankfully.

Reluctantly, I put my cellphone back in my pocket and holstered my gun so I could pull out some surgical gauze to pack my gun wound and staunch the bleeding.

I started to roll the gauze as I stepped into the alleyway, intending to call out to my team.

There was no noise or movement within the alleyway. There was a blob of navy-blue cloth splayed over the edge of the green dumpster. The longer I looked at it, the more I suspected it was a task force uniform shirt. *They planted it to leave a scent trail and buy time to get away. I did hear a bang when I was in the other alleyway, but*—my thoughts stopped when a silhouette stepped between the streetlight and the mouth of the alleyway.

My eyes focused on the shape, but it took my beleaguered brain a few extra seconds to kick in before I recognized Lady Gisila.

She was approaching the alleyway, and Considine was just a few steps behind her. Both looked in my direction and saw my *face*.

*Run! I've got to get away, now!*

I convulsively clutched my surgical gauze and darted back around the corner, getting out of their view.

Angling away from the alleyway, I ran across the street—my feet were too heavy to sprint—and darted up another road,

my mind struggling to process the best path.

*Team location is unknown. I have no method of contacting anyone. I'm shot and injured—not mortally, but if I don't get a fae potion and some medical attention soon it's going to be close. Gisila and Considine likely both know what I look like now. I can't expect to run back to the Cloisters solo...what do I do?*

I looked up at the buildings around me as I jogged down the sidewalk, belatedly recognizing them.

I was downtown, just a few blocks away from my apartment.

*I better go underground.*

It was slayer instinct to retreat and hide in a safehouse when hurt—the scent of blood called out to vampires, even if we poisoned them with it. I didn't fancy having to face any right now when I could barely put one foot in front of the other.

*Home. I'll go home.*

I couldn't tell if I was being followed, I was too out of it. I stopped just long enough to pack my wound, which hurt so much a groan escaped my control, but I didn't want blood droplets leading Gisila straight to my apartment—even if she'd seen my face.

Regardless, I'd probably need to move and use a disguise now that my face had been seen—and that was the best-case scenario. Possibly, I'd have to leave Magiford altogether.

*If I make it out of this alive.*

My wound packed, I made myself keep moving—heading towards my apartment. I looked back multiple times, but I never caught sight of anyone.

It wasn't until I reached my building that I remembered I didn't have my apartment key, just my emergency one—which opened the lock I'd installed on my window for emergencies.

*Why. Why did I get an apartment on the top floor? I dragged myself up the rickety fire escape stairs, wobbling*

more and more with each step I took.

I was panting—from pain, and because every step I took felt monumentally difficult—by the time I reached the platform outside my window.

My fingers were clumsy as I struggled with the lock, but eventually it clicked open. My vision grew dark as I climbed in through my window, barely remembering to close and lock the window behind me.

The key slipped through my fingers, which were too numb to hold onto anything, and I knocked into the sofa as I stumbled through my tiny makeshift living room.

The ringing was back in my ears as I staggered across the ground, my legs giving out when I reached the doorway of my bedroom. I collapsed on the ground, my vision blurring more.

My body felt like a boulder had been dropped on top of me, it was so difficult to move.

*I'll rest here. For a second. Two seconds.*

I briefly shut my eyes, and before I could open them, I felt my consciousness slip through my fingers.

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-SIX

*Considerin  
e*

After several more gunshots, shouts, and muffled gurgles, nothing moved in the alleyway.

*Hah. That means Jade and her team did it. The mercenaries would be howling if they'd won. Stupid mutts can't keep a secret to save their lives.*

“Sounds like your team just underwent a very decisive loss,” I said.

“I already told you, Elder Maledictus, these werewolves aren't mine.” Lady Gisila managed to keep her tone light, even though her facial muscles were convulsively tightening in the silence that had enveloped the alleyway.

She stepped off the curb and started across the street. “But, perhaps, I ought to see if anyone needs help.”

“Oh yes, I'm sure you're just *full* of *help*.” I lazily followed around behind her, crossing the street at a much slower pace to help secure the ‘uncaring’ front that I was presenting to the dragon shifter.

I turned around to look back over my shoulder at the industrial buildings behind us. Cloister backup had undoubtedly made it to the industrial part of Magiford. The sound of car engines was impossible to miss, and I was fairly certain it wasn't more mercenaries as I could—at the very



edge of my hearing range—hear the familiar crackle of the radios Jade’s team used.

“Hmm. Company,” I said, contemplatively. “Better act quickly or you’re going to get caught.”

*That’s my signal to move along. It’s one thing to tease Jade’s little team, it’s another to prance around in front of so many Cloister employees. That would be foolishness—*

Gisila paused in front of me. Instinctively, I twisted back around to see what had stopped her.

Jade stood at the back of the alleyway, her mask off and her hood down. She was bleeding from a wound on her shoulder—was that one of the shots I’d heard?

Her face was dangerously white, her mesmerizing green eyes wide with panic as her gaze flickered from me to Gisila. She backed into the shadows, blending in, and disappeared from the alleyway.

*Does she know backup arrived?*

“So that’s what she looks like,” Gisila muttered in a dark tone that immediately got my attention due to how much I instantly hated it.

The radio crackles were starting to get closer. I needed to leave but I wasn’t thrilled about the idea of leaving Gisila to poke around, especially as she entered the alleyway picking her way through it.

“What, did you think slayers weren’t human?” I asked as I reluctantly followed her.

“I’m well aware slayers are humans,” Gisila said. “It’s just so rare to see one’s face.”

“It’s a face,” I said. “Not anything special.”

“Perhaps.” Gisila wore a smile that I disliked even more than the dark tone she’d used earlier. “But having seen her face, it will certainly be easier to track her down again.”

Gisila placed her hand on the brick apartment building to steady herself as she stepped over one of the wounded

werewolves, emerging from the alleyway just in time for us to catch sight of Jade's red hair as she sprinted up a road heading north.

A car pulled up in the street behind us, and I recognized the silver haired naiad who emerged from inside the car as Jade's boss.

"You stay here and keep chortling like a villain. I'm leaving before the Cloisters sweep this rathole," I announced.

Gisila didn't even turn around to acknowledge me. She instead picked up Jade's slayer mask that the werewolf had tossed aside, then took a step towards the road Jade—wounded and bleeding—had disappeared down.

*She's going to follow Jade.*

If Jade had gone north instead of cutting back south, she must not have heard her backup. I didn't see the wizard, vampire, and werewolf she'd fought with anywhere—it seemed like she'd acted solo. She was headed off alone, and it looked like Gisila was going to give chase.

Jade was going to be an easy target, injured as she was.

I narrowed my eyes as I glanced back at the car and tried to wait for a good moment.

*This would be so much more satisfying if Jade weren't out there, half-dead. Then again, she might judge me for my harsh tactics. But, hey, at least it's not murder!*

I reached out and grabbed Gisila's head, slamming it against the wall. I then stepped back and turned into a bat, flitting backwards, and hiding myself in the shadow of a boarded-up window frame as the dragon shifter fell. Safely hidden, Gisila didn't see me when she twisted around and splatted on the ground. Instead, she spotted the Curia Cloister's car—just as I'd meant her to.

"Cloisters." Gisila growled something—probably a curse in draconian or something—then shakily boosted herself to her feet.

She headed east, away from Jade, and away from the scene of the crime.

I waited until I didn't hear her footsteps before I launched myself off the window frame and assumed my humanoid shape.

Striding out of the alleyway—I didn't want to get caught here anymore than Gisila wanted to—I headed after Jade.

*If my luck is holding, perhaps Gisila doesn't suspect it was me who attacked her.* I hoped she'd assume the attack somehow came from the Cloisters if she saw them and not me.

I finally let an annoyed exhale escape me as I rounded the corner and headed north up the same street Jade had taken. A very memorable scent brushed my nose and I jolted to a stop, looking down.

Droplets of blood marked Jade's progress up the street. I couldn't see her, but the blood trail was clear—troublingly so given the frequency of the drops.

*I should have slammed Gisila's head into the wall twice. At least.*

I gritted my teeth—my vampire fangs prickled the inside of my lips—and kicked my pace up from a lazy walk to an actual jog before giving into a run.

I followed the trail—which thankfully became less clear after a few blocks; she must have tended to her wounds or something—all the way back to her apartment.

Her blood led to the fire escape stairs, so I turned into my bat form to zoom up to her apartment and plant myself against the window.

It was dark inside—not a single light was on. But I had no problems seeing her. She was wavering on her feet, tilting back and forth as she staggered towards her bedroom. She'd dressed her arm wound so it wasn't bleeding nearly as much, but blood still dripped from her clothes to the carpet.

*She's in there. She probably has fae potions.*

The assurance didn't do much to abate the sick feeling in my gut. She looked so weak—would a potion even work when she was in this state? I didn't know—I hadn't bothered to learn about the effects of fae potions on magic humans as I never intended to need the information.

Her already snail-slow steps were getting slower by the moment, and I still hadn't gotten a look at her face, but she had to be in a lot of pain.

An old familiar feeling that felt horrifically like *caring* throbbed in my chest. It was overwhelming and drove me to do something, anything!

Swallowing a curse, I stopped peering into Jade's apartment like a creeper bat and glided down to an entrance of the building. I found a patch of shadows where I could safely make the instantaneous shift from bat to humanoid, then rushed inside.

I yanked my hood down as I took the stairs two at a time, trying to come up with a plan but unable to. I needed to change out of my night clothes—because there'd be no charming my way out of appearing as Connor and wearing Ruin's clothes—but the burning sensation in my chest said I didn't have time for that.

*I can dazzle her with pheromones later—wait, no I can't, she's a slayer, she's immune. She's so out of it, maybe she won't notice? But the second she's stabilized she will...*

I jumped the last two steps, landing on our floor. I meant to aim for my apartment to go change, but almost against my will I strode up to Jade's door.

"I'll figure it out somehow," I grumbled before knocking on the door with enough force that I rattled the whole thing. "Jade? Jade open up. I know you're in there. *Jade!*"

I was loud enough that if this went on much longer I was going to wake the neighbors, but when I pressed the side of my head to the door I couldn't hear any movement within the apartment. "*Jade,*" I hissed.

Nothing.

I didn't even take a moment to think—I was running off panicked instinct. I backed up and kicked the door by the lock.

Vampire strength is nothing compared to werewolf strength but given how our powers increased with age I had plenty of strength to kick the door open—breaking the door frame and the door lock.

The apartment was still pitch black, but the scent of her blood was so overwhelming it made me sick.

I cast around for an explanation—anything that would explain my sudden presence. “I—uh—need a cup of sugar. I was suddenly filled with the need to bake,” I said as I strode through her apartment heading towards her bedroom. “I get why you're so obsessed with—”

I broke off my flimsy excuse with a few curses in languages that had been lost to time when I saw Jade slumped on the ground—her legs and lower body stretched out in the living room, her upper body and outstretched arms laying in her bedroom.

Her fingers twitched, but her eyes were closed and her face was a deadly pale color I didn't care for.

“Jade.” I knelt at her side and gently shook her.

She didn't respond.

*She needs a potion. Or medical help. Unfortunately, I have neither.*

Stupidly, it had never occurred to me to keep a few potions in my apartment for Jade—I hadn't thought I'd care about her maintenance and wellbeing.

Even more unfortunately, I didn't know where Jade hid her fae potions in her apartment—since she was pretending to be human, she'd have to hide her supernatural grade potions. Assumedly, it was somewhere in her bedroom or bathroom as it seemed like that was where she was headed before she collapsed.

“Jade. Where are your potions?” I started to shake her again but she looked so terrible I didn't want to be rough, so I

settled for pushing some of her red hair out of her face.  
“*Jade.*”

She didn’t stir—she didn’t even groan.

*Guess I’ll just have to search for them.*

I stood up and carefully stepped over her, then rushed into her bathroom and ransacked it—opening drawers and the medicine cabinet, searching for the familiar glass vials.

*Nothing.*

Desperate, I returned to her bedroom and checked under her bed—which hid a box of ammo, two swords, and her slayer uniform, but no potions.

Jade still hadn’t woken up.

I didn’t know much about human medical care, but I knew that was a terrible sign. Jade was getting worse—she was likely too injured for her slayer healing powers to keep up.

The feelings I hadn’t wanted to label were close to crushing now. But as I knelt at Jade’s side, I forced my thoughts to slow.

*I’m wasting time looking for her potions. I need to get her help. But where?*

I scooped Jade up—one arm under her knees, another supporting her back. I was careful so that her injured arm faced out where I wouldn’t bump it and her head rested against my shoulder.

My concern secured, I effortlessly carried Jade out of the apartment barely noticing her front door that hung on one hinge when we passed by it.

I tried to make our descent down the stairs as smooth as possible, but Jade was so *still*—so lifeless. I would have welcomed a groan or any kind of reaction from her.

I’d long been beyond such a paltry feeling like terror—there was nothing I had to fear with my abilities and strength. But Jade’s white face and slumped body unlocked everything I’d lost or hidden away, leaving me bare with the realization

that she meant far more to me than I thought—far more to me than she should—and I'd do anything to save her.

I hurtled out of the apartment building, my movements vampire fast, but once I reached the sidewalk the hopelessness of the situation dawned on me.

I had no idea what to do with Jade. I didn't know how to help her; I didn't know where to take her. Would the Cloisters help? I didn't know! Would it be best to take her back down to the scene of the fight where her boss and teammates were? How would I know? I was completely ignorant in the care of humans—magical or otherwise. But I did know if I didn't do something fast, there was a possibility that Jade would slip away from this world and die in my arms.

I glanced down at her, struggling to decide what to do. Jade's freckles were more pronounced in the stark white of her skin, her red curls were tangled, and the boneless still way she was slumped against me felt so foreign compared to her usual strength and warmth.

*I'd burn it all to save her, I realized. So, I'd better start the fire.*

I closed my eyes to concentrate, then—for the first time in decades, maybe centuries—I unleashed my full power.

All the carefully constructed walls I'd made to contain my powers dropped, expanding my awareness and slamming my brain with new sensory information. I impatiently pushed it aside and tapped one of the powers that made me an elder—the ability to command any vampire of lower strength.

Normally I'd limit this power to a vampire standing directly in front of me, but Jade was dying in my arms so I expanded my powers— first to a two-block radius around the apartment building, then all of downtown before expanding my reach to a good third of the city.

I could feel the life forces of the vampires I'd captured in my net. Some were flickering—young and green, newer vampires—while others were steady and strong—older vampires with decades to centuries of experience.

Once I was certain I had command of them, so they couldn't move due to the mental hold I had on them, I gave the command.

*Get here. Now.*

The order given, I kept control of them, but barely noted the sharp tang of the fear I inspired within them. I was mostly interested in making sure they followed the order and sure enough, immediately vampires—regardless of Family, origin, or power—headed in my direction.

Satisfied, I returned my attention to Jade.

“Jade? Snack. Slayer! Can you hear me?” I rocked her trying to get a reaction.

She was slumped in my arms, motionless.

Footsteps echoed down the street, and I turned to see two vampires—a petite blonde woman wearing what appeared to be a Victorian day dress she had hiked up to her shins so she could run better and a lean spider-y man with a formidable mustache, a bowler hat, and a suit—sprinting down the sidewalk.

“S-sire,” the male puffed when he reached me. “Er, your honor? Elder?” He stammered, not sure how to address me.

“Stop talking,” I snapped. “How are injured wizards treated?”

The woman dropped her skirts. “I-I beg your pardon, sir?” She asked.

“Where are injured wizards taken for medical treatment?” I snapped.

The vampires exchanged panicked looks.

“Have you ever dealt with an injured wizard?” the male whispered to the female, who shook her head.

“Maybe the hospital?” The woman glanced uneasily from her companion to Jade.

“I don't want a *maybe*, I want a certain answer,” I growled.



“Wizards heal differently from humans and they can take potions, so, so perhaps the Cloisters?” the male said, his tone becoming increasingly desperate.

The woman pulled a cellphone out of her handbag—a very wrong looking image considering her hair and dress. “Our Family has a blood donor, let me call them.”

“Blood donors are humans, not wizards!” The man cried.

“Figure it out fast or call someone who will know,” I snarled.

More footsteps echoed down the street as three more vampires came sprinting in my direction, but it wasn’t until I heard the distant roar of an engine that I began to hope.

*I figured at least a few of them would be dispatched to the city, but I didn’t know if they’d be in range. Please, please—*

Before I dared to hope, a black SUV screeched around the corner flashing a dragon insignia that was painted on the door.

The Drakes—Killian’s Family—were here.

The driver slammed on the brakes and the car screeched to a stop in the middle of the road, next to me.

The driver door, front passenger door, and a back seat door were flung open. A tall, red-haired vampire emerged from the driver door, a broad shouldered vampire that looked more like a werewolf with his muscles than a vampire climbed out of the back, but it wasn’t until I saw the black haired, bland faced vampire that hopped out of the passenger seat that I relaxed, recognizing Killian’s Second Knight.

“Elder Maledictus.” Josh—the Second Knight—gave me a sweeping bow. “How can we help you.”

I lifted Jade. “She’s hurt. Where do I take her?”

Josh blinked as he took in Jade’s pale face and task force uniform. “Ah. Is she a wizard, or...?”

“Slayer,” I said.

Josh nodded, even though all the vampires around me suddenly took a huge step backwards likely spooked by the

poisonous properties of her blood. “Very good, Sir,” Josh said. “If you’ll load her in the car, we’ll take her to a medical facility. We have a stock of high-grade potions you can administer to her on the ride over that will stabilize her.”

More vampires hurried down the street, summoned by my command. I ignored them, honing in on Josh. “The Cloisters wouldn’t be a better choice?” I asked.

Josh tilted his head, studying Jade. “They are an option, but it appears your slayer has lost a great deal of blood. Fae potions don’t help with blood loss, so I believe a human facility will be better equipped to help her.”

I hesitated, feeling torn. *How would the Drakes know what’s appropriate when the rest of us don’t have a clue?*

The Drakes must have sensed my hesitation. The broad shouldered one exchanged looks with the redhead, who gave me a second deep bow. “If you’ll excuse my impertinence, Elder Maledictus, but our Family is trained in the treatment of magical humans due to His Eminence’s One being a wizard.”

*Killian’s pet wizard, right. I should have just called him instead of panicking.*

Tapping my speed, I stepped off the curb and made it to their car in moments where I struggled to ease Jade into the car without jostling her.

Behind me, the Drakes huddled up.

“I’ll drive,” Josh volunteered. “Gavino, you stay behind to direct these stragglers. Wouldn’t want any accidents to happen.”

The big vampire bowed his head to Josh, then turned to the rest of the vampires who were looking at the drops of blood Jade had left on the ground with horror.

I’d managed to shift into the car, Jade mostly situated in my lap with her legs stretched across the bench seat. I slammed the door shut and impatiently waited.

The redhead turned to walk back towards the car with Josh. “I’ll call ahead to the hospital.”

*So slow. Why are they so slow?*

“You can,” Josh blandly said. “But I don’t believe it will make much of a difference.”

“What do you mean?”

“Stop talking and *drive*,” I snarled.

I noticed when the blonde vampire from the task force joined the growing crowd of vampires. “Jade?” She shouted, clutching a radio. She looked like she was going to step off the curb until the broad shouldered Drake vampire directed her to back up.

Josh hopped in the driver’s seat and buckled his seat belt—they’d left the car idling, so when his red-haired companion threw himself into the passenger seat, Josh shifted to drive and slammed on the gas before he could close the door.

The SUV roared down the road, breaking every traffic law in the city as the red-haired vampire barely managed to shut his door and buckle himself in.

“Potions,” I snapped.

“Yes.” The red-haired vampire opened the SUV’s glove compartment and passed me back an aqua blue potion, followed by a rose red potion. “Pour the blue one over her arm wound—it can be absorbed through the skin but try to avoid just dumping it on her clothes.”

I held the vials in one hand—clutching them by their necks.

I bit the cork of the blue potion and yanked it out, then delicately peeled her tattered sleeve off her arm. “She packed her wound; do I need to take that out?”

“No—oof.” The red-haired vampire winced as Josh blew through a stop sign and took a left turn, the momentum slamming him against the door. “If the surgical gauze absorbs the potion, it’s fine, as it’s inside the wound. *Look out!*” He pointed to the vampires who were starting to swarm the road.

I barely registered the car’s sudden movements as I emptied the potion bottle over Jade’s wound.

“Perhaps you should release your command, Elder Maledictus?” Josh humbly suggested as he narrowly avoided hitting a vampire standing in the road.

I’d called out to every vampire nearby. They were following us on my continued command.

Instead of letting them go, I shifted the command as I tossed the empty potion bottle to the ground.

*Clear the roads to the local hospital.*

“Very good, Elder Maledictus,” Josh said—likely feeling the order all the way to his bones. “That will help a great deal.”

“Oh, backup.” The red-haired Drake pointed to a dark SUV that pulled onto the road in front of us and the black car that joined our caravan behind us, both cars driving with the same high speed as Josh.

“Hold on,” Josh advised before he took another sharp corner.

Jade and I didn’t move, but the red-haired vampire had to brace himself from getting tossed around.

“How far out are we?” I impatiently asked.

“Less than five minutes,” Josh said.

“You can administer the red potion,” the redhead said. “Here.” He pulled a white kerchief from the pocket of his suit, then took the red potion back from me—uncorking it and pouring some of it over the kerchief. “Pour it on the cloth, then wipe at her lips or stick it in her mouth. You don’t just want to pour it in—she could choke.”

I took the moistened kerchief and potion, juggling them so I could properly support Jade, then followed the directions and dabbed at Jade’s mouth.

Josh watched for a moment in the rearview mirror, then nodded before returning his attention to the road.

Neither of the vampires, I noticed, had mentioned my bespelled clothes or the general weirdness of the situation.

The red-haired one, however, eyed Jade's blood. "Elder..." he slowly said. "Do you... to be safe..."

"The poison in her blood doesn't affect me," I said. "I'm too old."

"Ah." He sat back in his seat looking vaguely terrified.

"I didn't know that was possible." Josh gunned the car through a red stoplight after glancing to confirm that a few vampires were standing in front of the rare car at the intersection, holding it back. "But I suppose it makes sense—you can likely heal faster than the poison can affect you."

The redhead clutched the door. "You just ran a stoplight."

"I'm aware," Josh said.

"Could you *not*? You might like to wax poetry about the *sweet embrace of death*, but I'd like to survive tonight."

"I looked—see?" Josh looked left, then right before he blew through another stoplight in which the intersection was blocked by vampires.

The redhead made a noise.

"Look back at Elder Maledictus and tell me if I don't drive through stoplights that our lives won't be in danger."

The redhead sank lower in his seat and gulped. "Point taken."

A phone rang. The red-haired vampire checked it. "Gavino," he announced, before accepting the call. "Yes?"

"*I'm calling to confirm that Elder Maledictus has Jade O'Neil in his custody?*" A deep voice boomed through the phone's speaker—I was assuming this *Gavino* was the muscley vampire we'd left behind, given I recognized the background chatter as the voices of the vampires who had first arrived when I'd made my command. "*I've got a member of the Curia Cloister's task force. She said she recognized Jade before you left,*" He paused, then added, "*She's getting hysterical and is threatening to call the Cloisters—ouch!*"

“Yes, the slayer is Jade O’Neil,” I said before the redhead could repeat the question to me.

He nodded. “Did you hear that, Gavino?”

*“Ow! Yes—stop kicking! I’ll notify His Eminence—we’ll need to stop the Cloisters before they mobilize.”*

“If the Cloisters are so concerned, her team should have thought twice before leaving her,” I snarled.

It was an unrealistic sentiment—Jade and her team had been pushed to their limits. If I wanted to assign blame, I should have just stepped in and ended the fight. But it had taken me holding a lifeless Jade to realize that revealing my location to Killian, officially standing against Gisila, none of it mattered.

“Coming up on the hospital,” Josh announced. The inky black sky was more of a dull charcoal from all the light pollution as we turned a corner and the street opened to reveal a brightly lit, multi floor building. “We’ll be taking you to the ER—the emergency room, the place humans go for medical attention in case of emergency. Might I suggest to you, Elder Maledictus, that you only harness a few ER staff? If you daze them all too many will attempt to help, and the uncared patients will suffer and get in the way,” Josh added.

“What are you talking about?” the redhead asked.

“I’ll take it into consideration,” I said.

Josh followed the signs for the ER, slamming on the brakes when he drove under an overhang. “Here. I’ll park—Rupert, go in with Elder Maledictus—”

I don’t know what else he said, I unlatched the door and kicked it open with enough force that the car made an ominous creaking noise. I slid out, careful not to jostle Jade as I transitioned from sitting to walking.

I’d been trying to dab more of the potion on her lips, but I didn’t think she was getting much of it. I put the vial in my pocket, then strode for the front doors which automatically opened.

I walked into the sterile stale scent of filtered air and copious cleaners. A waiting room littered with plastic waiting chairs stretched to my side, but there was a front desk tended to by a man and a woman wearing scrubs.

The redhead—Rupert, apparently—scrambled in behind me as I stalked towards the front desk.

“She needs medical attention,” I said to the humans behind the desk. “*Now.*” My eyes glowed red as I used a power unique to vampires—pheromones—which made humans pliable and easy to order around. “You will focus on her and give her the best medical care possible and your absolute priority.”

Their eyes unfocused and one immediately turned to a computer while the other picked up a phone and spoke in a lowered voice.

Seconds later a herd of medical staff stampeded into the room—doctors, nurses, and other roles I didn’t recognize due to my general ignorance of human medical care. Confusion creased their foreheads until I took a step towards them and the pheromones hit, making them dreamy faced and starry eyed.

“Medical care, *now*,” I snapped. “She was shot and there’s something wrong with her head.”

Their eyes stayed unfocused, but they moved efficiently, one of them fetching a stretcher, another pulled out a tablet, while the others scurried around doing more preparatory tasks.

“Possibly a concussion,” one medical staff member muttered to another.

“Check her eyes.”

“Understood.”

One of the humans peeled Jade’s eyelids back and shone a light in her eyes. “Her eyes aren’t constricting—she’ll need an MRI.”

A staff member wheeled a gurney up to me. “After her gunshot wound is addressed.”

The medical staff spoke quickly, but their voices were so neutral—from the hold I had on them—it bordered on uncaring. I gently lowered Jade onto the stretcher and was promptly crowded out as the humans gathered around her.

I clenched my jaw and held in the raging emotions I still couldn't trace: Jade was my priority. I'd hold it together for her sake.

“Any other injuries?” the nurse—or doctor?—with the tablet asked as they started to push the stretcher down the hallway.

I started to shake my head, but Rupert—who was walking so fast he almost had to trot to keep up, added, “She's a vampire slayer—a supernatural human.”

The nurse/doctor paused. “Can type O blood still be used for her?”

My mouth felt dry and I wanted to curse my ignorance. I was aware of blood types due to my drink of choice, but I had no idea if or how that affected Jade as a supernatural.

My disregard for humans was finally coming back to haunt me.

“Yes, she can take blood type O,” Rupert said. “But you should record that a potion was administered to the wound. Elder Maledictus attempted to give her an oral potion, too, but we were afraid she'd choke, so it was only dabbed on her lips and tongue.”

“Understood,” the nurse/doctor said, her voice emotionless.

As we passed through a hallway, a doctor in a white coat with a deep frown stalked up to the procession. “What's going on—”

“No,” I said, putting my will behind it.

The doctor blinked, his eyes glazing over, and he abruptly turned around and walked back in the direction he'd come from.



Rupert eyed the man, his eyebrows crawling up his forehead.

“Do you have something to say?” I asked him.

“No sir,” Rupert said. I must have unconsciously been still using some of my command because he blurted out, “I was just thinking the Second Knight was wise to warn you it wouldn’t help to daze the entire hospital.” He snapped his mouth shut and sucked his neck in when he glanced at me.

I shrugged. “As long as they fix her.”

Rupert was silent for a few steps. “They will,” he said, his voice confident in a way I wished I felt. “Vampire slayers are among the toughest of humans, and she was designed and trained to deal with blood loss. With the right medical care, she’ll be fine.”

Thinking of the way Gisila’s eyes had lingered on Jade’s revealed face, I shook my head. “I’m not so certain of that.”

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-SEVEN

*Jad*  
*e*

I woke up slowly, sensory details slipping through the fog that clouded my mind.

There was a pinching sensation on my fingers, the air smelled funny—both sterile and kind of sour—and the sheets of the bed I was in were rough on my skin.

*This isn't my bed. And I'm definitely not in my apartment.*

I tried to open my eyes, but they felt heavy. My body in general felt heavy—as if a troll was sitting on me.

Something—or someone—shifted, and I heard the creak of a plastic chair. I finally peeled my eyes open and stared up at a tiled ceiling.

*I'm in the hospital.*

The room was dark—the only lights came from the display unit of the probe attached to me and a slice of florescent light that pried its way in through the cracked door.

I'd been in the hospital my fair share of times. This one was nicer than any I'd been to before. There was a big window that overlooked a parking lot, a big TV screen, and even a few framed paintings hung on the standard beige-y walls.

I managed to twitch my fingers, and I recognized the clip clamped over my finger as a probe that measured my vitals. I

was stuck in a flimsy hospital gown without a single weapon on my person.

*How did I get here?*

At least, I was feeling a lot better than I did when I passed out. The lightheadedness, the ringing in my ears, and the general head pain were completely gone.

I managed to roll my eyes to the side with a great deal of effort, surprised to see Connor sitting in a plastic chair scooted close to my bedside. He stared blankly across the dark room looking at the still darkened sky. His dark hair didn't have its usual tousled look—it almost seemed flattened, like he'd been wearing a hood—and he was wearing uncharacteristically dark clothes.

He lowered his gaze, and when his dark red eyes met mine, he surged out of his seat. “Jade?”

“Hey, Connor.” My voice sounded as rough as I felt. I struggled, trying to turn on my side.

“Take it easy,” Connor said, his voice low and silky. “The doctors said you'll be fine—you have a concussion and the gunshot wound needed surgery, but your healing powers have kicked in and I've been administering high grade fae potions, so you're healing up, fast.”

*That's right... I got shot. And I fell off that ladder. No wonder I don't feel great.*

“Thanks.” I held in a groan as I tried to adjust my body—my brain was so fuzzy it felt furry, even though I was gradually waking up. “Did you bring me in?”

Connor took several seconds to reply. “Yes.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He shrugged.

“I mean it—thank you,” I repeated. “I remember being in my apartment, but that's it. If I'd stayed alone and passed out, things would have gotten ugly. I was trying to get to my potion stash...” I trailed off as my brain finally started to kick in.

*Wait...how did Connor know I could safely take a high grade fae potion? Those aren't safe for non-magical humans to consume.*

I craned my neck to peer at Connor again. Maybe my eyes finally sharpened or maybe my brain was operating at a more normal level, but I recognized the dark shirt he was wearing and more specifically I could feel the spark of fae magic that radiated from the spelled hood.

“Considine,” I said, the name dropping from my lips before I could think. “You’re...Connor is Considine?”

Connor—Considine—raised both eyebrows and a slight smile that I hated because it was unfamiliar on Connor’s face twitched across his lips. “You figured out who Ruin was? Impressive.”

Maybe it had been impressive at the time, but now it was dangerous.

I was in a hospital room, alone, with *the* Considine Maledictus. Did my team even know where I was? Did *anyone* know I was here?

*I might die.*

I’d been getting along with *Ruin* at night, but he didn’t know I knew he was Considine. There was no telling how he’d react to me knowing who he was—there was no telling how much Connor and Ruin had been a lie.

*I’m an idiot—I should have told my family the second I figured his identity out, and now I could possibly die because of it.*

Or... would I?

Why had *Considine Maledictus* brought me to the hospital?

Considine folded his arms across his chest as he stared down at me. “What, no threats or cursing me now that you know my secret identity?” He smirked—it was the same one he’d given me as Connor whenever we shared a joke and I used to like it, but now it felt like a lie.

There were a million things I wanted to know and most of them probably weren't safe to ask. But... I didn't get it. He obviously knew Jade O'Neil was the slayer he fought at night.

"Why?" I asked, the word coming out as a croak.

"Which why?" He asked, a mocking tone to his voice that was very foreign matched with Connor's face.

I shut my eyes and pushed my head back into the pillow, misery knifing through me.

More than the concussion—more than the gunshot wound—my heart ached. I'd counted Connor as a true friend—a *rare* friend. And it had been a lie.

*It's a wonder he didn't break a rib holding in laughter every day we hung out.*

My eyes burned with tears I refused to shed—that would *really* make Considine Maledictus laugh.

"I saw you were wounded in the fight." The smugness was gone from Considine's voice, and when I opened my eyes again he was staring outside. "You didn't know it, but backup pulled up shortly after you left—it's why Gisila didn't follow you. When you didn't circle back to join with your team... I knew it would be bad. So, I followed you back to your place." He pulled his eyes away from the window and glanced around the room. "Then brought you here."

The way he finished the explanation made me suspect a lot had happened between finding me in my apartment and me ending up at the hospital.

But instead of asking about it, I scanned the room. I didn't see my uniform or any of my weapons, which put me at a severe disadvantage. *Since I don't have my gun or daggers, what could I use in lieu of them? There must be a sharp instrument somewhere in this room.*

The cream cabinet on the wall probably just had linens, but there was a lamp I could maybe use as a bludgeon.

"Your team has been informed you're here," Considine said.

The announcement shocked me so deeply I stopped looking for potential weapons and gaped up at him.

“They’re on the way. Someone should be here shortly,” Considine continued.

“D-did,” my voice wobbled, and I licked my lips. “Did they get Gisila?”

“No.” Considine sat back down in the chair and rested his elbows on his thighs, his posture relaxed. “The mercenaries have a geas on them, and she never personally attacked you or your teammates.”

I clenched my hands into fists.

*All of that, and we still didn’t get her!*

Even more frustrating, even if the Cloisters couldn’t charge her, technically, Tutu could go after Gisila. There was enough suspicion that the dragon shifter would be well within her rights to attack her sister. But for whatever reason, so far Tutu hadn’t done more beyond strengthening her defenses.

*Maybe they’re in cahoots and this is all an elaborate insurance scam. Except Tutu’s reputation would be ruined, so that makes no sense.*

“All of the mercenaries have been arrested,” Considine said.

“W-what happened to my team?” I cleared my throat and wished I had water.

“Ah, yes. That.” Considine leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing. “Apparently, they entered a human apartment building using an alleyway entrance. They’re fine.” His voice dripped with disdain and an anger I didn’t understand, but I was glad Brody, April, and Tetiana were okay.

“Gisila...she saw your face,” Considine said.

I flinched remembering how the werewolf had yanked my mask off. “Yeah.”

Considine tilted his head back, his red eyes glowing in the low light. “She’s going to come directly for you.”

I sighed. “Yeah.”

“What will you do?”

I glanced over at the vampire. “I’m not sure. I’m more concerned about whether I’ll make it out of this room alive.”

Considine blinked. “You think *I’ll* hurt you? When I went through the trouble to drag you here?”

“You’ve beaten me up before.” I said. “Badly.”

He shrugged. “Not recently.”

“You’re Considine Maledictus.”

“And you’re Jade O’Neil of the O’Neil slayers,” Considine said.

I wasn’t sure if that was a threat or if he was being factual, but his expression was too neutral to give me any kind of clue.

He glanced at me, then heaved his eyes up. “I’m not going to beat you up when you’re helpless like this. First, where’s the fun in that? Secondly, I will repeat, I have gone through a great deal of trouble to get you here and voluntarily signed myself up for new sources of aggravation in the process. I’m not going to waste all that effort.”

“Why?” I asked.

Considine leaned back in his chair again, and I saw a flash of metal on his belt—of course, *he* had a weapon on him. That was just my luck. “Why, what?”

“Why go through all the effort to bring me in?” I struggled to sit up in my bed. My muscles protested, but it also felt good to move again.

He shrugged. “I’ve said it from the beginning: You’re entertaining.”

*Entertaining. Right. And I have a pet unicorn.*

He had to have some other motive. Entertainment was rare for a vampire—particularly as they grew old and apathetic towards living—but it wouldn’t be enough to make a vampire of his caliber pretend to be a young vampire and let himself

get dragged around to festivals and cafes, live through potential baking hazards, and act like...

*Friends.*

It hurt to even think it. I really had let Connor in—deeper than I'd been aware.

*Stay focused. This is a dangerous situation, no matter how benevolent Considine is acting. I can cry later.*

Spooked by the realization that I *was* going to cry over this—later, once I knew I was safe—I cleared my throat. “You knew who I was from the start?”

Considine studied me for a long few seconds, and I wondered if I'd gone too far. “No,” he finally said. “I figured it out after our fight with the snake.”

“Ah,” I said. When I shifted in my bed, my hand hit plastic. When I looked down I saw a remote that had labeled buttons that controlled my bed, the TV, and a button to call the nurse.

*This is a very nice hospital.*

“I assume that was approximately when you realized I was Considine?” he asked. “That was roughly when you became even more cautious when facing me at night, anyway.”

*There can't be any harm in telling him, right? I don't think he can use it against me.*

“Yes,” I said, slowly, as if I was afraid to part with the word. “I saw you turn into a bat, then did some research into what vampires are old enough to have that power and are still awake.”

“That would make it rather easy,” Considine said. “Although I am disappointed with myself. I was sure you hadn't seen that.”

“I probably wouldn't have noticed if I wasn't a slayer,” I admitted.

Considine laughed—it was Connor's laugh, which had my heart aching all over again. “Am I really so pathetic that you



feel the need to reassure me..." He trailed off, blinking a few times, then turned around in the chair to peer in the direction of the door.

A second later the sensation of fire and spicy food brushed my mind—dragon shifter magic.

"Gisila?" I whispered.

"Probably." Considine stood up and casually leaned closer to me, so his side pressed into my bed.

"Already? Even if she knew my face, she couldn't have figured out my name," I said.

"She likely figured out you came to the hospital—I wasn't exactly covert in moving you here. From there it would be easy enough to figure out your room. The staff is shocked to be dealing with a supernatural, even a human one," Considine said.

I mentally chewed on Considine's offered explanation. For a moment I wondered if maybe *he* had told her—he'd been standing with her, after all, when I saw them in the alleyway.

*No, that's not feasible. He went through a lot of trouble to get me here. If he was working with Gisila he wouldn't have bothered.*

"Shall we set her up and see what she wants?" Considine asked.

I weighed out the options. Considine had said my team would arrive soon, but I didn't have a way to contact them in the meantime. Considine would have no problem crushing Gisila, but that didn't mean he wanted to.

*Given his offer, though, I think he's willing to exert himself.*

"Okay," I agreed.

Considine turned, his eyes scanning the room as he searched for a place to stand out of sight.

I stared at his leather belt, homing in on the daggers strapped to it. "You carry weapons now?"

“Yes,” Considine said. “I decided they were necessary in case you ever feel the need to unleash another giant snake upon me.” He took a step towards the shadows.

“Wait.” I put one hand on his belt and tugged on him. He twisted for me and obligingly raised his arm so I could pull one of the daggers he carried free from its sheath on his belt.

It didn’t occur to me until after I held the blade that despite him having Connor’s face and Ruin’s carefree attitude it was no longer safe to act so familiarly with him.

“Go ahead, help yourself,” Considine said, shattering my concern. “It’s not like I could use a weapon when we’re about to face off with a powerful dragon shifter.”

“You’re fine.” I worked on hiding the blade in my blankets in a way that I could quickly draw it. “You could kill her blindfolded, and I don’t have any of my usual weapons.”

“Ahh yes. Those scruffy Drakes did take your things, but I’m not certain where they stored them.” Considine peered around the room.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway—she was coming.

“It’s fine, just hide.”

“What, don’t you want to strip me of additional weapons?” Considine turned to put the small of his back to me, revealing another dagger.

“Connor!” I snapped as I found the little remote for my bed again. “She’s almost here. Hide!”

It wasn’t until Considine silently approached the wall and mingled with the shadows that I realized I’d used the wrong name.

I grimaced at the reminder—that Considine was Connor and I was an idiot—but turned my attention to the door just in time to see Gisila nudge it open.

Gisila—wearing a trendy black cocktail dress—smiled at me. “Good evening, Jade.”

*Ahh yes. She figured out who I am—probably from the staff. She’s telling me that she knows who I am—that she can easily find me again.*

“Lady Gisila,” I said, my usual social anxiety entirely gone as my slayer senses flooded my aching body, preparing to fight.

Gisila smiled pleasantly. “I have something of yours.” She held up my slayer mask. “The hospital staff kindly let me in so I could return it to you.”

*That explains why they told her who I was.* I knew from experience hospitals were usually sticklers about privacy, but supernaturals usually excited even the most rule-abiding humans. Plus, thanks to the Cloisters efforts to paint supernaturals as harmless and loving, they’d have no reason to assume a dragon shifter in possession of my mask might have it for nefarious reasons.

“Thank you,” I said—good manners drilled into me even in current circumstances. “You shouldn’t have bothered. I have extras.”

Gisila’s smile turned cruel, and she pushed her fingers through the right eye hole and mouth hole of my mask and clenched her hand. The right half of the mask warped then crumbled, the fragments falling to the hospital floor before the surviving left half of the mask fell. “Too bad. You won’t be needing them anymore.”

*She wants me dead. Because I saw her with the mercenaries?*

Gisila stepped closer to my bed, her smirk growing.

I watched her, waiting for my optimal chance. “Why are you trying to break into Tutu’s?” I asked on a whim, hopeful she might answer if she really thought she was going to off me.

Gisila shook her head, her beautiful purple hair swirling around her. “Don’t trouble yourself, slayer.”

*Looks like she’s not narcissistic enough to answer any questions. Maybe if I get her mad? That tactic frequently*

*works on vampires and werewolves.*

She stretched out her hand. Her nails—manicured and painted with a marbled purple and black pattern—were extra-long and filed to points.

I waited until she was at my bedside—which put me in a disadvantageous position as I was lower than her. Her smile widened as she reached for my throat, and I struck.

I flung the plastic remote that controlled my bed, hitting her under the chin so her head snapped back. Ideally, I'd go for her throat, but since I was sitting on my bed it was out of reach, and I couldn't risk letting go of my only weapon.

Instead, I stabbed her in the side. The blade—designed for stabbing—cut through her dress and dug into the muscle.

Gisila uttered a roar of pain and staggered backwards.

I clutched my dagger so the blade slid free as she backed away, and she started bleeding profusely.

“You *worm*,” Gisila growled, her voice losing all its polish.

She darted forward, evading my attempt to stab her gut, and backhanded me with enough force to almost make me collapse backwards and fall into my bed.

I caught myself—bracing with my core—but before I could recover Gisila wrapped her hand around my throat and squeezed.

I'd held my breath in preparation, so I was ready for the attack. But her nails still hurt as she dug them into the delicate skin of my neck.

*Regroup!*

I shifted my grip on Considine's dagger, intending to stab her in the ribs this time, when a shadow broke off from the wall and gathered behind Gisila.

*Considine.*

I thought he'd warn her first—maybe make a few threatening statements like Gisila had.

Instead, he grabbed her by the shoulder, yanked her backwards, and then flung her to the ground with so much strength all the air expelled from her body in a large croaking gasp.

Checking my throat for blood—worry over my poisonous blood broiled in the back of my mind for Connor, until I remembered he was Considine—I leaned over the side of the bed.

Considine placed his foot on Gisila's throat and stepped down.

Gisila squirmed, clawing at his boot as her face turned colors from the lack of air. "C-Considine?" she managed to squeeze out, her eyes wide with shock as she peered up at his shadowed face.

Considine watched her impassively, seemingly waiting for... I didn't know what.

"She's after me," I said. "Though I don't know why—I'm just one member of the task force. Even if she killed me, they'd still come for her."

"She's trying to minimize threats," Considine said. "You're the biggest, so you are the lucky recipient of her attention. Until now." He continued watching her scabble as if she were a bug and didn't react even when she tried to claw at his leg with her sharpened nails.

Gisila's lips turned blue from lack of oxygen and her skin was almost a grayish hue. *She's getting close to suffocating—how far is he going to push this? I thought the plan was just to bait her.*

Considine's expression was nonchalant, but his red eyes had a murderous glint I hadn't seen in them before. (Admittedly, he might have been flashing that look around during his nightly rounds as Ruin and I'd have never known thanks to his enchanted hood.)

I swapped my dagger from my right to my left hand, then grabbed the left sleeve of Considine's spelled shirt.

“Considine, you can’t kill her,” I said. “Her bloodline would be furious.”

“I already thought of that, yes.” Considine’s murderous gaze remained locked on Gisila. “But it also occurred to me that there might be a few ways around that.” He smiled, and Gisila kicked her legs—struggling for air.

“You’re going to put one into plan, right? And *not kill her?*” I asked, my worry starting to grow.

I wanted Gisila caught and arrested but that didn’t mean I wanted her dead, especially since we still had no idea what her aim was.

Considine didn’t answer me. Instead, he waited, his red eyes glowing as he studied Gisila—whose gaze was becoming unfocused, her movements more frantic flops than anything useful.

Just before she passed out, Considine lifted his booted foot enough to give Gisila enough room to take a shallow breath.

“Listen carefully, lizard.” Considine’s voice was dark and raspy.

Gisila, still struggling to breathe as coughs were mixed in with her shallow gasps, looked up at Considine—her eyes wide with fear.

“Touch even a hair on Jade O’Neil, and I will come after you with all the power I possess. She is *mine*. Understood?”

Gisila made a wheezing noise—the very same sound I would have made if I had less control over myself.

*That is your “way around” killing her? By staking a claim on me?!*

I couldn’t react—that’d be giving away free information to Gisila—so all I allowed myself was a slow blink.

Considine had essentially declared that going for me would unleash his wrath. Warning her like this gave him a sort of brutal, semi-recognized form of claim, so if she attacked me it would be well within his right to attack her back—and it

didn't need to be stated that when Considine attacked, he'd kill.

"You haven't answered me, lizard. *Understood?*" Considine started to put more pressure on Gisila's throat again.

"Y-yes," Gisila managed to squeeze out.

"Good." Considine pressed down harder on her throat, then abruptly backed off. "Then leave."

Gisila gasped for air for a few moments as she peeled herself off the ground—not looking nearly as gorgeous in her ripped and bloodied dress, her hair full of fly-aways from her struggles against Considine. She glanced up at Considine, then shifted her gaze to me and her eyes darkened with anger.

*It looks like she's going to internalize her embarrassment over Considine handing her rear to her and blame me. How standard for the supernatural community.*

Gisila managed to gracefully stand up, her poise returning. She pressed a hand to her bleeding side and rushed through the open door, her footsteps speeding up as she retreated.

Considine was unnaturally still until her footsteps faded entirely. Then he relaxed, the darkness fading away from him as his usual nonchalant attitude returned. "Nicely done," he said.

I studied him, struggling to balance the threat he posed with what I knew of Connor and his actions as Ruin.

*I don't get him. I thought it was because he was just a weird vampire, but it was probably his age. But vampires as old as Considine don't care about individuals, much less humans like me. There must be something I'm missing... unless was our relationship as friends real?*

That would practically go against the law of nature—a slayer and a vampire?

"Thank you," I said, slowly.

Considine turned towards me, his expression was amused but almost mask-like. "For warning Gisila off?"

“Yes,” I said.

He shrugged. “Then I should be thanking you for being interesting to watch.”

“Me being interesting... is that why you claimed I belong to you?” I asked.

Considine looked away from me. “I believe I hear some of your coworkers coming, so I’m going to bow out. Happy hospital stay.” He waved and disappeared through the door.

“Wait—your dagger...” I held the weapon out but Considine was gone, his footsteps quieter than Gisila’s had been.

*This is an unexpected complication.*

It didn’t mean much to me—Considine saying I was his didn’t give him any legal grounds over me, so it really was a protective move. But *why*, when he’d gone through such lengths to trick me? Being a source of entertainment would only get me so far, so what was this?

*My family is going to go off like a grenade when I tell them about this.*

I doubted any member of my family or any slayer resources, would help me puzzle through this, either.

I heard more hurried footsteps outside, so I wasn’t too surprised when my doorway was suddenly crowded.

“Never fear, Blood, we’re finally here!” Juggernaut jumped into my room and locked his legs so he went skidding across the floor, skating past my bed.

“Blood—you’re okay!” Brody stood in the doorway, bracing himself as he sniffed the air.

Grove crouched and poked his head through the space under Brody’s arms. “I brought potions! Extra special ones—very potent with absolutely no poisonous materials mixed in. I was *that* worried for you.” He pushed his way into my room, his leather satchel close to bursting.



Sarge placed his hand on Brody's muscled shoulder. "Brody, could you go in or get out of the way?"

"Ah—sorry. It just smells *weird* in here." Brody took a few steps in, then sneezed.

Sarge, followed by Captain Reese, stepped into my room.

"Blood—glad to see you're awake." Sarge folded his arms across his chest and nodded awkwardly at me. "You seem... cognitively sound."

"I'm, I'm," I stammered under the scrutiny of so many people, so I paused and took a deep breath. "I'm okay. A bit banged up but doing fine." I shifted in my bed, then remembered I was still holding Considine's dagger, which was red with Gisila's blood. "Uh..."

"Gisila was here." Captain Reese tapped her nose. "That's what you're smelling, Brody: dragon shifter."

I nodded, and Captain Reese eyed my borrowed dagger. "I take it she is also the recipient of a fresh stab wound?"

"Yeah," I said. "She didn't hurt me—she didn't get the chance. Considine Maledictus warned her off."

Sarge rubbed his forehead. "I'd be surprised by his actions if I hadn't received a phone call from Killian Drake himself to tell me where you were and what your condition was—which was a good thing. Tetiana was going crazy, as she knew Considine had you but didn't know where he took you."

"What happened with Gisila?" Captain Reese asked.

"Ah-ah—no." Grove shook a finger at our boss's boss and set his satchel down on my bed with a thump that I felt through the mattress. "Potions first, questions later. We must make sure that weird goth bat didn't do anything to her." Grove turned his attention to me, then curled his hands in a fist. "*Blood. How many fingers am I holding up?*" He shouted at me.

Brody slapped his hands over his ears. "Bro—warn a guy before you use that volume!"

Juggernaut shook his head. “She hurt her head, Grove, not her ears.”

“You can’t know that—she didn’t answer the question.” Grove flipped open the flap of his satchel and started digging around in it.

Captain Reese turned her back to the chaos that was my teammates and studied me. “Are you really okay? You’ve been through a lot tonight. I can clear the room.”

“I’m okay,” I assured her. “I don’t know what happened while I was out of it, but I feel a lot better now than I did after the fight.”

“From what His Eminence says, Considine poured a fortune’s worth of potions on your arm so I imagine that helped you a great deal,” Sarge said.

*Why was he so concerned? I mean, he fended Gisila off for me, that’s big. But the whole Connor-Considine thing...*

The situation was so weird—and wild—I still didn’t quite believe it.

“Seems like he went a bit overboard, considering he thinks of you as a toy.” Captain Reese rubbed her chin as the lights in her prosthetic leg glowed shedding more light in the room.

“I discovered he’s also my neighbor,” I said, staring at the dagger.

Sarge straightened upright. “*Neighbor?*”

“It means he lives next door to her,” Grove said in a know-it-all tone. “Here, Blood. Drink this.” He passed over a tiny, candy-apple-green-colored potion.

I took the small vial with my free hand, tilted my head back, and drank the miniature vial in one gulp. I didn’t taste it until I swallowed, and I was pleasantly surprised by the sweet but sour taste that reminded me of sour apple candy.

“Considine Maledictus is your neighbor,” Captain Reese repeated.

“Yes.” I nodded, then awkwardly held the dagger up. “I can tell you about him, but Gisila’s actions are probably more important to discuss first given the wolf mercenaries. She didn’t confess to or say anything that would give us any kind of grounds to arrest her. She didn’t even directly threaten me, just made lots of vague statements.”

Captain Reese grimaced as she pulled out a tiny pad of paper and a pencil from her jacket pocket. “I swear Lady Gisila is almost as bad as a fae. Alright. Lay it on us—Sarge and I would like to get the preliminary reports done tonight.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

# CHAPTER

## TWENTY-EIGHT

*Consider  
e*

I strode down the empty hospital corridor, moving fast to get out of Jade's hearing range as I wasn't sure what I would do if she called after me.

She was safe.

Gisila had been properly warned.

The dragon shifter wouldn't bother Jade again—not unless she wanted my enmity.

But I had just opened myself up to a world of trouble.

For starters, Killian—and by proxy the rest of the Dracos offspring—now knew what I had been doing with my evenings and where I lived.

Even worse, Killian knew precisely who I spent the majority of my time with.

*Calling him had been unavoidable.*

I passed by the nurses' station, stopped, did a U turn, and circled back.

A young female nurse had been watching me walk past. She giggled as I strode up to the desk.

“Hello.” I gave the nurses my most dazzling smile and made sure to look every one of them in the eye—from the

exhausted male who looked like he was approximately five seconds away from quitting to the young giggler to the older Hispanic woman who popped an eyebrow at me in amusement even though I hadn't said anything yet. "Jade O'Neil in Room 1285 will be under your care until she's released this morning, correct?"

"Jade O'Neil..." The exhausted male nurse flipped through some charts. "Oh—the special case. Yes. Yes, we've got her."

The giggler stopped ogling me to look at her coworker with wide eyes. "Special?"

"The vampire slayer," the older Hispanic woman said. "She's a supernatural."

"Wow, that's rare. I don't think I've ever given a supernatural medical attention." All signs of humor were erased from the giggler and worry creased around her eyes. "She must be in rough shape to be brought in."

"She's stable," The male nurse said.

"Yes," I agreed. "And she's woken up."

"Oh. Oh! We need to check on her then." The male nurse stood up, but his badge caught on the edge of the desk yanking him back down.

The older nurse patted his back and pushed an enormous plastic cup of iced liquid that was colored an alarming shade of neon yellow at him. "I'll handle it." She stood up and met my gaze. "Thank you for letting us know—are you her family?"

I laughed. "No—not hardly. But I did bring her in, and I'm very vested in her care."

The male nurse nodded. "Understood. We will do our best to make sure she heals up and remains comfortable." He reached for his cup and missed.

"Nick, you need to take a day off." The older woman put the cup directly in the male nurse's hands, then nodded to me.

“I assure you Jade O’Neil is in great hands. She’ll be just fine.”

Their promises were nice enough, but I studied the trio and considered using my pheromones just to be certain.

But taking over the emergency room as I had was...not *deeply* illegal, but definitely over the line. I didn’t care much about legal repercussions, but Jade would—

*Wait, wait. Am I truly so far gone that I’m fretting over her feelings?*

The no-longer-a-giggler put her hand over her heart. “You don’t have to worry about a thing, sir. We’ll take great care of your girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” I repeated the word, which tasted as foreign as it sounded.

The not-a-giggler nodded. “I think it’s so romantic that you’ve got the whole star-crossed lovers thing going on—since you’re a vampire and she’s a vampire slayer.”

The male nurse jumped. “He’s a what?”

“Vampire—he’s got the red eyes,” the not-a-giggler said. “And Lucia is right, Nick. You’ve gotta take a day off—the lack of sleep is getting to you. You’re usually sharper than I am.”

I was still processing the assumption of our relationship—which had happened before. But those assumptions had been for Jade and Connor.

This nurse thought *I* was involved with a *slayer*.

*But is that guess so far off, given everything I did tonight for her?*

I couldn’t tell if that was disgusting, disappointing, or fine, and I didn’t want to think it over to find out, so instead I offered the nurses a smile.

“Thank you so much,” I said, oozing goodwill. “I deeply appreciate the care you’ve given her.” I winked, then made my

escape, striding away before I could hear anything more, which seemed to be a common action for me currently.

I focused on my goal—to get out of the sterile smelling surroundings where it felt like the walls were closing in and retreat outside. Josh and that other Drake vampire were still hanging about. I'd find them and get a ride... somewhere.

My concentration kept the intrusive thoughts at bay, so I was left in peace as I trotted down the stairs and traced a path through the large building.

I prowled through the front doors—which opened automatically—and didn't let myself relax until the chilly night air surrounded me.

The sky had faded from inky black to a sort of dirty gray color—lightening at the first hint of sunrise.

When I exhaled, my breath turned into a silvery puff. The street in front of the hospital was quiet—my breathing was the only noise. Streetlights marked a sidewalk that wrapped around the hospital to the parking lot behind it.

I followed the sidewalk—I needed to, as the Drake vampires were kicking up their heels in the parking lot—but my mind was now free to ponder what I'd been avoiding.

*What now?*

My holiday was quite obviously over and in comparing Killian Drake to his siblings, it was obvious that despite his questionable choice at having a One, he was still of sound mind. (Or sounder than his siblings, anyway.)

Staying around Magiford was just going to invite headaches. However... there was still Jade to think about.

I turned around to glance back at the hospital. Jade's room overlooked the parking lot, so I wasn't yet on the right side of the building.

There—I was thinking of Jade, a human, again.

But leaving her in the hospital didn't sit right with me.

*She's feeling good enough to stab a dragon shifter and has some members of her team with her. She'll be fine.*

On second thought, the presence of her team was not much of a reassurance given they'd been *with* her when she'd gotten so soundly beaten. But I also knew Killian Drake would soon secure the hospital's premises if he hadn't already.

Jade would be safe.

The antsy feeling in my chest that still hadn't fully dissipated twisted uncomfortably, proof that I didn't believe my own assurances. I would have said the feeling was the kind of comradery I'd shared with Ambrose, but it wasn't. It was... different, in ways I couldn't define and probably shouldn't try to.

I growled in disgust at myself as I rubbed my forehead.

*Is there really any purpose in avoiding the realization when the damage is already done? I can't dodge it any longer: I care for Jade O'Neil. A human.*

Somehow, between her shy smiles, disastrous baking trials, and her fearlessness, she had effortlessly squirmed her way into my heart passing through all my disdain and dislike of emotional attachments to others.

She was important to me.

*I'm not on the edge of the danger zone, I'm squarely in it.*

Nothing besides Jade's life hanging in danger would have moved me to reveal myself to Killian. Nothing besides Jade could have gotten me to take full advantage of my powers and status.

I might have amused myself by instigating skinship with her as both Ruin and Connor, but the truth was her warmth and actions had made the interactions downright addicting.

Instead of backing off, I continued down the path—with the excuse of entertainment. In hindsight, my quest for entertainment had worked too well, to the point of backfiring, as it had given Jade the opening she needed to become an important fixture in my life.



*It's even worse than that—I don't just feel friendship for her.*

I'd been enraged that Ambrose had kicked the bucket after his One died, but as close as we had been we still had occasionally gone months and sometimes an odd year or two without seeing each other and that hadn't bothered me.

Jade, on the other hand...

I laughed and slid my hands into the pockets of my trousers, amused by the irony of the situation. "I'd been concerned Killian was losing his mind and came to Magiford to fix him. Instead, *I* ended up being the loon who had grown attached to a very mortal—though perhaps not so fragile—human," I murmured to myself.

I rounded the corner of the hospital, revealing the stretch of the asphalt parking lot, then slowed down and stopped under one of the sidewalk lamps.

I had to give myself some credit—I was *not* as head-over-heels as Killian Drake was for his One. But, given enough time and exposure to Jade O'Neil, I had no doubt that I would be.

As much as I delighted in Jade's company, as important as she'd become to me, I wasn't so far gone as to not recognize the danger of my position.

If something happened to Jade, I'd turn into one of those sappy useless vampires that I despised.

And something would inevitably happen to Jade. Either she'd perish in combat—likely, given the lifestyle of slayers and the events of tonight being a sample of her work life—or eventually she'd die of old age or sickness. Whatever it was, something would take her out.

*This is why I don't like humans. Because growing attached to them is dangerous. Jade is dangerous.*

Never one to languish, I pulled my shoulders back and forced myself to face the problem with cold and clear judgement.

“The problem of being attached to her leaves me with two options,” I said, speaking into the void that was the cold early morning air.

The first option: I could leave Magiford immediately, severing my relationship with Jade.

I was attached to her, yes, but not yet irreversibly so.

Leaving Magiford—fleeing her presence—wouldn’t be fun. In fact, it would take what little bit of sparkle she’d restored in my life and snuff it out leaving me with the bitter sensation of knowing precisely what I was missing in life for the next few decades, until I eventually forgot her.

Jade was laughter, warmth, and affection—all things I hadn’t felt in centuries.

However, allowing the attachment to fade would preserve my sanity and general wellbeing. It was the wisest, surest choice.

I sighed again—another sign that the attachment was already getting to me, as I was not one for melodrama—and rubbed the back of my neck.

I swear I heard Jade’s delighted laughter, the feeling of her warm hand in mine swamped me, and I knew my decision was inevitable.

I frowned as I once again strode down the sidewalk watching for one of the Drake’s black SUVs.

I wasn’t looking forward to what was coming next, but it was necessary.

# EPILOGUE

*Jad*  
*e*

I violently shook my smoothie—trying to make sure I'd properly blended all the cucumber bits and frozen mango chunks—when my phone chirped with an incoming text message.

My guts churned, and I slowly turned the phone over terrified to see what message was waiting for me.

It was my older brother—Peri, short for Peridot—texting in our sibling group message.

PERI

There hasn't been any yelling, so I assume you still haven't told the parental units?

Not yet.

I set my thermos down and held my breath, waiting for an answer. My phone immediately chirped again, this time with a message from Jasper.

JASPER

Jade. The only reason we agreed not to tell Mom and Dad is because you said you would. It's almost been a week. Tell them!

I guiltily tapped a button on my phone to lock it.

They were right, I needed to. But I was waiting for one last piece of info that might help smooth this situation over: Confirmation that Gisila really had left Magiford.

After getting discharged from the hospital, I had immediately called my older brothers to tell them about everything: Gisila, Considine/Connor, the mercenary wolves, all of it. Having Considine be the one to drag my unconscious carcass into the hospital had been a wakeup call to the danger I'd put myself in by not telling my family.

Over the phone call, my brothers had... listened. Furiously.

In the end, they'd agreed to stay silent until I had a chance to tell our parents—and grandparents—but I'd wanted the chance to fortify my situation and get a couple of work items crossed off to use as evidence for why I could and should stay in Magiford, specifically that Gisila had indeed left Magiford. (There was still a very real chance my parents would drag me back home after learning about everything unless I had a strong defense.)

I scooped up my thermos—reassured that I'd blended it well enough. I swapped the blender blade secured to the thermos for a to-go lid—then did one last inspection of my apartment.

My windows—which reflected all the lights I had on, since it was pitch black outside due to the much earlier sunsets—

were locked, and the fae defense spells I'd paid a fae to create for me were active and humming. My apartment was safe—a very real concern because despite Gisila leaving, she'd proven she wasn't above hiring goons to carry out her dirty work.

*I have my keys, wallet, everything I need for work...* I took a sip of my drink and shook my head. The watermelon flavor of the potion I'd mixed into my smoothie—the one additional requirement my brothers had demanded—that I take daily potions for the next week even though I was perfectly fine—wasn't the greatest match with the mango-cucumber base I'd blended up.

A tap on my front door had me pausing, my heart twisting in my chest. *Maybe?*

“Jade!” Sunshine's voice was muffled through the thick door. “We're going to be late for work, let's go—and I brought breakfast-egg muffins!”

“Coming!” I glanced one last time around my apartment, then flicked off the lights and slipped through my front door.

Sunshine stood in the hallway wearing her work uniform of a white lab coat, slacks, and a bright pink collared shirt, and holding two egg muffins that were basically quiche in a muffin form.

I smiled at her and juggled my thermos to my left hand so I could lock my door. “Are you really sure you want to work the night shift?” I asked. “I feel really bad that you put in the change request because of me.”

“Use that feeling of guilt to inspire yourself to stay alive during your patrols,” Sunshine dourly said. “And this is a temporary measure—until I'm certain you aren't going to get yourself killed while on the clock. Besides, don't you want help with your paper?”

“Yeah,” I sighed.

Sarge had assigned me another five pages of writing for my dreaded paper and had extended the deadline. I had no idea what I was going to write about for so many pages when I still didn't get what dynamic he was talking about.

“Then take your muffin and let’s go,” Sunshine ordered. “I’m not going to be late for my first night on this shift!”

I took the muffin Sunshine offered and bit into it, humming in appreciation.

The muffin was still warm, so the cheese was melty and the herbs mixed into the egg and bacon base were strong and fragrant. “I love it. Thank you.”

Sunshine waved a hand at me. “My mom made it, not me, but I’ll pass the praise along. Come on!” She scurried across the hallway and started down the stairs.

I followed her, but I paused at the top stair and peered back over my shoulder at Considine’s quiet empty apartment.

I hadn’t seen Considine since he left me in the hospital roughly a week ago. He hadn’t appeared at night on the streets of Magiford when I’d returned to work the night before or popped up around the apartment building during the day.

In fact, I hadn’t heard any noise in his apartment at all and I’d been at home 24/7 the first few days after I’d been discharged.

*Did he move out? But why didn’t he tell me?*

The realization that Considine was Connor had put me on uneven ground.

Connor had been my friend, while Considine was a threat. Plus, he’d *known* who I was—it was a game to him. Logically, the less I interacted with him the better.

But he’d followed me to my apartment and taken me to the hospital. He was dangerous and deadly, but I didn’t think his Connor persona was a complete lie or he would have left me to bleed out and potentially die in my apartment.

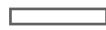
Which was why I’d spent several hours throughout the week debating if I should text him or not.

As more time passed and I didn’t hear anything in the next-door apartment and I didn’t hear about Ruin up to his typical micromanaging ways downtown, it made me suspect he’d left Magiford.

*Why was he here anyway—living in a human apartment building?*

“Jade! Let’s go!” Sunshine shouted from a floor down.

“Coming!” I hurried down the stairs, pausing on a landing to take a slug of my smoothie and trying to shrug off the sting of disappointment that I knew wasn’t a good sign.



SUNSHINE and I rushed to the Curia Cloisters—stopping to say a quick hi to Emi as we passed through.

Sunshine had watched me change into my new uniform with a scowl and insisted on walking me all the way to the meeting room.

Sunshine rolled her newspaper into a cylinder shape and tapped it on her leg. “Are you *sure* you’re okay?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m fine. I don’t need a babysitter—and you need to go report in, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” Sunshine looked back up the hallway. “Okay, just remember, don’t head home without me! We’re walking buddies. Understood?”

“Understood,” I said.

Sunshine nodded in satisfaction, then marched off down the hallway—her steps so fast it made her brown hair bob.

I took a big breath, then entered the meeting room.

April, Juggernaut, Tetiana, Clarence, and Binx were seated together playing a round of go fish with the obligatory emotional support old maid card while Grove and Medium-Sized Robert watched with raised eyebrows.

Brody sat by himself, but based on the way he kept craning his neck in the direction of the game, he not-so-secretly wanted to join in.

“Blood,” Brody called when I slipped around a few tables making my way to my usual isolated table.

“Hey,” I awkwardly said before I remembered I wasn’t wearing my mask and I flashed a quick smile that was a little too late.

April looked up from her cards and scanned me while Brody not so subtly sniffed the air.

I didn’t know what to make of their reactions, so I busied myself with sitting down and smoothing out nonexistent wrinkles in my uniform.

When April finally looked back at her cards, Tetiana turned around in her seat to get a look at me as if I was a creature in a zoo.

*Am I supposed to say something? But they haven’t asked me a question...*

Grove pushed away from the table and sauntered up to me. “You’re still taking potions?” He asked, eyeing my smoothie.

“Yeah—my brothers told me to,” I said. “As a precaution.”

“Wow.” Grove pushed his eyebrows so far up his forehead they disappeared under the drape of his hair. “Your brothers are strong enough to boss you around? They must be terrifying.”

“Grove!” Medium-Sized Robert rumbled in disapproval.

“I’m just sayin’,” Grove complained.

The door opened, and Sarge slipped inside the meeting room. He nodded at me, but his silvery eyes lingered on the card game. “Take your seats, team.”

“Yessir.”

“You got it, Sarge!”

“I win!”

“No, no, no! The old maid card means you automatically *lose*.”

The team filled up their usual spaces—April and Juggernaut sitting together, with Clarence and Tetiana at a table in the back across from Grove and Medium-Sized



Robert, Binx and Brody sitting in the front, leaving me by myself at my table in the center of the room.

I rested my hands on the table and waited with the rest of the team as Sarge organized his documents on the podium at the front of the room.

“Before we begin, I have an announcement.” Sarge folded his hands behind his back and studied us.

“Oh—pick me, pick me!” Grove stood up and held his hand up. “Did we nail Gisila?”

Sarge frowned. “No. The mercenaries’ geas is holding strong and despite additional questioning Orrin hasn’t been able to drop any additional hints besides what he told Blood.”

“Oh. Well. That’s disappointing.” Grove plopped back down in his chair with a massive sigh.

“Lay it on us, sir!” Brody pumped his arm in the air. “We’re ready.”

“I’m not sure you are.” Sarge frowned at the werewolf. “Regardless, this decision comes from upper management. We are adding a new member to the task force.”

The door to the meeting room opened. I glanced at it fully expecting Captain Reese to come in—if the announcement was from the higher ups, she’d want to be here.

Instead, a task force member—wearing the navy-blue uniform with the gold edging and task force patch—stepped inside. I took in the black hair and red eyes, then did a double take, my heart stopping.

“*Considine?*” My voice was deafeningly loud in the silence of the room.

Sarge glanced over at the elder vampire. “Precisely, yes. Please join me in welcoming Considine Maledictus to our team.”

I was too shocked. I couldn’t even register my teammates’ reaction. “*What?*” My voice was so squeaky it had to be hitting registers only shifters were capable of hearing.

Considine smiled—one that was too sneaky for my wellbeing—and prowled across the room, stopping directly next to my table. “Hello, *teammate*,” he purred. “I think we’re going to get along wonderfully.”

“This can’t—there’s no way—*why* would you—” I babbled, unable to finish a coherent thought.

“Didn’t I warn you? One day a supernatural might sweep you off your feet.” I didn’t even notice when Considine scooped my hands up, tugging on them so I automatically stood up. “As for the why... I chose option two.”

“Option what?” I asked blankly. I’d recognized his reference to the conversation we’d had about dating after we’d passed out my poorly seasoned Party Mix, but the mention of options lost me beyond comprehension.

“I decided to go the protection route, which means accompanying you at all hours to watch your back as your team doesn’t seem to be particularly good at it.” Considine looked away from my face to scan the room.

I felt a shiver ripple across my teammates.

*At least I’m not the only one thrown by his presence.*

“But...but...*what*?” I said, still not able to mount any kind of verbal defense from the shock of it all.

Considine shifted his red eyes back to me, blessing me with a dangerous smile. “Don’t worry, it’s quite simple: I fancy you.”

“You fancy me,” I repeated after him, like a bewildered parrot.

“Yes.” He said casually.

“You, Considine Maledictus, elder vampire, fancy me,” I said.

“Precisely.” Considine gave me a smile that sounded off every internal danger bell I had, then he leaned into me.

“I don’t believe it,” I said.

“That’s acceptable,” he purred. “Since we’re working together, I’ll have plenty of time to prove it.”

He’d invaded my space so frequently as both his day and night persona that I didn’t back up, didn’t flinch, didn’t even realize what was happening, until it was too late, and Considine’s lips were against mine in a very public, very real kiss.

My brain ceased to function and all the thoughts bouncing around my head instantly perished as I struggled to connect with reality.

I barely registered more than the gentle but insistent feeling of his lips pressing into mine, his hand curling around the small of my back, and the choking inhale my entire team took in a synchronization that would have impressed me if I had the ability to think.

Considine’s arm around my waist kept me from tilting backwards and sitting on my rear in shock. He gently tipped me against his chest—still kissing me—as I automatically grabbed the shoulder of his uniform to balance myself.

After several long moments, Considine released my lips. But the fireworks weren’t over. Ooh, no.

He set his cheek against mine. “Thank you for that delightful welcome, partner,” he whispered in my hair before kissing the rim of my ear.

I stood, stunned, holding myself upright by my grip on his uniform. This went beyond every observation I’d made about him as both Connor and Considine. *What was going on?*

I turned my head to look at Sarge.

My boss merely nodded confirming Considine’s presence on our team. “Considine will be serving as Blood’s permanent partner.”

As Considine chuckled into my hair, I came to a very real conclusion.

*I’m going to die, I realized. Of shock... or a heart attack.*

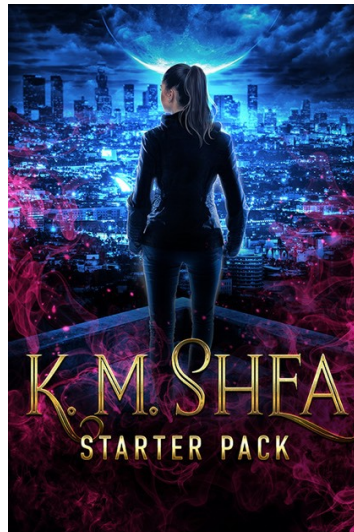
THE END

*The story continues in The Order of Blood and Ruin, the final book of Magic on Main Street.*

*If you want more of Considine, Jade, and the Snake-Brats, check out my website, [kmshea.com](http://kmshea.com), for a free companion short story!*

# AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *The Games of Enemies and Allies*, I hope you enjoyed Jade's story! If you want to read more of my work, [sign up for my newsletter](#) to receive my **free K. M. Shea Starter Pack** ebook.



It contains:

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My newsletter is released every month, and contains information about the books I'm working on, new freebies, and exclusive content just for newsletter subscribers!

Thank you for your support and encouragement. I am proud to say I have the best readers. Therefore, it is my dearest wish that Jade and her friends made you laugh and warmed your heart. Thank you.

# JADE'S ADVENTURE CONTINUES IN...



The Order of Blood and Ruin

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K. M. Shea is a fantasy-romance author who never quite grew out of adventure books or fairy tales, and still searches closets in hopes of stumbling into Narnia. She is addicted to sweet romances, witty characters, and happy endings. She also writes LitRPG and GameLit under the pen name, A. M. Sohma.

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[kmshea.com](http://kmshea.com)

