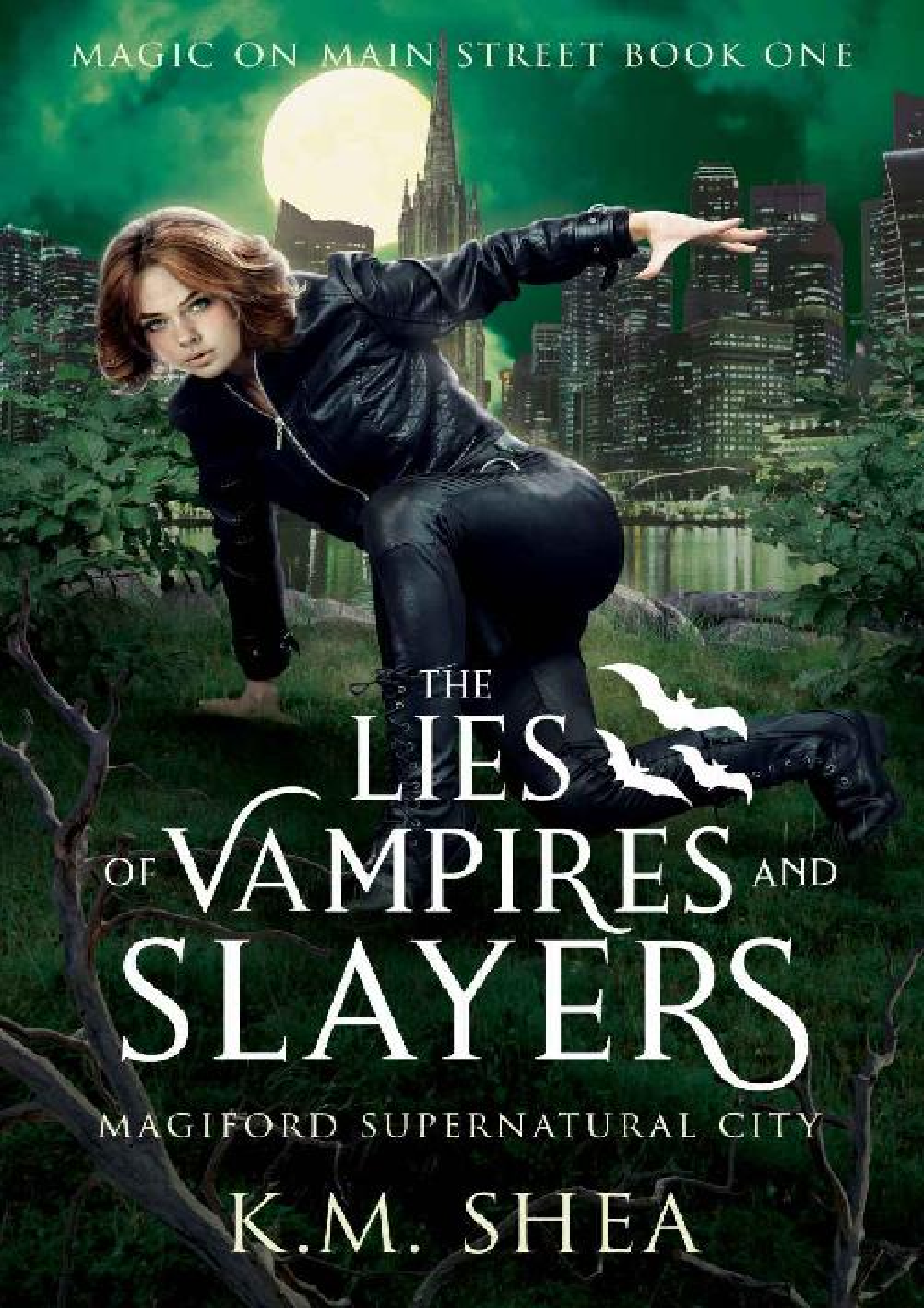


MAGIC ON MAIN STREET BOOK ONE



THE
LIES
OF VAMPIRES AND
SLAYERS

MAGIFORD SUPERNATURAL CITY

K.M. SHEA

THE LIES OF VAMPIRES AND SLAYERS

MAGIC ON MAIN STREET BOOK 1

K. M. SHEA

THE LIES OF VAMPIRES AND SLAYERS

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About the Author

CHAPTER ONE

Jade

I felt the spell growing behind me and dropped to a crouch so it sailed over my head. I realized a moment too late that avoiding it meant it was going to hit one of my squadmates—a fae named Grove.

“Spell!” I called—which was a horrible way to warn him because there were spells *everywhere*. But one-word, half-strangled shouts were about all I could manage.

Grove seemed to share my belated opinion because he swung around, his thick eyebrows bunching together. “What kind of spell—” Magic hit him square in the chest with a fizzle of light, and he dropped like a sack of rocks.

For a moment my blood turned cold and I feared the worst, then a loud snore erupted from him a second later. He was still alive.

If I don't do something he's going to get stepped on. First, the spellcaster.

We were in the middle of a fight between two opposing fae Courts or rather what had *started* as a fae fight between two Courts. As the spell proved, the fae were starting to attack my team more than they were fighting each other.

I kicked the spiky haired fae that had thrown the spell, aiming my blow so I knocked the air out of her. She collapsed with a strangled gasp. I was on her before her head hit the ground, placing a booted foot on her chest to keep her down. Yanking a pair of standard issue magic-canceling cuffs from my belt, I knelt to fasten them around the fae's wrists before she could recover.

With the target secure, I guiltily peered at Grove's prone form. *Maybe I should drag him out of the fight? Wait. Protocol first. I need to warn the team he was taken out.*

Thankfully another one of my squadmates—a petite, beautiful blonde vampire named Tetiana—was on it. She stepped over Grove's prone body without batting an eyelash. "Grove's down," she announced as a troll—who must have been a juvenile, because he wasn't even seven feet tall—flung a decorative boulder that was the size of Tetiana's torso. She casually sidestepped it, and watched as it smashed into a metal bench bolted to the sidewalk.

With Tetiana handling the verbal updates, I hooked my arms under Grove's armpits and lifted him high enough so only his heels dragged on the ground. Then, I pulled him away from the fight to position him so that he was somewhat shielded by a sign for a bus stop.

"We're supposed to use the radios," Brody, a werewolf, said before he tackled the troll—making the large supernatural fall to his knees with a rattle that sounded like it might have cracked the asphalt.

"Oh, right." Tetiana pulled her handheld radio off her belt and pressed a button. "GROVE IS DOWN!" she shouted, her Ukrainian accent even thicker with the raised volume.

Whatever button she had pressed wasn't the right one because none of our radios even crackled, but I wasn't going to be the one to tell her. Instead, I jumped onto the back of a centaur who was bearing down on Tetiana. I gripped his horse torso with my legs before wrapping my arm around his human neck and pulling tight, cutting off his air supply.

Brody didn't share my reluctance in correcting our vampire teammate. "Jeez, Tetiana! You did it wrong. *Again.*" His voice was strained as he tussled with the troll, yelping when the juvenile yanked on his arm. "Pressed the wrong button."

The centaur tried to rear, but he was already weak from a lack of oxygen so he couldn't manage it and instead dropped to his knees.

It's so nice to fight opponents who don't recover insanely fast.

As a former vampire slayer, I was used to fighting vampires whose powerful healing abilities meant sometimes they could heal faster than I could inflict damage on them depending on their abilities and age.

The change was a pleasant one.

"I did *not* use this blasphemous hunk of metal incorrectly," Tetiana imperiously declared. "It is the machine's fault. It is possessed." She shook the radio for emphasis.

Still cut off from air, the centaur collapsed. I had to spring from his back to avoid getting crushed when he flopped to the side. Based on his fishmouthed gasps and red face he was probably down for at least a minute, giving me time to subdue another opponent.

I scanned the crowd, inventorying the still standing fae. The sides weren't even pretending to fight each other anymore; they were focusing on us—the squad that had been called in to subdue their territory fight.

There weren't many fae left on our street—we were on the fringe of Magiford which divided one of the residential areas from the industrial area. But I spotted a fae noble—a handsome male—crafting a spell that glowed an ominous red.

He's the last spellcaster in the bunch, so I'd better take him out first.

I backed into the thick shadows the dim night provided—surprise was an excellent element to use in a fight against fae

since they lacked the extra senses vampires and werewolves had—and crept towards him.

Brody slammed the troll's head into the asphalt. This made a spiderweb of cracks appear in the road—werewolf strength was no joke—and the troll finally stopped struggling thanks to his probable concussion. “Face it, Tetiana: you're incompetent with tech. Though I would have thought radios—as old as they are—would have been around long enough for you to get used to. Just how old are you?” He shook out the arm the troll had pulled, was it injured?

Tetiana, who'd been skeptically studying her radio, scowled at Brody. “Are all werewolves as rude as you or are you just special?” Brandishing her radio she spun around and smashed the plastic contraption into the skull of a naiad that had been sneaking up on her, downing the naiad and denting her radio.

Vampire strength wasn't nearly as powerful as werewolf strength, so the naiad fell to her knees with a moan but wasn't unconscious. Instead, she managed to fling her arms out... splashing Tetiana with algae-hued water.

I checked to make sure Tetiana wasn't hurt—she wasn't, she was just frowning down at the naiad as a patch of algae fell off her uniform—before focusing on my target.

I wasn't fully behind the fae noble yet—which would be the most advantageous spot to spring an attack from—but he started to raise his hand. The crystal orb he held—his artifact that let him use magic—flashed and the red fog that hovered around it started to peel away.

He's about to release his spell. I must stop him!

I jumped out of the shadows, pulling one of my daggers from my belt. I slammed the pommel of my dagger into the base of his skull and the fae noble collapsed, his spell dissipating.

I yanked my second—and last—pair of magic-canceling cuffs from my belt and secured the fae noble. I pulled his

hands behind his back, spotting the flower insignia of King Harel of the Seelie fae sewn into the neckline of his shirt.

Looks like this really was a struggle between two Courts.

Fights between the smaller local fae Courts had become more common these days as the local rulers were struggling with each other trying to swallow the other Courts in order to grow.

When my team had been sent out, we were told it was most likely a territory dispute. But you could never be sure what you were stepping into when it came to disagreements between supernaturals.

Back in the thick of the fight, Tetiana was still frowning at the naiad that had dosed her with water. She casually picked the naiad up by the neck and shook her—muddling the naiad—then flung her at a nervous faun armed only with a bow.

The last remaining opponent was an angry looking leprechaun. He smashed Tetiana in the kneecap with a hammer making the vampire exclaim something in her native tongue that was probably an old curse word going by the fire in her voice.

I grabbed the fae noble's crystal orb and launched it at the leprechaun, cracking him in the head so he toppled, falling on top of the centaur I'd downed earlier.

The street was abruptly quieter, except for the groans of the defeated fae.

Brody perched on the chest of the troll he'd downed, showily pulling out his radio and pressing the necessary button. "Evergreen Road is cleared," he announced, his voice crackling over the line and blasting out of our radios for everyone to hear.

Tetiana brushed more algae off her uniform. "Showoff."

"*Well done,*" another voice answered over the radio. My hearing wasn't good enough to recognize the speaker over the slightly static-y sound the radios always produced, but it was probably Sarge—the sergeant who led our squad. "*Any injuries?*"

Brody glanced at Grove as he pressed the right button to talk again. “No one is hurt, but Grove’s out of it.”

“Understood. Secure the area and revive Grove. We’re almost done with Sapphire Street. We’ll meet up once finished.”

“Got it,” Brody replied over the radio. “You heard Sarge, Tetiana. Get hopping.”

Tetiana rolled her eyes. “Very well, only because as a furball you are so weak that it takes all of your concentration to keep one juvenile troll down.”

“Hey!” Brody protested.

I smiled at their easy banter—something they couldn’t see thanks to the full mask I wore. It was slayer tradition to hide your face. Vampires had long memories, and you didn’t want to be recognized by them—that would make hunting and tracking them much harder. Even though I was no longer working as a slayer, I still hid my face—I didn’t want any vampires besides my squadmates knowing what I looked like. As a lone slayer without my family to back me up, I was an easy target when I was off the clock.

Tetiana idly picked Grove up by the collar of his uniform. “At least you are better at remaining conscious than this buffoon.” She casually held Grove up. He dangled from her grip, still snoring. “WAKE UP!”

Brody cringed, his werewolf hearing amplifying Tetiana’s shouts. “Has anyone ever suggested you could use your voice as a weapon?”

“Every part of my person could be a weapon,” Tetiana declared.

As the two continued to exchange insulting but easy banter, they both wore slight smiles. They were comfortable with each other—something rare for vampires and werewolves.

That must be nice, I wistfully studied the fae noble trying to judge just how out of it he was.

The streetlights illuminated his face and revealed the pout of his lips that made me suspect he was finished fighting, so I stepped away.

My movement killed Brody and Tetiana's verbal sparring. Their smiles disappeared when they glanced at me.

Disappointment at their obvious change in attitude needled my heart.

No, it's okay. In fact, it's expected. They don't know me since I'm new to the night shift.

I'd been working on the Curia Cloisters task force for most of the year. They'd started me on the day shift and had only recently swapped my schedule, so I now covered the late evening/ night shift.

I just need to be friendly. I should tell them they did great and compliment them. Everyone likes compliments, and it will make a good impression.

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, my nerves clogging my throat. I meant to say *I admire how you two worked together to finish the fae off*. What came out of my mouth was a monotone, "Finished?"

Tetiana and Brody shifted, their carefree air officially dead and buried. "Yes," Tetiana said with a precise emphasis on the word she used only when she was being formal.

Brody jumped off the troll and got about grabbing the naiad and dragging her over to the pile I had started with the leprechaun and the centaur.

I held in a groan. *Why did I say that? I messed up. Again. All that practice in the mirror isn't helping my social anxiety even a little bit.* Disappointed, I tugged the fae noble to his feet and frog marched him over to the growing pile.

Tetiana was studying the belt of Grove's uniform—likely trying to guess which of the vials attached to it were healing potions—when she abruptly straightened up. "Do you hear that?"

I froze, going quiet. I heard a noise so faintly I couldn't even identify what it was.

Brody lifted his head and sniffed the air. "I smell...a cat?"

The steady beat of footfalls echoed down the silent street, bouncing off the apartment buildings that boxed in the road.

About a block down I saw another fae noble—a pretty female who had her purple tinted hair arranged in an artful braid—chasing after a black cat.

I didn't see any insignia on the fae noble's clothes that gave away her allegiance. Chances were she'd been a part of the fight up on Sapphire Street and got away.

Brody and Tetiana both stiffened and then relaxed when the fae continued to chase the cat across the street, completely ignoring us.

"Should we call it in?" I asked.

Brody rubbed his jaw. "Is there a reason to? She's not doing anything."

The heat of the summer air was starting to get to me and sweat dribbled down the side of my face, but I couldn't wipe it away while my mask was secured. "She's chasing that cat," I said.

"Maybe it's her cat," Tetiana suggested.

I studied the cat—who was puffed up and ran with the slight arch in her back that cats get when they're scared. "I don't think it is." I adjusted the plastic shell of my mask—it was a standard gray color—easier to blend in with shadows—and only had eye holes. (The eyeholes weren't really necessary—the mask was spelled by fae so I could see through any part of it. But it did make for better ventilation.)

"Call it in and ask," Brody said.

I automatically followed the order, reaching for the radio I'd attached to my belt as I started down the street.

The cat led the fae in a chase, weaving around two trash cans that had been put out for garbage collection. Neither the

cat nor the fae appeared to notice as I started to approach them.

I pressed the talk button on my radio. “Sarge, did you have any runners from Sapphire Street?” I asked, the words coming out since this was a work situation not a social moment.

“*Description?*” the Sergeant’s voice crackled over the radio.

“Female fae noble, purple tinted hair, wearing a purple tunic and has a flute secured to her belt—I suspect it’s her magical artifact,” I recited, copying the description format the task force used as I watched the fae make a jump for the cat, who darted around a different trash can.

“*Maybe?*” the Sergeant said. “*Is she causing trouble?*”

“She’s chasing a cat,” I said.

“*That’s it?*”

“The cat is very scared,” I said.

“*Sometimes you are shockingly sentimental for a vampire slayer,*” the Sergeant said, obviously not sharing my concern.

That was when the fae stopped and yanked the wooden flute from the tie that secured it to the belt of her tunic.

“She’s going to use magic, engaging.” I clipped the radio to my belt then kicked my pace up into a sprint.

My footsteps were quiet as I raced down the street and the fae raised the flute to her pursed lips, drawing on magic.

The cat must have sensed the brewing spell because she jumped into a bush.

When the fae blasted a note on her flute, magic wrapped around the wooden instrument, and the fae took a step closer to the bush where the cat was hiding.

No!

I made it just in time, sliding in between the fae and the cat. I grabbed the flute with my free hand, yanking it from the fae’s loose grasp.

Next, I popped the fae in her unprotected throat making her instantly gulp and gag so she twirled in a circle like a woozy ballet dancer, gripping her throat.

I tossed the flute into the street—away from her reach but where it would be easy to find again—and waited until the fae’s back was to me before I kicked the back of her knees, dropping her to the ground.

I grabbed the back of her neck—she was too busy coughing and hacking to put up any kind of fight.

I took a risk to glance over my shoulder and caught sight of the black cat streaking across a front lawn, unharmed.

Good, the cat is okay. I dropped my shoulders and returned my focus to the fae noble. “Stand,” I ordered. I grabbed her by her arms so she couldn’t fight back, then pointed her in the direction of Brody and Tetiana. “Walk.”

The fae noble tried to shake me off. When that failed, she coughed one last time and tried to bat her eyelashes at me likely in a plan to try to use fae charm.

“Don’t bother,” Brody advised from farther down the street. “Slayers are stone cold—they can’t be charmed.”

The fae noble scowled at me over her shoulder as I prodded her down the street. “Of course, a slayer,” she grumbled. “Why is a slayer poking her nose in fae business?”

“I’m not a slayer,” I said. “I’m a member of the Curia Cloisters’ Magical Response Task Force.”

CHAPTER TWO

Considine

An explosion made the ground quiver under my feet and was marked by a temporary inferno that ate up the west-most turret of the burning Victorian mansion.

I raised an eyebrow as I studied the turret, which was burning much faster than the rest of the building. *Was he storing fireworks in there or is Vígi so off his rocker that he had a gas hookup in the turret?*

The historic-obsessed Viking had taken great pains to model his estate after a real Victorian mansion when he'd built it twenty years ago. I hadn't the faintest clue why he'd made that decorating decision. He was a Norseman, and had hated Victorian England with a passion, spending nearly every moment of that time complaining about how weak Englishmen were. But time had a habit of defanging vampires—we did not age well, for all that it was one of our powers.

The heat thrown off the burning mansion was immense, and the smell of smoke permeated the air—though any vampire like myself would still be able to detect the pungent odor of gasoline.

I watched and waited, admiring the blaze which lit up the estate grounds so well it was almost as bright as daytime.

It's just as well Vígi built his hideaway decently far from human civilization. Those self-important insects would have been drawn to a fire of this size and would never resist involving themselves in it.

The boredom was starting to get to me. I sighed and slipped a hand into a pocket of my suit trousers, checking for my cellphone. It wasn't there, but my gold ring with the garnet stone was. I pulled it out to study it, grimaced, then slipped it back in my pocket so I could check my suitcoat. Yes, I was still wearing my suitcoat despite the blaze—heat didn't affect vampires much, nor did the cold. Even if it did, I'd still wear it. Unlike Vígi and the rest of the dramatic Dracos children, I had standards.

“My mansion!”

I straightened up—my entertainment had finally arrived.

Vígi was easy to spot among his vampire offspring. He was as thick as a tree and stuck out among the more modern clothes and hair styles with his Viking hairstyle of shaved temples and long hair on top of his neck pulled back into a bun. He staggered through the picturesque glen of trees making his way to me.

His face was red—though that was likely the reflection of the burning fire. “What—who—how?” he sputtered.

I lifted up one of the many empty, plastic gas cans littered around me. “Oops.”

“You set my house on fire?” Vígi gaped at me. “Why?”

“You left me alone.” I let my boredom shine through as I tossed the gas can on the admirably large pile—it had taken a lot of fuel to cover Vígi's obnoxiously large home. “You went to that house party hosted by Elder Olsson for reasons beyond my understanding as it was guaranteed to be an absolute bore,” I said.

“You said you didn't want to go!”

“I didn't.” I checked my suitcoat pockets, still looking for my cellphone. “Because Elder Olsson is a molding fool who is

half in his coffin and only rouses himself awake once a decade. But you took all your minions and left me alone.”

“You *told* me to take my children with me,” Vígi thundered.

I pulled my phone out of my left pocket and checked the time. “Yes, well, you should have known better. You didn’t even leave a servant on duty to see to any of my needs.”

That was by design, of course. I’d calculated both the party and the serving staff’s schedules to assure I’d be alone when I set the mansion on fire. I couldn’t have him thinking I had an accomplice. If he was at all suspicious about his people, it would become a lot harder for them to submit their reports to me.

Vígi stared, gape mouthed, at the inferno.

I watched his reaction with clinical interest.

Just how long is it going to take him to actually do anything?

Maybe he was even more dangerously lethargic than I’d thought. Just as well that I torched the place. If this didn’t rouse him, I’d need to resort to something even more drastic.

“You obviously aren’t *too* upset,” I said, purposely poking him. “I’d thought for sure you’d put on a show trying to save all your precious historical replicas.”

That got a reaction out of him.

Vígi turned in my direction, his shoulders rising as he audibly ground his teeth.

What’s this development? Has he truly lost his mind and is going to challenge me?

He’d been spending more time sleeping the past decade—that’s why I was here—but even if he was sighing over historic times he had hated, I assumed it was just the typical vampire melancholy and nothing more serious.

I put my cellphone back in my trouser pocket in delighted anticipation. It had been decades—no—centuries since any of

the Dracos children had tried to attack me.

This could be fun.

Vígí balled his hands into fists, and I smiled at him—trying to inflict the maximum irritation to perhaps push him over the edge.

Vígí raised his chin, then froze when he looked me in the eyes.

To my immense disappointment, he immediately ducked his chin and looked down at the wilting grass of his lawn.

I double checked, making certain I was keeping my powers controlled and that they hadn't slipped out with my momentary interest—warning Vígí just how dangerous his actions were. No, my advanced powers were still tidily in hand.

How disappointing. Though I suppose it's a sign Vígí hasn't completely lost his sensibilities.

“Sir?” A reed tall and thin vampire whose name I didn't bother to remember—Vígí was an even bigger softy about turning humans than his sire had been, and as a result his vampire Family, the Dreki, was enormous—hovered at Vígí's elbow. “Shall we do something?” Reedy-Vampire gestured at the still burning mansion.

The ten vampires that had accompanied Vígí when he stormed the glen waited with bated breath, their red eyes shining with hope as they watched their sire.

Disgusting, I thought. And nauseating. This is why young vampires are so annoying: they still have hope.

Vígí turned towards his blazing mansion. Once again, he drew his shoulders back—this time not in anger but determination. He stared at the mansion the way he used to stare down the Englishmen he so desperately wanted to punch in Victorian England.

“Clancey, call Jackson and tell him we need to pump water from the river to put out the fire,” Vígí barked. “Fleur, notify the sheriff—we don't want human government getting

informed of this by humans! Miguel, call up Katz—we will need the entire Dreki family for this. The rest of you, come. We're walking the perimeter to take note of the damage."

Vígí stomped off, so he didn't notice when his underlings paused to bow to me.

The deference was normal for vampire culture—no one was as obsessed with power structures as vampires. But they bowed a little *too* deeply and muttered thanks to me as if they were reciting prayers, which was too much for it to be simple decorum.

"Stop it and go away," I told them.

Vígí's bright eyed children bowed again before they hurried off after their sire. "Perhaps we could turn on the lawn sprinkler system?" one of them suggested.

I rubbed my temple, attempting to ease my budding headache. *If they aren't careful, they're going to ruin all my hard work. Vígí isn't so far gone that he won't notice that they're clearly excited by this house fire. This is why I never wanted offspring.*

Despite being among the oldest generation of vampires, I'd never turned a single human. I didn't want to be responsible for anyone, and vampires were smarter than humans but just barely.

No, instead my closest friend, Ambrose Dracos, had kicked the bucket, but not before asking me to take charge of all his insipid, silly children.

Well, not all of them are insipid.

There was one child of Dracos who had some redeeming value—the youngest, who also was the most powerful of the litter: Killian.

Killian was my favorite, mainly because I could trust him to keep himself alive. He had a thirst for power that meant his vampire Family, the Drakes, was flourishing while the rest of the Dracos offspring had the mental capacity of a flea carrying the bubonic plague.

It's been years since I last saw Killian...and matters with Vígi are clearly handled. The rest of the Dracos brats can survive for a few months; perhaps it is time to finally see Killian's haunt in Magiford.

I'd heard he'd adopted a pet wizard, which was an odd enough idea for a vampire Family that it deserved a visit to make sure he wasn't losing his mind. Since it was Killian, there was a good chance he'd just taken in the wizard for power usage, and I could actually just *live* for once.

Car lights bounced down the driveway—more of Vígi's children had arrived.

Yes, Vígi is fine. I have some downtime.

My mind made up, I turned my back to the roaring flames and again pulled my cellphone from my trouser pocket. I flicked it open and tapped a number.

My phone rang, and eventually voicemail clicked on.

“Hello, *Killian*,” I said. “I have delightful news: I'm coming to visit you.”

CHAPTER THREE

Jade

Sunlight poured in through the window at the back of my modest apartment, giving it a warm glow that I barely noticed. I was occupied, peering at my phone screen, hunched over like a goblin as I watched the video Nan and Paddy had recorded. “*Next, add your chopped potatoes. You’ll need to cook them for about ten minutes,*”

I brandished my wooden spoon—caked with burnt bits of sausage—at my phone. “I did that.”

“*Until tender,*” Paddy added, the video whirling as Nan scooted around him to get a better shot at his skillet.

“Tender? Was I supposed to check that before I added everything else?” I glanced at my skillet, which was a mess of still hard potatoes, burnt sausage, and the spinach and veggies that I’d cooked into basically nothing. “I cooked them for ten minutes like the video said.”

I glanced back at the video where Paddy stirred his breakfast hash. His potatoes looked crisp and golden—just how I remembered from family breakfasts before mission days.

“Well. That’s another failed recipe. I better make a note for next time.” I set my spoon down and scribbled away at my

notebook, which was filled with the easiest of my family's regular recipes.

I'd been trying to make them since I'd moved to Magiford back in January, attempting at least two recipes per week. So far, I'd successfully completed only *one* of them and that one recipe was a salad dressing so I wasn't sure if it counted.

This was my third attempt at the breakfast hash recipe, and despite the reconnaissance I'd done—and getting the video from Paddy and Nan—this attempt hadn't come out any better than the first two tries.

My cellphone alarm went off, reminding me that I was due at the Curia Cloisters for my shift in half an hour.

Biting back a sigh of disappointment, I dumped my failed hash in the garbage, did the dishes as quickly as I could, then grabbed what had become my standard before-shift-meal from the freezer: a veggie smoothie.

My freezer door was lined with smoothies. Banana-peanut butter, very berry, pumpkin, spinach—I might have lacked cooking skills, but I'd learned how to make just about anything in a smoothie and had frozen them ahead for the convenience factor.

I grabbed my backpack, which held a change of clothes, my ID, and wallet, then snagged a spoon and my veggie smoothie. The smoothie was basically a block of ice, but with the crazy August heat—even if there were only a few days left in the month—it would thaw before I got to the Cloisters.

A double check of my windows—having a vampire slayer background encouraged some paranoia—and I was out the door, juggling my frosty cup between my hands.

It took a moment to lock my door—then double check that I'd locked it—before I heard someone bang their way up the stairs.

I watched the stairway as I pocketed my key, and was surprised to see movers—in green uniforms—carrying a set of beautiful wooden dining chairs.

They trudged across the hallway, ducking into the apartment next to mine.

Did someone finally rent it out?

It was the last apartment in the hallway, and it was the biggest one in the building. (I knew because I'd looked into the floorplan of the place when I'd selected the building to rent from.)

It had been empty for at least three months, so it was exciting news that it was going to be filled.

It's probably a family renting it. Maybe they'll be friendly?

With that hope to buoy me, I trotted down the stairs heading out to my car in the apartment parking lot.

Arriving at the Curia Cloisters with ten minutes to spare and my smoothie thoroughly thawed, I gulped the mix down as I hustled across the parking lot.

The humidity and heat of the hot evening made my cup a drippy mess, while the sky turned golden as the sun sank lower and lower.

I used one of the side entrances to the Cloisters, blinking when I stepped inside as my body adjusted from the heat to the air-conditioned building and all the fluorescent lights.

I'd parked on the opposite end of the building and purposely entered the main chamber of the Cloisters—which was busiest at this time of day since it was the small window where daylight loving supernaturals and more nocturnal supernaturals could meet.

I waved at Emi, the black-haired secretary seated at the main/information desk, then darted through a few crowds and made my way to a door marked for employees only, which opened into a Cloister employee's lounge.

At the far end of the lounge—a room with thin carpeting and a few couches bearing some stains that looked suspiciously like blood—another door opened into an empty hallway.

I took the hallway, which was sterile and painted an off-white color, that ended with a locked door.

I scanned my badge at the door, which opened into the Magical Response Task Force locker room.

There was a public door that in theory I could have used, but the roundabout trip to the locker room was necessary. I didn't want anyone to realize I was the slayer employed by the task force, and using the Cloister's popularity made it easy enough to avoid attention.

I pulled my shoulders back as I peered around the locker room—all squadmates shared the space, which smelled faintly of wet dog—that was the werewolves—gun powder—a few of us had standard issue sidearms—and flowers—the fae members brought in vases of flowers every three days no matter what time of the year it was.

A few day shift members were still at their lockers, and I spotted Tetiana at her locker two rows down.

I swallowed twice—my mouth felt a little gritty, probably from the chopped carrots in my veggie smoothie—then tried to greet my squadmate. “Hey, Tetiana.”

Tetiana glanced back at me as she removed her cloth hat—a bell-shaped cap made of maroon colored felted wool. “Good evening.”

The greeting was formal, but at least this time I'd managed to say *something*, so I chose to interpret this social interaction as a positive thing while I slipped farther into the locker room.

The room, with its gray lockers, wooden benches, and fluorescent lighting, looked like it could have been used by humans for one of their police procedural shows.

This wasn't an accident; the department head, who'd been charged with founding the Magical Response Task Force and its parent division the Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement, was a human TV junkie.

Since supernaturals hadn't previously had any kind of joint law enforcement—the general thought had been that each

species should mind their own business—there was no model or protocol for the department head to follow.

So, the Commissioner had borrowed liberally from human TV in creating and organizing the Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement.

The desk area with its cubicles for the higher ups and glass-window offices for the chiefs had clearly been inspired by police detective shows, and the few rooms we used to test any kind of magical evidence had green lights thanks to numerous crime scene investigation shows until the evidence processors started to complain about headaches from the low light.

No one else was in my block, so I felt free to plop my stuff on the wooden bench before I opened my locker—no sense locking it; any werewolf and most vampires who wanted to get into my space could just rip the lock right off.

I stored my bag, then stripped off the dress blouse and pants I wore for my cover revealing the sports clothes I had on underneath, which I also wore under my uniform for added protection/comfort. (They were mostly for road rash prevention, but a few vital spots—like my knees—were also fitted with thin gel padding.)

I slipped my uniform on—fitted pants, and a long-sleeved shirt that had an asymmetrical V-neck as the shirt buttoned on the left side of my torso. The shirt and pants were both a deep, navy blue color with gold buttons, trim, and gold detailing on the shoulders. The Magical Response Task Force patch was sewn in place on the right side of my chest for identification purposes.

My shirt was special order—I had a hood that my mask snapped into that I wore to cover my hair, but I didn't wear the mask inside the department's walls.

Next, I used the small mirror I kept in my locker to pin my short hair back.

My hair was a bright shade of red—just like every other member of the O'Neil slayer family—and with the move to

Magiford I'd decided to go shorter, so my curly hair had a bob cut that was just a touch past my chin.

I loved the new style, but it took a bazillion pins to keep it out of my face.

Pulling the hair back from my face emphasized my freckles and made my green eyes look huge, but if I didn't pin it back my hair would bounce around inside my hood and stick to my mask. Besides, no one would see it once I put the mask on.

Next came my gloves—fitted and made of special fabric to improve my gripping ability. The gloves weren't part of the Magical Enforcement Task Force, but they were slayer tradition.

I checked to make sure the neckline of my black undershirt was hitched high enough—the goal was to cover every square inch of my body while on patrols—then pulled my hood up, grabbed my belt and gear, and made my way to the meeting room.

Each night my squad held musters where we were read into any incidences or ongoing investigations before our shift.

The meeting room was another relic of human TV with glass windows that served as walls, thin blue and gold carpeting, and rows of tables with blue, plastic chairs that matched the carpeting.

There were whiteboards at the front of the room—or rather, there were those smart screen boards. No one in the Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement knew how to use them, so they were treated like whiteboards.

Nobody was in the meeting room yet, so I picked a table in the middle of the room and sat down.

Brody and Binx—a werecat shifter—prowled into the room together, their voices lowered.

Both were wearing the short sleeved, summer-appropriate variation of our uniform—something I couldn't risk as a slayer—but Brody had a barely visible set of dusty paw prints adorning the belly of his shirt and wolf hair stuck to his pants.

It seemed his Pack had given him a particularly enthusiastic sendoff tonight.

Binx's uniform, on the other hand, was perfect—wrinkle free with the seams lined up—and her dark brown pixie haircut was slicked back into perfect order.

I straightened in my chair. *I need to say hello to them. This is the perfect chance for small talk.*

As Brody and Binx settled at a table in the back of the room, they glanced in my direction. Brody gave me a wolf head-bob, and Binx nodded—both wordless ways of communication.

Wait, if they used body language, should I? Would it annoy them if I said something?

I snapped my mouth shut and instead initiated an awkward wave. I'd taken too long, and the duo had returned to their conversation without seeing my wave.

Do they think I ignored their greeting? I didn't mean to be rude—why can't I think faster in these situations?

I held in a sigh and let my hand fall into my lap.

Well, I should at least do something useful with my time.

I removed my handgun from its holster, along with my extra magazine. I was one of the only task force members to be issued a handgun since I'd trained and worked with guns as a vampire slayer.

I also had two pairs of magic canceling cuffs, my personal daggers—which I'd cleared with Sarge for use—and a few small potion vials.

I was issued less gear, to keep me lighter and faster, so my movements weren't hindered when I fought. Larger members of the task force—like Brody—carried extra cuffs—while designated medics—like Grove—carried potions.

I was in the process of inspecting my spare magazine when an impression of sunlight tickled at my senses.

I looked up just in time to see my one hardcore friend in the Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement, Sunshine, skip past the meeting room.

Sunshine was a brownie—a petite, but willow-y fae with warm brown skin, brown hair, and a smile that was equal parts brightness and sass. She carried a massive purse that was bigger than her head, and she was wearing the white lab coat that was part of her TV inspired uniform. She wasn't on the task force; she was in a different division inside our department where she processed and organized evidence and cases.

When Sunshine got to the edge of the room she glanced inside, then skid to a stop and did a double take. She slipped through the doorway—elbowing her way past Tetiana—and trotted up to my table. “Jade—my dazzling jewel!”

I smiled, my awkwardness melting away under the glow of Sunshine's affectionate nickname. “Hi, Sunshine. Did you have a good day at work?”

Sunshine rolled her expressive brown eyes. “It was fine, but it's way less fun since you left the dayshift.”

“You could also swap to the evening shift,” I suggested.

“I'm from the Day Court. Which means that, unlike you—Miss Night Owl—I don't roll like that. Daylight is the best.” Sunshine glanced over her shoulder at Binx and Brody, then back at me. “I read the report from the fight last night. It sounds like you kicked some fae butt!”

I fumbled and almost dropped my magazine. “I messed up, and it got Grove spelled.”

“So?” Sunshine's eyebrows crawled up her forehead with her skepticism. “He should have been paying more attention in an active fight situation.”

I shook my head. “We're a team. We're supposed to watch out for one another and work together. I should have been more aware of his presence and taken precautions.”

“The squad might, by definition, be a team. However—my precious jewel—you're the only one who is actively aware of

that.” Sunshine opened her massive purse and pulled out a crossword puzzle book. “The rest of the task force is still very singularly minded—I see it in the day shift, too.” Sunshine tapped her crossword puzzle book on her thigh. “Though I’m not sure if it’s a product of supernatural culture or the kind of individual the Cloisters recruited for the department. They understandably sought out strong supernaturals to fill the team, but it seems to me that strong supernaturals also tend to be more independent and less aware of others.”

I glanced around the room—more of my night shift squadmates had arrived, so the room was half full, but it was still quiet as most everyone was keeping to themselves.

Tetiana was seated at the back of the room, filing her nails. Clarence—the only other vampire on the task force—was seated next to her trying to adjust the fancy Regency style cravat he always wore.

Juggernaut and April—the squad’s two wizards—were also seated together, but they were chatting as Juggernaut casually shuffled a deck of cards. They entirely ignored Binx and Brody who sat just behind them.

“I guess I understand what you mean,” I said.

“Mmhmm.” Sunshine raised her eyebrows again, until a new emotion flickered across her face. “Oh! I can’t believe I nearly forgot to tell you! You won’t believe what I heard.” Sunshine tapped my shoulder with her rolled up crossword book. “A dragon shifter is coming to Magiford!”

I paused in the middle of clipping my magazine back on my belt. “Really? That’s rare.”

Dragon shifters were the most powerful shifter in the world. They were a selective bunch and as a result there weren’t a whole lot of them, which is why they weren’t in many positions of power and it was rare to see one.

I double checked that the safety of my handgun was on before I holstered it. “Is it Tutu, visiting her business?”

Magiford saw one particular dragon shifter, Tutu, reasonably often (which meant once every couple of years).

Tutu owned *Tutu's Crypta & Custodia*, a franchise she founded and ran that operated as a bank and vault system for supernaturals. (No place was safer to store your valuables like your ancient artifacts, priceless spells, or family heirlooms than with a dragon.)

There was a location in Magiford, but as a new resident I'd never seen the famed dragon shifter. It was one of my idle hopes to change that—I'd never seen a dragon shifter before.

"It's not Tutu," Sunshine said. "At least, I don't *think* it is. I just heard an unknown dragon shifter is coming to Magiford and that her staff arrived this week to prepare. Tutu would be known to city residents, so I figure it must be someone else. Still, pretty exciting, right?"

"Yes," I agreed.

Sunshine scanned the room. "Looks like it's about time for muster, but—really quick—do you know the answer for this block? The clue is *popular martial artist, Jackie*, and then I'm supposed to fill in his last name." She unrolled her crossword book and opened it up to show me a puzzle.

I stared at the blank spots. "I apologize, I don't know much about human pop icons. Is Jackie a movie star?"

Sunshine's shoulders fell and she shut the book again and rolled it up. "I don't know, I only get the one clue."

"I could look it up for you on my phone," I offered.

"No, that would be like losing." Sunshine stuffed the puzzle book into her purse with feeling. "I'm willing to seek help, but I can't let the *machines* win!"

I laughed. "Okay, I will support your decision. Have a good night."

"Thanks! Have a good shift!" A wink and Sunshine was gone, scurrying out of the room.

I barely had enough time to straighten up and point myself at the front of the room before our captain—the supernatural who dispatched us, assigned cases, and generally managed the

night shift Magical Response Task Force squad—stepped inside the meeting room.

Captain Reese was a werewolf who had made it to her early 50s—something of an accomplishment for a werewolf as they weren't known for their self-preservation skills.

On first impression, Captain Reese was no nonsense with her steely blonde hair kept shoulder length and a sure and steady stride. She had a prosthetic leg—she'd lost her leg a decade earlier, saving a human child from getting hit by a car—though I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd gotten it magicked to conceal a weapon or spell.

A second look at the werewolf and you'd notice deep smile lines that hinted at her quick grin. Despite being our captain, she was always quick to joke with us, and her desk was covered with artwork her kids—now full-grown adults—had made in elementary school.

“Good evening, night shift,” Captain Reese said—her voice had a lilt to it that made it musical and instantly settled down what little conversation my squadmates had been having. “Fae kings Harel and Nover have been quiet, so it seems you intimidated them both enough last night. Well done.”

Supernatural society didn't have the justice system humans had, so when we intercepted a supernatural endangering others one of two things happened. If the issue was large scale enough—like the vampire who launched an attack *inside* Curia Cloisters nearly two years ago—the individuals were arrested if they were lucky or taken out if they were particularly dangerous. If it was a smaller issue—like fights between fae Courts—usually we fought with the perps to beat the struggle and emotions out of them. If they'd raised a big enough ruckus we'd drag them back to their leaders, who we would either warn or threaten with the political power of the Curia Cloisters if they failed to toe the line. (There was a reason why the task force required strong individuals.)

Last night had been a warning—the fae hadn't created any property damage besides a few small potholes in the road, and

they hadn't harmed any humans. Regardless, we still had to put an oomph behind the warning or the Courts would keep taking their battles public—something that would be disastrous for supernatural PR efforts among humans.

“You're on normal patrol shifts tonight,” Captain Reese continued. “But first, I have some updates from Magiford City Hall.” Captain Reese taped a printed photo of a woman to the whiteboard. “The human police chief reached out to the Curia Cloisters to inform us of a missing person case—a woman who is a Magiford citizen. I want you all to study her picture carefully.” She pointed to the photo, which looked grainy—like it had been cropped and blown up.

The woman in the picture appeared to be in her early thirties, with blonde hair and brown eyes. She had a faint smile that made her eyes look tired, but would be easy to recall while out on patrol.

Captain Reese continued, “This is the first time they've reached out to read us in on one of their cases that doesn't involve supernaturals. We need to take advantage of the situation and show we're willing if we want to forge a relationship with city hall. Any questions?” Captain Reese leaned against the podium positioned at the front of the room.

Brody stood, knocking his chair into the wall behind him. “Yeah, what did they send over with her scent?”

Captain Reese rested her hands on her podium. “They didn't send anything.”

Brody frowned. “No scent? How are we supposed to find her without a scent?”

Captain Reese held her hands up. “I don't know how they conduct their investigations, but her picture, name, address, and physical description is all we have to go by.”

“Wait,” Tetiana also stood, her eyebrows furrowed. “Do you mean that they didn't even list her blood type?”

“No,” Captain Reese said.

The room was quiet for a moment.

“Humans are incompetent,” Brody muttered.

“They’re *different*,” Captain Reese corrected. “I imagine they don’t have much use for scents or blood types given human abilities.”

Tetiana turned to one of the two wizards in our squad. “Is that true, April?”

April—one of the other members of the task force who’d been issued a gun because her wizard House was obsessed with firearms and weapons—tilted her head. “I guess? I only grew up with wizards. I don’t know humans that well.”

No one even glanced at me despite my also being human. (Not that I blamed them. I couldn’t even help Sunshine with her crossword puzzle. It did make me wonder if they didn’t consider me a human or if they’d just forgotten I existed.)

“What do their TV shows do in missing persons cases?” Brody asked.

April, who I estimated to be in her early forties, didn’t react. “Might I recommend the task force, in general, stop relying so much on human TV?”

“I know!” Grove stuck his pointer finger up in the air for emphasis. “We could use their internet to look it up.”

April tugged on the tail of the braid she’d tucked her light brown hair into. “That’s even worse.”

“Maybe,” Captain Reese said. “Anything to add, Slayer O’Neil? You’re a human.”

I straightened up under the captain’s attention—I’d been willing to transfer to the short-staffed night shift because I wanted to work under her, and she was an amazing boss—while I tried to ignore my rising nerves as the rest of the squad glanced at me.

I tried to speak, but nothing came out of my mouth, so I cleared my throat before trying again. “S-sorry. No.”

I should explain why not—my answer is too short.

Ignoring the odd flutter of my heart caused by my nerves, I squared my shoulders and forced myself to speak again. “My family didn’t...interact much with humans.”

Tetiana raised a sculpted eyebrow. “I’ll bet,” she vaguely said, and an awkward silence settled over the room.

Captain Reese frowned at Tetiana before addressing the room. “Missing woman. Study the picture and keep an eye out for her,” she said. “Moving on...”

CHAPTER FOUR

Considine

I waited until the flight crew secured the stairs before emerging from the private jet. The stairs were unnecessary; I could have jumped out without any difficulty, but as little attention as I paid to them, I was vaguely aware that humans got twitchy when they were reminded of supernaturals' physical superiority.

The sun was a sliver on the horizon casting a rosy orange-gold color on the airstrip that would clear out soon for the invasive swell of night.

Pulled up just off to the side of the airstrip was a motorcade of six SUVs. Vampires, wearing spotless black suits and standing at attention, were positioned in front of the vehicles—at least two vampires to every SUV.

Despite the still visible sun, none of the vampires wore sunglasses. None of them even twitched.

Ahh, yes. Killian's brood. The Drakes.

Killian kept his Family on a tight leash. They were the best trained, most efficient, and most mentally sharp vampire Family I'd ever seen. Which might not be a distinction, considering the competition was the likes of Vígi and his Dreki Family who bleated like upset sheep whenever Vígi was melodramatic.

But the lackluster competition didn't take away from the truth. Killian's Drakes would maim anyone who even suggested to them that they simper. Which was just *beautiful*.

Killian emerged from an SUV, slipping his phone into a pocket of his suit before he slammed the car door shut. His vampires parted for him. I idly wondered if the suited look was for intimidation or some kind of herd instinct to make fighting them more difficult, as I swaggered down the stairs.

I crossed the hot tarmac, and Killian bowed his head. "Elder Maledictus." Behind him, his Family bowed to me angling their torsos in a bow much deeper than their leader.

"Hello, Killian." I narrowed my eyes as I studied him, looking for any new signs of insanity or melancholy.

He hadn't changed much from when I last saw him several decades ago. His suit was from a current designer and his haircut was more modern. He'd always favored the slightly mussed styles his black-brown hair was tousled in.

Looking at the two of us, we more resembled a sire and offspring than Killian resembled his actual sire. Ambrose had been as bright—in personality and appearance—as the sun.

What *was* different in Killian, however, was the set of his expression.

He was guarded—rightfully so—but there was something to his face. It was too relaxed—he didn't have the tight expression that stated he felt most of the earth's population consisted of intolerable idiots.

Killian blinked slowly, completely unbothered by my scrutiny. "It is an honor to host your visit," he blandly said.

I laughed. "Really? You're going to go with flattery? Killian, you disappoint me."

Killian shrugged. "I thought boring you would make you leave sooner."

I held a hand to my chest, feigning hurt. "I just arrived and you're already talking of my leaving?"

Killian raised his dark eyebrows. “You never stay very long, regardless. But my siblings have requested that I occupy you for as long as possible.”

“And you’re tattling on them?”

“No.” Killian looked back at his minions. “I simply don’t care, and I don’t have the time or required enthusiasm to teach them that I don’t care.”

I chuckled. “You really are my favorite Dracos.”

“So you claim,” Killian said. “Shall we go?”

I glanced at the motorcade. “Yes.”

I waited until Killian led me to an SUV and we slipped in. One of his people—a vampire with a shoulder width to rival Vígi’s—slid into the driver’s seat and turned the vehicle on.

I took the blood pack Killian handed me and flipped it over, appearing to inspect the packaging. Instead, I angled my gaze so I could watch Killian’s reaction. “So tell me, what’s this I heard about you adopting a pet wizard?”

“Married,” Killian said.

“What?”

“I married a wizard.”

I looked up from the blood pack and stared at Killian, furrowing my brow. “I guess my hopes were always too high for you. Sooner or later, you were bound to become a lunatic like your siblings. Unless this is all a big power grab and you’re aiming to take down the Midwest wizards?”

That was almost certainly his plan. Killian didn’t even like humans, much less wizards—

“She’s my One,” Killian said.

Well, that changes things. I kept my look of bemused disappointment on my face—no sense letting him realize he’d put me on high alert.

A vampire’s One was the person they declared they’d love for the rest of their days. Even after the One died and months,

years, and eventually centuries passed.

Killian—the deadliest of the Dracos Family—declaring he had a One was essentially announcing he had a giant weak spot that could easily be attacked.

I made a show of rolling my eyes and setting the blood pack into a cupholder. “Your One? I guess you really are Ambrose’s offspring. The lot of you are a bunch of romantic sops.” I sighed and leaned into the leather interior that covered the door, appearing indolent. “And? Are you telling me this so I can say a few sweet words about you when you croak because the wizard gets herself killed? I suppose I could do that. They’ll be lies, of course, but that’ll be more fun for me.”

“Hazel isn’t going to get herself killed,” Killian said. “She’s the protégé for the Wizard Elite on the Midwest Committee of Magic.”

“Mmhmm.” I hummed and made my expression bored as I looked out a tinted window at the city streets that rolled past.

The wizard’s background had been why I was so sure the entire thing was a power play. *I should have visited sooner. This is what I get for trusting that he’s competent. Goodbye, vacation. Goodbye the dream that I could spend a few moments of my life not babysitting or picking up after Ambrose’s millennium-lasting mistakes.*

“I’m extending her life,” Killian continued. “So she’s stopped aging. Eventually, I hope to turn her.”

“Wait, you’re *feeding* off her?” I barely kept my disappointment off my face and was able to keep my obvious reaction as shock. “You, who has made Uptight-and-Paranoid not just a personal philosophy but a lifestyle?”

Feeding put us vampires in a position of weakness. If we drank fresh blood from a human, it usually made us pass out in an odd cross of euphoria and relaxation.

I hadn’t experienced such a high in centuries. Given my power, I didn’t need to ever take so much blood that I’d get to that addled state, and I’d never been a fan of the feeling. It made vampires sloppy.

Previously, Killian had subscribed to my opinion on the issue. It seemed that was no longer so.

Just how big a mess am I going to have to clean up?

“I am,” Killian said. “And whatever you’re picturing for wizards; her House isn’t it.”

I settled myself in for some stupid lovesick talk. “And how is that?”

“All wizards in her House train—not just in magic but weapons, firearms, defensive maneuvers, everything. They’ve helped my Family multiple times, and act more like Drakes than the whining wizards that grace most Curia Cloister halls.”

If the wizards have helped the Drakes, perhaps this is more of a power play than he wants to imply and he’s using the love claim as a front.

Regardless, I was going to need to hang around Magiford longer than I’d initially intended: I had to prepare for the worst-case scenario. Whatever that was—there were too many worst-case scenarios to pick at the moment.

Staying at Drake Hall won’t help me. Killian is too much of a tyrant over his Family.

Since Killian established the Drakes centuries ago, I’d been trying to turn one of them to me so I could use them as an informant. None of them had budged—though his Second Knight sent me a scrapbook every few years that chronicled Killian’s greatest achievements, and his First Knight occasionally emailed me.

No, if I wanted to be free to observe the situation, I’d have to follow my original plan and disappear into Magiford where none of Killian’s minions—whose competence would now be an annoying hinderance—could get in my way.

It seems the original plan still stands—in theory if not in spirit.

“When do I get to meet this dear *One* of yours?” I asked.

“Ideally, never,” Killian said.

“What, afraid I’ll sweep her off her feet?” I smiled winningly.

“No,” Killian said. “She mocks me for my age. Given how much older you are, she’ll likely think of you as some doddering, babbling, historical artifact.”

I laughed as I glanced out the window.

We were at the edge of Magiford, leaving tightly boxed in suburban neighborhoods for stretches of fields filled with half dried corn stalks and soybeans. This would be a good time to just stop the motorcade with my power and get out. I could put all of them, Killian included, under my thrall, controlling them so they wouldn’t follow me.

But I couldn’t recall if I’d seen Killian’s Magiford home before, and it would be best to know it—and review his Family’s faces so I’d know who to watch for—before I left.

It’s been a while since I’ve managed an infiltration. Perhaps this could be some fun after all.

I made myself turn to Killian and adopted my usual smile. “So, you’re turning sentimental and emotional in your old age, but I haven’t heard that your grasp on Magiford politics has wavered.”

“It hasn’t,” Killian said. “The vampires are still the most powerful supernatural in Magiford.”

“Then the rumors that the new Night Court fae queen is growing strong is incorrect?” I asked.

“No,” Killian said. “She’s powerful, but she is also a tightwad who refuses to spend even a penny on expanding her kingdom.”

“That sounds...not at all fae-like,” I said.

“You’d think so,” Killian agreed. “Until you try to bargain with her.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Jade

“These cookies will turn out best if you refrigerate them for a minimum of two hours after mixing up, and they will keep in your fridge for up to two days,” the perky voice of Éclair—the host of the cooking show, Spice ‘N Dice—blasted through my earbuds.

My theory was listening to a show about baking while I worked out might help me troubleshoot some of my cooking issues. So far, it just made things more confusing because it turns out baking and cooking are very visual arts, and I couldn’t watch my phone when I was weightlifting.

“I don’t think lack of refrigeration would burn cookies,” I muttered to myself as I finished wiping down the weight machine I’d been using while music played—Éclair was probably showing how to place the cookies on a tray.

I’d tried making cookies yesterday—two days after my last attempt of the O’Neil breakfast hash.

The bottoms of my cookies had burnt. I’d had to cook them longer than the directions said because the tops were still visibly raw.

“This recipe is perfect to mix up a day before you have friends over, so you can use the dough to make a fresh tray of

cookies right before they arrive! Nothing beats hot cookies straight out of the oven,” Éclair said.

“That sounds nice.” I wistfully sighed as I picked up my free weights, starting on my last lunge set.

At least my apartment didn't smell when I burnt the cookies. Maybe, even if I didn't actually serve the cookies because they're inedible, the smell would make my apartment more inviting? But first I have to invite someone over.

Sunshine had come over a couple of times, but between our mismatched shifts and her crazy schedule with all her family and Court events I didn't get to see her outside of work very often.

I held my lunge for a second, then straightened up as the show's tinny credit music played signaling that I'd finished another episode.

The muscles in my legs were starting to have that quivering, jelly-like feeling I got after a good workout and, thankfully, I was almost done for the day.

Training had been a part of my daily routine as a vampire slayer. Even though I'd left the profession behind I wasn't going to give up the benefit that came from training. As slayers were a subset of wizards, I was among the physically weakest of supernaturals. Keeping myself muscled and in top fighting condition helped bridge that gap at least a little and could make a huge difference in a fight.

If I want to entertain in my apartment that means I'm limited to either humans in my building or anyone I meet as Jade O'Neil, not work friends.

Not that I didn't trust the task force. To keep my slayer persona firmly at the Cloisters, for safety reasons, I pretended that I was fully human whenever I was off the clock. I lived in a regular human-filled apartment building with the cover story that I served as a human secretary at the Cloisters.

Having task force members over would be a fairly big risk given the unlikelihood of a human secretary hanging out with the night shift Magical Enforcement Task Force squad. I'd

been less concerned about Sunshine because it seemed reasonable that I'd meet her at work.

Not that any of the risk matters. No one on the night shift even thinks of me as a friend, so I'd need to change that first...

I heaved another sigh when I finished my lunge set, then wiped down my free weights before returning them to the rack on the wall. I turned off the treadmill I'd used for my warmup, double checked that I'd reset the other weight machines I'd used, then flicked off the light and exited the small but efficient gym to swing into the stairwell and jog up it heading for my apartment.

The gym was another benefit of living in a human apartment building—working out here saved me the price of a gym membership.

I used the purple hand towel that hung from my neck to wipe off my forehead, but I couldn't reach the sweat spot between my shoulder blades that made my t-shirt stick to me.

Maybe I should ask my neighbors for advice on baking. It would be a great excuse to approach them. But if I can barely make myself talk to them, could I really ask them something as bold as 'why do my cookies keep coming out as hard as hockey pucks'?

I could feel the burning flush on my cheeks—one of the joys of being so pale I could have passed for a ghost—as I trotted up the last set of stairs.

I paused when my senses roared to life screaming that a vampire was present.

My training kicked in, and I kept my expression casual as I peered down the hallway. My apartment was at the far end of the hallway, and no one stood between me and it.

Someone was, however, standing in front of the apartment next to mine—the last one on the floor, the one the movers had been filling up earlier in the week.

I stepped into the hallway, my stance casual, although I made sure to keep my hands down so I had easy access to the

dagger belted high up my thigh and hidden by my baggy workout shorts.

Every step I took made my inner warnings louder, which meant the vampire had to be the guy standing in front of the next-door apartment.

His straight posture emphasized his height and lean build—he was roughly as casual as the gun I carried when on duty—but his general air of danger was thinly disguised by his chiseled jaw and slight five o'clock shadow that would give him an edge if he shared the vampire tendency towards brooding.

His hair—which looked dark brown in the hallway's fluorescent lighting—was casually slicked back, and his skin was a warm shade of olive that made him look healthier than the typical vamp.

His over-the-top attractiveness was a knife held to the throat—a weapon he could use with deadly force. Which was another tally for the *probably a vampire* category.

It wasn't until the guy—who was either my new neighbor or a budding burglar—glanced in my direction, revealing his eyes that were as red as the blood he assuredly drank, that I knew for certain.

Ah. Yep, he's a vampire.

The vampire smiled, revealing his larger canine teeth, and waved. "Good morning."

"Good morning." I smiled in a show of friendliness I didn't feel but I needed to lure him into thinking I wasn't a threat. I could physically feel my slayer-work-mode activate and take over, giving me an eloquence that I wished I could harness when I wasn't facing down potential threats. "Do you need help with something?"

Please don't tell me he's my new neighbor? The only reason a vampire would live with so many humans is if he's planning to make this his hunting ground or if he's on the run from the vampire governances.

He had to be a fairly new vampire. His clothes—dark navy jeans, a white t-shirt that was sized so it barely hinted at his muscles which I saw as a threat rather than an attraction, a gold ring with a red garnet on his right index finger, and shoes so white they had to be a luxury brand—were too modern for him to be anything else. As magic had steeply declined over the last couple of decades new vampires had become increasingly rare, so what was he doing in my apartment building?

“No, no. I’m just new to the building,” the modern vampire said. “My name is Connor. I just moved in.” He gestured at the door to the apartment, and I spotted the keyring with the apartment’s standard issue key that hung from his thumb.

“In that case, welcome to the building.” My words flowing freely with none of my usual awkwardness as I zeroed in on the vamp. “My name is Jade. I live next door.” I watched his face, trying to catalogue any reaction he made. I needed to figure out his threat level—he could have easily duped his way into the apartment building by dazzling the owner with pheromones.

Connor smiled—it was the perfect amount of charm and sincerity, instantly making me suspicious. “We’re direct neighbors then? How delightful. I imagine that means I’ll see you about?”

“Yep,” I said. “The apartment building is always bustling.” Hopefully he’d take the necessarily hidden hint that this meant he shouldn’t try anything. “If you don’t see me, there’s always a bunch of people around—if you have any questions for us fellow residents, I mean.”

“Thank you.” Connor glanced at his door, a nonverbal hint that he wanted to finish our conversation. It was odd; he was charming, but he wasn’t really friendly. Maybe he wasn’t planning to make the building his hunting ground after all?

Unfortunately, I can’t let you escape just yet. I need to dig and get more information.

I took a half step closer to him to draw his attention back to me. “Are you new to Magiford or just the building?”

“I’ve been to Magiford before,” Connor said. “But it’s been a while.”

“It’s a gorgeous city,” I said. “And the Curia Cloisters is really nice. I’ve been told it’s among the biggest Cloisters in the USA!”

Connor tilted his head. “You find the Cloisters to be a point of interest?”

“Well, yes.” I made a point to look puzzled and tilt my head. “But I figured they’d also be a point of interest for you.”

Connor stared at me.

“Because you’re a vampire,” I supplied.

“You can tell?” Connor asked.

I squinted at him, trying to figure out if this was some kind of weird, post-modern vampire humor. “You have red eyes. That’s kind of a giveaway.”

Something shifted in Connor; I couldn’t have said exactly what it was. There wasn’t anything in his body language, but there was something different in the air around him. “Sorry, I just find it interesting. Most humans can’t tell supernaturals apart.”

He’s falling for my act. Good. Thank you, slayer magic!

Connor assumed I was human because my blood smelled human.

To vampires, supernaturals’ blood smelled different. Wizards—the supernatural equivalent of magic humans—smelled awful as a natural defense mechanism. They smelled so bad most vampires couldn’t stand to be anywhere near them and if they were desperate enough to try biting a wizard, they’d end up gagging.

Although slayers were a subset of wizards, we couldn’t cast elemental magic. Instead, we possessed powers that made us the perfect vampire predator. One of those abilities was that

our blood smelled like a regular human's. Vampires couldn't tell otherwise until they tasted our blood, and by then it was too late for them.

"I work with supernaturals," I explained. "I'm a secretary at the Curia Cloisters. You learn quick what a fae looks like verses what a vampire looks like," I said—using my cover story I'd endlessly rehearsed. "With your modern clothes, I'd believe that you've confused people before!"

Vampires were known to favor historic costumes over modern clothes—even regular humans knew that.

"Interesting," Connor said. "I didn't know that was a possible career choice for humans."

"There's not a lot of us," I said. "But the Cloisters is talking about making a bigger effort—to promote supernatural-human relationships."

I watched Connor for any sign of disdain, but his face was still a perfect expression of polite interest. "Fascinating," he said. "I will certainly make an effort to see this Cloisters of yours."

"I look forward to seeing you there," I lied—ideally, he'd never set foot in the building. "So where do you work?"

"I don't. I don't need to," Connor said. "I hate to further the cliché, but I have managed to procure the vampire stereotype of being independently wealthy."

I wrapped a curl of my red hair around my finger—something I only ever did to sell the *totally a human* act to a vampire. "I don't know that it's a cliché, so much as a fact."

As a vampire slayer, I knew first hand just how wealthy vampires were. Living as long as they did, they got to be very good at recognizing where to invest, who to charm, and where the money flowed.

Add in that they lived in Families, so it was like a vampire elder had a little army of minions to do his bidding, and you had a recipe for wealth that lasted generations.

I don't know that I've heard of a solo vampire being independently wealthy. Well, the Ancient—the top vampire of the USA—is, so I guess it's possible. Still, it's odd...

“Yes, thank you for your understanding,” Connor said, interrupting my thoughts. “I’m afraid I should be going.”

“Oh, yes! You’re busy moving in.” I laughed and jangled my full keyring. “Now don’t be a stranger! I’m right next door if you need anything!”

Connor smiled charmingly but he didn’t respond as he unlocked his door and slipped inside his apartment, shutting the door behind him.

Hmmm. He's walking a careful line of charming and disinterested. The chances that he's hiding from vampires must be fairly high? But he didn't seem spooked or nervous when I mentioned the Cloisters, and if he's a new enough vampire to still be interested in complying with modern fashion I doubt he'd be so good at covering his reactions up.

I unlocked my apartment and stepped inside. I shut the door behind me, locked it, bolted it, then immediately shucked my workout shoes off. I put them in the shoe rack in my front closet and groaned as I raised my arms over my head, stretching.

Why couldn't talking to people be as easy as talking to vampires? Maybe I'm like this because I only ever talked to my family and vampires when I was out on cases.

The most effective way to fight a vamp was to pretend to be their prey, so I’d been trained since I was a kid to be a convincing normal non-magical human. Pity none of that practice counted to my brain when I was in social interactions!

My phone rang. The ringtone was muffled since it was still stuffed in the sweaty armband strapped to my right bicep.

I struggled to get it out, lighting up when I saw the name that flashed across my screen.

I swiped to accept the call. “Nan!”

“Hello, lass. How are you?”

“I’m doing good.” I glanced at the wall I shared with Connor’s apartment.

Vampire hearing wasn’t anywhere near as good as a werewolf’s but it was a lot better than a human’s. *Better to be safe. Especially since Nan is an O’Neil.*

Both my mom and my dad came from slayer families but Mom had joined Dad’s family, the O’Neils, so that was the name my family operated under.

“How are you and Paddy?” I padded across my apartment heading into my bedroom.

“*Oh, we’re as right as rain. Except your grandfather got it into his cracked nob that our house security measurements need an upgrade. He’s been testing it all day, setting off the alarms so often I hear bells even in silence!*” Nan laughed, a familiar sound that made my heart ache just a little.

“And how is the rest of the family?” I closed the bedroom door behind me, then climbed into my closet and closed that door too. Surrounded by clothes and crouching on the ground like some kind of cave goblin, my voice was quieter and muted.

“*Jasper, Peridot and your father and mother unearthed an illegal vampire nest with your Uncle John, cousin Mack, and Great Aunt Patsy as the playmaker,*” Nan said, naming my two brothers.

“Alex didn’t go with them?” I asked. Alex—Alexandrite—was my older brother, who also was a slayer.

“*No. Your cousin Bonnie’s daughters had a ballet recital. Alexandrite, Paddy, and I went to it. All the kids were so little they could barely do anything besides toddle around. They were as cute as buttons!*”

I moved around in my closet, trying to get away from the hanger that was stabbing me between my shoulder blades. “That sounds fun. So... how is Dad?” I asked.

“*You could ask him yourself. I know you haven’t called home in weeks.*”

“Because the last time I did he just roared at me over the phone,” I said.

Dad took it hard when I left the family. It wasn't that he was upset I didn't want to be a slayer. Dad's sister, my Aunt Erin, wasn't an active slayer anymore either and he didn't mind that. No, it was that I'd left the family to work for the Cloisters in a position that was still combat based.

Dad hadn't exiled me from the family or anything—my dad was a loud man, and he loved deeply. But any time I tried to talk to him or mom on the phone, it spiraled to him shouting in the background that I needed to stop playing around and come back home.

“Fergus can be inappropriate in the way he shows his love. He brings me shame with his habit of crying over spilt milk,” Nan tartly said. *“But he does fret over you so. I think it worries him that you're fighting without the family to back you up.”*

“I have my squad,” I said.

“I'm aware. He thinks no squad can match the support of a slayer family that has trained with you since you took your first breath.”

I leaned into my closet wall. “Yeah, that's what Mom said, too.”

My mom didn't disapprove of my career change like Dad did, but she still didn't like it. So for now, it was still safest to get any family news from Nan and Paddy.

At least, that's what I told myself. The truth was, I wasn't sure I could take much more of my dad's disappointment or my mom's softer sadness before I'd break and head home.

It was especially hard on days when I sat alone in my quiet apartment, being used to having my family piled around me like an exuberant werewolf Pack.

But my job was important to me. I was tired of killing, tired of living an assassin or mercenary-like existence all slayers adopted as we weren't very popular among supernaturals.

Most slayer families no longer only hunted vampires, but shifters, wizards, and occasionally even fae if they were offered a contract for it. (The O'Neils were able to be choosy with our contracts, so we mostly only went after vampires. Although I'd been taught about wizards and shifters, and even a little about fae—just in case.)

I wanted to prove not just to my family, but to supernaturals in general that vampire slayers could belong to the magical community. And most of all, I wanted to prove we could use our powers to help—we didn't *have* to be assassins.

“Well, variety is the spice of life,” Nan said.

I smiled in my dark closet and my heart twisted with homesickness. Nan loved proverbs and wisdom phrases. She collected them like they were a hobby. I hadn't realized until I moved away how much I loved that about her.

“Your parents will eventually come to like the new spice you're introducing. Just give 'em time. You're their baby—Fergus was bound to throw a fit whenever you finally left the nest, no matter where you were going.” Nan summarized.

“Thanks, Nan.”

“Of course, Lass. Now, tell me. I got the picture message you sent yesterday. Those were cookies?”

“They were supposed to be,” I said. “But I went wrong somewhere, and I can't figure out where even though I've watched the show that used the recipe several times.”

“Humph. You can't trust the telly. All that glitters isn't gold, and let me assure you, Television isn't gold! Now you tell me that recipe, and we'll see if I can help you.”



I CRUMPLED up the plastic wrap my sandwich had been packaged in, then tapped my smoothie cup, testing to see if my strawberry smoothie—one of my favorite flavors—had thawed enough to eat yet.

I was alone in the meeting room, so I leaned back in my chair and looked around as I sipped at my sweet smoothie.

As usual, I arrived early at work for my night shift. I'd again failed with the night's cooking attempt—mac 'n cheese. I'd apparently removed the noodles too early from the boiling water, so the mac had been crunchy. I'd stopped by my favorite café, Cat Tails, to grab dinner to make up for it.

I'd asked Sunshine if she wanted a tea or something, but she didn't work today so I'd just gotten myself a sandwich. *Maybe I should text the squad to see if anyone wants me to pick up something the next time I stop by Cat Tails? That would be a friendly gesture...right?*

I got up to toss my garbage in the trash by the door, then wandered back to my seat.

One of the ceiling lights flickered. I frowned up at it as I sucked more of my smoothie down, idly wondering what bulbs it used—I had a bit of a thing for lights as I'd trained as an electrician under my uncle as my backup career. (My family invested in backup careers, in case you lost the passion for slayer work or an injury made it no longer advisable.)

Maybe I messed up by making my human persona a secretary. I should have gone for the Cloisters' electrician.

My straw got clogged with an ice chip, pulling my attention away from the light fixture, so I tapped my cup on my table as the door swung open.

April and Juggernaut strolled into the room.

April, tall and admirably muscled, likely honed from a significant amount of training with bladed weapons—a rarity among wizards—was securing her firearm holster, while Juggernaut—shorter, with a mop of curly hair and a tiny chip on his front right tooth that somehow made his smiles incredibly infectious—fidgeted with unbridled energy.

“I'm telling you; she was gorgeous.” Juggernaut threw his arms wide, narrowly missing cracking a knuckle on a chair. “And she practically *radiated* magic. It smelled like sulfur! It was so cool.”

“Who?” I asked.

April and Juggernaut looked at me, which instantly made my throat close.

Juggernaut immediately lost some of his enthusiasm as he settled into place to answer me. “I saw the dragon shifter on my way here. She just arrived in town.” His tone wasn’t unfriendly—or friendly for that matter. He sounded like a newscaster reporting on an issue to an uninvolved third party. He started to turn back to April placing his back to me.

Quick, ask a follow up question! I need to keep the conversation going in order to be friendly! “H-how did you know it was the dragon shifter?” I said, my voice faltering only twice.

Was that an OK question? Or was it insulting because I’m insinuating he wouldn’t know the difference?

Juggernaut turned back to me. “I could sense her magic,” he said. “Wizards all experience magic differently. I smell it. The dragon shifter’s magic smelled like sulfur—which isn’t the scent for fae or wizard magic.”

He’s right, obviously he’d sense her magic. That was a terrible question! What’s a better one?

I frantically cast around my mind trying to remember the list of questions I’d come up with while off shift and memorized, asking about the weather wouldn’t help me in a case like this. “What did she look l-like?” I asked, the words desperately bursting out of me.

“She has long, straight purple hair,” Juggernaut said. “I’m not sure if it was dyed or natural, though. It wasn’t an illusion.”

“Height?” I asked. The single word came out easier than a full sentence, but I needed to expand the question or I’d sound rude. “I mean, was she tall or short?”

“Tall,” Juggernaut said. “A very stately tall. She held herself like royalty.”

Desperate to keep the conversation going, I followed up with, “What was she wearing?”

Juggernaut’s eyebrows mashed together. “Business attire,” he said with a seriousness as if I was quizzing him. “Black slacks, black suitcoat, white undershirt. Except she wore an orange ribbon instead of a tie. And—her eyes!” Some of Juggernaut’s original enthusiasm finally broke through and he flashed me his infectious smile. “They were this golden-*y* orange color. Like a bonfire!”

His longer response had given me time to think of another, desperate question. “What was she doing when you saw her?” My voice cracked at the end of the question, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“She was walking down the sidewalk, talking with someone.” Juggernaut hunched his shoulders a little as if my gaze intimidated him. “I don’t remember who.”

April set her things down on a table at the front of the room, but kept her shoulders pointed towards me. When Juggernaut scooted closer to her, though, she hooked a chair with her foot and pulled it out preparing to sit down with her back to me.

I couldn’t think of any more questions to ask about the dragon shifter, and the conversation was about to slip away from me again. Which was fine, I’d managed a few exchanges so it was good practice. Could I do anything else to improve their impression of me? While both wizards were polite, they seemed even less inclined to talk with me than Connor, my new neighbor!

End with a compliment. That will leave them with a positive feeling about the interaction!

“You have an excellent memory, Juggernaut,” I said.

Juggernaut stood at attention again, his expression neutral. “Thank you,” he said. “I’ve been trying to improve it so I can better remember any suspects we meet.”

Well. That’s not the reaction I was expecting.

He was staring at me like he expected me to comment that he needed to be on a performance improvement plan.

Did I accidentally say something in the past? I must have, otherwise, why would he be telling me this? Should I say nothing now in case he interprets it as another criticism?

My mind spun as I tried to figure out the best choice, but I was paralyzed with indecision.

Juggernaut, seemingly deciding my awkward silence meant the conversation was over, gave me a business-like nod and settled into a chair next to April.

I wasn't so sure it had been a *good* conversation, but at least it had gone better than those in the past.

That's encouraging—maybe I'm finally getting somewhere! Should I apologize to him if he thinks I'm grading his abilities? I can't remember when I would have said something that would make him think that...maybe I was so nervous at the time I babbled without realizing what I was saying?

More of our squadmates sauntered into the room—it was almost muster time.

I hurriedly sucked down the rest of my smoothie as everyone settled into place, as usual leaving me and my table alone.

By the time Captain Reese stepped into the room, accompanied by Sarge, I was settled into place with my slayer mask resting on the table in front of me.

Either way, I was able to reach out to a squadmate today. I just need to keep trying, and maybe eventually they'll be friendly with me too.



AFTER MUSTER, we were given our patrol teams—we covered the entire city over the course of our shift unless we got a call, but Sarge changed who we were sent out with every night to promote squad unity.

Tonight, I was out with Grove and Brody.

We'd been assigned the downtown area, so we were starting at the edge—not too far away from my apartment, actually.

I studied the dimmed innards of a local café, Queen's Court, as we turned off King's Court Drive and onto Main Street, officially beginning our patrol.

Brody was scenting the air, leading the way, with Grove trudging along next to him, and me bringing up the rear.

"These Friday fish fries are gonna kill me." Brody coughed as he tried to clear his nose. "The smell permeates the air so much it covers other scents."

This observation was about as conversational as Brody got, which meant it was an excellent moment to say something.

Unfortunately, I'd been trying to casually check behind us—I took my position as rearguard seriously—so I didn't realize it until Grove spoke, taking the opportunity before I could.

"Good boy," Grove absently said, his voice lacked the typical snootiness of a fae despite the almost-insult. (Wolves did *not* like being compared to dogs.)

"I've said before, don't call me that," Brody snapped.

"Sorry." Grove fanned his face with his hand, trying to stir the humid air. "Hey, I tried to improve the scent of this potion. What do you think of it?" Grove ruffled his short coppery colored hair that was cut in different lengths—as if his stylist had gotten bored with the task—but somehow still looked fashionable on the fae. He grabbed a glass bottle from his belt, uncorked it, then shoved it under Brody's nose before the werewolf had a chance to reply.

"What—ugh!" Brody gagged, then staggered a step away from Grove. "Dude, what *is* that?"

"It's a health potion." Grove put the cork back in the potion, then studied the label. "Oh, oops. I misspoke. This is part of my newest poison brew. My apologies, I grabbed the

wrong bottle,” Grove sounded genuinely apologetic as he put the bottle back into the depths of his leather bag.

I kept an ear on their conversation as I studied the streets, eyeing the few humans that were out. I touched the deadly pointed hair stick tucked into my belt—I’d put the weapon to good use before when I had long hair and did undercover work but I kept it with me because now, facing multiple kinds of supernaturals in Magiford, a variety of weapons was a combat boost.

“Ugh, that was awful,” Brody moaned and slapped a hand over his nose. “You don’t keep it anywhere near the health potions, right? You’ll kill one of us if you administer that by accident!”

“No, no. I keep them in separate areas. See, this is a potion.” Grove plucked another bottle from his bag; this one was made of green glass. Grove blinked, then turned the bottle around. “Wait, this is another poison.”

“If I ever find out who decided to hire *you* to work as a medic, there is going to be a tussle,” Brody grunted. “Also, why do you carry so many poisons?”

“Because I hope to use them, obviously.”

I smiled, safely hidden behind my mask. My humor dropped when I felt the back of my throat ache, and I faintly detected the metallic scent of blood.

“Brody.” I spun, staring down a street that connected with ours and ran south. It was a touch past dusk, but the street felt smoky from the muted light the city cast on the gray clouds that hung low in the sky. “Blood.”

CHAPTER SIX

Jade

Brody stopped midstep and raised his nose, sniffing. “I’ve got it, I think. Did you...?” He eyed me out of the corner of his eye, fidgeting with obvious discomfort.

“Slayer powers,” I said.

“Ah,” Brody said.

One of the handier slayer powers was the ability to sense spilt blood.

While we could sense vampires, we couldn’t pinpoint their location. Our ability to home in on blood, however, was much more precise. If we could sense the presence of a vampire and spilt blood, it was as good as having a neon sign hanging over them.

Brody turned in a circle. “I think it’s to the south.”

I narrowed my eyes as I evaluated my own powers. “It is. You lead?”

Brody shook his head. “Nah—no. You have a better lead on it.”

I nodded, then reached for the daggers on my thigh holster—I was naturally a steel kind of girl. Guns were more typically a werewolf hunter thing. They were too loud for most contracts my family had taken—vampires usually lived in

urban areas, and humans didn't take kindly to random gunfire. Plus, while werewolves rampaged, vampires usually liked to gloat and monologue giving us plenty of time to react.

I held a dagger in each hand and slipped past Grove. Following the throat-aching sensation, I stalked a block down the new street.

When we started down the second block, Brody froze. "I hear something."

I paused, and the werewolf shook his head. "Whatever it was, it's quiet now."

Shortly after we crossed the road to begin the third block, the squeezing sensation in my throat intensified and tugged me to the right.

At the same moment, my slayer senses lit up and I noticed a narrow alleyway on our right. "Vampire is near," I whispered.

Grove shifted the strap of his satchel from one shoulder to the other. "Could it be Tetiana?"

"We're the only ones from the squad downtown right now," Brody said. "It's gotta be a different vamp. Maybe they were feeding?"

I nodded and followed the throat-aching sensation of blood into the darkened narrow alleyway. It was hemmed in by a red brick building and an auto shop constructed with painted cinder blocks. A car was parked in the entrance—I'd need to turn sideways to shuffle past it—and a chain-link fence stretched across the back of the alleyway.

This is the perfect spot for a vampire to grab a quick bite—they could keep their prey hedged in.

It was illegal for vampires to feed on an unwilling participant. But that didn't mean it didn't happen. Ravenous—starved—vampires were the worst offenders, and there were always vamps around who believed they were above all supernatural laws and rules.

The most maddening part was that regular vampires never had to drink enough to harm their targets—ravenous vamps were a different matter entirely. The O’Neil family still had work in modern times not just because occasionally vampires broke the law and would swipe any random human they found on the street, but because they also had the nasty habit of letting their victims bleed out and die.

I edged into the alleyway—still holding my daggers—and eased my way past the empty car. My eyes quickly adjusted to the darker shadows and lower lighting, and I glanced back to see Brody silently padding after me. Grove was following behind him—though the fae stopped to draw a heart on the car’s dusty back window.

“Radio,” I mouthed to Brody, exhaling the word.

Brody—with his werewolf hearing—nodded and unhooked his radio from his belt so he’d be ready to call for help.

I traced the sensation to the enormous dumpster pushed against the chain-link fence.

Of course, it has to be at the back of the alleyway!

I motioned to Brody and Grove to stay back—this could be a trap, so I wanted them to stand clear—then edged my way towards the dumpster.

There was a drained blood pouch—the bagged alternative so vampires didn’t need to keep willing donors or starve—tossed casually on the ground in front of the dumpster. My senses told me the actual source of the blood was inside the dumpster.

I adjusted my grip on my daggers to a hold better suited for climbing, then half-scaled the chain-link fence and jumped from it to the dumpster where I balanced on the edge as I peered inside.

Inside the dumpster were three werewolves—big muscly guys who looked thick enough to rip their shirts if they flexed. All of them knocked unconscious, and all of them looked like they’d gotten run over by a semitruck. They were alive,

though. I could see their chests moving, and one of them groaned.

What could have done this to three werewolves?

My work mode activated, and I spoke without thinking—or worrying. “We’ve got three downed werewolves,” I called to Brody. “All three are breathing, but they’re wounded. Nothing life threatening.”

“Got it. I’ll come grab ‘em. If we’re lucky, I’ll recognize them and know what Pack they belong to,” Brody said.

“Wait,” I said. “Call it in first—so the Cloisters have a record.”

“What’s this?” A deep, throaty voice purred overhead. “I thought this might call out the local vermin, but I didn’t expect to catch a lost slayer.”

I stayed crouched on the edge of the dumpster and peered up, following the sound of the voice to a tiny fire escape made of steel grating that was tucked against a door leading to the brick building’s second story.

The vampire stood there—tall and threatening—blending in with the shadows so well that I almost didn’t see him.

The hood of his dark, charcoal gray jacket was pulled up and shading his face, so I only saw the glimmer of his red eyes. He leaned against the building with a lazy confidence surveying me like a king looking down at a peasant—or maybe like a predator watching his food, if I wanted to be more correct.

“What are you doing so far from your family, slayer?” the vampire asked, his voice sinfully smooth. (It was designed to pull victims in—everything about vampires was designed to lull potential victims into doing what the vampire wanted.) “You’re all alone.”

“She’s not alone—she has back up!” Brody bristled from his spot by the car. His werewolf instincts must have kicked in because he was standing in front of Grove, covering the fae from any potential attacks.

If I'd been less keyed in on the danger, I would have thanked Brody for his moral support but with the vampire staring down at us I only allowed myself a flash of warmth.

The vampire deigned to stir from his relaxed position as he chuckled. "You werewolves at least can be funny—unless... were you serious? You really think *you* and the fae who stinks of foul potions count as backup?"

Brody growled and widened his stance as if he was preparing to pounce, but he held his ground and glanced at me.

"We're with the Curia Cloisters. We're part of the Magic Response Task Force." I tried to watch the vampire for any changes in his body language.

He only went back to leaning against the building, as if he didn't have a care in the world. "A Curia Cloisters task force? What a quaint idea."

"Ah-hah!" Grove exclaimed, still hidden by Brody's bulk. "You sound surprised by the idea, so you're new in town!"

The vampire planted a hand over his heart. "You make shockingly accurate observations. I am no match for such an astute fae as you."

Grove peered over Brody's shoulder so he could get a good look at the vampire, his face bunching up. "Oh, I get it. You didn't mean that. Hey!" Grove yelped when Brody stepped on his foot.

"Stop talking," Brody barked.

I risked glancing down at the knocked-out werewolves. "This is your work?"

"You said you represent the Curia Cloisters?" the vampire asked.

"Yeah," Grove confirmed before Brody hip checked him.

"In that case, no," the vampire said.

"Then how did these three wolves get beat up and dumped in a dumpster?" I asked.

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” the vampire said. “Given their likely IQ, I’d say it was probably their fault because they lack intelligence.”

I looked at the beaten werewolves and their blood-spattered clothes, then back up at the vampire.

His jacket and pants weren’t even wrinkled. I couldn’t see his face so I suppose one of the wolves could have landed a hit there, but I didn’t think so.

I could feel the power he oozed. I was pretty sure he had it dialed down and was only letting enough out so I’d know he was too big a predator to mess with.

If he’s powerful enough to take on three werewolves, he’s gotta be strong. If he can control the power he’s radiating, that means he must be at least an Elder vampire. But what’s he doing without any minions? Those guys never go anywhere without at least a couple of their offspring around to do their dirty work. Unless this is a trap and they’re lying in wait?

“You didn’t drink from them?” I asked.

The vampire chuckled, “I am nothing if not a diligent law abider. Also, they reek of alcohol and are *werewolves*. I would never so sully my body.”

I didn’t think he was lying about not drinking from them—I didn’t see any of their blood on him. If he’d sipped on them, I don’t think he could have avoided that. There was no doubt in my mind he’d beaten them up.

What do we do in this situation?

Supernaturals didn’t follow typical human justice and law practices. The various races clashed occasionally, and the Cloisters typically remained uninvolved.

The task force existed more as a way to ensure supernaturals didn’t mess with humans and that any supernatural conflict was ended before it got close to endangering/involving humans.

This is such a small fight—and he handled it fast. But... his power.

His presence set my teeth on edge, he didn't have offspring, and Grove was right, he seemed new to Magiford.

This is something we need to report to Captain Reese and Sarge.

The vampire stirred, and I immediately switched my hold on my daggers to a defensive position.

“So jumpy,” the vampire said. “But unless you feel inclined to join those mongrels, I'd suggest you run along.”

I could feel my slayer powers stir in my blood. “That sounds like a threat.”

“Certainly not,” the vampire said. “Law abiding citizens don't make threats. It's merely an *observation*.” His voice turned darker with the warning.

I stiffened, and my every inner alarm screamed at me to get out and flee this predator.

“Ooh, a fight! Let me get my poison out,” Grove unhelpfully declared.

Our radios erupted with a metallic shriek that made Brody yip and slap his hands over his ears.

It was so loud my initial reaction was to cringe but I was too well trained to give into the feeling, so I stayed locked on the vampire.

“Backup request—over on Goldstein Street! Six mantasps are loose on the street!”

I immediately jumped off the dumpster and ran towards my squadmates as Brody herded Grove out of the alleyway.

“You're really going to leave?” the vampire asked. “Just like that?”

I glanced back at the intimidating shadow he made. “We'll be back,” I said. “And I expect there will be three live werewolves when we return.”

I ducked past the car and raced out to the street, then sheathed my daggers—running with bare blades wasn't a great idea. I glanced back at the alleyway—I couldn't see the

vampire anymore but I could still sense his presence—then poured on the speed to catch up with Brody. “I’m here.”

Brody pressed a button on his radio. “Team Blood, on our way,” he shouted into the machine.

Grove panted as he made an abrupt turn, heading south, away from the lakes. “Where’s Goldstein Street?” he asked.

“It’s a several minute run from downtown,” Brody said. “It’s a business street—lots of office space with a few stores, some human banks, and Tutu’s Crypta & Custodia.”

Thankfully, our little fieldtrip brought us a few blocks south; that will save some time.

“It might take more than a few minutes,” I said as I tried not to glance at Grove—he was the slowest of our trio.

“Why don’t we go get the car?” Grove huffed, his bag smacking his side with every stride he took.

“Because the car is a ten-minute run in the *opposite* direction,” Brody said.

We sprinted through a crosswalk, which got us honked at by a car that wanted to turn.

“Can you smell anything, Brody?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Brody grimly said.

We turned a sharp corner, and I glanced back to make sure Grove was keeping pace. “Grove, mantasps are a fae creature, correct?”

“Yep,” Grove gulped.

“Want to share anything about them?” Brody asked.

“They’re big,” Grove said.

“And?” Brody asked.

“They’re a combination of wasps and praying mantis, except it doesn’t have wings. Front appendages have scythes for claws. And it’s got a stinger in its abdomen. Poisonous,” Grove’s breathing was starting to come at a gasp.

“Brody, could you carry him?” I asked.

“Oooh, please do,” Grove flung himself at the werewolf.

“I’m not a pack pony,” Brody grunted, but he let the fae cling to his back as he raced along.

“This is *so* much nicer,” Grove said. “It does jostle my bag though—I hope nothing breaks.”

“Grove,” I called, trying to keep the flaky fae focused. “Any weaknesses?”

“Its underbelly,” Grove said. “It’s got an exoskeleton that covers its back and legs, so the weakest point is its underbelly. Or its mouth, but it’s got a pair of serrated jaws that will mess you up, so maybe not a great target.”

“I’ve got a scent,” Brody announced. “It stinks of fae.”

“There’s blood,” I added a second later as I felt my throat tighten.

“That doesn’t bode well,” Grove said.

We burst onto Goldstein Street, and the scent of blood hit me like a wall.

Five mantasps roamed the street—the exact unnerving combo of wasp and mantis Grove had promised.

The biggest was the size of a large car, the smallest was still as big as a bear and had sapling sized legs. Their carapaces varied from grayish brown to a watery charcoal color, and the stingers Grove had warned us about were the size of my favorite dagger.

One of the mantasps knocked over a trash can that was bolted to the cement sidewalk like it was a toy.

Two of them were sawing at a lamppost with their front claws, clicking their serrated jaws at April—who had scaled the light. April shot the bigger mantasp in the face with a jolt of lightning that made the monster click in anger and stagger backwards, but the other one kept trying to ram her.

Binx—the werecat shifter—was facing off with the fourth mantasp in her human form, wielding a stop sign bolted to a cut-off post—probably the mantasp’s work.

One mantasp was down, its legs still twitching with its death throes.

The situation was bad, but Binx and April were doing a good job at containing the monsters considering the honking cars that had piled up at a stoplight two blocks down.

That makes five mantasps—where's the sixth?

My sense of blood sharpened, and I caught sight of the last monster.

It was closing in on Clarence—the shyest of our squad's two vampires.

Clarence was frozen, splayed out in the middle of the road, staring wide-eyed up at the monster, blood dripping from a nasty looking cut on his arm.

It's going to stab him if he doesn't move!

“Brody. Throw me—there,” I pointed to the mantasp that was now almost crouched over Clarence. (With his werewolf strength Brody could toss me like I was a dog toy.)

Brody, however, was unprepared for this idea, so he actually drew back from me as he dumped Grove on the sidewalk. “W-what?”

I pointed again. “Clarence—you can throw me faster than we can run.”

“B-but—”

My usual worries about communicating well evaporated under the threat of danger. “*Brody*. Throw me!”

Brody knit his fingers together to form a stirrup with his hands, which I put my right foot in and then crouched.

Brody drew a breath, then flung me using every ounce of his werewolf strength.

The wind whistled in my ears and the putrid smell drifting off the dead mantasp made my eyes water, but I unsheathed a dagger mid-air.

Brody's aim was excellent, and I landed on the mantasp's back—heels first. I hit it with enough force to make it crumple, smacking the ground, and Clarence scooted out of the way just in time to barely avoid getting crushed.

I rolled off the mantasp, being careful to keep the edge of my dagger pointed away from me.

I don't have any room for mistakes. I can't risk cutting myself when I'll be so close to Clarence.

The mantasp made angry clicking noises as it struggled to stand. It reached for me with one of its claw-tipped front legs, but I was already sliding toward its back end reaching underneath it to stab my dagger into its abdomen, piercing its softer underside and mortally wounding it.

The mantasp shuddered in pain and scabbled to try and stand. It nearly stabbed Clarence, so I grabbed the vampire by the white cravat he always wore tucked into the neckline of his dark blue uniform, and yanked him to his feet, dragging him a safe distance away.

The mantasp collapsed while we fled, its legs twitching as it slowly died.

“T-thank you,” Clarence gasped, his face paler than usual.

I patted him on the shoulder, which made him cringe. (He was a vampire, I was a slayer, I got it.)

I respectfully took a step away to give him some stress-free breathing room, then surveyed the battle.

Brody was helping April over by her lamppost. He was distracting a mantasp while luring it under April's perch, giving her a clear shot with her lighting. It looked like they'd already finished off a mantasp that way—the larger one of the two that had originally targeted April was collapsed in a smoldering heap.

Grove had joined Binx—who was still smacking her mantasp with her cleaved stop sign. He watched for a moment as he flipped his leather messenger bag open and pulled out one of his bottles. I couldn't tell whether it was a healing

potion or one of his poisons, but it seemed the kind of potion didn't matter for what Grove had in mind.

He chucked the bottle, hitting the mantasp's triangular head. The delicate bottle shattered on impact. The monster staggered backwards, clawing at its face as the glass shards dug in and Binx smacked it again with her stop sign.

Both of those mantasps are occupied, and it's only going to be a matter of minutes before they are down. Three of the six are already dead. That leaves one left.

I turned in a circle, looking for the mantasp that had been investigating trash cans unhindered.

It was wandering away from the fight, heading straight for the congestion of cars stuck at the stoplights.

“Pursuing the runner!” I shouted to my squadmates before I sprinted after the mantasp.

The mantasp must have heard me—a disappointing reflection on my skills of running quietly—or sensed me, because it kicked up its pace from an ambling walk to a scuttling run.

I gritted my teeth as I kicked up my pace and considered my options.

Humans were milling around, so I was reluctant to use my handgun, but I needed to take the mantasp out as fast as possible without risking an injury. (I still had Clarence to think of.)

I caught up with the monster—running down the middle of the road—and yanked a pair of my magic canceling cuffs off my belt.

Using my presence as pressure, I herded it towards the sidewalk. When it tried to kick at me, I stabbed it in the leg with my dagger.

It shot towards the sidewalk, conveniently ramming into a pole that held up a crosswalk sign.

Now!

I dove under the monster and tried to stab it, but either I didn't use enough force to smash through its exoskeleton or my dagger was dull from the first fight because the blade only scratched the crunchy exterior.

Instead, I was forced to follow my back up plan and snapped one of the cuffs shut on one of its legs. I had to let go of the cuffs and roll out of the way to avoid getting speared through when it jabbed at me with its front claws, but that put me in the perfect spot to plant my feet on either side of the crosswalk sign pole. I then grabbed the dangling end of the cuffs and yanked hard, using my planted feet for resistance, and snapped the open cuff around the sign pole.

Okay, it's at least somewhat contained. Now, I just have to kill it before it figures out it can claw through the pole.

The mantasp started thrashing, so I backed out of its reach circling around it to look for an opening.

Around then was when the mantasp remembered it had those hook-like claws on its front appendages, so it locked both of its legs around the pole and braced with its other legs.

Opportunity found!

I kicked one of the joints on its back left leg, which made it tilt to the side to compensate.

I yanked my hair stick from the front pocket of my uniform, fixed my hold on it, then smashed it as hard as I could into the mantasp's exoskeleton, piercing it.

With its carapace compromised, I used my slightly dulled dagger to finish the monster off, stabbing it in the same location and making the wound even bigger.

Like the previous mantasp, this one shook and writhed as it died, so I backed up a few paces holding both of my weapons and staying crouched in a fighting position.

When it stopped moving I checked to make sure it was dead, then reclaimed my cuffs—they were too expensive to leave sitting around—before turning back to my squad.

April and Brody had already finished their monster and, as I watched, Binx gave her and Grove's mantasp one last smack on the head as it died.

The fight was over.

I pulled out a square cloth from the top of my boot and wiped down my dagger before I sheathed it. *I'll need to sharpen it tomorrow. And check to see if the hair stick was compromised.*

I headed back to my squadmates—cleaning my hair stick as I walked.

April was starting to slide down the lamppost she'd climbed, and Brody unhooked his radio.

“All six mantasps on Goldstein Street are down, but, uh, we're gonna need some cleanup.” Brody adjusted his hold on the radio as he studied the stub of pole that had once housed Binx's stop sign.

I slipped my hair stick back into its proper spot on my belt. “Injuries?”

I meant for it to be a question for the group, but Brody interpreted it as some kind of correction because he cringed and pressed the talk button on his radio again. “No injuries.” He released the button, then called to Clarence—who was huddled behind a large sign for a human bank. “Right, Clarence?”

Clarence scooted out from behind the sign. “Correct.”

I gave the quiet vampire a quick look over, but he seemed a normal level of shaken—normal for him, anyway—so I started studying the street trying to make sense of the wreckage the mantasps had caused.

“The lack of injuries is most disappointing.” Grove smacked the side of his bag. “This would have been a great time to try my new healing potion.”

“We might need a charismatic fae to calm the humans.” April pointed to the cars still at the stoplight. It looked like some of them at the back of the line had realized what was

going on and started backing up, it would take a few minutes to clear the intersection despite the late hour.

“I’m a fae,” Grove reminded her.

Binx dropped her sign pole on the cement with a loud clang. “She said a *charismatic* fae.”

“Oh,” Grove said. “Yeah, that’s not me.”

Binx narrowed her eyes at Grove, while the fae casually scratched his elbow through the sleeve of his uniform. “I can’t get a read on you.”

“That would be because I’m not a book,” Grove said.

I completed my street survey following the line of wreckage they’d caused on the sidewalks. “It looks like the mantasps came from farther up Goldstein, traveling this way. Is that right?” The words came easily if I was focused on work—no small talk required.

“Yes.” April joined me and pointed at the streetlight intersection about three blocks up. “We heard them first—I think they ripped out those trash cans three blocks up. We intercepted them when they wandered past Tutu’s Crypta & Custodia—they blasted themselves on one of the dragon seals protecting it.” She gestured to an innocuous building made of brick and accented with bright red trim, which was the front for what was undoubtedly the best protected building in Magiford—and that included the Curia Cloisters. “There were originally seven mantasps. The one that took the brunt of the blast got incinerated.”

Dragon Shifters were the only kind of shifter capable of magic, and they specialized in seals—a magic that was defensive in that once set up it protected an area, but it was unique because it could blast an enemy that tested the boundary.

“Weird,” Brody said. “What were a bunch of mantasps doing here?”

I didn’t know anything about mantasps. I was cramming whenever I had time to try and learn more about supernaturals

at large since the bulk of my education had centered on vampires, but mantasps hadn't come up yet in my sessions.

Grove would know the most out of all of us, so I pivoted to face him.

“Mantasps live in the fae realm, I assume?” I asked.

The fae realm used to belong to the elves, but they'd been defeated in battle centuries ago and with their mass extinction the realm grew poisoned. Now, the only fae that lived there were connected to the largest fae Courts who had enough power to protect their territory.

“Yeah, they're from the fae realm,” Grove confirmed. “They're not capable of realm hopping. They're more into stabby-stabby action. There's not much going on in their craniums.”

I pulled out my cellphone and opened the notes app—we'd need to file a report for this, so it was better to take notes now than to ask again later. “So, someone had to have brought them here?” I guessed.

“Oh yeah,” Grove said. “No way around it.”

“Can anyone sense any magic?” I asked. Grove and April would be able to, while Brody and Binx would theoretically be able to scent it out. Technically I could sense magic, too, but I only got muted sensations—my abilities were way more honed in on the presence of blood and vampires.

Even now, I could mostly just sense Clarence's arm wound and the knicks and cuts April and Binx had with only the faintest hint of fae magic, which felt like gossamer wings brushing my mind.

April frowned as she looked up and down the street. “I sensed dragon magic when the seal went off, obviously. I also felt fae magic before we even made it onto the street, but the mantasps might be the source of that since they're from the fae realm.”

Binx sniffed the air, while Brody crouched down and sniffed at the sidewalk and then sneezed.

“I’m picking up on something weird,” he said before he sneezed again. “A faint trace of some kind of weirdo magic I don’t recognize. The overwhelming magic I’m smelling is fae. Whoever popped them in had to be a fae.”

“Unless one of the Seelie or Unseelie Courts were keeping them as pets,” Grove said. “You know, to fight with?”

“Are any of the Courts warring around Goldstein Street right now?” April asked.

Since summer, the small fae Courts—the ones without access to the fae realm—had been locked in a succession fight. The handful of Seelie Courts were fighting among themselves—as were the Unseelie Courts—and Courts were getting absorbed left and right, their territories and people getting unwillingly drafted into the winner’s Court.

“Who knows,” Binx snarled. “It’s not like they keep a website conveniently updated with what Courts have survived and which ones have been absorbed.”

“Tetiana, Jade, and I put down a fae fight about a four-minute jog from here a couple days ago,” Brody said. “So, it’s probably near a territory line.”

I nodded as I typed away on my phone, recording everyone’s thoughts. *It wouldn’t surprise me if one of the Courts started using monsters as a fighting force. Fae monsters are easy enough to replace, and no one is keeping tabs on mantasps since they’re considered deadly to all. They’re just killed on sight in the fae realm.*

“I remember that night,” Grove said. “I was there, too. Why didn’t you mention my name?”

“Because all you did was get yourself knocked out,” Brody said. “Blood had to save you.”

I’d swapped over to my camera app by this point to take pictures of the downed mantasps and the street, but I paused when Brody’s comment caught up with me. *Blood? Who’s Blood?*

I turned to ask, which is when I realized Brody and Grove were both guiltily looking in my direction, and I was able to

do the math.

Wait, I'm Blood? I lowered my phone as the realization dawned on me. *Is that why every patrol trio I get sent out on is called Team Blood?*

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, hurt by the name. Why did they call me Blood? Was it because I was a slayer, and my blood was my greatest weapon against vampires? Or was it because they felt I spilled too much blood when I fought?

All the questions I wanted to ask got stuck in my throat, and I couldn't ask a single one in the oppressive silence that blanketed the street.

My squadmates were quiet. Even Binx—who spent most of her life growling—awkwardly cleared her throat and looked away.

Even if I could ask, now isn't the time. We're in the middle of a case. There's work to do. I have a job to finish.

I forced myself to hold my phone upright again, and I took a picture of the mantasp Grove and Binx had killed.

“Sarge is sure taking a long time to radio us back,” April said, punching through the awkward silence.

“Yeah, right?” Brody held his radio up and squinted at it, overacting. “Maybe I ought to repeat what I said since Sarge never responded.”

“Maybe,” April agreed. “Once the scene has been recorded; we should drag the mantasps out of the street.”

Everyone murmured their agreement but no one followed me as I picked my way up the road, heading towards the still smoking pile of ash the seventh mantasp had left on the sidewalk next to Tutu's.

An emotion I didn't want to label—if I had to guess I'd say it was probably disappointment—filled my gut with a cement-like weight. I tried to ignore it as I crouched down and took a picture.

I can't blame them. Vampire slayers are practically the supernatural's assassins-for-hire, and I've been so tongue tied it's not like I've been the best ambassador for us.

But... *Blood?*

I'd taken this job because I wanted to show my family—to show slayers that blood and death weren't our only lot in life. That we could do more than destroy.

I adjusted my mask and my hood—it was kind of stuffy for me with the hood up and the mask on—then stood up and took a picture of Tutu's.

I just have to keep trying. If I can show them how competent I am with my job, maybe I can change things.

With that resolution, I squared my shoulders and followed the mantasp's trail up the street pausing when it led into an alleyway. "Backup?" I called.

I should have asked in a complete sentence, I just couldn't muster the will I needed at the moment.

"Coming," April called. "Come on, Clarence. You're coming with."

Clarence made a wheezing noise in response.

I studied the dim alleyway—it looked like the mantasps had either been dumped or somehow transported to the alleyway because I could see a few claw marks on things, but there wasn't a ton of destruction.

The alleyway reminded me. *I should make a report about that vampire. The Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement will want to know that a vampire of elder caliber has shown up in town.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Considine

After spending a full night and day observing my new—temporary—city, I judged it was finally time to return home to my safehouse.

I tamped down on my vampire powers, lowering myself to the level of some stooge that had been turned maybe only seventy or eighty years ago, and changed into a more modern outfit inside an empty storage unit I'd rented years ago—I had similar units, warehouses, and empty buildings in all the cities the Dracos children occupied.

With my benign costume in place, I made another circuit of the area around my apartment building before I finally went inside.

It was early in the afternoon, and the sun was obnoxiously bright but I didn't feel it. As powerful as I was, I hadn't felt the dampening effect the sun had—the way it muted a vampire's senses, the pain it caused—for at least five or six centuries. But I also didn't feel the baking, warm sensation humans felt from it. I couldn't even remember what that felt like.

I must remember to act weak in the sunlight if I truly want to sell my front. What do weak vampires do in the sunlight?

I half shook my head as I climbed the stairs of my apartment building. I was vaguely aware that most vampires avoided sunlight, but I didn't intend to impede myself in that way.

I'd witnessed a lot of pathetic mewling and complaining among Vígí's offspring while staying with him, so being generally pathetic and useless was seemingly my best option if I wanted to blend in.

I exited the stairs pausing when I saw humans clustered in the hallway.

One of them was the chirpy human who lived next to me. She was easy to recognize with her bright red hair, and fetching green eyes, though her blood was so neutral smelling it bordered on downright boring. She clutched a cup of some foul, green concoction so hard her knuckles were white, as if she were... afraid?

Her partner in conversation was another young woman who was weighed down with a gigantic diaper bag on her left shoulder and a squirming toddler on her right hip. She rocked from side to side, dark circles under her eyes, and the ponytail her hair was gathered in appeared to be in the process of falling down.

"Did... did you take Mia to the park?" My neighbor asked, her voice pitching higher and higher in noticeable anxiety.

"Mmhmm, yes." The mother responded, adding a bounce to her rocking that made her toddler's pigtails flap. "Did you have a good day?" Her words came out bouncy from all the movement and were slightly slurred together—probably due to general exhaustion.

"Sorry, what was that?" my neighbor asked, not having the bonus of vampire hearing.

"Did you have a good day?" the mother repeated, her words a little stiff as her daughter patted her cheeks and giggled.

My chirpy neighbor seemed to shrink in on herself with the manner I'd normally associate with defeat. "Sorry, could

you say that one more time?”

The toddler dropped a stuffed giraffe she'd been holding.

The mother started to bend her knees and my neighbor practically threw herself to the ground first so she could pick up the toy.

“Oh, thank you. Did you have a good day?” The mother repeated one last time, her voice quiet.

My neighbor, still crouched on the ground and holding the stuffed animal, stared wide eyed at the ground. “Ahh, hahahah,” she laughed—still, obviously, unable to hear the woman's mumbled question.

I was in the process of slipping past the duo with the hope of avoiding attention—human niceties were almost as bad as vampire basic conversation—but I paused in the middle of the hallway in my confusion.

My neighbor turned red, so her freckles looked more like a blanket than a dusting and was still white knuckled, while the mother appeared slightly puzzled with the look of grizzled acceptance that frequently accompanied the perpetually exhausted.

I don't understand. This is the same neighbor who greeted me with a frightening amount of perkiness despite knowing I was a vampire. What could she possibly find so frightening about an exhausted mother?

The mother glanced at me, and I could tell the moment my vampire pheromones—as much as I held them in check—brushed her because her eyes brightened and she watched me with a curiosity that I knew could turn into obsession.

As good as my control was over my powers, vampires were designed to draw humans—our prey and food source—in. It made it difficult to avoid being fawned over, which is why I typically moved quickly with the intention of avoiding notice.

My neighbor, still squatting on the ground, was apparently oblivious to vampire wiles. She steeled her shoulders as she stood up holding out the toy for the toddler, who took it with a

giggle. “Would you like to come over for a cup of coffee—or tea?” My neighbor blurted out in a rush of words I could barely understand.

The mother smiled. “Thank you, but I’ll need to pass this time. I’m on my way out—Mia has play circle soon.”

My neighbor visibly wilted. “Oh. Um, well, h-have fun!”

“We will. Have a great day.” Since the toddler-toting woman lacked free appendages, she smiled at my next door neighbor, then started down the hallway pausing in front of the elevator. With no free hands, the woman was forced to balance on one leg and press the elevator call button with her knee.

My neighbor stared at her feet, a visible war flickering across her face. She didn’t notice the other woman’s struggle until the elevator dinged and opened, and the human mother and child got inside. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I should have—and she’s gone.” My neighbor heaved a deep sigh that made her entire body slump after the elevator doors shut.

Humans are odd, I concluded before crossing the remaining distance to my apartment.

“Oh, hey, Connor,” my neighbor said, her voice loose and relaxed—a stark difference from the uptight anxiety I’d witnessed just seconds ago.

So very odd. I slipped my keyring out of my pocket. “Good afternoon,” I said.

My neighbor leaned against the wall. “Did you have a good morning?” she asked—I’d say it was a predictable human greeting, but it still struck me as weird that she was so relaxed with a *vampire* and treated her fellow human with fright.

I stuck my key in the lock—I had to be careful not to turn it too hard or I’d snap the key off in the lock. “It was productive. Tell me, do you find children terrifying?”

My neighbor had been in the process of taking a swig of her questionable swill, then she lowered the cup and confusion wrinkled her forehead. “What?”

“You looked as though you thought that woman or her child might eat you.”

She drooped. “Really? It was that bad?” She groaned and tilted her head back so it rested against the wall. “I’ve been working so hard—I thought I was getting better?”

“Better?”

She looked up and down the hallway as if she was about to reveal to me some great secret. “I’m bad in social situations,” she said. “I get so nervous. Small talk is terrifying to me.”

She was scared of...talking?

“It seems vampires and humans have differing definitions of small talk,” I said. “As I was under the impression that’s what we’re doing.”

“It is,” my neighbor agreed. “This is different. You’re a vampire.”

I stared at her, trying—and failing—to figure out what she meant.

It seems I’ve spent too much time around the listless Dracos children because I’m not following her at all. Perhaps I need to educate myself on modern society or soon I’ll be worse than my charges.

“I would assume my being a vampire would make the situation worse. Unless...” I took a step away from her. “Are you aiming to become a blood donor?”

Blood donors typically fell in one of three camps: those desperate for the money, those who aspired to become vampires themselves, and those crazy enough to behave like lunatic fans of vampires as they lacked the intelligence to realize just how dangerous we were.

“What? No.” It was Jade’s turn to frown at me—as if *I* was the weird one. “I just see vampires all the time for work at the Curia Cloisters. That makes you easy to talk to.”

“But you were raised around humans,” I pointed out.

Jade peered into her cup, which was wet with condensation. “Yeah, well, I was homeschooled. How are you liking Magiford?”

“It’s fine—very quaint,” I returned to my apartment, unlocked the door, carefully removed the key, and then paused thinking of the vampire slayer I’d met last night.

“It has some unusual points of interest,” I said.

I’d never known a vampire slayer to work with other supernaturals. As they somewhat mirrored vampires—all slayer families had some vampire blood in them—they were familial in nature, and typically only worked within their family lines.

That there was one running around the city, even if it was under the prerogative of the Regional Committee of Magic, was... odd.

“That’s great!” my neighbor said, her chirpy attitude making a strong comeback—which was a stark contrast to her nervous interaction with her fellow human. “Just wait until you see the supernatural fall market—it’s next week.”

I wanted to get away from the chatty human, but a supernatural market? *It sounds like something I should be aware of—so I can avoid it.* “And what, pray tell, is the supernatural fall market?” I asked.

My neighbor brightened—I got the idea she enjoyed being able to talk to someone about something that she clearly was excited for. “The Curia Cloisters sponsors a quarterly market that’s always themed to the season, so this quarter’s market is autumnal. There are vendors, food, photo ops, and it’s one of the only legal ways supernaturals can sell magical items to humans,” she explained. “You should stop by the Cloisters to get a list of all the other supernatural sponsored events!”

Yep. Something to avoid.

Satisfied with my conclusion, I stepped into my apartment. “I’ll have to do that. Thank you.”

“Yep!” The human smiled at me, her hold on the cup now relaxed. “Have a great afternoon, Connor!” She turned on her

heels and started down the hallway, the curls of her short red hair bouncing with every step she took.

She's definitely being overly friendly, not drawn in by my vampire powers or she wouldn't leave so easily. How can she find other humans so terrifying and be completely unaware of the threat I pose to her?

Humans were weird—and stupid when it came to basic self-preservation methods.

Ignorance really is bliss.

I locked the front door of my apartment and wandered over to the fridge—which was stocked with blood pouches in a variety of blood types. I picked one at random, dumped it into a glass—drinking it from the plastic pouch left an aftertaste I didn't like.

I sipped at the blood as I crossed the apartment, heading towards the laptop I'd left open on the dining table—a wooden furniture piece with an elaborately carved pedestal and padded chairs that didn't match the cookie-cutter styled apartment.

With three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a dining area, entertainment space, and a patio that wrapped around the corner of the building, I was renting the largest, human owned and managed apartment that was available in Magiford. However, for a vampire, this was slumming it.

Our long lives meant it was easier to build wealth. I hadn't lived in anything except luxury since before Ambrose, the sentimental idiot, had turned Vígí.

I stepped off the cheap Berber carpet onto the Turkish rug I had taken from storage and turned my sleek laptop on. The laptop was the only thing that accompanied me no matter which Dracos child I chose to plague, so I used two-step authentication to keep my whiny charges out of it—though the step was likely unnecessary as Killian was the only Dracos offspring to adopt the newest technologies.

My inbox was filled with emails—endless reports from the stooges I'd settled in the various Dracos households who reported in on the current state of their sires and respective

Families, letting me keep track of each of my charges no matter where I was in the world.

The First Chevalier—the second-in-command—of Auberi and Aimé’s household had submitted a sniveling email begging me to come to their chateau in France as the twins were starting to spend more time asleep than awake.

I wasn’t too moved. I had some time before the twins would truly start to slip, and I didn’t want to overly coddle them or their minions would be even more demanding in the future.

One of my underlings in Sachiko’s household—the Ryuu Family—mentioned another vampire family had recently attempted to assassinate her.

I sent out a text to another vampire family in Japan—Sachiko’s home—that owed me a favor, instructing them to offer an alliance with her.

Sachiko wouldn’t need it. When she wasn’t mooning over the death of one of her favorite humans, she was possibly the most bloodthirsty Dracos besides Killian. But the offer would offend her as it would spark the idea that others viewed her as weak, which would set her off so she’d clean house and destroy whoever had been stupid enough to attack her in the first place.

There were also a slew of emails from my accountant and my financial advisors sending me the necessary paperwork for some new properties I’d added to my portfolio. I didn’t keep any household staff for myself, but in addition to the various guards I employed to protect several of my homes I hired out legal and financial help.

I was looking over the last of the emails when my cellphone buzzed.

I flicked past the lock screen, then raised an eyebrow.

It was a text message, predictably, from Killian.

When I’d disappeared from his mansion the night after my arrival, he’d had his underlings endlessly call me. That he was deigning to text me was a new turn of events.

Opening the message, I scanned it, then chuckled.

KILLIAN

If your revenge on me for being Ambrose's offspring is to saddle me with endless messages from overly dramatic vampires who wish to grovel before you, you are succeeding.

How disappointing. I would have thought your fearsome reputation would have been enough to scare them away. I'd hoped for more from you.

KILLIAN

So sorry to disappoint. It seems my fearsome reputation can easily be overcome by the awe they hold for you as a celebrity. Every vampire within the Midwest has begged me to secure an invitation to meet you.

As a whole, we vampires were a power-hungry bunch; of course, they'd want the chance to grovel before me. There weren't many vampires my age or older, and only a few of us were awake—most had succumbed to permanent sleep.

How unpleasant for you.

KILLIAN

Do you really intend to stay hidden?

Yes. Feel free to celebrate.

I had enough time to drain the remaining blood from my sparkling chalice before my phone beeped with a new message.

KILLIAN

By celebrate I assume you mean curse your name and existence.

I set my cup down so I could respond.

I was unaware my presence meant so much to you.

KILLIAN

It means I'm aware that you are far more dangerous loosened upon my city than you are prowling around my mansion where I can be kept appraised of your movements.

I tapped my phone for a moment, mulling over Killian's responses, trying to sense if there was any weakness in them caused by the new acquisition of his One. It didn't seem like it, but I hadn't had enough time to suss out Killian's reputation and recent actions in Magiford.

What do you want?

KILLIAN

Meet up with the local vampires—we can make it a party, so you get it all over with at one time.

It was a fair ask, and it would give me an opportunity to see Killian's reputation among the other vampire Families. However, I couldn't give in too soon—Killian would be too suspicious.

That sounds boring—and like a colossal waste of time.

KILLIAN

Because it will be.

Maybe later. Once I'm more comfortable.

KILLIAN

Noted.

I set my phone down and contemplated my empty glass. “It seems Magiford has a lot of unusual things to share.”

Unusual was a rarity in my experience.

Nothing was truly new to the world. Technology might “advance” the human race, but the truth was every generation simply repeated the same mistakes and problems of their forefathers. This stupidity was not unique to humans—it also affected most supernaturals. It was why vampires were asinine in their longing for history, and why the vampires who *weren't* oblivious to this pattern typically ended up sleeping forever. The monotony of seeing the same pain and terror being repeated was enough to steal anyone’s desire to live.

And yet...Magiford had offered a lot of newness in the short time I’d been here.

Unbidden, my thoughts returned to my redheaded neighbor: the human who was terrified of humans but made herself approach them, yet was calm and easy with me.

Jade. That was her name.

The realization that I’d actually remembered her name when she’d introduced herself surprised me.

I didn’t bother to remember human faces, much less names.

But...I suppose there was no harm in having a name for one of my new methods of entertainment.

As long as my real powers remain hidden, I imagine Magiford will hold quite a bit of entertainment for me. I grinned and glanced in the direction of Jade’s apartment. *Perhaps this won’t be the trial I’d imagined.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jade

Music pumped in my ears, helping me keep my pace as I sprinted down the street avoiding looking at anyone's face as I dodged pedestrians.

I'd chosen today for my running program—my family had developed a very particular training regimen that included weightlifting and running for optimal health and physical wellbeing. I kept the training schedule, even though it wasn't very fun when I didn't have my brothers to train with.

Today, however, I was seriously questioning my dedication to the training schedule.

The sun beat down on my shoulders, and even though I'd put on sunscreen I had a nagging feeling I was still going to end up burned. (Thank you, Irish heritage that made me pale enough to pass for a ghost.) I'd also sweated through my athletic shirt so I probably smelled terrible. My face was red and a few loose tendrils of my curly red hair had pulled free from the pins and were plastered to my forehead. It felt like I was swimming instead of running thanks to the day's high humidity.

It might be September, but the weather certainly hadn't gotten the notice.

I kept sprinting, hurried on by the hope that my sprinting session was almost done.

I ran through a flock of pigeons, who flew off with an ease I envied—they didn't seem to mind the hot weather. A French fry pelted my shoulder—likely a parting gift from one of the birds—and just when I thought my lungs were going to collapse and I would die on the sidewalk from heatstroke, the alarm I'd set went off.

“*Finally.*” I slowed from my sprint to a slow jog more suited for a long-distance run.

Having the ability to both sprint and jog for long distances had been deemed necessary by my parents.

It did help—I had excellent stamina and lung capacity—but I still hated training for it.

“I can't wait for summer to be over,” I grumbled to myself as I peered around trying to get my bearings.

I'd started over on Main Street, and now I was on Goldstein Street—where the mantasps had been released.

I caught sight of myself in the window of a lawyer's office as I jogged past and grimaced.

My short hair made a miserably tiny ponytail and my run had yanked half of it out, so with my red face slick with sweat I resembled a kid that was just done throwing a temper tantrum.

Ahh, well. If I'm training to survive, I guess it's only right that I look like I'm fighting for my life.

I corrected my slugging jogging form, then looked around the street.

Part of the reason why I was running outside and turning myself into a sweaty mess instead of using the treadmill inside my blessedly air-conditioned apartment building gym was because the jogs were an excellent way to not only familiarize myself with the city, but the people within it.

This early in the afternoon—at the hottest part of the day because I'm smart like that—there weren't any vampires or

werewolves hanging out.

Scratch that, I could sense a nearby vampire but chances were it was a Drake vampire—they were famous for going out during the day.

Most of the pedestrians were humans with a smattering of fae going in and out of Tutu's farther down the street.

It seems like traffic has resumed as normal. Then again, the mantasps were released in the middle of the night so I guess people would assume there isn't anything to fear.

I could still smell the faintest trace of the hot, tarry mixture the city used to repair the potholes we'd created when fighting the mantasps, so I was studying the streets when I jogged past the pasty guy with the umbrella.

Hold up—vampire!

I slowed to a walk before groaning and staggering under the striped awning that was hung over the front of an accountant's office, which let me loop back a few steps so I stood closer to the guy holding an umbrella.

As I pantomimed 'exhausted jogger'—which was only half an act—I discreetly glanced up the street, getting a better look at him.

Hidden under the shadow of an enormous black umbrella, the vampire was wearing a tweed suit, with the shirt so starched he could have poked someone's eyes out with the points of his collar, and a bowler hat. The vampire's eyes had an unsettling orange hue to the usual red irises and the skin of his face looked thin—like it was hanging off his bones.

Fashion history hadn't been my best class—that was my mom's expertise—but I *thought* his clothes looked vaguely American from around the 1890s.

He's definitely not a Drake vampire. All the vamps in that Family wear modern suits.

Wishing I had a water bottle that I could drink from to further push my portrayal, I leaned against a wall and gasped for air.

At least now all that redness in my face will be useful for something!

Chances were this vampire was the lowest rank in his Family, so he'd been ordered out during the day to finish some business for the Family. That didn't mean he was doing anything illegal, but I was on high alert given the recent mantasp incident.

Besides, this was an excellent opportunity to practice my tailing/observation skills.

I fanned my face and casually peered up and down the street. The grumpy vampire remained where he was—in as much shadow as he could find at this hour, clutching his umbrella.

When I started stretching out my legs, a white colored van pulled up to the curb and into a 15-minute limit parking spot.

A man popped out of the van. Wearing an orange and yellow tie and vest matched with a white dress shirt, he looked as hot as I was as he squinted in the sunlight and stepped onto the curb. I noticed the patch on his vest, which had the crest of the wizard House Tellier.

What's a House Tellier wizard doing here?

The Tellier wizard looked up and down the street until he saw the lurking vampire. He ambled up to the vamp and greeted him in a lowered tone.

The vampire stuck his nose up in the air and responded in a similarly lowered tone that I couldn't hear.

The Tellier wizard jerked his thumb back at the van, then retreated to the car, climbing into the driver's seat.

Surprisingly, the vampire followed him and fumbled with the passenger door handle for a couple of moments before getting the hang of it and sliding into the van.

That's weird. I watched as the wizard turned the van on again, then slowly pulled out onto the street. *I didn't think Tellier was known for being particularly interested in inter-supernatural relationships.*

Supernaturals weren't all that great at working together. Sure, we were united in two things: firstly, in the war against elves because they had been awful tyrants who'd nearly ended supernaturals with their thirst for power and, secondly, in the need to make humans think supernaturals were all harmless and good.

Beyond that, we typically stuck to our own.

Of course, the higher ups in the Midwest Regional Committee of Magic were trying to change that. It was why the Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement existed, and why they'd been careful to recruit members from a variety of backgrounds to fill the department.

Outside the Committee, most wizards and vampires aren't chummy. Weird. Unless it's a sign things are changing?

The thought didn't sit right with me, then again, I'd been raised to suspect everything and everyone who wasn't family.

I stepped out of the shade cast by the awning back into the hot sunshine to continue my run, grimacing a little at the dull ache in my lungs.

I really do hate running. Weightlifting is way more fun. Running just makes me sweaty and red faced.

My steps were heavy as I jogged up the street dodging a gaggle of humans heading into one of the office buildings.

I stepped around a werewolf who was heading towards a battered jeep parked on the street, then sneezed as I stepped within the boundaries of Tutu's Crypta & Custodia's shields and seals.

The dragon seal blasted me, burning in my mind like spicey food—that was how I sensed magic, through oddly weird sensations I felt in my brain like spicey food for dragons or gossamer wings for fae.

When my vision finally cleared from my sneeze I jogged on, letting myself go slower so I could again look for damage the city had already repaired.

Or maybe the Curia Cloisters repaired it without telling the humans? I wouldn't put it past the Cloisters as shredded streets and insectoid monsters would crack the friendly and harmless persona they try so hard to curate.

My vampire senses stirred as a motorcade of black SUVs rolled down the street. The dragon insignia emblazoned on the doors of the leading car was the emblem of the Drake vampire Family—the Drakes were run by the vampire Eminence Killian Drake, who led all the Midwest vampires.

It wasn't unusual to see Drake vampires out and about in daylight. What *was* unusual was that all but the lead SUV had their windows down and each was staffed with two to four vampires who—clothed in dark suits and wearing matching black sunglasses—were looking up and down the street as if they were searching for something—or someone.

Maybe they were sent out to look for clues about the mantasps? But they're watching pedestrians.

I watched the cars as they rolled down the street and made a mental note to ask at work if anyone had heard what the Drakes were searching Magiford for.

My general body awareness kicked in, and I realized a fae was gliding down the city block on a direct path to collide with me.

He was a fae noble—humanoid in appearance with movie-star looks. His golden blonde hair was meticulously styled, and he was wearing a white suit that I would have gotten dirty if I just looked at it.

He wasn't watching where he was going. Instead, he was looking to the side, swerving slightly from side to side as if following some invisible sight.

I deftly stepped out of the way and continued plodding up the block, unbothered by the fae's self-absorption—which was pretty on par for his kind.

However, when I got free of Tutu's seals—and the spicy sensation of dragon magic disappeared—I whipped around.

The fae was still walking, his steps wavering from side to side as he meandered down the block. He didn't stop gawking until he reached the edge of Tutu's seals and shields. Then he picked up his pace and strode on, his face focused on the sidewalk in front of him.

Was he feeling for Tutu's shields and seals? But why?

Tutu's was impossible to crack—no one could best a dragon when it came to security. Also, no one would seek vengeance like a dragon who believed their hoard had been compromised, so no one was stupid enough to try it.

Maybe he was an employee, testing the magic after the mantasp incident.

It was a possibility. House Tellier joining hands and inviting vampires over for cake and tea was also a possibility, just an infinitesimally small possibility.

This is why it's important to know my city, I concluded as I reluctantly started jogging again. So that I don't see danger around every corner.

Still... I'd ask Sunshine, at least, about the fae. And House Tellier. Just in case.



TWO NIGHTS PASSED, and I still hadn't been able to find Sunshine and ask her for intel—she must have been off.

I was out on patrol with Tetiana and Binx and had spent the first couple hours of our shift attempting to screw up my courage to ask them for their opinion on what I'd seen.

What if they think I'm just paranoid? I checked my belt for my cuffs and my weapons as we strolled down the silent road.

It was late enough that Main Street—our assigned area—was silent. The only open businesses were a few bars and nightclubs.

Binx led us, with Tetiana in the middle, and I took up my customary rear position.

Tetiana paused to stare into the dimmed window of a pet grooming salon called Paw & Order that was closed for the night. “Binx,” she called. “Do you ever have to go to the groomers?”

Binx paused, then peered back over her shoulder. “What?” She growled, her voice going sublevel temperatures.

Tetiana studied her reflection in the salon’s window, then smoothed a part of the crown braid that wrapped around her head. “It’s a legitimate question. You must get your cat form clean somehow, yeah?” She pointed to the grooming salon. “This would be the easiest method.”

“That’s offensive,” Binx said.

“Oh, so that’s a no, then?”

“*Obviously!* I transform into a North American cougar!”

Tetiana clapped her hands together once. “I get it, you’re too shy to go by yourself.”

Binx looked like she might transform just so she could claw the oblivious Tetiana. “How could you possibly interpret what I said as shyness?”

“You said *North American Cougar* like you turn into a monster. Don’t worry, you’re a very beautiful kitty. Many people would love to pet you.” Tetiana solemnly nodded.

Binx took a step toward Tetiana, murder in her eyes. I knew the gorgeous vampire could hold her own, but I didn’t want to break up a fight between the two, so my desperation gave me the courage to blurt out, “Do either of you know anything about Tutu’s employees?”

It was Tetiana’s turn to peer back over her shoulder, her red eyes glinting in the light cast from a nearby streetlight. “What?”

Binx studied me, her head tilted.

I shifted nervously. “The other day. I was going for a run—past Tutu’s.” I spoke too fast, and I knew my sentences were stilted, so I tried to take a deep calming breath through my

nose. “I saw a fae. He looked like he was testing Tutu’s boundaries.”

Tetiana and Binx exchanged looks. I couldn’t read their expressions—they were too fast.

“Describe him,” Binx ordered.

I described the fae as we’d been trained, staring at the task force pin on the collar of Binx’s shirt instead of her face.

“He was probably an employee,” Tetiana said once I finished.

“Probably,” Binx echoed. “Word has it that Tutu’s increased security after the mantasps were released on Goldstein Street.”

“Ah,” I said.

Awkward silence filled the air like smoke from a smoldering fire. Tetiana glanced back at Binx again, who shrugged.

Great. I was right. They really do think I’m paranoid. Hey, at least they aren’t fighting anymore. I can unite them in their disbelief.

My face felt hot, and I rolled my shoulders back. “Should we keep going?”

“Yeah,” Tetiana said. “Yeah,” she repeated as she turned around.

Binx started stalking off again, and she nearly jumped out of her boots when our radios shrieked.

A burst of static blasted out of the radios, until we heard Sarge’s voice. “*Team Blood?*”

I grimaced at the name—another reminder of just what my squadmates thought of me.

Tetiana unhooked her radio and pressed a button. “YEAH?” She shouted. “YOU NEED SOMETHING, SARGE?”

Binx clamped her hands over her ears and scowled at the blonde vampire. “You don’t need to *shout*,” she hissed. “And you didn’t press the right button.”

“No way, I got it labeled.” Tetiana peered down at her radio. Someone—probably one of the techs—had put tape over the majority of the radio’s buttons so Tetiana couldn’t press them.

“*Team Blood?*” Sarge repeated. “*Can you hear me?*”

I unhooked my radio and pressed the correct button. “Yes, Sarge.”

“*We just received a report from the human police. They got a call that there’s a transformed werewolf running around downtown on your route.*”

I peered back in the direction of the streets we already covered. “Can you give us an approximate area?”

“*The caller phoned the police while standing by the Flying Curry.*”

I lowered the radio. “That’s a couple blocks up from here,” I said. “Going west.”

Binx nodded as she also unhooked her radio. “Understood, Sarge. We’ll look into it.”

“Ah-hah!” Tetiana triumphantly pressed a different button. “WE’LL BE IN TOUCH!” she shouted.

“Would you cut that out?” Binx hissed as she put her radio back on her belt. “The werewolf probably heard you from all the way downtown!”

I double checked that my weapons were secured as Tetiana put her radio away.

“Yes, yes, shifter hearing is so superior, I’m sure,” Tetiana said as she turned to face me again.

I had finished checking the daggers strapped to my thigh when I realized Binx was also watching me, the duo wearing an expectant look.

...what? Was I too slow?

“Ready,” I said.

“Ready!” Tetiana chorused in a sing-song voice.

“Ready,” Binx repeated before she started out.

We jogged the few blocks to the Flying Curry—an amazing Indian restaurant that I’d become extremely fond of as it had great food and an adorable striped cat that sat with me whenever I ate there.

It was closed for the night, but the Irish pub across the street had its lights on and thrummed with Celtic music—which was probably where the call had come from, and possibly what had attracted the werewolf to the area.

“What are the chances that the werewolf has gone feral?” Tetiana whispered as we slunk into the alleyway wedged next to the Flying Curry. The alleyway was open and kept clean as the Flying Curry had some tables and chairs—all stacked neatly—out there for its guests.

“Not very,” Binx said.

“Really?” Tetiana had been peering around the corner of the building and straightened up with Binx’s reply. “Why else would a werewolf be wandering the streets at night in their wolf form?”

Binx shrugged. “Werewolves are single-minded. And slobby. Werecoats know better.”

“Ooh, that doesn’t sound like jealousy at all,” Tetiana said with admiration.

“Do you hear anything, Binx?” I asked.

Binx tilted her chin up, then shook her head. “The music is too loud to pinpoint much. Something is going through the trash somewhere nearby. It might be a rat for all I can tell.”

I narrowed my eyes as I considered our options.

Werewolves had superior senses, and crazy amounts of strength that none of us could match. Sneaking up on it was our best bet—if Binx couldn’t tell where it was, there was a

good chance it couldn't hear/sense us, either. How would we find it?

Something crashed—a sound so loud it echoed, bouncing off the buildings.

I pulled two of my daggers free, holding them with a precise grasp, then peered around the corner. “Binx?” I whispered, speaking as quietly as possible.

Binx gave me a thumbs up and then crept out onto the street, leading us across the street to an alleyway. It was tight and cramped, and just held fire escapes for surrounding buildings and trash bins.

Something furry was sniffing bags of trash that spilled out of a plastic trash can that had tipped over—the source of the crash, probably.

I squinted trying to pick out the details of the furry body. “Is that...a dog?”

The dog—it looked like some kind of German shepherd mix with its triangular ears and black and brown coloring, except it was much smaller and weighed at most forty pounds—looked up from the trash cans and whined.

“Not a werewolf, for certain,” Binx said. “Too small, not fierce enough looking. Also, he smells better.”

Werewolves were massive—closer to the size of a pony than a dog—and they were way more muscled. This lost pooch was clearly a dog.

“He looks like a good boy,” Tetiana observed.

Binx took a step closer, which made the dog take a tiny step backwards. “I think it's wearing a collar. It must be someone's missing pet. I'll call it in to Sarge.” She picked her radio off her belt.

“We should catch him,” Tetiana said.

Binx paused with the radio raised halfway to her mouth. “Why?”

“Because he’s lost, and he might get hurt before the humans get him,” Tetiana said.

Hardnosed Binx apparently was a softy for animals because she lowered the radio and stared at the dog.

As one, Tetiana and Binx glanced at me.

They must think I’m going to vote against it.

I tried to open my mouth and tell them that I would be happy to help capture the dog, but—my face hidden by my blank mask—I opened and closed my mouth a few times. I couldn’t figure out what to say.

Think of a work way to say it, I desperately thought. Think of work! If it’s for work, I can talk.

“We should be slow to approach him,” I said. “Or we might freak him out.”

“It will be easy—we’re supernaturals!” Tetiana strolled towards the dog.

Binx skulked after her, her movements more liquid as she stuck to the side of the alleyway.

I sheathed my daggers and stayed where I was at the entrance, so I could make sure the dog wouldn’t escape between the two.

“Nice doggy,” Tetiana crooned as she held out a hand.

The dog nervously curled his tail tight against his rump, whining a little as he looked from Binx to Tetiana.

Tetiana took a step closer. “Can I look at your collar—wait!”

The dog took off down the alley, abandoning the trash.

Binx and Tetiana jumped for him at the same time and collided in a heap.

“Would you watch where you’re jumping?” Binx snarled.

“I jumped first,” Tetiana complained as she disentangled herself from the werecat.

I jogged past the duo, popping out of the far end of the alleyway in time to see the dog racing up the street. “I’ve got a visual,” I said. “Someone give Sarge an update.”

“On it,” Binx growled.

I jogged after the dog, trying to go slow so I wouldn’t scare him more. With my mask on and not an inch of my skin showing, I was probably scarier to the poor guy than Tetiana and Binx combined.

The dog kept running all the way to King’s Court Drive, stopping in the parking lot of a small strip mall.

The strip mall’s shops were closed. The parking lot was nice and empty with only two cars in the whole thing.

“Hey, buddy.” I made my voice as inviting as I could and crouched down trying to appear less scary.

The dog was sitting on the sidewalk in front of a very popular café, Queen’s Court. The café was closed, thankfully, as the dog backed up until his rear touched the massive windows.

“Do you want to go home? Your owners must be worried sick.” I crept forward, holding out my gloved hand.

The dog sat down and slightly wagged his tail, his expression hopeful.

“You’re so handsome,” I said—compliments worked on people, why not animals? “Let’s get you all sorted out so you can head home.”

I was almost to the sidewalk. The dog whined and then bolted, streaking down the sidewalk.

He was about two stores down when a massive body came shooting out past the side of the strip mall, hitting the parking lot pavement with a pained ‘oomph’. The body rolled, hitting a parked car, and denting the door with a massive foot.

CHAPTER NINE

Jade

I stared at the thrown blob, my mind recognizing that it was a troll slumped in the parking lot but refusing to comprehend what was strong enough to so easily toss a troll.

The troll made the dog change his mind as he made an abrupt U-turn and came running back to me, body slamming me as he whined in fright.

I grabbed his collar so he couldn't run off and he practically climbed into my lap, so I decided to pick him up as I took careful steps backward—I wasn't about to investigate whoever had thrown the troll when I had the dog to think of.

Thankfully, I heard the familiar tap of Tetiana's boots behind me. Backup had arrived.

"You got him," Tetiana trotted up the sidewalk, her breathing labored. "Well done! Also, wow. You can run. Very fast!" She made a show of sucking in air as she caught up, joining me to stand in front of Queen's Court. Her red eyes abruptly sharpened and she glanced at the slumped shape in the parking lot. "You have company?" She asked, her voice low.

I passed the dog, who was snuggling into my shoulder, over to her. "Yeah. Is Binx on the way?"

Tetiana cradled the dog, who licked her cheek and didn't seem very scared of her now that there was a real predator. "She's a block behind me. I heard her hissing at the radio."

I nodded. "I'll approach—for observation only. I won't be attacking. Warn Binx, I'll be back."

"Understood." Tetiana rocked back and forth patting the frightened dog.

I slunk down the sidewalk using a huge wooden planter for cover when I reached the end of the strip mall.

The troll groaned but wasn't moving. I wasn't certain he was conscious, but at least he was alive.

I held my breath, but I didn't hear anything moving in the area. I pressed tight against the planter and peered around the corner.

There was nothing. The road that looped back behind the strip mall—where employee parking was—was empty.

I stood up and took one step down the road keeping myself pressed tight against the building.

Faintly, I heard pained groans that sounded like they were coming from the back parking lot.

Was it another fae fight? Are they battling in the back parking lot? But what fae are large enough to throw a troll so far?

My senses abruptly lit up screaming at me that there was another vampire in the area besides Tetiana.

"We meet again, slayer."

I simultaneously spun around and backed up, facing the vampire who casually leaned against the side of the strip mall.

It was the same vampire I'd encountered with Grove and Brody. His face was still shadowed by the hood of the jacket he wore—this close to him I could feel the glossy mental brush of fae magic that radiated off his shirt, so it had to be charmed. Probably with an illusion spell—shadows fell across his face in the wrong pattern for the lighting back here.

How did he hide himself so well? I should have felt this kind of power all the way down by the café!

The vampire tilted his head, and despite the magic-produced shadows on his face I could see his ruthless red eyes. “Aren’t you happy to see me?”

“Not particularly,” I said. “Since it seems like unconscious bodies always accompany you.”

“Don’t mind them, they’re just stupid.” He sounded polite, but it didn’t go deep—it was more like a mask of politeness, someone pantomiming something they’d only seen and had never experienced. What worried me more than the show of politeness was the faint interest gleaming in his eyes.

“Them?” I asked, trying to keep him occupied.

I glanced past the vampire. He was standing between me and the rest of my team—isolating me in the worst possible way.

I might be able to outrun him and loop around the building without him catching me but if he’s this powerful, I don’t want to count on it.

“Oh, you only saw the troll, then?” the vampire asked. “In that case I meant he is stupid enough to count for multiple beings.”

More groans echoed along the side of the building.

He took down a lot more than a troll.

“And why did you attack the troll?” I kept my posture guarded but I didn’t reach for a weapon—he’d surely read that as a threat and react accordingly.

“I never said I attacked him,” the vampire said.

“Then he threw himself at the parking lot?”

“You see the most inconvenient things.” He sighed; his posture forlorn as he folded his arms across his chest. “If I claimed self-defense, surely you’d believe me?”

“You caused property damage this time,” I said.

The vampire peeled himself off the side of the building stretching up to his full intimidating height. “I should have known: slayers are always trouble. Though it is unexpected to find a solo one...”

He’s going to get nasty, which means the risk of staying here is greater than the risk of running and making his chase instincts kick in. Time to go.

I jumped backwards, neatly avoiding his attempted grab.

“Impressive,” he said.

I didn’t waste my breath—or time—responding. I turned tail and ran, following the road to the back parking lot.

I could hear him chase after me—his breath was non-existent, but his steps were louder than mine. (Improper shoe choice; many underestimated how important the right pair of boots were.)

Swerving to make myself a harder target, I made it all the way down the road, popping into the parking lot.

It was a massacre, with at least eight fae sprawled across the parking lot. No blood—I would have sensed it—but everyone was out of it. At least, I hoped they were just out of it and not... dead. That seemed most likely given the lack of blood and that their attacker was the vampire chasing me.

I was too well trained to stop and gawk, so I jumped over a faun—who was splayed out in a starfish position—and sprinted along the back of the building as I tried to take in the situation.

A dryad was thrown in a heap over an unconscious centaur, and a brownie—head flat on the pavement with his butt hitched up in the air—was wedged next to a no parking sign.

There were more, but I felt the vampire chasing me close in so I changed my focus.

He reached for me, his hand grazing the sleeve of my uniform.

I ducked under his arm, scraping my gloved hand across the pavement and grabbing a few loose pebbles. When I stood up, I threw the pebbles at him aiming for his eyes.

I had just enough time to see him raise an arm to block the pebbles before I sprinted off. I was about halfway down the strip mall's backside at this point.

"Why are you running?" the vampire asked, his voice infuriatingly calm even though he was racing after me. "What if I just want to talk? We could be friends—isn't that what this touchy-feely-city is striving for?"

He was so close that I swear I could feel his breath on my back.

This time, when he reached out, I felt him touch my left hip—I think he was trying to grab hold of the belt loop there.

I careened to a stop and before the vampire could smack into me, I raised my right arm—elbow up and stabilized. I braced myself, so I stayed standing when he bumped into me and rammed my elbow into his throat.

He took a step back and held both of his hands up, giving me space to run. He didn't even cough or sputter from the strike I'd just delivered to him.

No, he laughed.

The vampire actually *laughed*. Like a loon! It wasn't a cruel noise. It was worse than that. His laugh sounded terrifyingly close to delight.

I hadn't ever had a vampire *delighted* with me. I was pretty sure it was a very bad thing for my overall longevity, so I listened carefully for his footsteps as I kept running.

As his laughter faded away, so did his footsteps and right when I was about to turn around the corner of the strip mall—which would aim me towards the front of the building where Binx, Tetiana, and the lost dog were—I risked glancing back.

He was gone.

Only the fae were there—still unconscious. Even when I strained my senses, I didn't feel his power.

He'd left.

I didn't risk sticking around—safety in numbers, after all—so instead I kept running, popping out on the front sidewalk.

“What happened?” Binx strode towards me, pausing a few feet away. I thought maybe she was going to ask if I was okay since she looked me over, then the fragile hope was shattered. “We heard laughter.”

“*Male* laughter,” Tetiana was rubbing the lost dog's ears—he must have gotten over his initial fear of us because he was wagging his tail as she cradled him, his belly up. “Unless, do you have a very masculine and unhinged sounding laugh?”

“No.” I looked back over my shoulder as I carefully exhaled. “I encountered a vampire—the same one Grove, Brody, and I reported.”

“And you told him a good joke?” Tetiana asked.

Binx shot her a look. “Now is not the time for your stupidity act, Tetiana, it won't help her.” Binx rested her hands on her hips. “I take it the vampire did that?” she nodded in the direction of the still unconscious troll.

“Yes,” I said. “And some others. In the back parking lot.” I rolled some of the leftover tenseness out of my shoulders.

Tetiana whistled. “Sounds like he was busy. Shall we call it in? Binx already notified Sarge we caught the dog—we're supposed to take him to the Cloisters until his humans can be contacted.”

“I'll make the call,” Binx decided.

Tetiana nodded and rocked the canine.

I waited a second trying to measure out the group—that was one of the things I missed about fighting with my family. We always had clear roles and expectations. Half the battle of fighting with my squad was trying to guess what they wanted from me. “I'll start the report?” I asked, my voice cracking with the question.

Binx picked something out of a pouch on her belt and handed it to me. It took me a moment to realize it was a

butterscotch drop.

Is she saying good job? Or telling me my cracking voice needs soothing? It was hard to tell—I wasn't very confident in my understanding of how werecats operated but I was pretty sure it was a positive thing, so I took the candy.

“Thanks,” I said.

Binx didn't acknowledge my thanks. Instead, she plucked her radio up and peered down at it, reading the buttons despite the darkness, with her cat eyes.

Maybe I need to do some reading, I considered as I unwrapped the candy and stuffed my hand under my mask to pop it in my mouth. *There must be books about the psychology of other supernaturals. It might help me figure out how to interact with them.*

“This is Team Blood,” Binx said into the radio. “We have a situation.”

The warm taste of butterscotch swept away the last of the adrenaline trembles from my body, so I pointed myself at the troll and slipped out my phone so I could take pictures and notes. *First, I have a job to do.*



TWO DAYS LATER, I stood in front of Shelby's door, my mouth dry.

Do you want to go to the fall market with me? No, would you and Mia like to go to the fall market with me? I repeated the phrase endlessly in my head hoping the repetition would make it easier to say.

I'd been planning this for days—I'd asked for the evening off two weeks ago—but I kept missing the opportunity to ask any of my neighbors until today and, so far, I wasn't having any luck.

Mrs. Weston had been sorry but said she was going out with her bridge group when I'd asked her this morning on my

way to the gym. I'd managed to stammer out an invitation to Molly and Rachel—two college roommates—but they both had classes they couldn't skip. Even Ms. Elly—the nosy lady who had the only ground floor apartment and acted as the building gossip—was busy.

That left Shelby and her toddler daughter, Mia, as my last hope.

Shelby is very nice and patient. I can ask her. She won't mind.

Screwing up my courage, I knocked on the door, my heart buzzing in my chest.

A door closed, and I glanced down the hallway to see Connor slipping his key into his trouser pockets as he studied his door.

Great. My audience.

He'd been around for several of my failed invitations—apparently, he went in and out of the apartment building a lot as he wasn't the lurking type.

“Yes?” Shelby opened her apartment door and peered out at me. Her nose was red, and tiny little coughing noises slipped out of the apartment. “Oh, hi, Jade.”

“Hi. Hey.” I said, jittery with nerves. “Thanks for answering. Um.” My brain temporarily blanked.

Shelby faintly smiled, her expression patient as she leaned against the door. Although I couldn't see Connor as I faced Shelby, I could feel his eyes on my back.

“I was wondering if you and Mia wanted to go to the fall market with me,” I blurted out. “The supernaturals put it on—there's really cool stuff they sell. I think Mia would like all the magical sights.”

“I wish we could, but Mia is sick.” Shelby said, and I realized she was sagging against the door not with casualness but exhaustion. “She was up all-night coughing and probably shouldn't go out.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I said, the politeness my mother drilled into me speaking for me so I wasn’t scrambling for words.

“Thank you so much for thinking of us,” Shelby said.

“Yeah, I hope Mia feels better,” I said.

“Thanks. Have fun at the market,” Shelby smiled as she closed the door.

I stood there for a moment, thinking. *Well, I figured she was the least likely to be able to go.*

“How unfortunate, it seems that everyone in this apartment building leads very busy existences.” Connor strode closer to me. “Although I will say in this case it is perhaps sheer misfortune.”

“Yeah,” the word leaked out of me like air from a balloon. “I knew I should have brought it up sooner. Asking the day of is very last minute.”

Connor chuckled and for a second I thought I saw actual amusement in his dark red eyes. “You are very courteous for someone who is self-conscious.”

I shrugged. “It comes with the territory of fretting.”

“That sounds very inconvenient,” Connor said. “I’m glad I am not similarly plagued.”

“I don’t know that a vampire *can* be self-conscious.” As I turned away from Shelby’s door and drifted towards my apartment, Connor fell in line with me, and I vaguely registered his faint swirl of power. “You’re too convinced of your superiority—as a whole, I meant. Not individually.” I tried reading his face to see if I’d offended him but Connor was staring at the end of the hallway, his lips curved in a melancholic smile.

“Yes, I’m afraid that—to borrow your phrasing—comes with the territory of immortality. It offers a farce of protection, but it never actually works...”

He trailed off and for a moment I wondered if I’d misjudged him—not as a person, but his power level.

While he usually was all smiles and charm without anything deep—a more polite way of brushing humans off—as he stared at the brick wall, I could see the years in his eyes.

Maybe he's older than I realized...but the only vampires able to hide their power like this would have to be older than a millennium, and none of them would be kicking around Magiford trying to blend in with humans.

Maybe I'd been away from my family too long, and I was finally starting to get swayed by his handsome vampire looks even though I should be immune to any pheromones he was giving off.

Dad warned me that nothing good came from a slayer trying to separate from their family.

“My word, here I am prattling on like those old windbag elders, how embarrassing,” Connor laughed again—this time there was no accompanying glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “I wish you luck in your endeavors, Jade.”

“Thanks,” I said, pausing in front of my apartment door. “I hope you have a good day.”

Connor's smile was perfect—showing just a hint of teeth to make his pronounced canines dazzling and not intimidating. “Of course. You as well,” he said, every bit of polish and charm back in place. He winked at me, then ambled towards the stairwell.

I studied his back as he ambled off, every piece of his posture was carefree and casual.

The way he'd spoken...that didn't feel like a lie.

“Hey, Connor,” I called out before I even realized what I was doing.

Connor paused on the top step of the stairway and swung around to face me. “Yes?”

“Do *you* want to go to the fall market?”

CHAPTER TEN

Jade

Connor hadn't been on my list of targets—since he was a vampire, I was already pretty natural with him so it wouldn't stretch my skills to talk with him. But my shortcomings weren't a good enough reason to not be friendly.

And Connor was a vampire in a building full of humans that he wasn't hunting. If anyone was alone, it was him.

The amusement was back in Connor's eyes. "You are inviting *me*? Is it because every other being in this apartment building has refused you or are you really that stupidly polite?" He made a show of casually adjusting the gold ring with the red garnet he wore on his right index finger.

"It's a genuine invitation," I said.

Connor slowly left the stairs, swaggering in my direction. "Then don't tell me you're one of those humans who aims to become a donor?"

"Not even close," I snorted at the idea. "I'm going to the market regardless of whether you're coming with or not, and I *do not* consent for you to drink my blood," I made sure I held his gaze so he knew I was serious.

He *had* to take me seriously. His life depended on it.

As a vampire slayer, my blood was pure poison to vampires—it was one of our natural defenses. We smelled like an average human so a vampire wouldn't be able to separate our blood from that of the masses. We lured them into biting us, and they'd instantly die.

Our poisonous blood is also why traditionally we coated our weapons with our blood. A vampire might not be stupid enough to drink from a slayer in full slayer gear as they were well aware of what we were capable of, but if we could land one slice on them with a coated weapon it was all over.

I didn't follow that practice now—the risk was too great to Tetiana and Clarence—besides, the Curia Cloisters didn't really want us murdering when we were meant to subdue, and the nature of my blood meant death or nothing.

Connor tipped his head back and narrowed his eyes at me. I got the feeling he was weighing out the situation internally as several long seconds passed.

“Okay,” he said abruptly.

“Okay meaning...you'll come?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I straightened up, cheered by his acceptance—it is very hard to get as many rejections as I had this morning and still feel good about the day. “Great! Let me grab my bag, and then we can head out!”

Connor bowed gallantly. “I shall await your return.”

I slipped inside my apartment and grabbed my leather backpack off my kitchen counter—I'd have to make sure I didn't let Connor get a glimpse inside it or he might wonder why a secretary carried a knife set with her—then popped back into the hallway, locking my door behind me. “Let's go!”

I led Connor downtown—the market was held on Main Street, which was shut down for the day so all the stands, tents, games, and displays could be assembled on the street.

I was surprised he didn't show any of the usual signs of being uncomfortable out in the afternoon sun—the cloudy sky

might have helped that. The only sign he was bothered at all was that he put on a pair of sunglasses as he peered around inspecting all the sights and sounds.

“Have you ever been to any of the Magiford supernatural markets?” I asked as we stood at the very edge of the festival.

Connor watched a fae setting up a display of her suncatchers—some were magic-formed gems while others were colored glass cut and shaped in forms of the various Court crests. (I was willing to bet the dozen she’d made of the Night Court’s nightmares were going to sell out fast, as the Night Court was the most popular Court among humans.) “No, I’ve never seen any supernatural market open to humans like this.”

“I’m not sure if they have them outside of Magiford, here it’s a seasonal thing,” I said. “They frame it as a way for humans to have a chance to buy magic goods that are safe for human consumption, but really it’s a big PR push from the Curia Cloisters.” I realized a heartbeat too late that—as a human—I probably shouldn’t be aware of that.

Connor, of course, caught on to the inconsistency. “My, don’t you sound jaded?”

I kept my expression bland as I started walking, joining the swirling crowd that filled the street. “Not really. It’s just that since I work at the Cloisters, I get a better idea of how supernaturals think. I don’t think it’s wrong of them. Humans have their own PR efforts, supernaturals are just better at it.”

I sniffed picking up the sweet scent of kettle corn and sugar-glazed nuts that a wizard was making with her fire magic. “A lot better at it,” I said as I drifted towards the wizard’s cart.

Connor laughed. “You are wasted being a human.”

Thrown off, I peered up at him. “What do you mean?”

“Merely that you are fun. Relax—it was a compliment,” he said. “I wasn’t plotting to drain you before discovering you are humorous.”

I rolled my eyes. “I already warned you, it’s a no to the blood sucking. If you agreed to come here just because you thought it was going to be afternoon snacktime, you’re going to be disappointed.”

Connor stared down at me. “Snacktime?” He broke off into a bark of laughter. “I see. Very well, *Snack*, why don’t you show me the best of the stands?”

“I don’t know which stands are best,” I said, unbothered by the nickname—I could tell Connor didn’t really mean it. His eyes weren’t changing to signal he was feeling peckish, and he hadn’t tried busting out pheromones anywhere in the building. (And if it was his aim and he went for it without my permission, he’d only have himself to blame for his death.) “The fall market is the only supernatural festival I haven’t been to yet.”

I’d been in town checking out Magiford and applying to a task force position when I’d decided to go to the winter market on a whim, which had pretty much sold me on making the jump after I’d had a cinnamon roll from a brownie bakery stand.

“Then how do you best enjoy a market?” Connor asked.

“By eating your way through it.” I paused, then peered up at him again. “Sorry—do you no longer like human food? I know vampires can be iffy on that.”

“I don’t have cravings for it,” Connor said. “But I’m game to try something. Lead on, *Snack*.”

“Is that going to be a thing, now?” I asked. “Food related nicknames?”

“It’s going to be now that you gave me the idea,” Connor said.

I dodged a troll carrying a massive pumpkin towards a photo booth. “Then can I call you *Dracula*?”

“Certainly,” Connor said. “Though let me assure you Vlad—the inspiration—was entirely human, though his lust for power was impressively strong.”

“You knew him?” I paused in front of a sign advertising fireworks sponsored by the wizard House Tellier later in the evening. “Wow. You’re older than I thought.”

“See, if you get to make age jokes, I get to make food jokes,” Connor said.

“You’re right,” I agreed. “That’s how friendship works.”

Connor looked down at me with so much alarm I had to laugh.

“*That* scares you?” I hooted. “Friendship?”

“I fear nothing,” Connor insisted. “I am the night. I am so very fearsome, you ought to be trembling before me. You never know, I could be keeping you as my emergency rations.”

I laughed; our banter was so natural I could feel myself relaxing—it was almost like being home with my family. “Okay, *Night*.” I grabbed his wrist and tugged him along. “Let’s see if you can stomach kettle corn.”

“The night is delicate,” he announced, eyeing up a stall of swords and daggers that were forged and sold by a werewolf. “And will require encouragement to suffer through such things. For instance, I’d look very nice with a dagger.”

Now it was my turn to raise my eyebrows. “Nice try. I’m not buying you any weapons.”



“WHY ARE humans so obsessed with fudge?” Connor inspected a square of peanut butter fudge. “It seems to be a culinary practice frequently observed in the Midwest, and I haven’t the faintest clue why.”

I looked up from the pumpkin pie tart I’d bought from the brownie’s bakery stall. “If you’re going to complain, I’ll take it back. *I* like peanut butter fudge.”

Connor bit into the fudge, using one of his canine teeth to slice it in half. “Too late. It is... good?”

We strolled past a fae stall for face lotions and hair creams. “You sound surprised.”

“Because I am.” Connor brushed past a group of human teenage girls, who giggled to each other as they gaped at him. Admittedly, he looked extra picturesque with the setting sun casting a golden light on his face.

“You were similarly surprised by the kettle corn, the corn dog, the roasted sweet corn, the mini apple pie, and the Wisconsin brat.”

“You’re keeping track of what I eat? You are *such* a treat.” Connor veered closer to me and leaned over, cracking his head against mine.

“Ouch.” I held my pumpkin tart away from him, just in case he’d approached me to steal it. “Are you part werewolf or something? That was something I’d expect from a werewolf bro.”

Connor peeled his gaze away from the pumpkin pyramid a bunch of fae had cast illusion magic on so they made faces at everyone walking past and glanced down at me. “You continue to surprise me with just how aware you are of supernatural quirks.”

“Comes with the job,” I said—which wasn’t too far off from the truth, I just wasn’t referring to my fake job of secretary.

As a child, my parents had taught me about werewolves for slayer work.

Most of my werewolf knowledge, however, I acquired when I turned eighteen. I told my parents I wanted to train as an electrician with Uncle Kenny—my mom’s brother. They’d accepted the decision on the condition that I spend a summer training with werewolves.

I’d learned a lot about Packs and werewolf affection that summer.

“Yes, I imagine you learn all sorts of interesting things working for the Curia Cloisters,” Connor said.

“Yep,” I confirmed. “I’ve learned a fair bit about vampires. Which reminds me, who is your Family?” I asked, trying to sound as casual as possible, even though a lot road on this answer.

Vampire Families were their greatest allegiance. Whoever Connor’s family was would say a lot about him.”

“No one,” Connor said.

I stopped gawking at a stand of troll-portion pumpkin pies—which were almost as big as my torso—and stared up at him. “Pardon?”

“No one,” Connor repeated. “I’m not with a Family, I don’t have one.” There was a finality to his tone that warned me not to push it.

It’s probably a sore spot for him. In fact, it must be.

If Connor didn’t have a family, that meant he was unclaimed. Unclaimed vampires—vamps who didn’t belong to a family—didn’t tend to live very long. Vampire Families existed to politically, financially, and physically protect the vampires within their ranks.

Unclaimed vampires didn’t make the choice easily. So what had Connor gone through to make him choose a potentially shorter—and far more dangerous—life than safety in numbers?

I opened my mouth, but Connor—finished, apparently, with this line of questioning—cut me off. “Do you hear that?”

A sizzling noise crackled in the dusty evening air, and I stood on my tip toes to peer down the street at the circle that had been cleared at the end of the festival. “Looks like the fireworks are starting.”

“How quaint,” Connor said.

“I think it’s the first time they’re having fireworks here,” I said. “It’s sponsored by a wizard House.”

Connor ate the last bit of his fudge. “In that case, don’t get your hopes up. If wizards are running it, it’s probably going to be nothing more than colored flames.”

“I said they sponsored it, not that they were running it. Come on, I want to check it out.” I nudged Connor’s side with my elbow—there would be no head cracking on my end—then started edging down the street.

It was hard to get close as the festival attendees also drifted towards the new fireworks. In the end we had to slip out between two stalls and use the sidewalk to go out and around.

The fireworks were on the smaller scale with red, gold, and blue sparklers that the workers whirled through the darkening air to make glowing figures; pink, green, and purple fountains that spat colored flames nearly eight feet high; tiny popping fireworks that made whirling noises and glowed bright blue and green while they spun like tops; and a couple of roman candles that I was pretty sure broke the city noise ordinances, but shot off clouds of red and orange sparks.

The crowd oohed and ahed as they flowed in and out of the festival, and soon the sulphurous smell of the fireworks filled the air more than the scent of popcorn.

“What did I say? Underwhelming,” Connor said. “Not even full-sized fireworks.”

“I still think it’s fun.” Although it had been warm during the day, the temperature was falling rapidly as the sun set. I rubbed my arms as I watched a volunteer light the last roman candle. “They’re pretty, and the kids are enjoying it.”

The roman candle spat sparks as the fuse burned down, then it abruptly went out.

Connor tilted his head. “You were saying?”

The firework exploded with fire. Not colored sparks that were quickly snuffed out, but actual flames that engulfed the roman candle.

Someone screamed, and the relaxed crowd instantly turned into a panicked stampede as the festival attendees tried to back away from the burning firework.

The flames reached three feet high—which shouldn’t have been possible given the size of the firework—and then it started belching balls of flame into the air.

That's not good.

I pushed forward into the stampede trying to make my way towards the firework.

“And *where* do you think you're going?” Connor held me by the elbow and effortlessly tugged me backwards.

“Someone has to put it out,” I said as I tried to squirm free.

Connor was unrelenting. “Someone *will* put it out—someone who isn't a delicate human,” he said.

I was going to argue but a panicked dad carrying his kid plowed into me knocking me into Connor's chest.

I braced myself to be squashed further, but I felt Connor's shoulder move and nothing else touched me.

When I peeled my head off his chest, I was able to get a look around and I realized he had his left arm out and curled around me—not touching me but acting as a wall so that when humans rammed him they bounced off his unrelenting strength.

“Have no fear, humans!” Two wizards wearing coats in House Tellier orange and yellow broke out of the pandemonium. “We will save you!”

The taller wizard dramatically held his hands out and created a volleyball sized globe of water. He lowered it over the burning firework, encasing it in water.

The tall flames sputtered, then went out. The taller wizard popped the ball of water so it splashed across the street, while the shorter wizard grabbed the firework and tossed it in a bucket of water the volunteers setting the fireworks off kept on hand.

The two then turned and bowed as the crowd started to settle down enough to clap in appreciation.

I was pretty sure the taller wizard was the House Tellier Heir—the wizard who would one day inherit the house and become the House Adept, after his parents died, leading all the wizards that belonged to the House. I couldn't remember the heir's name, but his face had a perpetual sour lemon look that

made him easy to recognize. However, he wasn't wearing the sour look at the moment. Instead, he had a toothy smile as he took another bow.

I guess it's a good thing he was hanging around...but there's something I don't like about him. I unconsciously tightened my grip on Connor's shoulders.

"There, there," Connor patted my back twice, about as soothing as a cactus. "I'd say you must be frightened, *except!* You ran toward danger like a deranged carrot!"

That was odd enough to draw my attention from the preening wizards. "Carrot? Is that a dig at my hair color?"

"A firework blows up, you try to run towards it, and you're concerned I was making a joke about your hair?" Connor actually scowled at me. "I no longer wonder why you work for the Cloisters: it's because you lack common sense."

I patted Connor's shoulders, then released him and stepped away. His arm briefly grazed my midback before he relaxed into an appropriately casual pose that would have delighted a fashion photographer. "I would have been fine," I said.

Connor snorted. "The assurance of the delusional. Are you satisfied with this firework display?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "We can go."

Connor shook his head and prowled off, clearing a path for us.

I followed behind him deeply satisfied with the day.

It might not have been the practice I wanted, but at least it was fun. And this was the first time I got to experience another supernatural genuinely concerned for me.

It had been...unexpectedly touching.

Maybe Connor and I can be friends—real friends. That would be nice.

Either way, I could at least be sure by his reaction that he hadn't figured out I was a vampire slayer. I was happy my cover was working but there was a dangerous whisper at the

back of my mind that told me if we were really going to be friends, was it really okay not to tell him when my blood was a deadly poison to vampires?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Considine

Dusk painted the annoyingly bustling city of Magiford with shadows, giving some relief from the hot afternoon sun.

I stood in an alleyway keeping such a clamp on my powers that I shouldn't even register to other supernaturals as a vampire—except, apparently, to bubbly neighbors who noticed eye colors.

I leaned against the wall of the alleyway, patiently watching the trio of vampires that strode down the public sidewalk with so much competence it made them stick out like sore thumbs. Well, the competence matched their crisp black suits, which marked them as Drake vampires to every supernatural in the city.

Does Killian really think he'll find me with random searches? Does he think I'm so inept I've collapsed somewhere in a gutter?

The idea was insulting. I'd spent the last couple of centuries playing caretaker to the Dracos offspring—or as I had nicknamed them whenever they particularly irritated me, the snake-brats. Now he thought I couldn't survive alone?

This was Killian I was dealing with. *More likely he just doesn't want me loose and playing around in his territory. He*

probably thinks I'm trying to scent out his plans so I can ruin them.

It was an accurate guess. If I found a hint that Killian's obsession with his human had weakened him, I'd act.

When the trio was far enough up the street, I strolled out of the alleyway joining a cluster of humans stomping down the sidewalk like mindless herd animals for camouflage purposes.

So far, though, the underbelly of Magiford hadn't reported any change in Killian. If anything, he is beheld with even more fear.

I didn't understand it. Humans were useless for anything besides their blood, and they died easily. The long lived among them rarely made it to a mere century of age. What was the point in befriending them when they were gone before you could even get used to them?

Thinking of the amusing nights I'd had since arriving in Magiford, it did occur to me that perhaps there were some additional benefits.

Playing with the slayer on the task force is surprisingly amusing. Entertainment does have its uses.

I raised my right hand to adjust the sunglasses that hid my tell-tale blood-red eyes, and the red garnet on Ambrose's ring caught the light—a reminder I needed in my moment of weakness.

Entertainment, no matter how rare, isn't worth the cost of caring for a human.

I spotted a black SUV with tinted windows driving down the street—most likely one of Killian's fleet.

I peered up at the signs that hung overhead. I was dressed to blend in with the human night crowd with a black Henley shirt and dark slim-fit jeans.

The SUV pulled into a parking space on the side of the street and three vampires piled out.

I recognized Killian's First Knight—a tall, tawny brown skinned female vampire with a bright smile that hid her

ruthless streak. She flicked the braid of her dark hair over her shoulder, her red eyes tracing the sidewalks.

The First Knight is more observant. I better solidify my camouflage.

I leaned forward, inserting myself into the herd of gossiping human females clomping down the sidewalk in front of me. “Please excuse my terrible manners,” I said, drawing their attention. “Could you tell me where the boardwalk is?”

Two of the four women giggled at me while the remaining two gave me friendly smiles.

My powers were clamped down so in theory my pheromones weren’t affecting them, but pheromones were rarely necessary for manipulating humans. They were disgustingly weak to beauty, and those who weren’t were annoyingly friendly—like a certain neighbor of mine.

“Sure,” chirped one of the gigglers. “The lake is across the street behind the buildings. You can access it by...” She chattered away, pointing across the street.

I pantomimed listening, although I was keenly aware of the Drake First Knight leading her two underlings in my direction.

“The Eminence believes he is likely staying in the *Luxe Sejour* Hotel,” the First Knight said—her voice low and barely audible over the city noise.

“He wouldn’t stay with another Family?” That came from a petite blond, who casually tugged on the sleeves of her suitcoat as she looked around. “He’s old and powerful enough, no one would dare turn him away.”

Ahh, yes. They are indeed looking for me.

The First Knight shook her head as she led her underlings closer to me and my camouflage. “He hates everyone—vampires and supernaturals alike. He’d find any vampire Family annoying, overbearing, and stupid.”

Impressive. They know me better than I would have thought.

“Excuse me,” the First Knight murmured to one of the human women I was using as she edged past us.

The woman waved her off, and the First Knight and Drake vampires continued down the street completely oblivious to the fact that they’d just strolled past me.

“He sounds like a joy to interact with,” said the male vampire with black hair and medium brown skin.

“He’s charming,” the First Knight said. “He has to be, so you don’t notice the dagger he’s stabbed into your back until he’s gone.”

Now that’s insulting. I smiled and nodded as the humans kept chattering at me. *I would never stab someone in the back. That’s too much effort. I’d stab them in the chest and be done with it.*

I didn’t hear if the other Drake vampires said anything in response—they were too far down the sidewalk by that point.

“There’s a boardwalk that cuts across Fairy Lake,” the human woman continued. “It connects to a bike trail—”

I, judging she wasn’t going to take a breath for some time, interrupted. “I see, I think I know where I’m going now. Thank you so much for your help.”

I slipped off before she could come up with a reason to keep talking, heading for a crosswalk the first chance I had.

The crowds of humans were starting to grate on my nerves, so perhaps it was time to return to my apartment—taking a roundabout way, of course, just in case the First Knight’s obliviousness was an act and they were secretly following me.

Interestingly, the crowd hadn’t bothered me overly much at the fall market Jade dragged me to.

Nothing about the fall market would normally appeal to me. I disliked human food, saw no use for humans, and generally found supernaturals annoying with their constant quarrels and endless quest for power—something I personally knew was stupid and a waste of time.

That night had been interesting. Jade had *made* it interesting. And as a vampire as old as I was, interesting was a rare commodity.

I glanced at the sky—I was going to look suspicious for wearing sunglasses soon, as the sun had almost given up and sunk behind the horizon.

Jade has likely already left for work.

Watching Jade stammer and fidget as she (poorly) attempted to make friends with other humans with the enthusiasm of a puppy and the terrified fright of a French noble facing the guillotine had become a hobby.

Apparently witnessing such events meant I would get roped into activities her targets turned her down over, but it wasn't a terrible price.

It did strike me as slightly insulting that she blushed and was nervous when faced with humans, but didn't even bat an eye at my presence except to scold me not to bite her. But it was likely a product of her workplace.

I swung up an alleyway—I was going to take the boardwalk just in case the Drakes had heard the conversation.

A werewolf—a male with muscles so thick his neck looked like a troll's—stalked down the far end, heading in my direction.

“Move it,” he snarled at me.

Bemused, I tilted my sunglasses down so I could peer at him.

The werewolf met my eyes—unless he was a total idiot, he must have realized what I was—and he growled deep within his chest before charging down the alleyway.

Oh, this won't do.

I kept my pace at a casual walk, biding my time until he was an arm's length away.

He flashed his teeth and jumped at me.

I grabbed his wife beater tank shirt—which was stained a disgusting pitted yellow—and yanked him from the air, throwing him to the ground.

The werewolf wheezed on impact, his frame rattling when he hit the fancy pattern the brick was arranged in.

Without breaking my stride, I kicked him—rolling him over on his back, then walked over him, grinding my left heel into his chest so the wheezing noise expanded into gasps.

When I stepped off him, I paused and looked back at him. “Learn some manners, mutt.” I delivered one kick to the wolf’s head and he collapsed, either unconscious or so rattled he couldn’t so much as move.

Disappointing. I shook my head and continued down the alleyway. *The task force slayer would have countered that. And probably shot me.*

I sighed as I reached the end of the alleyway and stepped out into the last few anemic rays of the sun. *Maybe I’ll search her out. It’s been a while since I’ve had a good fight.*

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jade

One day and two nights after the market, I wasn't feeling quite so jolly as I sat at my desk staring at the stack of paperwork I needed to finish filling out.

"You know," Sunshine leaned back in her chair as she flipped a page in a blank report file I was supposed to use as a template. "I don't know much about human law enforcement, however, I'm pretty sure their paperwork doesn't include questions like *How did you vibe with the perp?*"

"It's the Commissioner," I said. "Since supernaturals don't have tons of laws about prosecution, he's making it up as he goes."

Sunshine turned another page in the report. "Which apparently means patching things together from as much human pop culture as possible." She set the report down, then picked up the sudoku book she'd abandoned on my desk. "Looks like you've got a lot of records to file. That means I'll be busy in the evidence room tomorrow, storing things away."

She processed evidence and stored reports, which meant she'd been one of the poor souls who got headaches from the green lights before someone had talked the Commissioner into normal LED lights for evidence processing, and she took boxes of open cases and stored them in the evidence rooms.

(For all his TV watching, the Commissioner must not have seen evidence storage because we had big rooms filled with boxes that anyone from our department could pass in and out of. They just had to check in with the “librarian” on duty, who would find the case for them.)

I looked down at the waiting reports: the stray dog—whose owner we had successfully found, and I’d gotten to witness their tearful reunion—the fae fight downtown, the released mantasps, and so on. “Most of these will probably just get scanned into digital storage,” I said. “I don’t think the chief will bother to keep hardcopies about the call we got from the human police that some inebriated person mistook a lost dog for a werewolf.”

“You said most. Which ones do you think will float my way?” Sunshine asked.

I picked up the report I’d started about the mantasps earlier in the week. “The mantasp case. Public property was damaged, and the case is still open. It’s assumed the monsters were released as a part of the fae royal succession wars, but we’re looking for evidence that would point to what Court did it. Beyond the mantasps...”

I trailed off and glanced over at the report I’d started and stopped writing nearly every day I’d been on duty for the past two weeks.

Sunshine peered at the first few lines I’d penned. “Ahhh, the case of the micromanaging vampire menace. Yeah, that one is a little concerning now that he’s appeared twice.” She flipped her sudoku book open and plucked a pen from her hair which she used to start filling numbers into empty squares. “You’ve told Sarge about him?”

I nodded. “He had me tell Captain Reese. So far, we don’t have any evidence that he’s doing anything. It’s just that a bunch of supernaturals end up mysteriously beaten unconscious whenever he’s hanging around and when they wake up, they just babble that it was an accident.”

“He hasn’t killed anyone, right?” Sunshine asked as she raced through her number puzzle.

“Not yet.” I tapped my fingers on my desk and glanced at the framed photo I kept of my family—my paternal family, so Nan, Paddy, my parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins were all crowded in the picture wearing our slayer gear. “I’m starting to think he’s establishing a territory. All the beatings are downtown—directly downtown. He doesn’t venture even out to Tutu’s.”

Sunshine finished her number puzzle in record time and flipped to a new one. “And that bothers you because? So far all he’s done is settle down unruly supernaturals with more force than necessary.”

“That’s all we *think* he’s done,” I said. “A vampire territory typically is their hunting grounds. He could be taking sips off humans, and we’d never know if he only takes a mouthful here and there.”

Vampires don’t usually publicly feed—generations of slayers had never been able to pinpoint *why*, but we suspected it had something to do with the feeding process. However! Vampires could still bite a human and siphon off a mouthful or two of blood—essentially a snack for them—without notice if they used their pheromones on the human to lull them into complacency.

I picked up my mask—I didn’t wear it when I was in the department offices. “I wouldn’t be bothered if he wasn’t so strong. He has to be an elder but he just wanders around by himself, without any offspring bowing and scraping to him.”

“Maybe he had a Family and they all died,” Sunshine suggested.

“I suppose that’s possible.” I glanced at my family photo again.

Slayers had resources—ways I could look specific vampire lines up. *But I don’t have enough information to make the search reasonable. There are too many possibilities right now.*

Even if he was the sole survivor of an extinct Family, there were hundreds of vampire Families that fit the description since I had no idea when he’d been forced to strike out on his

own, and history was rife with vampire wars and slayer attacks.

“What’s his case name?” Sunshine asked.

“His what?”

“His case name.” Sunshine tossed her hair over her shoulder when it got in the way and draped across her book. “He’s struck twice, now. Surely someone has given him a nickname.”

“Oh. Uhh, I think processing calls him Ruin.”

Sunshine snorted. “Sounds about right.”

“E-excuse me, O’Neil?” Clarence slowly approached my desk, clutching a manilla folder so tightly his hands shook, and his pale face was blanched with dread as he reluctantly inched closer.

I shifted into what I hoped was a more inviting posture as I tried to smile. I wasn’t sure I succeeded based on the way Clarence cringed. “Yes?”

“C-could you confirm an update for the mantasps case?” He pointed to a whiteboard, which had a printed picture of a mantasp and scribbling from various task force members posted on it.

“Sure. Sorry, Sunshine, I’ll be a minute,” I said.

Sunshine waved her hand as she settled into a new puzzle. “Take your time!”

I scooped up my cellphone and my own report, then followed Clarence over to the whiteboard.

Brody, Grove, and Binx all waited by the whiteboard, each holding their own packet of notes.

“Hey, Blood,” Brody said—apparently the team was done pretending they hadn’t nicknamed me and had moved onto openly calling me by the unfortunate moniker. “Grove, Binx, and I are taking point on the mantasp case to present it to the Commissioner.”

I glanced at Clarence, who shifted nervously under my gaze.

“Clarence is helping,” Binx said.

“You need my report?” I guessed. “I’m sorry—I haven’t yet completed it.”

“No, no.” Brody threw his hands wide. “It’s fine. We just wanted to ask you to include how you defeated the two mantasps you offed.”

Grove rubbed at the tiny glass vial filled with a gold liquid that hung from a chain on his neck. “Be sure to include if you think the use of poison applied to your weapons would have helped fighting them—I already took the liberty of confirming it in my report, but Sarge will give it more stock if you say something.”

Binx, ignoring him, gestured to the pictures of the defeated mantasps. “We’re trying to scale just how difficult these monsters were to defeat.”

“Understood,” I said. “I’ll make sure I detail the defensive and offensive maneuverings and submit the report before the end of our shift. Is there any other way I can help?”

They shook their heads—or at least, Binx and Brody shook their heads. Clarence was tugging at the now flattened ruffles of his cravat, and Grove was sighing at the printed-out pictures of the mantasps.

This clearly was my cue to leave, but I lingered trying to figure out something I could say that would be appropriately friendly.

I should ask them about the progress on this case and compliment them. It’s important to acknowledge your teammate’s hard work.

My dad had always made my siblings and I both compliment and critique each other’s methods when we finished a job so we could improve. I knew enough about teamwork to know that a critique would probably make my reputation worse. The compliment would hopefully show I was also aware of what they did for the team.

“Any—is there any new evidence that would indicate which Court was responsible for the mantasps?” I asked, biding my time while trying to think of the different compliments I could give. “What about the unfamiliar magic you scented out?”

Binx’s expression turned unreadable, Clarence almost strangled himself with his cravat, Grove kept on staring at the mantasps, and Brody flinched.

“We...don’t know,” Brody said. “Nothing conclusive was found about the odd magic—it’s assumed it must have been an artifact of some sort, but we haven’t found any proof so there are no updates on it.”

Oh, darn it. I fought to keep my expression neutral as it seemed, based on their reactions, they believed I’d be upset about the news. “Understandable. There wasn’t much you could go off,” I said, trying to backtrack.

Brody straightened up, as if he was reporting in to Captain Reese instead of me. “If we build enough evidence that a fae summoned the mantasps, the Commissioner will give us the okay to raid the fae Courts,” he said. “We’re trying to narrow down which Courts could be responsible.”

I nodded and internally tried to sort out a proper response.

Tell him that’s reasonable—or smart! Wait, does that sound patronizing?

“What he means to say,” Grove blithely said, finally pulled out of his sighing over the monsters, “is that it could be *any* court because none of the Seelie or Unseelie are able to claim Goldstein. I checked around my Court and found out Tutu laid claim to the area. Because she has clients in all the local fae Courts and requires that the Courts—no matter the territory lines—allow access to it.”

Sounds about right. No one would willingly mess with a dragon shifter.

Dragon shifters were the longest lived and strongest of the shifters. They had rivaled the elves in power, but there were always so few of them. They didn’t typically get along, so

each dragon shifter never bothered much with anyone or anything outside of their domain unless they were forced to—like when the elves had forced the dragon shifters to join the rest of the supernaturals in our war against them centuries ago.

“Understood,” I said. “That does make your role more difficult.”

“Rest assured, we’ll find the culprits soon,” Binx growled.

“You will,” I said. I’d meant for it to show that I believed in them but as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized it almost sounded threatening.

Uncomfortable silence stretched between us and I knew if I hung around much longer, I was bound to say something stupid again.

“I’ll finish my report and let you know when it’s submitted,” I awkwardly said, taking a step back.

When they didn’t say anything in response, I fled, hurrying back to my desk—red faced and sweating from my anxiety.

Sunshine looked up from her sudoku book. “Tried small talk again?” she asked sympathetically.

I collapsed in my chair and miserably thumped my head on my desk. “Every time. *Every time* I open my mouth I just mess up!”

“That’s not true,” Sunshine said. “You are scarily competent when you’re out on an assignment if the gossip chain can be trusted, my delightfully dangerous jewel.”

“And then I accidentally insult everyone with my sputtering, so no one likes me,” I said miserably.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Sunshine flipped her book shut. “Your team doesn’t make it easy on you with their awe. If you’re bad at small talk, they’re horrific about trying to include you in conversations.”

“They don’t exclude me because they are awed.” I glumly scanned my teammates. Juggernaut caught me looking, and even though I’m sure I looked ridiculous with my face planted on my desk he flinched—flicking the deck of cards he’d been

shuffling every which way. I sighed. “It’s because I’ve accidentally insulted everyone in this department at one point or another.”

“You’re overthinking things,” Sunshine said. “That’s how you freak yourself out and mess up when you try to be social—you analyze your actions from about twenty different angles because you want to control how people react to what you say. That overloads your brain, so you spit out less than half of what you mean to.”

I peeled my face off my desk so I could scowl at my friend. “Has it ever occurred to you that it would be *worse* if I didn’t analyze things so deeply?”

“You’re just proving my point.” Sunshine hopped out of her chair. “Come on, walk me out.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I need to finish my mantasp report.”

“No, you need a break or you’re going to beat yourself up all night about some insult you think you said that I’m sure no one else noticed. Up, up, up!” Sunshine came around the desk and smacked me on the shoulder with her rolled up sudoku book until I groaned and started to stand.

I grabbed my mask off my desk and fixed it in place as I obediently followed Sunshine. She marched through the department—skirting Juggernaut’s mess of playing cards—and took me out the front doors. (I wore my mask whenever I was in my task force uniform and outside the department walls.)

“Look, you might not think it but you’re doing great,” Sunshine told me as we trooped down the hallway—the Curia Cloisters were starting to bustle as the early evening hours were its busiest. “Part of the problem is that you just don’t know how skilled you are in combat.”

“Because I’m not,” I said. “I’m a good solid average.”

Sunshine snorted. “You’re average in your freakishly intense, perfection-demanding slayer family who are so elite you predominantly still hunted vampires in a time when a lot of slayers were forced to branch out. Your entire world was fighting.”

“And blood, apparently,” I said, thinking of the nickname as we entered the main chamber of the Curia Cloisters.

The room was massive with staircases and hallways leading in and out of it, so it vaguely reminded me of a beehive with supernaturals going in and out. Tonight, it smelled faintly of wood cleaner and fresh flowers from the buds some fae had brought in. The chamber also housed the main information desk—a sprawling desk lined with pamphlets, papers, forms, and the visitor sign in station.

Sunshine sighed—a sound I barely heard over the hum of conversation and general noise in the enormous room. “You have no idea how badly I want to rescue you and sit your whole squad down and give them a talking to. But! You want to adjust and live outside your family, so I will *make* myself sit on the sidelines so you can figure this out. I just have to remind myself it’s for your own good.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Don’t apologize!” Sunshine said, sounding more like Binx with a growl in her voice. “Come on, I see that Emi is on duty. We should go say hi.”

Emi was a secretary who worked at the information desk. She and Sunshine were friends long before I arrived, and Emi had become my second workplace friend, too—though I didn’t get to see her much outside the Cloisters as she worked a lot. (It seemed to me like she worked more shifts than was legal. I knew she volunteered for the extra hours. When I asked, she said she was happy to cover them so I left the matter alone.)

She was an amazing, kind person—she’d spent multiple afternoons teaching me about her duties as a secretary so if I was asked about my fake job, I could give basic believable information.

Emi also let me ask her questions about humans since she was full human without a drop of magic in her blood. (She was the one who’d suggested I invite someone from my apartment building to the supernatural fall market.)

Sunshine stomped up to Emi, heading for the lower portion of the desk that had been designed with shorter supernaturals in mind. “Hey, Emi!”

Emi, from the perfect smooth ponytail her black hair was pulled back into, to her gentle smile and warm dark brown eyes, exuded an incredible amount of calmness that staked her desk area out as an island of serenity in the chaos of the Cloisters.

Her crisp white dress shirt was as spotless as her work reputation, and there was something so innately graceful about the way she moved—even now when she looked up from her computer and removed her fingers from the keyboard. “Sunshine and Slayer O’Neil!” Emi was always careful just to use my last name when I was masked up. “What a delight to see you two.” She slid off her stool and approached the low counter. “Did you need something?”

“Nah, just stopping by to say hi,” Sunshine said. “You’re on the night shift tonight?”

“Yes.” Emi smoothed her navy-blue pencil skirt. “One of the regular night shift secretaries is out with a cold, so I’m subbing for him.”

I’d been ransacking my brain for good questions to ask her and when I found one, I finally spoke. “How is your family?”

“They are excellent,” Emi said. “Their garden is exploding with eggplant and zucchini. I’ve been forced to lug bags of it to the employee breakroom every day. You should both take some. I’ve been leaving it in the breakroom connected to your department.” Emi shifted her gaze to me. “If you wanted to try that zucchini bread recipe I gave you last month, you should take some zucchini, O’Neil.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’ll do that.”

Emi did a quick scan of her desk to make sure no one else had approached it before she returned her attention to Sunshine and me with a friendly smile. “How did the market go?”

“Oh, yeah.” Sunshine peered up at me. “Weren’t you going to invite one of your neighbors?”

“I did,” I slowly said.

“Someone accepted?” Emi asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s great!” Emily reached across the desk to pat my shoulder. “You’re getting better with humans!”

“Not exactly.” I fidgeted, feeling weirdly guilty. “I asked my new next-door neighbor. He’s a vampire. Everyone else couldn’t make it.”

Sunshine hooted in laughter, but Emi only blinked in surprise.

“A vampire moved into your apartment building?” Emi asked.

“Yes.”

Emi opened her mouth to ask a follow up question, but her secretary senses must have kicked in because she abruptly whirled around to face the front section of her desk.

Sunshine and I also turned so we could see what had grabbed her attention.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jade

A gorgeous woman who was tall—taller than me—sauntered up to the desk. She was carrying a briefcase and was wearing a sleeveless dress that was purple marked with a black pattern that almost looked like scales.

I didn't know which was more eye catching—her dark purple colored hair or the bracelets and matching ring she wore, all of which had massive gems that I was fairly certain were diamonds. Like, *huge* diamonds. She was also wearing a necklace of simpler design that had a purple stone in the center. I didn't have great magical senses, but I was willing to bet a wizard would feel some kind of enchantment on the necklace—it looked *old*.

She's the dragon shifter, no doubt about it.

Like their legendary counterparts, dragon shifters had a thing for gold, precious gems, and treasure in general.

“Hello, welcome to the Magiford Curia Cloisters,” Emi said. “How can I help you?”

“Hello.” The dragon shifter's voice was low and pleasantly husky. “I need a visitor's pass for myself and my assistant. We're expected by the shifter department.” The dragon shifter motioned to the fae that was hovering behind her.

He was a fae noble, and he was dressed to compliment his employer's darker hair and clothes with his dark gray suit and purple tie. His golden hair sparkled in a way that was only possible with fae illusion magic.

"Of course," Emi said. "Let me check my records before I make your passes. Can I get your names, please?"

"I'm Gisila of the Von Faulken line," She held up her hand sliding down one of her bracelets to show her lineage tattoo—a band over her wrist that represented her family line. That done, she glanced back at her assistant. "Orrin."

The handsome fae stepped forward. "Orrin of the West Coast Winter Court," he rattled off his alliance to his monarch, and I studied his face trying to place why he seemed so familiar.

"Welcome," Emi said. "If you'll wait just a moment, I'll have your passes processed." She smiled, then bowed to the pair before she retreated to her computer—looking up the schedule to confirm the shifters were indeed expecting the pair.

Emi was obviously going to be busy, so I tried to discreetly tap Sunshine's shoulder. When she glanced up, I inclined my head to the left trying to hint that we should leave.

Sunshine pointedly looked at Gisila—who was fixing her bracelets.

I scowled at Sunshine even though she couldn't see it with my mask on. *Yes, I know she's the dragon shifter. But we should leave! She's way above our paygrade!*

My slayer instincts were prickling—I hadn't been around raw power like this since I'd appeared before the Regional Committee of Magic to get approval for my employment with the task force.

My gut instincts would have been set off by so much power even if Gisila meant no harm. Nothing good ever came from mixing with the powerful when it came to supernaturals. They were dangerous, no matter how benevolent they might

appear to be—and dragon shifters belonged with the elite top tier of supernatural society.

Unfortunately, Sunshine was as bold as the light she was named after, so she planted an arm on the lower desk surface making it clear that she wasn't going to budge an inch.

As Emi typed away on her computer, Gisila scanned the area, her eyes—which were slightly unsettling with her slit pupils—landing on us.

She took in my dark uniform, her eyes lingering on the task force patch. “Ah, you must belong to the new task force I've heard so much of.” Gisila handed the briefcase off to her assistant.

I bowed, hoping that said enough so she wouldn't expect me to say anything else.

“Orrin said it was a newer program,” Gisila continued. “And very forward thinking. But... I am surprised to see a slayer among their ranks.” She smiled—which was probably meant to be reassuring, but as a dragon shifter too much power oozed off her to make any of her movements reassuring to my slayer instincts.

I glanced at her assistant, surprised he'd heard of the program. The task force wasn't widely talked about outside Magiford. Had he researched the city for her? For what point?

As I studied Orrin's face, I finally placed him: he was the handsome fae I'd seen outside of Tutu's on my run last week.

“I have your passes here,” Emi cheerfully said.

Gisila turned to face Emi releasing me from her scrutiny. “You've finished?”

“Nearly. I just need you to sign these papers, and then return the badges when you leave.” Emi smiled as she passed Gisila and Orrin the clipboards.

The duo signed off on them and passed the clipboards back.

Emi handed them each a visitor's badge. “Just pin these to your clothes, and you'll be allowed upstairs. I hope you have a

wonderful day and thank you for visiting the Magiford Curia Cloisters.” She bowed, and the dragon shifter and her fae assistant swept off without a second glance at Sunshine or me.

Sunshine waited until the duo reached the staircase that would take them upstairs before she whistled. “Wowee, now that is power! I guess the legends don’t lie about dragon shifters.”

“Yeah.” My figurative hackles were starting to settle back into place now that Gisila wasn’t nearby blasting us with her power. “She must be here to meet some big players. The Regional Committee of Magic, probably.”

Sunshine peered up at Emi, who shook her head. “I only know what you heard—she’s reporting in to the shifter department.”

“I figured as much,” Sunshine grumbled.

Emi watched as Gisila and Orrin disappeared upstairs. “I do find it surprising, however, that even though she arrived in town earlier this month, this is the first time she or her assistant have been here.”

“Really?” I pivoted my entire body, facing Emi with my confusion. “This was her *first* time here? Did she just come when you weren’t on shift?”

Emi shook her head. “Nope, I can see her visitor history, and today is it.”

“She must be in Magiford for business purposes then,” Sunshine said. “The life of the rich and powerful.”

“Yeah,” Emi agreed.

I fidgeted, pulling on my glove to try and release the nagging sensation that Sunshine’s guess didn’t feel quite right.

Not because of Gisila, but because of the micromanaging vampire—as Sunshine called him. Between him and Gisila, he set off my concern a lot more—I couldn’t get a good read on him, which meant he had to be *old* and powerful. Besides everything I’d said to Sunshine earlier, it brought up one major and worrisome question: what was he doing in Magiford?

“I’M NOT GETTING any kind of read on magic. How ‘bout you, Grove?” Juggernaut juggled his ball of flames from his right hand to his left, holding it high above his head to shed more light in the area.

The fire burned a dark purple color, which matched the colors of Juggernaut’s wizard House, Bellus. The flames were pretty but the purple hue they cast on everything was a little eerie. I was thankful that I had excellent night vision compliments of my slayer magic.

“Grove,” Juggernaut called when the fae didn’t answer him.

I broke off my scan of the street—we were investigating a report of magic being used in the fringe of the downtown area. “*Grove.*”

The easily distracted fae was reading a sign posted on a chain-link fence that surrounded most of a city block, fencing in a destroyed building.

“Looks like they’re gonna build something here.” Grove itched his side as he studied the sign. “A clocktower? That’s weird—oh! No wonder—the humans are building it. They’re so odd.” Grove settled his bag of potions/possibly poisons on his hip. “Did you say something, Juggernaut?”

“Do you sense any magic?” Juggernaut repeated, enunciating his words.

“Hmm, I don’t think so?” Grove said.

“Could you test so you’re certain?” Juggernaut’s voice was rapidly tightening with irritation.

Grove, oblivious to our squadmate’s growing anger, picked at a corner of his leather messenger bag. “Do I *have* to?”

Juggernaut was almost shaking now with his ire—he was generally good tempered, but he had a short trigger that Grove seemed to know just how to push.

We don't want a meltdown when we're investigating a call. I better lean into it.

I hated using my rocky reputation with the team to get results, but better that than an exploding wizard.

“Grove,” I repeated.

Grove spun in a half circle. “On it!”

I watched the fae prowl up and down the sidewalk, then approached Juggernaut where he was standing on the curb.

Juggernaut cradled his flames in his hands, scowling as he watched Grove. When I joined him, he rolled back his shoulders and stood straighter. “Did you sense anything?”

The work-related question sparked my sense of duty, so I was easily able to reply. “No. As a slayer I’m not as sensitive to magic as you are as a wizard.” I waited a beat, then added, “I also can’t find any sign of a disturbance.”

Juggernaut nodded, his posture straight and at attention.

Why is everyone so formal with me? We're the same rank. Do they think I'm a snob?

The rolling feeling in my gut said that unlucky guess was probably right.

Since we were stationary, my family drilling kicked in and I absently checked my belt to make sure my cuffs, daggers, and radio were secured before I checked my shoulder holster.

I stiffened when I felt the unfamiliar sensation of gossamer wings brush my mind. “Something’s coming. Grove!”

Grove popped out from behind a tree he’d been investigating. “What? I’m searching like you asked!”

“Incoming!” I shouted.

As Grove sprinted towards us, I turned so I stood back-to-back with Juggernaut. I was surprised when he backed up to me so we could cover each other’s blind spots.

The road vibrated under our feet—whatever was coming our way was *big*.

I heard distant squeals and just when Grove reached us, the monsters turned on to our street.

Three giant, pig-like creatures that were the size of draft horses raced towards us. Their tusks were chipped and stained with what appeared to be dried blood, and their wiry coats were a coal black color while their tiny eyes were a milky shade of yellow.

Those must be fae creatures.

“Grove?” I asked.

“They’re miasma boars,” Grove shouted over the pounding of their hooves. “They’re destructive and violent, and they live in the fae realm but the threat they pose is that they can ram through magic. They’re a pain to get rid of if they break into a Court.”

Juggernaut slipped out from behind me—since we saw the enemy, we didn’t need to be back-to-back anymore. “That sounds great for all the city taxpayers.”

“Can you make a stand?” I asked as the boars raced closer.

“I can try,” Juggernaut said, “but I only recently learned how to make magic shields from April—that’s not a typical wizard skill.” He pushed his arms out and his purple flames were snuffed out, only to be replaced with raw magic—purple colored—that he formed into a shield that was just barely big enough to cover Juggernaut, Grove, and myself.

Meanwhile, the boars reached the Curia Cloister car we’d brought to investigate the magic report—a little Honda Civic.

They smashed into the car, setting off the alarm, breaking all the windows, and *crunching* the front bumper like it was tissue paper.

Once they’d destroyed the vehicle, they returned to racing down the street unharmed even though they’d just body slammed a car.

“Grove, call back up.” I unholstered my sidearm and flipped the safety off. I waited a moment and then racked the gun, pulling back on the slide to load a bullet into the chamber,

barely aware when I heard Grove shout into the radio our location and the discovery of the monsters.

If there's a monster I need to kill fast, it's going to be these things.

The boars were almost on top of us before I felt the sparkle of fae magic. I had to wait until they were close enough to get a good shot—pistols didn't have the greatest aim.

I ducked around the side of Juggernaut's shield and took aim, shooting the boar in the lead.

It squealed and went down, but I hadn't killed it.

The second boar slammed into Juggernaut's shield, shattering it.

Juggernaut dove to the side. Grove boldly remained where he was and flung a bottle of medicine-pink liquid at the boar's face.

The vial broke on impact, and the pink liquid dripped into its eye. The boar squealed and wildly tossed its head as it backed up.

“Success!” Grove declared, pumping his hands over his head. Juggernaut grabbed him by the collar of his uniform and yanked him out of the way, so he narrowly avoided getting clipped by the boar's tusks.

The third boar ran past and continued to thunder down the street. It apparently had no loyalty to the other two boars. That meant we'd have to chase it. First, though, we needed to finish off these two.

I cautiously approached the boar I'd shot, keeping my gun pointed down at the ground—Mom had drilled it into me at a young age that you only pointed your gun at things you're willing to shoot.

When I got close enough, I saw my shot had clipped the boar's forehead. *Its skull must be scary strong because the angle should have been right.*

I tried shooting it in the head again, once again the bullet seemingly clipped it, and then I shot it in the chest—

approximately where I imagined its heart was.

It shuddered and its loud squeals cut off as it died.

Juggernaut and Grove, however, were still tangling with their boar.

It whirled in a circle and Juggernaut ducked beneath its tusks. “That was unfairly easy for you, Blood,” he said. “Why can’t we all get guns?” He tried shooting the boar with a bolt of purple lightning but missed and struck the traffic light above us instead, blowing the light out and showering us with glass.

Grove shook his head at Juggernaut with pity as he rummaged around in his bag. “Wow, you’re really oblivious. I’m possibly the least responsible of our team, and even *I* know why only April and Blood get guns.”

I grabbed Grove and yanked him backwards, whisking him away just before the boar slammed into the tree Grove had been standing by.

The boar broke through the tree trunk like it was a toothpick, shattering it so chips of the trunk and splinters shot through the air.

I took cover behind a trash can and yanked Grove after me. Unfortunately, he was a second too late and was pelted with some shrapnel.

I felt my throat tighten before the scent of blood hit me, and I made a hurried inspection of Grove. It didn’t look serious—he had a few cuts on his face, but his uniform wasn’t even frayed.

The tree trunk was caught in the boar’s tusks, so it thrashed until the trunk slid and fell off into the street.

I let go of Grove and he staggered a step. “Grove, stay out of range,” I said.

“Gotcha. Lesson learned,” Grove said.

The second boar was thrashing too much for me to get a good shot—he was pretty upset about the poison in his eye—so I flicked my safety on and holstered my gun.

I pulled one of my daggers free and flung it at the monster, hitting it in the chest.

Its' tough hide prevented the blade from digging in, so I'm not certain it even felt the dagger as it bellowed its anger.

Juggernaut tried his lightning bolt again. He hit it this time—square in the head, an excellent shot—but the boar just shook it off nailing Juggernaut with one of his tusks and tossing him backwards.

I held my breath until Juggernaut popped upright, his expression angry but not hurt.

“Juggernaut, try aiming for the chest!” I shouted.

Juggernaut threw up another shield, trying to stop the boar from charging a parked car. “That’s kind of a hard target.”

The shield shattered when the boar smacked into it, but it made the monster stop, spin around, and come racing back at us, so the car was spared.

“Don’t worry!” Grove winked at us. “I got this.” He held the tiny vial that always hung from his neck, then glanced over at the fallen, splintered tree.

The severed tree abruptly stood upright, then tipped over falling directly on top of the boar entrapping it within its branches.

“Revenge of the tree!” Grove shouted.

Juggernaut scowled in concentration. “I’m taking my shot!” He announced before a massive purple bolt of thunder erupted from the sky, striking the boar and the tree.

The boar died with a squeal, and the tree lit up on fire like a massive torch.

Juggernaut swore and used his magic to create purple water which he dropped on the flaming tree, extinguishing it.

“I don’t know what caused more damage, you or the boar,” Grove said.

I checked to make sure both monsters were dead before I turned down the street. “Come on, we’ve gotta go.”

“Go where?” Grove asked.

“After the last boar,” I called, already about a block down.

“We’re running?” Juggernaut yelled after me.

“We don’t have a car!” I pointed back at the crunched mess of metal we’d arrived in.

Juggernaut groaned as he started after me, Grove trotting along with him.

“We’ve taken out two of the targets,” Grove announced over the radio. “We’re now tracking the third miasma boar, heading north towards Main Street.”

I pushed myself, following the clear trail of damage the rampaging third boar had left: it had smashed the side of a black SUV, thrown a motorcycle up on the sidewalk, trampled two pots of flowers, and bent a stop sign pole in half.

At least it’s late, so even the bars are closed. It doesn’t seem like the boar has encountered anyone, so there are no injuries. But we’re getting closer to Main Street...

I made sure I kept Grove and Juggernaut within hearing range as we ran. Whenever I got too far ahead, I’d take a closer look at the damage—pausing just long enough to take a few pictures—then sprinted ahead again when they caught up.

I didn’t want to risk getting too far away from them—task force protocol was to stay together.

But when I could hear the boar a street or two ahead of us, I made the call and kicked up my running speed to close in on the animal.

The boar had made it all the way to Main Street and was rooting around in a greenspace on the shore of Fairy Lake.

I had to slow a little bit so I’d be understandable as I unhooked my radio and pressed the button so I could talk. “I’ve got eyes on the last miasma boar: Main Street, in the park on Fairy—”

Something slammed into me, throwing me off the sidewalk and into the middle of the street.

I would have been tossed clear off my feet, but I dropped my radio and caught myself with my gloved hands, managing to maneuver myself into a roll that transformed my momentum so that I popped out of it landing on my feet and standing.

“Good evening, slayer.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jade

I yanked a dagger free and spun around, my heart sputtering when I saw the micromanaging vampire with the charmed hood, Ruin, standing on the sidewalk turning my radio over in his hands.

“This is the device you use to contact your squadmates?” he asked, his voice conversational and yet so deadly it set off every internal alarm I had. “It seems very old and inconvenient when mobile phones exist.”

I swallowed and tried to listen for Juggernaut and Grove, but I couldn’t hear them—though they would have been hard for my human ears to pick up over the grunts the miasma boar made as it rooted around in the lush green park lawn. “What do you want?”

Ruin tossed the radio with one hand, catching it without even looking at it. “Entertainment.” He squeezed the radio, crushing it in his hand. The plastic broke, and my radio gave one last ear-piercing blast before it died.

Ruin dropped the pieces of my radio so they hit the sidewalk in a rainstorm of plastic knobs and bits of metal and wire. I had to rely on my years of training to keep my body relaxed, my breathing even, and my heartbeat steady—I didn’t want this powerful vamp figuring out how much he freaked

me out. “You’re that excited to watch me wrangle a wild boar?”

Ruin shifted towards the miasma boar. “Yeah, I thought you’d show up soon when that thing meandered down here. But no, that’s not the entertainment I was referring to.”

My heart dropped to my toes. “I don’t have time to play,” I said. “I’m busy.”

“I’m touched, you already know me so well.” He stepped off the curb, approaching me where I stood in the middle of the empty street. “But I’m afraid I simply won’t accept that I come behind a *pig* in your list of priorities tonight.”

I swapped my dagger for my sidearm—maybe if I shot him, he’d back off, though I didn’t have much hope.

He’s twisted enough that he’d probably be delighted.

Ruin bowed at the waist. “I’m feeling generous tonight, so I’ll even let you have the first hit.”

“In that case, I pass and choose the pig.” I started to turn to face the boar, but I didn’t really have any hope this would work.

“Slayer, slayer, slayer,” he tsked. “Well, you made your choice. A disappointing one—I’m sure you’d be even more fun if you started the fight, but, alas.”

I felt him move before my eyes caught up with him.

Acting by instinct, I jumped to the side to avoid him and then struck out, intending to use my pistol like a hammer and hit him in the head.

He caught my wrist and held it high above my head, which left his side open so I rammed my knee into it.

He coughed, but he didn’t even move. “See?” he said. “Far more fun.”

“I have to *work*.”

I got the impression that he smiled at me—even this close I couldn’t tell for sure with the bespelled hood. “And I don’t care—”

I tossed my gun from my right hand—which he still held captive—to my left hand. Aiming for his right thigh—though it would have been impossible to miss from this distance—I flicked the safety off and shot him.

As I feared, his only reaction was delight. “You’re ambidextrous? Your family must be old stock to care so much about your training. Why are you rotting away here—wait, don’t answer that. You probably have some heroic rot and that’s only going to make me lose respect for you.”

I squinted trying to gauge just how bad his wound was. I wasn’t going to risk shooting him in the chest or head. All he’d done so far was grab me a few times and beat the snot out of other supernaturals, but he hadn’t crossed the line and killed anyone—that we knew of.

He was bleeding less than a bullet wound should—heck, he was still standing, so the limb had to be functional. That meant his healing powers—a vampire ability that grew stronger the older they were—had to be insanely powerful.

Just how old is he?

“This is going to be fun.” Ruin said, swapping his grip on my arm.

Move—I need to move away from him!

I flicked the safety of my gun back on—I needed it secure for what I was going to do next, no misfiring allowed—then slammed the gun on his elbow, attempting to use it like a baseball bat.

He dropped my wrist, and I was pretty sure that—after his nonreaction to a *bullet wound*—he was doing it for his own purposes not because I’d actually hurt him.

Sure enough, when I tried to leap backwards, he caught me by my belt and reeled me in. He held me tight, turning me in the process so that my back was pressed flush against his chest.

Can’t see—I can’t see what he’s doing.

Every nerve in my body was on fire as my innate magic whirled trying to predict his movements.

I still had my gun. Ruin had his left arm around my waist, his right hand pressed against my hood on the back of my head so I couldn't turn my neck, but I knew my gun by heart.

Off went the safety, and—since I knew his healing was top notch—I let myself be nasty.

I twisted my arm, reaching behind me so my gun was pressed into his belly, then squeezed the trigger.

The recoil of my sidearm normally wasn't noticeable, but I had to unnaturally twist my arm and brace it so I felt it up my entire forearm.

Ruin *finally* reacted, tossing me into the street with a speed and force that made my heart numb.

I hit the pavement shoulder first—I could have tried landing on my feet but I was too concerned about losing control of my loaded pistol, so I took the hit, rolling twice.

My shoulder was on fire. With the extra underclothes I wore to reinforce my uniform—a family practice as we couldn't risk bleeding everywhere with our poisonous blood—I was pretty sure I hadn't cut my skin. I was going to have a nasty case of road rash if the burning feeling was any indication, though.

“Fighting dirty, are you?” Ruin's voice was directly over me.

I flipped the safety of my gun back on—safety first in all occasions—then rolled to the side barely avoiding his foot when he tried to step on me, slapping his boot into the ground with enough force that I felt it through the cement.

Oh yeah. He definitely felt that stomach shot.

At the very least he wasn't playing around—a kick like that would have hurt, slayer blood or not.

“Grove! Juggernaut—back up!” I shouted as I scrambled to my feet trying to get some distance between me and the vamp.

Ruin matched my pace following me up the street. When I glanced back to look for my squadmates he grabbed me again. This time he held his arm tight against my neck to block off my air supply and he grabbed my gun with his free hand, yanking it from my grasp and flinging it down the street.

“That was unsafe,” I managed to gasp out despite his arm pressed to my throat.

“Considering how *brutal* you are with your sidearm, you are ridiculously concerned about safety,” Ruin said.

“Gun safety,” I wheezed, trying to keep him distracted so he wouldn’t notice that I was reaching for my thigh bandolier of daggers. “Important to mind.” My lungs were burning, but my fingertips grazed the pommel of one of my daggers. I was able to snag it, easing the grip up to my palm giving me a decent hold on it.

“Sure,” he said. “If you—” he broke off uttering curses in three different foreign languages when I stabbed the dagger into his stomach, aiming for roughly the same area I’d shot him in.

He released me, applying a knee to my back and throwing me towards the pavement.

I didn’t have time to turn so I caught myself on my wrists—which jarred me badly enough that I felt it in my teeth. I strengthened my wrists for occasions like this, so at least I didn’t injure myself.

On the downside, I’d been stabbing behind me, so my dagger slipped out of my tenuous hold when Ruin threw me. But now, I could breathe!

“You have the tenacity of a viper.” The vamp plucked my dagger from his stomach. Based on the little amount of blood on the blade, I half wondered if he’d healed up already. I’d been hopeful that I’d finally been able to rattle him, but his voice was still charming and put together.

When I rolled to my feet and swung around to face him, he tilted his head back just enough that I saw a flash of a smile

before the enchanted shadows of his hood swallowed the lower half of his face again.

I coughed. “I’ve entertained you, now I need to get back to work.”

Please, please, please just let me go. I’m not going to survive this cat and mouse game if backup doesn’t show up!

“Oh, no. This has been far too much fun to let you go now,” His eyes were glowing an even brighter red, and I realized—with dread—that he was enjoying this.

This wasn’t hard for him at all—I don’t know if he was even feeling my admittedly brutal attacks.

He rushed me. My abilities kicked in and I hopped away—sprinting up the street and barely avoiding his hand when he tried to grab me.

How do I even the stakes? I don’t know where my gun is, I’ve got plenty of daggers, but I can’t seem to hit him hard enough to do more than make him pause!

“Ruin, stop it!” I snapped.

“Ruin? You have a nickname for me?” His voice was liberally colored with delight as he tried to kick me.

“Not me—the department.” I dropped to my knees and slid under his leg. The maneuver gave me enough time to yank a dagger free from my belt and stab upward, stabbing his leg in the calf as I passed underneath.

Ruin made a noise in the back of his throat. “That’s not half as fun. Let’s just say it’s your special name for me.” He made another grab for me, and I sprang to my feet slipping out of his reach so his fingers only brushed the shoulder of my uniform.

“No thanks,” I said as I fled.

What do I do? I can’t face this caliber of vampire alone! My whole family would have to show up for a target like this.

He somehow got in front of me, so I ran into his chest and bounced off.

He grabbed my wrists—holding them with an iron grasp so I couldn't reach my daggers anymore.

My heart beat frantically in my chest and the toehold fear had on me started turning to a consuming fear.

Ruin started to yank me closer, when a static filled shout pierced the air.

“OH YEAH, I SEE HER! TEAM FIRE IS A BLOCK UP!” Tetiana's voice blasted over the radio.

“Freeze!” I recognized the commanding voice and my suffocating fear instantly died.

Sarge appeared, stepping out of an alleyway on the side of Main Street that backed into the lake.

The faint pattern of silver scales that brushed across his jawline and neck shimmered in the streetlight marking him as the naiad he was, and he had a hand pointed back towards the lake—an enormous water supply that he could command with his magic.

Radios crackled, and Grove, Juggernaut, April, Clarence, and Medium-Size Robert stepped out of the shadows, ringing us.

“You're surrounded,” Sarge announced.

“I see that.” Ruin tilted his head contemplatively.

“Release the slayer,” Sarge ordered.

Ruin shifted towards me. “It seems like you're getting away tonight. Good luck with the pig.” He released my arms, then burst away slipping between Medium-Sized Robert and Clarence before they could react.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

I survived an elder vampire. That's rare.

Elders usually finished off their playthings. But Ruin seemed like he had a few loose screws considering his general lack of a Family.

“Search the area—stay in pairs, and don’t leave my sightline,” Sarge ordered the rest of the squad as he stepped off the sidewalk, joining me in the street. “O’Neil. Are you okay?”

Relief smacked me so hard that my legs actually gave out. My right knee hit the pavement, sending pain shooting up my leg—I was pretty sure I was going to feel *that* tomorrow, too—but I made myself stand. “Yes, I’m fine, Sir.” I glanced at Clarence, who had huge moon-sized eyes. “No blood injuries.”

“Broken bones?” Sarge asked.

I shifted my weight back and forth, testing my limbs. “No. Just bruised.”

Sarge frowned, his expression stormy—which highlighted the faint gray and blue highlights in his silvery-white hair that reminded me of whitewater rapids. “Do you need Grove?”

Thinking of Grove’s many poisons he kept stocked in his bag, I shook my head. “I’m fine.” I scanned the street looking for my gun. “He tossed my firearm somewhere in the street. I need to retrieve it.”

Sarge stepped in front of me blocking my view. “We’ll find it.” He rubbed his forehead, smoothing out his barely visible scales. “Brody and Binx are with Tetiana’s team. They can smell your gun out.” He paused. “Just how powerful is he?”

“The vamp?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I sifted through what I’d witnessed of him, sorting out his actions and abilities. “He’s older than we thought—his healing is extreme. I’ve seen similar levels before, but rarely.”

“You said previously you thought he was an elder?”

Sweat dripped down my forehead, but I couldn’t wipe it off with my mask on. “Yes.”

Sarge unconsciously fiddled with the radio unit holstered to his belt. “Still think that?”

“Yes, but I still don’t know what Family would let their elder run around like this with none of his offspring around,” I said. “It’s possible he might be high standing in an old, European family and was exiled to America. He speaks multiple languages and he’s aware of tech, so he can’t be *too* old.” I tried to discreetly flex my knee—it still ached from my fall, but I was pretty sure it was just bruised.

Sarge thought for a moment. “I’ll tell April. She’ll pull the car around and get you to the Cloisters. Get medically checked, then revise your report on him. We could ignore him if he didn’t beat anyone in front of us but attacking a member of the Magic Response Task Force crosses that line.”

“Shouldn’t I stay to help with the boar?” I finally glanced over at the park. The boar was long gone. Medium-Sized Robert and Juggernaut were searching the area trying to pick up the trail.

Sarge folded his arms across his chest. The pose was intimidating but his fae looks with his ruler-straight nose, high cheekbones, and the drops of water that floated around him made him downright dazzling. (That was at least something I could handle. I worked with so many beautiful people you’d think I’d be frequently struck dumb, but I was used to that from hunting vampires.) “No, the squad can cover it.”

Medium-Sized Robert—who was a massive troll despite his misnomer of a name—casually picked up a park bench—which made Juggernaut hop up and down and shout at him for thinking a horse-sized boar would be hiding under a bench.

Sarge abruptly turned and strode away. “O’Neil,” he called.

Sarge used even fewer words to communicate than I did, so—aware my name was a command—I fell in line behind him.

I grimaced behind my mask—my weight balance felt off without my firearm and several of my daggers missing.

“April,” Sarge called. “Car.”

“Yessir.” April saluted him, then tossed the ball of blue flames she’d been holding to light the area up into the air. She had better control than Juggernaut—she belonged to a wizard House that drilled and practiced so much even my dad would be impressed—so the flames stayed there, casting light and hovering midair.

April hurried off, disappearing farther up the street.

“When she pulls up, you leave,” Sarge told me.

“Understood,” I said.

Sarge nodded and pulled his radio off his belt. I expected him to head off to the next thing—as our sergeant he was incredibly busy and even though he patrolled with our squad he hadn’t been on the same team as me since my third week on the night shift, so I knew him the least out of everyone in our squad.

To my surprise, Sarge stayed on the sidewalk with me using his radio to call the boar and vamp incidences into the Cloisters.

Grove sidled up to us, glancing first at Sarge and then me. “You look okay,” he said.

“Yeah, I’m not really injured,” I said. “Just banged up.”

Grove nodded. “Sympathy,” he said. “Lots of sympathy. You want some poison?”

I blinked, trying to process what he’d just said. “Poison?”

Grove pulled a bottle out of his bag and shook it, sloshing the suspicious black liquid it encased. “It’s super potent! Guaranteed to wreck your digestive system.”

“Um, wouldn’t a healing potion be more helpful?” I meekly asked.

“I meant for the vamp,” Grove said. “Seems like he’s obsessed with you.”

I grimaced, thankfully no one could see it with my mask on. *I hope not. A vampire of his caliber when I’m a lone slayer? That would be dangerous.*

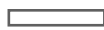
“Grove!” Brody barked. “Leave Blood alone—don’t try to get her to do your dirty work and test your dubious poisons!”

“No one understands my art,” Grove complained, theatrically slumping his shoulders. He wandered off, dragging his feet.

“T-thanks, Grove,” I belatedly called—hoping I hadn’t reacted too late.

Grove turned around long enough to bow at the waist to me.

Well, maybe I’m getting somewhere—even if they call me Blood. I absently rubbed at my shoulder. Grove, at least, has been more willing to talk to me.



EARLY THAT MORNING—SO early, in fact, that dawn was just burning on the horizon—I limped my way up the stairs of my apartment complex, grimacing with pain.

The rampaging boar had eluded the squad all night and was still at large. I didn’t get how a Clydesdale-sized pig could *hide*, but its scent trail had disappeared and neither Brody nor Binx had been able to pick it up.

Although I’d been given the all clear with my health—no broken bones or serious injuries—I still hadn’t had enough time to swig a low-level potion. When Captain Reese heard about my encounter with the micromanaging vamp, she’d had me verbally report into her and then sit in on a meeting with Sarge and two other sergeants who had driven in even though they were off duty.

They’d asked me a lot of questions. I’d painfully choked on my words, but at least I’d been able to bumble through—though I kicked myself for not getting a picture of the downtown vamp. (Any kind of pictorial evidence would have given them something besides *me* to look at!)

All in all, it had been nerve wracking, and I deeply hoped I was never forced to undergo a situation like it again. (At the

very least, if it happened again, I was going to insist on dragging my team in to give their own testimony!)

I reached the top stair, and the hot knifing feeling in my weakened right knee made me think I maybe should have taken the elevator instead of my usual stairs.

All I want is to take a potion and fall into bed.

I needed to shower, and I suspected that was going to make my shoulder sting like one of Grove's poisons.

I sighed and leaned into my door, so worn out I needed to gather my strength before I made myself look for my keys in my backpack.

I heard the soft tap of footfalls in the stairway and my senses kicked in. "Busy night, Brunch?"

I rolled so my right side was on my front door—I was too tired to stand upright—and watched Connor clear the last few stairs. "That's one way to describe it."

I unthinkingly kept turning intending to let my back rest against my door. When my left shoulder touched the door it sent a bolt of pain through my body, so I rocketed upright.

Connor strode across the hallway with a frown. "You're hurt?"

A warm feeling bubbled in my stomach—he cared. Maybe not much, but my neighbor had noticed I was hurt.

At least I have one actual friend here! "It was a rough night," I, losing my head in my elation, volunteered way more than I should have. "Things got exciting at the Curia Cloisters."

"What happened?" He stopped in front of me, his eyes tracing me from head to toe, taking in my tan trousers and flower blouse.

The intensity of his eyes jolted me from my euphoria. *I need to answer him very carefully.*

"A supernatural new to Magiford visited the Cloisters," I said carefully. "And picked a fight. The task force had to step

in.”

“Aren’t you a *secretary*?” Connor asked.

“Yes.”

“How could a secretary get involved in a fight?” Connor’s lack of a smile removed that veneer of charm he wore, and between his dark red eyes and bunched eyebrows his darker side was burning through.

Feeling extra gleeful—it hadn’t been a fluke, he really did care, I finally had a friend in my apartment building—I patted his arm. “I was collateral damage,” I said. “It’s fine. The situation was taken care of.”

Next time we go out somewhere I’ll let Connor pick, I decided—the most generous thing I could think of as I had a four-page-long list of all the places in Magiford I wanted to visit with friends.

Connor narrowed his eyes. “You got help at the Cloisters?”

I stared at Connor, feeling much like a bunny facing down a wild but weirdly judgy wolf. “Um...” I tried to throw him off by finally searching for my keys.

I can steady my heartbeat so I lie believably to vampires, but I’m not sure my skills are up to a lie of this size.

Connor rolled his eyes. “Humans. You’re so *frail* but you never take care of yourselves. Do you have a first aid kit or the necessary cleansing agents in your apartment?”

I pulled my keys out of my backpack and zipped it shut. “Yes,” I confirmed—I had a whole shelf in my cabinet devoted to first aid kits.

“Then open up.” Connor sighed and ran a hand through his dark hair. “I’ll help you treat your injuries.”

“Oh, I’ll manage,” I protested.

“Dessert,” he deadpanned. “You’re injured.”

“Yeah.”

“You need treatment.”

“Yes,” I slowly said—I couldn’t tell Connor I’d planned to take a potion. Most fae potions were deadly to humans since they couldn’t take that much magic in their bodies. Potions that were watered down enough to make them safe for human consumption were so weak they didn’t do much of anything.

“And despite all of your well-meaning but inarguably fumbled attempts, you are not close enough with any of the humans in this building to ask them for something like this,” Connor said.

I scowled. “You don’t have to rub it in.”

“I’m making a point,” Connor said. “Open the door.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jade

I studied Connor, taking in the irritated slant to his eyebrows and his sharp frown both of which were slightly softened by the odd light to his red eyes.

Well, I was going to try and wrap my shoulder and knee anyway, even after taking a potion. As Nan says, don't cry over spilt milk.

It was a risk to invite a vampire into my apartment, but I kept all my potions and weapons out of eyesight in the fruitless hope that one day I'd need to invite one of my neighbors into my apartment without any preparation. It was ironic that the situation was happening, just with a vampire.

It wasn't like Connor posed any kind of threat. If he went crazy and tried to bite me, he'd die. But he was too controlled for something like that to happen, and he wasn't acting. His reaction was genuine.

He might not be human, and he's not part of my squad, but he's willing to be my friend.

"Okay," I agreed. "But!" I held a finger up. "I do not consent to be bitten."

Connor rolled his eyes. "I get that the Curia Cloisters might have trained you to think that all vampires are just

waiting to pounce on any unsuspecting human but allow me to say feedings are a lot more complicated than you'd think. Though if you frequently get roughed up on the job, perhaps they haven't made you paranoid enough. I digress: stop dragging your feet, open the door, and show me your first aid kit."

I laughed as I unlocked the door and flung it open.

"Don't *laugh*," Connor complained as he strode in—he didn't even look around my place, he just followed behind me. "That makes it seem like you haven't learned your lesson."

"You don't need to worry, I'm tougher than you think," I said. "Take a seat—I'll go get my kit and change."

Connor grumbled about "overconfident humans" under his breath before he settled down on my couch, that was positioned in front of my TV, with both his arms resting across the back of it.

I paused in the doorway of my bedroom and studied the back of his head. Connor somehow managed to still look trendy and relaxed even though he looked out of place in the commonness of my apartment.

The warm feeling in my stomach bubbled up again. I couldn't help but smile as I shut my bedroom door and then changed into a tank top, that didn't cover up the angry red smear of road rash on my shoulder, before slipping out of my room and heading into the bathroom.

I flicked the light on with great satisfaction—when I'd moved in the switch had been in the process of wearing out, so I put my electrician training into use and replaced it myself.

I closed the bathroom door. I didn't want Connor to see the shelf of first aid kits—that would raise a few questions. Next, I wiped down my knee and my shoulder, grabbed a kit, and emerged.

"Here we go!" I set my first aid kit down on the coffee table with a flourish. "I'll need antibacterial ointment for the road rash on my shoulder and some special stuff for my knee."

Connor opened the kit and stared at the many tubes and bandages stuffed inside it. “What’s road rash?”

I selected the ointments and creams that I’d need and set them aside. “A friction burn.”

Connor read the label of the antibacterial ointment I handed him, then abruptly set it down. “Wait, do you mean to tell me your shoulder got rubbed on the road?”

Shoot, I should have called it rugburn!

“It’s a general term that just means my skin rubbed on an abrasive surface.” I stuck my right leg out in front of me—my knee looked a little bruised but it wasn’t bad. Using the cream would probably help it as much as a potion given how fast I was sure to heal.

Connor plucked the tube of cream—one of those topical pain-relieving creams that felt cold and then heated up to help muscle pain—from my hands. “You hurt your knee *and* you have road rash?”

“Yes, but that’s it,” I said. “It’s just minor injuries.”

Connor made a noise of disbelief in the back of his throat as he moved to sit on the edge of my coffee table. “I will not be fooled. I understand a rogue sniffle could make a human expire.” He patted the side of my leg and then jerked his thumb up, motioning for me to lift my leg.

“It’s not so bad as that—human medicine is way more advanced—but that does make me wonder just how old you are. Also, I can rub my knee in,” I protested, even though I lifted my leg. “It’s the shoulder I’d appreciate help with—I can’t reach there so I can’t rub it in evenly.”

Connor ignored me as he propped my leg up on his lap, then uncapped the tube. He instantly coughed. “How can you claim human medicine has improved when you want to use a cream that has such a strong scent to it, it has burnt every hair in my nose?” he asked as the astringent smell of the cream permeated my apartment.

“In that case, I’ll do it myself.” I tried to grab the tube.

“Afternoon Tea,” Connor said in a warning tone. “Sit still and stop squirming.”

I leaned back on my couch, blinking when Connor squeezed some of the cream out on his fingers and started rubbing it into my knee. Vampires ran cold, so his fingers were as cool as the cream. Despite his initial complaints about the smell, Connor worked quietly and efficiently lulling me into the danger of nostalgia.

I’d spent countless nights with my family like this, treating each other’s minor injuries.

It was another thing I missed about home: piling on couches with my brothers and cousins, sharing our pains and laughter after a fight.

I had hopes that one day my squad would accept me enough that we could joke like that, for now Connor’s kindness and gentle hand was enough to almost make me cry.

“Thank you,” I abruptly said, my voice thick with everything I couldn’t say.

Connor glanced up at me, his red eyes tracing my face. “Of course.”

I cleared my throat, and my comfortable feeling with Connor let me ask. “So... afternoon tea?”

“It’s a snack related term,” Connor said.

“Yeah, but using that term implies you’re old enough to have regularly partaken in it back when it was a bigger thing.”

“If you’re trying to suggest that I’m older than you, the answer is yes. Obviously. Also, despite what you Americans believe, other countries in the world exist and still partake in afternoon tea to this day.” Connor wiped off the residue the cream left on his fingers using a paper towel I’d previously tucked in the kit. “Now let me look at your shoulder.”

I took my leg off his lap and scooted forward, turning so I sat sideways on the couch.

Connor selected the antibacterial ointment I’d set aside, then sat down behind me. He leaned close, his breath brushing

my neck.

“Connor,” I warned him.

He rolled his eyes and leaned back. “For the last time, I’m not going to bite you.”

“I know,” I said.

“Then why do you keep reminding me?” he complained.

“Because,” I said. *I can’t risk you forgetting.*

Today Connor had cemented our friendship. I couldn’t tell him what I was yet—it wasn’t only my secret to reveal, anyway, as it was my family’s secret too. However, even a nip had the potential to kill him, and I wasn’t going to let him die just because he was more friendly than the average vampire.

“This looks painful.” Connor smeared some ointment on my shoulder. “You said a supernatural new to Magiford attacked you—what kind were they?”

“Can’t say,” I said. “Legal reasons.”

I couldn’t risk crafting such a specific story—if he thought to ask anyone from the Cloisters, they might try to look the fake incident up. I didn’t want him getting too curious and poking holes in my cover story.

“Of course, you can’t,” Connor grouched. “Politics are always the worst. Regardless, I hope that task force the Cloisters keeps leashed managed to thrash whatever supernatural lost it.”

I laughed—the idea that any of us could “thrash” Ruin was hilarious—then it felt like I almost broke my jaw when my laugh turned into a yawn. “Don’t worry. I just need to sleep, then I’ll be fine.”

“You are not a computer that needs to be turned on and off.” His fingers were gentle as he continued wiping the ointment on.

“I’m really impressed you know enough about technology to make that comparison,” I said. “Just how old are you?”

Connor wiped his fingers off on the paper towel, then capped the tube. “A vampire never tells.”

I turned around so he could see my look of disbelief.

Connor winked looking way too young and comfortable. “It would ruin the mysterious aura that is oh-so-important to my race as it covers for our general lack of personality.”

Okay, he’s not old. There’s no way an older vamp could be so irreverent to his own kind. I was already pretty sure he was an Unclaimed, so maybe he just dislikes vampires despite being one?

“That’s harsh,” I said.

“But not untrue.” Connor’s eyes dropped down to my shoulder as he opened my package of extra-large bandages.

I slowly turned around again, and Connor applied two of the bandages to my shoulder setting the crumbled wrappers on my coffee table. “I think you’re sorted. The bandages don’t cover the full thing but they’re on the worst of it.”

“Thanks.” Finally able to sit normally, I started repacking the first aid kit. “That would have been awkward to apply.”

“Of course.” Connor slipped his fingers under my chin and gave me a campy smile. “Gotta keep my Emergency Rations in peak condition!”

I swatted his hand away. “I’m going to sleep. When I wake up, do you want to come over for coffee—or tea since you’re into afternoon tea?”

Connor paused in the middle of standing, his eyebrows briefly pulling together. “How thoughtful of you to invite me,” he said slowly, as if tasting the words.

“You don’t have to come over,” I said. “Or if you’d rather bring a blood pack that’s fine.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I’m not usually one to dabble with stupidity.”

I blinked. “Sorry, what?”

Connor didn't seem to hear me. He rubbed his jaw line, sporting a faint five o'clock shadow. "I'm experienced enough not to get attached, so why should I give it up? This was meant to be a holiday when I first arranged to come here. Why not act out? All the snake-brats get to do that year-round."

"Not attached? Connor, does our friendship mean so little to you?" I tried to keep my expression casual, but his response kicked off enough warning bells that it had me doubting my instincts.

Was I wrong about Connor? Is he secretly a crazy psychopath of a vampire?

Connor fixed his eyes on me again, his smile back in full force. "Don't worry, Breakfast. I was referring, of course, to Magiford in general. You'll find that I'm a very specific sort of friend. Regardless, I'll come over for drinks. Just ring the bell of my apartment."

"Okay." I studied Connor trying to pick up on any visual hints that would clue me into his mood. He was lying, obviously. I couldn't tell in what capacity. He definitely wasn't planning to eat me—he was too smart to prey on humans in the apartment building he lives in. But what *holiday* and *snake-brats* were he referring to?

Connor, meanwhile, stood up and crossed my small apartment in just a few strides. "For now, though, I will go—as a delicate human you surely need your rest. You have a nice place. It's very tidy and wonderfully suits you." A playful wink and he was gone, slipping out my front door.

I stared at the closed door baffled by the abrupt changes in his attitude.

...Maybe he's just older than I thought. Vampires get more eccentric as they get older.

Regardless, I was cautiously optimistic that Connor was becoming my third friend in Magiford—the first two being Sunshine and Emi. If I wasn't wrong about him and he was just odd, he was an accomplishment of the biggest goal I had

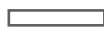
for this year which was making a friend in my apartment building.

Better yet, he even has time to do things with me.

Sunshine and Emi were always so busy, but Connor, being Unclaimed and, as far as I could tell, fun employed, had all the time in the world.

I should still be careful—until I can really be sure he's not hiding anything dark. No matter his intentions, I'm pretty sure I could get him to help me befriend the other residents of our building. He'd probably find it funny, and I can put his vampire pheromones to good use on our fellow residents.

I was determined to make a life for myself in Magiford, even if that meant trying things my family would question—like befriending vampires.



I WAS BACK to work that night, my knee and shoulder fully healed after I drank a fae potion before I fell into bed and my slayer healing had time to work.

Connor had come over as he'd promised. He drank only a sip of the tea I'd made for him, but he had a lot to say about my burnt lemon poppyseed muffins that had come out with the consistency of a hockey puck. (The muffins were the box mix variety—I was getting desperate to succeed in baking/cooking.)

Unfortunately, Connor was just as clueless as I was about cooking, so he didn't have any wisdom to offer. That didn't matter, though. The absolute joy to just have someone *over*—to chat over breakfast—had been so fun I didn't care.

My apartment didn't feel so blasted lonely, and I didn't feel so desperate—like I was clawing to settle in a city that didn't want me. Plus, Connor hadn't said anything else that had set off my *this is unsettling* instinct, so it was a great time.

I leaned back in my desk chair, drinking the last of the peanut-butter banana smoothie I'd brought to work. *I still miss*

my family, but at least friends can make things bearable.

“If you don’t mind my asking, Blood—err, Ma’am?—what is that you’re drinkin’?”

I froze in my tilted back position holding my cup straight up to get the last sip. *Blood...someone’s talking to me...about something that isn’t work related? They’re being friendly?*

I set my drink down with a little too much force before I spun my chair around to face Medium-Size Robert.

Medium-Size Robert—who insisted that we call him that when he joined, because his father was Big Robert and his nephew was Small Robert, even though Sarge had pointed out the squad both lacked other Roberts and anyone larger than him—was wearing a slightly amended version of our department uniform. He didn’t have much on his belt besides a radio and his mace because he carried a backpack of stuff for the squad whenever we were sent out.

He was smiling weakly at me in a way that suggested he maybe regretted asking me the question, but he’d asked. And I’d take whatever I could get.

“It’s, it’s a smoothie.” I had to try twice to spit the words out.

Easy, take a breath. Just pretend he’s Sunshine—or Connor.

“I made it with a blender before I came in—it’s got banana, peanut butter, some Greek yogurt, spinach, and frozen cucumber.” I looked back at my mostly consumed smoothie, which was an unappetizing green color.

“Oh,” Medium-Size Robert blinked. “So, it’s not part of your training?”

Confused, I looked from Medium-Size Robert to my smoothie, then back to Medium-Size Robert. “No?”

“I see.” Medium-Sized Robert slumped his shoulders for a moment. “I thought, maybe, you were doing something to build up your resistance to poisons. In case of... accidental poisoning.” He glanced at Grove’s empty desk, which had a

potion sitting on it that had been there since the day I'd arrived. The potion was green, and a highly suspicious orange ring had formed at the bottom of the bottle.

"No," I said. A moment passed, and I realized I should elaborate if I didn't want to come off sounding like a snob. "It's my meal. It's just green because of the spinach."

"I understand." Medium-Sized Robert nodded. "Thank you for taking the time to answer my question, Blood. Ma'am." He bowed a little, then edged away making for his chair—which was enormous and made of wooden logs that were each as thick as my neck.

I tapped my cup on my desk as I watched him. *He's weirdly formal with me. Calling me Ma'am? I'm one of the youngest members of the squad. I'm twenty-six!*

If I asked Sunshine about the Ma'am thing, she'd just tell me he was in awe of me which I wasn't sure about since he seemed eager to get away from me.

If I was more friendly, he might have been less scared. But it takes me so long to think of questions to ask and ways to be friendly that I just end up making things more awkward.

I sighed and glanced over at April wondering if I should ask her for help.

The House Medeis wizard was wearing her long-sleeved uniform tonight—the chillier nights despite the warm days were making the humans of the night shift make the swap earlier than the werewolves and vampires would—and was seated at her desk.

Juggernaut's desk was across from her, and the two appeared to be playing a card game—drawings cards from each other's hands—though they paused frequently to fill out spots in the reports they were working on.

April was intimidating given her wizard abilities but even as she and Juggernaut played cards together a couple of night shifters from the evidence processing team waved to her as they walked past. Even Tetiana paused by her desk, watching the wizard duo exchange cards with interest.

Maybe I should make getting people to wave to me my new goal since friendship with my squadmates seems out of reach.

“Hey-o, Blood.” Grove swung his legs wide as he duck waddled past my desk, pivoted, then stopped and saluted me.

For a moment I had hope—was Grove stopping by just to say hello?

The fae dashed those hopes when he straightened his shoulders. “We’ve got some more questions for you.”

Ahh, of course. Work. At least that will make it easier to talk.

I stood up and my chair made a low groaning noise as its legs scraped the tile floor. “Questions about the boars?”

“Yep.” Grove did a little twirl and led me to a whiteboard, where Brody was waiting.

They must have just put it together because it didn’t even have the photos that I’d taken of the damage the rampaging boar had done. (I’d uploaded them last night during the meetings Sarge had me sit in on.)

“Any news on if the boar is still loose?” I asked, settling into work like putting on a comfortable jacket.

Brody shook his head, then nodded. “No, or yes?” He scratched the back of his neck, and his blue eyes were so bright they were jewel-like in the bright office lighting. “None of the other shifts were able to find it, either, so as far as we know it’s still loose. All the investigations have hit dead ends—the only good thing is none of the other werewolves or shifters could catch its scent, so at least we know Binx and I didn’t miss something.”

I nodded as I studied the whiteboard taking in photos of the boars we’d killed as well as the scent profile Binx and Brody had created.

“On the bright side, the boar hasn’t done more damage since last night,” Grove said. “Or someone would have seen it. Coffee?” He didn’t wait for my reply, and instead shoved a mug into Brody’s hands.

Brody scowled down at the mug—which had a kitten riding a pink unicorn on it. “Dude, this is so old it’s cold.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to walk it back to a sink to pour it out,” Grove said. “I was told by some weirdo Night Court fae that coffee is as good as tea. That was a lie. It is not.”

Brody rolled his eyes and turned to set the mug down on a nearby desk, showing off twin paw prints—the work of one of his packmates no doubt—on the back of his shirt that he likely didn’t know about. “About the boar,” he said. “Another possibility is that it’s not destroying half the city right now because whoever released them on the city might have found it and taken it away.” Brody made a face. “Which isn’t great, either.”

“Maybe someone poisoned it?” Grove suggested.

Brody rolled his eyes. “You need a new hobby. No—like *five* new hobbies. You’re way too fixated on poisons.”

“Aww, are you concerned for me?”

Brody snorted. “I’m concerned for the squad.”

I traced the boar’s path that someone had marked on a satellite image map of Magiford with red marker. *Looks like it was dumped off on a corner of Goldstein. That’s not exactly where the mantasps were but it’s too close to be a coincidence.*

“Have we considered the possibility that this case might be linked with the mantasps?” I asked.

Brody and Grove stopped their bickering and turned simultaneously to stare at me. If Brody had been in his werewolf form, his ears would have been high and his tail up with the intensity he was staring at me.

I didn’t know how to interpret that—or Grove’s extra round eyes.

“Sorry—I haven’t had time to look over the debriefing about the boars yet. Did someone already point that out?” I asked, starting to regret I’d said anything.

“No, no one had connected that,” Brody said. “It makes sense—they were dumped in similar locations.”

Grove traipsed off and grabbed the whiteboard for the mantasp case, wheeling it across the office.

“Yes,” I agreed. “And both situations involve fae animals—not constructs or spells like we’ve seen more often.”

“She’s right,” Grove meticulously lined the mantasp whiteboard up with the boar’s whiteboard. “Last summer up through the beginning of this year Magiford saw a lot of weird, unidentifiable magic.”

“The attacks on Queen Leila of the Night Court? Yeah,” Brody folded his arms across his chest making his defined biceps pop. “We’ve seen lots of fae magic involved as the Seelie and Unseelie Courts keep swallowing each other but they haven’t been busting out fae animals as part of it. Now with two similar cases, it’s time to drop the assumption that it might be related to the succession wars. Hey, Binx!” Brody called.

The cat shifter bristled at her desk. “*What.*”

“Blood pointed out that the mantasp and boar cases might be related. Since you’re on point with us for the mantasp case, do you want to join the conversation?” Brody asked.

Binx slowly stood up—a feline grace marking her movements—and prowled towards us. “Related? How so?”

Brody recounted our realizations to Binx as I studied the two whiteboards.

Grove stood at my side—I assumed he was listening to Binx and Brody, but he surprised me when he abruptly asked me a question. “Hey, Blood. You took pictures that night with the mantasps, right?”

“Yes.” I swiped my phone open and brought up my photo gallery. “I uploaded them all. Evidence processed them.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want photos of the mantasps,” Grove said. “I’m more interested in the damage.”

I paused in the middle of bringing one of the photos I’d taken of the dead mantasps up. “Didn’t we already process the

damage? We had to record it for the humans so they could give us the bill.”

Binx growled low in her throat. “We processed any damage that would need to be fixed—potholes, that kind of thing.”

“Yes,” Grove patiently said. “But I want to look for any proof of fae presence and see if the more cosmetic damage—like overturned trash cans—was in any particular pattern.”

I paused, trying to sift through the underlayers of what Grove was saying. “Since we have two crime scenes to compare, you mean we might be able to see a pattern that would give us a better idea of who is doing this—or why?”

Grove beamed at me. “Exactly! We’ve got to widen the scope.”

“I was able to smell fae magic here, which is where we believe the fae gate was created to drop the mantasps.” Brody pointed to the satellite view of the street someone had printed off the internet for the mantasp board, pointing to a gold blob marked on the sidewalk. “That’s the only spot where I could smell fae magic. There were scents from earlier in the day, but that spot was the only area that matched the strength of the scent I’d associate with the timeline. Oh—except for the dragon seal magic that came from Tutu’s.”

“That spot is the only place I sensed fae magic, too,” Grove volunteered as he rubbed the tiny glass vial that hung from his necklace. “I did pick up on additional magic—a faint glimmer of foreign powers—but I assumed it was magic from Tutu’s. Unless it’s the weird magic Brody sniffed out at the scene of the mantasp crime?”

“Maybe?” Brody said.

I tilted my head as I thought. “If this was part of a battle between two Courts, there would have been more fae present. That place should have reeked of fae magic.”

“Yeah.” Brody agreed. “And the boars were a similar case. Their appearance spot was farther up Goldstein, but I only

smelled fae magic directly where their scent suddenly appeared.”

“Again, it was the only spot I sensed fae magic, too,” Grove said. “So that’s another point to Blood’s theory that it’s the same person.”

“Okay, who can control mantasps and fae boars besides a fae?” Binx asked.

Grove sighed longingly as he stared at the whiteboard. “I’d like to study them,” he said.

“Dude,” Brody said. “You’ve gotta get over those things.”

Grove bristled. “I’m not referring to the mantasps—this time.”

“Oh?” Binx said.

“No. It’s rather the fae who brought the mantasps and boars out must have a rather unusual array of magic because fae are incapable of opening fae gates,” Grove said. “We rely on various animals to create portals.”

A nearby printer sputtered to life and spit out a report making the air smell like warm paper and pungent ink.

I watched it for a moment, deep in thought, then shifted my attention back to Grove. “Is there any other way to make a gate?” I asked.

“Well, elf magic,” Grove said. “And magic artifacts left over from their time that were specifically forged for such purposes. But most of those were destroyed.”

“You said most,” I said. “Is there a chance any of the Seelie or Unseelie kings or queens could possess one?”

“Perhaps, but not likely,” Grove said. “They’d have to pay a king’s ransom to purchase it. Speaking of which, I suppose we could use that tidbit to help us narrow down possible perps. It instantly makes the biggest Courts at the moment—like King Harel of the Seelie—more suspicious, as only Courts with enough money could pull this off.”

“If they’re using an elf artifact, that might even explain the weird magic I smelled with the mantasps,” Brody chimed in. “I’ve never smelled elf magic before.”

“Could be what I sensed with the boars, too,” Grove said.

Looking back and forth between the maps on the two whiteboards, I ventured another question. “What if all of this isn’t a succession fight between the fae Courts?”

Brody cocked his head. “Well, a fae is obviously involved. That was the predominant scent at both crime scenes.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s automatically a conflict between fae,” Grove said. “I said it before, Goldstein is neutral territory—it has to be, because of Tutu’s Crypta & Custodia. There’s no reason to make that area a war zone and risk Tutu’s wrath.”

“Then...why dump monsters on Goldstein Street?” Brody asked.

Binx made a noise in the back of her throat, and Sarge stepped into the office.

“Squad!” he shouted, his voice loud but still musical. “Gear up. The Cloisters just received a call: the boar has been spotted!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jade

I crouched behind an overgrown bush that spilled over the side of a white picket fence enclosing a front lawn.

I kept my breathing even as I strained my ears, listening for the boar.

At my side, Binx shifted her weight flexing her paws, so her massive claws flashed in the orangey light the streetlights cast on the sidewalk.

She was in her cat form—a North American cougar. In this form she couldn't talk, but Sarge had both her and Brody in their animal forms for tracking purposes—we couldn't risk letting the boar slip away again.

"I don't hear Medium-Sized Robert." Grove sat pretzel-style on Binx's other side, his leather bag sitting on his lap.

Medium-Sized Robert, Brody, April, and Tetiana were supposed to flush out the boar, chasing him toward our position. Binx, Grove, and I were supposed to take the boar out and Sarge was with Clarence and Juggernaut, who were ready to launch a surprise attack from the side if my team failed.

"It's too early to expect them. Sarge said we had to be careful to control the boar so it doesn't stampede," I said,

reciting the mission statement Sarge had repeated to us over the radio on our way to the site. “We can’t let it get away from us or damage the neighborhood.”

Damage would have been a bad look for the Cloisters since not only had the boar escaped us once, but now we were in a human neighborhood.

Well, mostly human. There are a few wizard Houses in this area.

House Tellier was a few houses behind us. It was hard to miss with its orange and yellow trim and memorable farmhouse/colonial style architecture.

Binx abruptly stiffened, then stood up.

“You hear the boar?” I asked.

Binx nodded as she stretched, loosening up her muscles.

“Anyone want some poison?” Grove asked.

Maybe I should say yes sometime, just to please him—but today it won’t work since I need to use my gun. “No thank you, Grove.” I removed my firearm from its holster and flicked off the safety, pointing it at the ground before I racked it, loading a bullet. “I’ll be aiming for its chest, Binx. It seemed like bullets just broke the skin when I aimed at its skull last time.”

Binx made this squeaking-chirp noise that sounded like it should have come from a bird, which was her version of acknowledging what I’d said.

I could hear the boar, now, along with the heavy thuds of Medium-Sized Robert chasing after him.

I eased my way to the edge of the bush so I was still hidden by it and could see better.

The boar ran down the center of the street picking up more speed than I would have liked given Sarge’s orders.

We needed to slow it down.

While I was good enough with my gun to be trusted to use it within the city limits, I didn’t want to take chances. “Grove,

can you use one of your poisons to blind it?" I asked. "You can throw it when I try shooting it."

Grove leaped to his feet. "Of course! I can't be trusted with a gun, but I'm a crack shot with throwing things!" He frantically dug through his bag.

"We have to be quiet," I warned him before I started to edge into the street, Binx stalking next to me.

The boar was half a block up and rapidly closing in.

I felt the soft touch of fae magic in my mind—Sarge must have been charging up a water attack.

"At your mark, Binx," I whispered.

Binx trotted a little up the street and then crouched down, every muscle in her body taut, before she launched herself at the boar.

She landed on its back, digging her claws deep into its hide as she screamed—a hair raising noise that gave me goosebumps.

The boar squealed, rearing its head back and bucking as it tried to dislodge her.

This gave me the perfect target, but I didn't have much time to line my shot up since it was writhing.

I held my hands steady and took my shot, hitting it in the chest.

I must not have gotten it perfectly in the heart because it staggered and didn't fall.

"Hi-yah!" Grove—hiding behind me—threw a glass vial, hitting it square in the left eye. The glass shattered on impact, and the boar shrieked—either from the poison or because Binx bit into its neck.

I need to get it with this next shot—it's too wild.

I did a quick scan of the street. It was thankfully empty, though I still felt the magic Sarge was charging.

I slunk closer to lower the potential risk of missing—I could no longer afford to miss.

The boar whirled in a circle trying to dislodge Binx.

Binx's back legs slipped, and she scrabbled for a hold but kept her front claws dug in and bit more deeply into the animal's hide.

I narrowed my eyes, honing my focus. When the boar whirled past me I saw an opening and pulled the trigger, shooting it.

The boar collapsed, a shrieking squeal ripping from it before it went quiet.

I kept my gun pointed at it—I wouldn't move until I knew for certain it was dead. "Grove? Check it, please."

"Right-o." Grove trotted past me approaching the boar.

Binx finally relaxed her claws and hopped off the boar—making angry noises as she spat out its most likely foul-tasting blood.

Grove prodded the boar. "It's dead! It's not breathing."

I flicked the safety back on, then holstered my gun as Binx ate some grass from a human's lawn.

"Well done, Team Blood." Sarge stepped out from behind a tree planted on the curb. "Very neatly done." He stopped just short of the boar, crouching down next to it.

I blinked as I stared at him tipping my head. *Did he release the spell he'd been holding?*

My training—which some might call induced paranoia—poked me, so I turned in a circle doing another scan of the street.

The feeling of fae magic was gone now, and I saw a smudge of gray farther up the street.

I thought I saw a blonde-haired man but when I blinked, he was gone.

"Sarge? Were you holding a spell ready to use?" I asked.

Sarge glanced up at me. “No. Why?”

I hesitated. “I felt a fae spell in the area, and I saw someone down the street. He just left.”

“Ah.” Sarge rested his arms on his knees as he remained crouched. “Yes, I felt the magic too, a block or so down. It was probably a Seelie or Unseelie fae scouting out the fight,” he said. “I saw an Unseelie brownie when we were setting up our perimeter, too.”

I nodded, changing my stance so I was more relaxed but could still easily pull a weapon.

Juggernaut dragged Clarence out from behind a team car we’d parked on the street for cover purposes. “Why’d you guys kill the boar so cleanly? I wanted to try shooting it with lightning,” he complained, holding onto the short sleeve of Clarence’s uniform so he could tow him along.

“You already did that,” Grove reminded him. “It didn’t work.”

“Yeah, well this time I was going to try aiming for its chest—like Blood,” Juggernaut said.

“You’re too bad a shot for that!” Tetiana called from farther up the street, where she trotted after Medium-Sized Robert.

Brody and April followed behind the pair, Brody loping along in his wolf form.

“What’s going on?” The unfamiliar voice came from behind me.

I turned in time to see a woman in her thirties, wearing a fuzzy pink bathrobe and bear-paw slippers, standing in the front doorway of a ranch house.

Sarge glanced at the woman, then shifted to our team, the faint scales on his lower jaw gleaming in the streetlight. “Binx, Clarence?”

Binx stopped eating grass and approached the ranch house, Clarence following behind her.

The moment Binx stepped on the sidewalk that led up to the house, her body language changed. She perked her cat ears, casually twitched her tail like a house cat, and purred so loudly I could hear it in the middle of the street.

Although she was rough in her human form and tended to bristle a lot, in her cougar form Binx was charming and friendly. Even though she couldn't talk as a cougar, she was always elected to accompany whatever sacrificial lamb was sent to talk to the humans. Her deep purrs and soft fur helped smooth over any human fears.

Clarence was typically her partner for these talks. Clarence looked remarkably unthreatening in general and, when he wasn't yanking on his cravat in fear, he was very reassuring. (At least, from what I'd heard. Whenever I was around, he was a nervous wreck.)

"Good evening, Madam," Clarence said as he climbed the step to the ranch's front porch. "I am with the Curia Cloisters. I apologize for all the noise."

"Oh." The woman looked down at Binx, who preened under her gaze and purred some more, inviting pets. "Um. No worries..."

I wish I was as good with people as Clarence, I thought wistfully.

When Sarge approached me, I stood up straight settling my shoulders. "Sir."

Sarge nodded to me. "Nice shot."

"It took two," I felt obligated to point out.

"You killed it with very little fuss—and no backup was necessary," Sarge said. "Well done."

"Thank you," I said, though it didn't really feel warranted.

Brody whined as he circled the boar—it bothered him that Binx had been voted "definitely more charming" than him. Brody was bigger than a regular wolf, and even when he wagged his tail and tried to look cute most humans were freaked out by him.

Sarge shook his head at Brody, then returned his attention to the boar. “Juggernaut, call it in with Cloisters—and request an evidence team come out to test the boar.”

“Yessir!” Juggernaut saluted Sarge, then unearthed his phone.

“You think whoever loosened this beast upon Magiford left a trace?” Tetiana nudged one of the boar’s cloven feet with a boot.

“I hope,” Sarge said. “But it’s not likely. Still, if we move it, we might damage evidence. It’s also late enough at night that traffic won’t be a problem on this street, so immediate transport isn’t necessary.”

I glanced back at Binx and Clarence—they were working their friendly abilities. Binx had successfully lured the woman into petting her, so the lady was crouched on the ground scratching Binx’s chest.

I was watching Binx with awe, even though I’d seen her charm humans dozens of times before, when I felt something brush my senses.

I whirled around, pulling my gun from its shoulder holster as I stared down the shadowed street.

Nothing besides my squadmates moved on the street. Moths fluttered around the streetlights, but this late there wasn’t even a firefly out and about.

“Sense something, Blood?” Sarge asked.

“Maybe,” I hesitated. “Permission to check?”

Sarge nodded. “Go. Brody, Tetiana, watch her back.”

Brody woofed and then—seemingly eager to prove he was as good an animal as Binx—tip-tapped after me, his claws clicking on the pavement.

Tetiana lazily saluted Sarge and was much less obvious about following me. She yawned, then strolled in Medium-Sized Robert’s direction, before ambling over to the team car parked on the street.

I continued down the street trying to track the feeling as I glanced at houses.

The street was deceptively cozy with all the house porchlights on, and the occasional sidewalk chalk drawing or bike strewn across the front yards added to the character.

But despite the quaintness, my senses lurched to life setting off my inner alarm bells.

Vampire. There's definitely a vampire. I could feel it, in addition to Clarence and Tetiana's presence.

Brody panted, his pink tongue hanging from his mouth, and glanced up at me.

"I sense a vampire," I paused, then voiced what I'd been avoiding thinking. "It could be Ruin. Although this isn't in his territory."

Brody growled low in his throat.

I stopped when we reached the front lawn of the wizard House Tellier. The vampire sensation prowled around, but I couldn't see any sign of movement anywhere on the street. I started to pull my gun when the feeling abruptly faded.

"The sense is leaving. Do you smell anything?"

Brody tilted his head back, scenting the night breeze. He then sniffed around the sidewalk a little making a circle around me before he stopped, sat down next to me, and sneezed.

That's a no. Am I just over sensitive?

I stared into the darkened front lawn of House Tellier—it had a porchlight on like everyone else. I could see through one of the storm windows that some kind of basement light was on, and a light was on in an upper window—a bedroom, probably—but everything else was darkened.

I checked the daggers in my thigh bandolier while keeping myself pointed at the House as if it was the reason why I'd wandered down the street.

The last sensation of the vampire winked out, and I let myself look up and down the street.

“Maybe I’m imagining it,” I muttered to myself.

Brody whined, making me jump—I’d been so focused on my senses I’d forgotten he was with me.

When I glanced at him, he lifted his right front paw at me and flattened his ears.

“Sorry,” I said, though I wasn’t sure what I was apologizing for. I turned, heading back up towards the boar.

“Find anything?” Sarge called to us.

I shook my head as we passed Tetiana and one of the squad’s cars. “I think it was a vampire, but they’re gone now.”

Brody woofed, then loped off heading for Tetiana and Medium-Size Robert.

I bowed my head to Sarge. “Sorry, Sir.”

Sarge shook his head making his silvery light glow. “Your senses haven’t ever been wrong before. I’d rather trust them.”

“Thank you, Sir.” I saluted him again.

“Of course.” Sarge turned back to the boar.

I moved to join him, but first I glanced back down the street.

Maybe he’s right. It must have been someone. There’s no way it could have been Ruin. This isn’t his territory, and he has no reason to come down here... right?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Considine

I had intended to let Killian stew for at least a few months before I finally agreed to talk. However, Jade had raised up several... not *concerns*—that implied a certain amount of care—but rather... *questions* that I intended to find the answers to.

I texted his Second Knight to make the arrangements, which is why—one evening in the last week of September, I entered Club Luminary instead of hanging around Magiford’s downtown district as I was prone to do.

The elevator dinged before it opened, and when I stepped out several Drake vampires who’d been posted by the door greeted me.

The Second Knight—a shorter vampire with dark hair, a serious manner, and the misleadingly benign name of Josh—gravely bowed to me. “Greetings, Elder Maledictus.”

“Good evening, Josh,” I said. “You’re here to guide me to Killian?”

“Indeed,” Josh said. “If you would follow me.”

I strolled after him, blinking when I saw the outline of no less than three firearm holsters through his suitcoat. “I thought Club Luminary had a strict no-weapons policy.”

Josh forlornly paused, then opened his suitcoat to show his empty holsters. “They do,” he said. “I was forced to part with my dear weapons, leaving them behind. I cannot understand why anyone would *enjoy* a dining experience in which they do not have the beautiful brush of cold metal against them—it is one of the few joys in life on this endlessly turning orb of brokenness that is our world.”

“Ah,” I said. “Glad to see you’re still you.” Josh was a rather unique vampire with his dark poetry, preoccupation with death, and unusual name. His uniqueness generally lulled enemies, so they weren’t aware of just how deadly he was until it was too late.

“Who else would I be?” Josh asked as he marched into the restaurant.

Club Luminary was a trophy of modern luxury, with its glass walls and stained-glass ceiling, with skylights that gave guests a peek at the night sky. The stained-glass mosaics gave homage to the various supernatural races depicting them at their impossible best, like the werewolves that actually appeared groomed and not half flea bitten peering out of a green forest.

The restaurant was circular shaped to give guests a view of the city, with the kitchens in the center adding to the décor with granite countertops and stainless-steel appliances. Kitchen staff dressed in spotless white uniforms, who also looked beautiful enough to lure a lesser vampire into a bite, worked over the food, and the scent of garlic and basil drifted from their workstations.

“This way, Elder Maledictus,” Josh said.

I was surprised when he didn’t lead me to the vampire section of the club—marked by a stain glass ceiling that depicted a castle and men and women dressed in renaissance clothing attempting to look menacing with glowing red eyes—a depiction I found absolutely laughable—but instead to the *wizard* area, which was marked by a stain glass window of robed humans wielding the elements.

Killian was already seated at a square table, looking at something on a tablet, with several folders of papers spread across the table.

He flicked his eyes up as we approached, and I was pleased to see his eyebrow twitch in irritation. “Con. Where have you *been?*”

I made a show of checking my watch. “What are you complaining about? I’m two minutes early.”

“Not tonight,” Killian impatiently said. “I mean in general! Where have you been in Magiford?”

“Oh.” I sat down giving the area another look. There were elegant glass vases of blood-red roses everywhere—most likely at the insistence of the club owners, one of which was a fae and the other being a vampire. “So, you haven’t figured that out even with all your little minions out looking? Good for me.”

Killian put his tablet aside. “Hardly. Hiding is child’s play to someone with your powers,” his voice was lined with fresh irritation.

I grinned. “Sore that I didn’t arrive tonight in a car for you to track? Killian, I’m hurt you’d think I’m that sloppy.”

I’d been using one of my rarer powers that only came with age—great age, at least two millenniums—to fly around the city, precisely because Killian was competent enough that if I had any kind of vehicle he’d find me in an instant.

“Don’t worry, Killian.” I rested my arm on the back of the chair next to me. “One day you’ll have these powers too. I’d bet you’ll develop them before Vígí, even.”

“Vígí is centuries older than me,” Killian said, sounding slightly distracted as he handed his paperwork off to Josh. I caught sight of the header—something about wizards—before Josh took the folders. “Of course, he’ll get the powers first.”

“Not of course,” I countered. “Because Vígí is an idiot.” *And I’ll have to poke and prod him every decade to keep him alive long enough to develop these powers, something I tire of.*

“As much as I agree with your estimation of my older brother, you cannot distract me. Where have you been?” His work set aside, Killian stared at me, his hands rested casually on the table.

“Surely you know I’m not going to tell you that.” I eyed the waitstaff—all human, so no supernaturals could pull political moves as Club Luminary was considered neutral territory.

“I still feel honor bound to ask,” Killian said.

“Honor?” Shocked, I sat up straight giving the youngest of my unwanted charges a careful scan. “Since *when* have you cared about honor?”

Killian had all the ambition his siblings lacked—one of the many reasons why he was my favorite of the Dracos children.

He waved off my concern. “Stop fretting like a nursemaid and just tell me why you agreed to this meeting. Surely you had some reason?”

I sighed and made a show of pinching the bridge of my nose. “All of you rebellious snake-brats are going to drive me into an early grave.”

“You could just let my siblings suffer the consequences of their asinine decisions,” Killian pointed out.

No, I can't, because I promised Ambrose I'd watch over his offspring.

Though I'd regretted that asinine promise on a daily basis for several centuries.

A waiter approached the table, placing a crystal glass of blood in front of me and then a second in front of Killian before he bowed and swept off.

I swirled the glass. “I’m not sure I know what you’re referring to.”

“Yes, you do,” Killian said. “Every time one of them is on the edge of letting go and drifting off into an eternal sleep, you pop up like a vulture and either half kill or psychologically and

financially destroy them, disappearing once they're incensed enough to fix all the wreckage you caused."

I considered Killian as I idly sipped on the warm blood—once upon a time the sweet metallic taste would have been delightful, but the problem with immortality is that the joy of things gradually disappeared so to me it tasted empty.

I figured he'd catch on eventually. Not that it matters. It wasn't like Ambrose told me I couldn't tell his children. I just didn't want them to think I actually care about them.

I'd never turned anyone and had my own offspring and Family line for a reason: I didn't care about anyone, and I didn't intend to change that.

Ambrose had been my best friend—closer than blood given the centuries and horrors we'd been through together. Wars, plagues, the changing of eras and empires, we'd seen it all.

And then, he'd kicked the bucket after his One died.

It wasn't worthwhile caring for others. In the end, all you were left with was pain.

"What I haven't figured out, is why you do it," Killian continued.

"What is your best guess?" I asked, curious.

"You don't deny it, then?" Killian asked.

I shrugged, not interested in committing.

Killian rolled his eyes. "Fine. Be melodramatic. I suspect that you're bored, and you get an unholy sense of delight in making my siblings live the boredom out with you."

I laughed. "Not a bad conjecture! You've taken my temperament into account."

"Yes, but it doesn't fully work," Killian countered. "As you don't *like* any of my siblings, and it seems like it would be more trouble to hang around them in order to terrorize them."

"I don't like anyone," I countered. "Although I find you tolerable. And Margarida and Sachiko have their moments," I

said, naming the next youngest siblings after Killian.

Killian boredly drummed his fingers on the table. “Then allow me to warn you that my siblings are most alarmed by your disappearance.”

“Alarmed? Whatever for?”

Killian shrugged. “They seem paranoid that you are using this time to plot and scheme against them. It’s upsetting their fragile inner balance.”

I toasted Killian with my glass. “Good for them.”

Killian sourly frowned. “Hardly. I didn’t know it was possible to communicate one was having *vapors* over cellphone text conversation, but they have managed it.”

I shrugged. “You were the one stupid enough to tell them I’m not staying with you.”

“Something I regret, I assure you,” Killian’s nearly indiscernible British accent grew stronger with his irritation.

I laughed. There was something fun in knowing I wasn’t the only one to suffer for the existence of the Dracos Family, however temporary Killian’s discomfort was.

“Fine, then. As my thanks for dealing with your siblings, I’ll get to why I’m here.” I set my crystal glass down, and my amusement died as I narrowed my eyes at Killian. “Just how dangerous is it at the Cloisters that non-combat employees can be harmed while working?”

It was a risk to so blatantly ask Killian. He’d use the information somehow. But it was a calculated risk on my end.

Jade had been hurt.

If I poked Killian—the vampire Eminence of the Midwest—I could possibly nudge him to interfere with whatever stupidity the Cloisters was up to.

Not that I truly care for her. Rather, Jade makes my days amusing, and I’m not ready for such amusement to end quite yet.

Entertainment was a luxury I didn't often come across, so Jade had to be preserved.

Killian blinked twice, his eyebrows crawling up his forehead. "*What?*" he asked, sounding—for the first time ever—truly bewildered.

I kept my gaze on him, pushing a little of my power into it so he'd feel my strength. "A non-combat employee was recently injured during a shift at the Cloisters. *How* did that happen?"

Killian frowned. "I'm afraid I don't know what specific instance you're referring to."

Good. That's exactly what I want.

Aloud, I said, "Are you not the vampire Eminence—the vampire representative on the Midwest Committee of Magic?"

"I am," Killian said. "But that means I make and shape laws and events—I have no control over daily activities within the Cloisters. I'm not informed about them unless there are political ramifications."

I weighed the situation out for a moment. Admitting Jade was human would make it that much easier to find her. I didn't want Killian knowing exactly what incident I was referring to—it's why I hadn't given her role of secretary away—as learning Jade's identity would lead Killian straight to my apartment doorstep.

"Why are you concerned about the dealings of the Curia Cloisters?" Killian asked, taking advantage of my silence. "You don't care about supernaturals as a whole. You don't care about the world. Why would you possibly care if an innocent was harmed?"

I could practically hear the cranks in Killian's crafty brain clank as he tried to reason through the situation.

"The situation involved humans," I cagily said.

"So? You care about humans even less than you care about supernaturals," Killian said. "Unless...you don't have a donor. Do you?"

He's going to go personal—I need to distract him and cast a wider net.

“No. I’m not that stupid—or desperate. But the involvement of humans means there’s potential consequences.” I pinched the stem of my wine glass. “I have no desire to emotionally care for or grow attached to anyone—human or otherwise. But—despite the fact that the lot of you Dracos offspring have painted me as a villain of the worst kind—I do wish for society to survive as I have no desire for wars to return us to the lifestyle we had before indoor plumbing. Hence, we must be watchful,” I said, for once being honest if not misleading.

Killian rubbed his jaw. “That sounds reasonable. As a general rule, you *aren’t* reasonable. What is this really all about?”

It was ironic that Killian’s cunning and stable temperament that had endeared him to me was turning out to be very inconvenient.

I took another sip of blood to mentally fortify myself. “Stop asking for details I’m not going to give you.”

“Why else—”

“*Killian Drake, offspring of Dracos,*” I said putting more power in my words, bending him to my will. “Stop asking questions.”

Killian snapped his mouth shut—my power clamping down on him and keeping him from asking anything else.

I was aware of several of his offspring stirring in their position by the club entrance, but Killian held his hand up, and they resettled.

“Fine,” Killian said. “If it’s information you want, I can look into the situation—”

“I don’t want an explanation,” I said. “I want you to make sure it doesn’t happen again.” I smiled widely, which seemed to unsettle him. “For the good of the supernatural community.”

“Very well,” he said. “We’ve been talking about expanding the Department of Supernatural Law Enforcement and providing more guards. I’ll support the issue when it comes to the Committee.” He made a face. “Though you better be grateful. This means I’ll be facing down the miserly Queen of the Night Court, who is allergic to spending money.”

I tilted my head. “Is one fae so terrible to face? They are typically obsessed over their appearance and Court politics.”

“This particular queen is a regular nightmare because she’s invested and concerned.” He shuddered, revolted by the idea. “Since it’s a security issue I imagine she’ll let herself get talked into it, but my reputation is going to take a hit if it’s known I care about Curia Cloister employees.”

“Please,” I snorted. “You’re already sinking your fangs into wizard affairs.” I pointedly looked at the files Josh still held.

Killian shrugged, unrepentant at getting caught in a lie. “It comes with having a wizard wife—who is also *invested* and *concerned*.”

Ahhh—so his One is the source of his sudden acquisition of honor. Interesting.

“To answer your original question, fights within the Cloisters aren’t common,” Killian said. “The place is spelled to the gills, and losing one’s temper within the building and acting violent would have some stiff repercussions. If a non-combat employee was hit, it was likely that it happened as collateral damage.”

That lined up with what Jade had said. *But she was quite banged up to simply be someone caught on the sidelines.*

More likely, my recollection of human fragility had failed me, and I no longer had a reliable mental scale to ascertain exactly how hurt Jade was.

But... There was still something about it that didn’t sit well with me.

Don’t dwell upon it. Jade is diverting, but she’s a human.

I leaned back in my chair letting the last wisps of power I'd held onto evaporate. "You said there are plans to expand the department?"

"Yes," Killian said. "Specifically, the Magic Response Task Force. The wizards have been suggesting it for a month. I wasn't inclined to agree until a certain elder vampire started running around Magiford, and it struck me that a bigger task force might indeed be warranted," he snidely said as he pulled his buzzing phone out of his suitcoat pocket.

He didn't look too bothered, but I might have pushed Killian a little too much with the use of my powers. He wasn't arrogant—he was too competent for that—but no vampire would take well to being ordered around within their territory.

I studied him trying to ascertain if hidden rage boiled within him.

Killian ignored me and focused on his phone, his eyebrows twitching with irritation again.

"You aren't mad," I said.

"Mad about what?" he asked.

"My heavy-handed use of powers."

"Of course, I'm not," Killian said. "I don't really care why you had to ask me all of this because I got the answer I wanted."

"And what answer is that?" I asked, curious.

"That you're amusing yourself somehow," Killian glanced up long enough to give me a cocky smile. "Which means you aren't sticking your nose in my affairs, which is what *I* care about."

I shrugged. "You've given me no reason to interfere. Although I would like to meet your little wizard."

"No," Killian said. He was calm, and his body stayed relaxed, although I could feel his tautness like the tuned strings of a violin.

She's a weakness.

Even such a small sign would have once been enough to make me consider eliminating the wizard.

But.

Could I *really* consider that, when Killian was so competent... and I myself had just questioned him for the sake of a human?

Maybe I'm growing soft. Perhaps soon I'll simply expire from a weak heart?

Wishful thinking.

I faintly heard the elevator ding as I took a sip of my now tepid blood. The cheerful noise was followed by a couple of muffled oaths.

Killian, staring beyond me, stiffened and Josh—standing a foot away from our table, shuffled his armful of papers. “Oh dear,” he said.

“Stop her!” a Drake vampire hissed.

“Don't be silly, just let me through,” A woman said in response.

“Watch it, she's got a book in her bag—oof!” One of the vampires said before I heard a thud that signaled they'd been hit. Apparently by a book?

Must be a dictionary of some sort to cause damage to a vampire.

Curious, I twisted in my chair but the herd of Drake vampires blocked my view of whatever female they were trying to keep out.

“I believe I'll be the first to leave,” Killian stood, his chair scraping the floor as he pushed it back. “Unless you had any additional questions about injured Curia Cloister employees?”

I waved him off. “No. By all means, go contain your wizard,” I guessed.

Killian's eyes briefly narrowed, but he walked off calmly enough, Josh trailing behind him.

I watched him and drained the last of the blood in my cup. “Interesting,” I said as Killian slipped into the cloud of his vampires.

It occurred to me that I could use one of my powers and go spy on Killian’s One, but I had a hunch that would anger Killian much more than letting my powers loose on him.

I have time to meet her, I reasoned. I’m going to be in Magiford for a while.

I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and turned to look.

A stately, purple haired woman wearing enough gemstone loaded jewelry to wake up the greediest of vampires watched the scuffle with interest, her dark eyes with unusual slitted pupils taking it in.

Ah, she must be the dragon shifter.

My information sources said one had recently come to town.

I didn’t care about dragon shifters any more than I cared about anyone, but I didn’t appreciate the interest in her eyes as she watched Killian enter the elevator, his Family making a wall that partially blocked the sight.

When the woman swiveled looking from the closing elevator to me and the interest stayed in her eyes, I gave her my most feral of smiles.

Go away.

Apparently, the dragon shifter was not familiar with reading body language because she strolled in my direction, leaving the werewolf section she’d been standing in.

“Good evening, Elder,” she said. “I’m Gisila of the Von Faulken line.”

She’s a Von Faulken? She’s a relative of Tutu’s then.

As a large client of Tutu’s Crypta & Custodia, I’d met the fierce dragon shifter before.

“Good evening,” I said, unwilling to give her a proper greeting or exchange—there was no way she was approaching me out of harmless curiosity.

Dragon shifters were never harmless.

Unfortunately, Gisila kept on staring eagerly at me obviously expecting a name in return. “And your name is?” she finally asked.

I pushed my chair out and stood up, putting the table between us. “A mystery.” I strolled towards the elevator—where a handful of Killian’s Family had remained behind, likely to vainly attempt to follow me home.

Gisila trailed behind me. “You must be old to be able to meet Killian Drake on even ground. Unless... are you enemies?”

When I glanced back at her, she smiled at me—a gesture so perfect, so *poised*, it set my teeth on edge.

She’s fishing for information. Why would a dragon shifter care about what we vampires are up to?

It was possible she had aspirations of social climbing or wished to establish a working relationship with Killian. However, she’d watched his Family with an interest that didn’t seem to match either of those goals, and she seemed hopeful I was his foe. It was most likely she was planning a move against him.

Not while I’m here.

Killian Drake could take care of himself, and he wouldn’t thank me for interfering. But I wasn’t going to tolerate anyone—a dragon shifter included—picking a fight with a Dracos in front of me.

I glanced at the remaining Drakes, who—unlike the dragon—were well versed in body language, so one of them pressed the button to call the elevator.

I stopped just short of the trio of Drakes and turned to smile at Gisila, taking care to flash my elongated fangs. “No, Killian and I are not enemies. Rather, he’s a cherished charge.”

“*Charge?*” Gisila repeated, her eyes wide with shock. “Killian Drake is your *charge?*”

“Indeed. Now if you’ll excuse me—oh, *do* tell Tutu that Considine Maledictus sends his regards,” I purred.

Right on time, the elevator dinged and opened.

I stepped inside and flicked a finger at the remaining Drakes, who fell in line stepping inside the elevator.

Before Gisila could come up with a reply, the doors shut.

“I hope your venerated leader is keeping an eye on that lizard?” I asked.

The blonde female shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “If he isn’t yet, he will now.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jade

“Here it is. Book Nookery!” I pulled my hand free from the deep pockets of my wind breaker—it wasn’t chilly enough to bust out a winter coat, but the wind would rip through the black and red flannel shirt I was wearing without the jacket.

Connor—unaffected by the wind—wore only a black long-sleeved shirt as he stared up at the brick Victorian mansion that housed Book Nookery, the city’s only twenty-four-hour bookstore. “You’re certain this isn’t a wizard House?” he asked. “Because it seems like one.”

I stepped onto the front walkway, passing through the open front gate where a wooden signpost for the bookstore hung. “No, it’s run by an older woman named Ms. Booker and her handful of employees. Ms. Booker is a wizard, but she doesn’t have a House.”

I peered up, admiring the white ornamental trim and gables that had fairy tale shapes carved into them—the closest one was of a mermaid perched on a pier. “But the store caters to supernaturals with night hours for nocturnal supernaturals, and Book Nookery has reference books about and for supernaturals.”

“I see.” Connor studied the lamppost that lit up the front sidewalk but was always sputtering. “And why are we here?”

I squeezed my eyes shut when a sudden blast of wind plastered my short, red hair to my face. “Because I’m looking for self-help books on effective communication.”

“Why bother?” Connor asked.

I charged towards the store. “Because the more strategies I know, the more tools I’ll have available to use in conversation.”

“In theory, that sounds correct, but have you ever considered that you psyche yourself out with your demand for verbal perfection?” Connor ambled after me.

“No,” I automatically said, then mentally paused.

Maybe Connor is right—in a way—and this is about control.

I was pleased the task force had found and dealt with the last boar, but I didn’t like that the case just... *ended*, with no resolution. Maybe I was attempting to bring control to another situation to make up for it?

I shook the idea off—even if it was right, I didn’t have to change my plan—and prepared to march off again.

Connor reached out to snag me by my jacket’s hood. “Slow down, Provisions.” He tugged me backwards so we could step onto the house’s porch and enter the magical bookstore together.

The front door opened into the bookstore’s main parlor, where the checkout desk and staircase leading to Ms. Booker’s private upstairs rooms crowded one end, while zig zagging bookshelves filled up all other available space.

The shop’s proprietress, Ms. Booker, stood behind the giant checkout desk—which was reminiscent of a library’s reference desk.

Her shoulder length brown hair streaked with natural gray and not even the smallest hint of frizz made her an unlikely sort of guardian over the store. But the scant times I’d met her

she seemed to exude equal parts power and old school elegance—the kind you didn’t often see these days.

When she saw us she smiled, showing off the kind crinkles around the corner of her lips and wrinkling her button nose. “Welcome to Book Nookery,” she said. “Have you been here before?”

“Yes,” I said, then paused. “No. That is.” Embarrassment over my mixed words made heat bloom on my cheeks and my heart twist in my chest. I looked up at Connor.

He was busy peering up at the tall ceiling, from which a model airplane, a hot air balloon, and a herd of origami pegasus made of silver and gold paper hung. He patted my shoulder. “You’re charming enough on your own.”

He’s not going to be any help. I took a deep breath, then tried again. “I’ve been here,” I said—short sentences were easier to gurgle out. “He has not.”

“I see.” Ms. Booker eyed me, and there was something about the way her eyes flicked back and forth between me and Connor. “Out on a date night, are we?”

My jaw dropped. “What?”

“A date night. Unless you two are just friends?” Ms. Booker asked with too much innocence.

Connor exploded into deep laughter, and he finally stopped surveying the book store to bump my shoulder with amusement.

“No, definitely not dating,” I said. “Absolutely not. Nope. No.”

There was a smile playing at Ms. Bookers lips that made me think she knew we were just friends, but was having fun teasing us. “I see.”

Connor abruptly cut off his laughter and frowned at me. “Did you really need to deny it that strongly?”

I awkwardly shuffled my feet. “I didn’t want there to be any misunderstandings.”

“Well now she’s going to assume I’m a proper idiot if you were so desperate to prove we aren’t dating,” Connor said.

“You’re very secure in yourself,” I said. “I’m sure you’re fine.”

“You’re right. But! I would be the best lover in the world.” Connor threw an arm over my shoulder, eliciting a loud crinkling noise from the fabric of my windbreaker.

“No one uses that term in this context—it’s boyfriend,” I said.

“No, I reject the use of such a bland term,” Connor declared. “In courting, the whole point is that you do not wish to be a mere male friend.”

“No one uses the term courting either,” I said.

“Their loss. The point is you should be so lucky to date me!” Connor concluded.

I turned away from him so I could direct my words to Ms. Booker. “I’m looking for the self-help books.”

“I see. This way.” Ms. Booker led me through the store, into one of the side rooms.

Big, sweeping drapes were pulled back from the windows, and the walls were adorned with gray-blue painted paneling marked out with gold edging that were mostly covered by gigantic forest paintings—the smallest of which was the size of my bed.

“This is the drawing room,” Ms. Booker announced. “It contains all the store’s biographies, self-help books, books on languages, and any nonfiction books about supernaturals.” She stopped in front of a shelf and swept her hand towards it. “This is specifically the selection of our self-help books. It’s quite large and wraps around the other side of this bookshelf as it contains books on everything from creativity to stress management.”

I tried to smile. “Thanks,” I said, but my voice cracked mid-word, so I’m not sure I was audible.

“Enjoy,” Ms. Booker left the drawing room, returning to her post at the front desk.

I released the air I’d been holding, which escaped me in a whistling sigh.

“Are you searching for a specific title?” Connor asked.

“No, I just wanted to browse.” I scanned the assortment of colorful bindings. “I’ve already bought a couple communication books from here, but they move through inventory pretty fast so they might have something new.”

“Have you ever thought about getting a book on self-defense?” Connor asked.

For a moment, my heart stopped.

Had he somehow realized?

“No. Why?” I looked away from the books to study his face. He appeared normal with a faint smile on his lips, and his eyes a deep, rich shade of blood red that—in my heart of hearts—I thought was nicer than the more usual crimson-y shade that a good portion of vampires had that made their eyes look kind of bloodshot.

“So, the next time a rogue supernatural loses it in the Cloisters, you can break their nose instead of getting injured,” Connor suggested.

Oh, he’s suggesting because he’s still upset about my injuries.

I chuckled, all worry leaving me. “That’s a good idea. I’ll have to ask Ms. Booker where those types of books would be.”

My response must have pleased him, because Connor’s smile grew, turning him extra handsome. As a vampire he was always good looking—being beautiful made it a lot easier to prey upon humans—so I turned back to scanning the books, unimpressed.

A title jumped out at me, *The Quick and Easy Way to Effective Speaking*. It looked like the author, Dale Carnegie, had written multiple books on communication.

This might be helpful.

I pulled the book from the shelf while Connor stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “So, since you didn’t get at all embarrassed, I take it you’re not interested in dating in general?” Connor asked.

I paused my inspection of the book. Connor sure was busting out odd topics, but maybe it wasn’t that unusual, because Emi and Sunshine had asked me after we’d become friends.

“Connor,” I started. “I am desperately trying to talk to our apartment neighbors without messing up, and I’m failing at it all the time. Do you *really* think dating is even on the horizon for me?”

“A fair point,” Connor said. “Do you mean to say, then, that you have no experience?”

“No, I’ve gone on some dates.” I flipped the book over to read the back cover, but it was one of those annoying covers where the book only had general, vague quotes of praise that didn’t give any details on the book’s contents, leaving me clueless.

“Really?” Connor said, surprised. There was a wrinkle on his forehead and a slight furrow to his eyebrows that said the shock was real—which was a little hurtful.

“Yep.” I flipped the book open and scanned the table of contents. “Just a few casual dates and a few group dates, nothing serious.” Deciding I’d take this book, I rested it in the crook of my left arm and went back to perusing.

“Any reason why it didn’t work out?” Connor took my book from me, holding it on my behalf.

I froze.

The other dates had been with guys from other vampire slayer families—mostly ones I met in training as kids who were also family friends. It hadn’t worked out because we had fundamental differences in beliefs—I wanted to protect, while they were happy to be the assassins of the supernatural world.

But I couldn't really tell Connor *that*.

"We had very different views on the roles of supernaturals," I summarized. Weighing out the issue, I felt honor bound to add, "And my social anxiety didn't exactly win them over, even if I had no problem talking to them personally."

My social anxiety didn't stretch to other slayers, particularly ones I knew as well as the scant guys I'd gone on dates with. But it still made going out on public dates awkward beyond all belief.

A full scowl clouded Connor's face. "Then clearly they were never worth your time. The ingrates."

This was a rare opportunity to practice soothing a friend, so I patted Connor on the back. "Don't worry about it. It was only a few dates, and mostly group dates at that, with my brothers along for the ride. None of the dates were ever serious, and I wasn't sad that none of them worked out," I truthfully said.

I had zero hard feelings about all the endings. None of the guys had trained as much as they should and they had sloppy weapon safety, so if we ended up in a battle I'd have to carry the brunt of the fight, and I didn't feel great about having someone careless with weapons at my back.

Anyone I seriously dated would have to be reliable backup.

"Well, my moment of what was supposed to be good fun fell flat," Connor grumbled. "But I hope, at least, it hasn't turned you off the idea of romance? Humans seem to be very attached to the idea that it's necessary for life. What a bunch of optimists."

"Romantic relationships are important." I crouched down to look at the bottom shelf of self-help books. "But having good relationships—with friends, family, whatever makes up your support network—is more important."

"What makes you so fun is that you genuinely mean that." Connor said. "I don't know if I should admire you for your

maturity, or pity you for your general lack of romanticism.”

I set my shoulders with determination. “I don’t understand social interactions, but I know my limits. Come on. Let’s go ask Ms. Booker about self-defense books.”

“A fantastic idea, Meal.”



“NOPE, NO SIGN OF FAE.” Brody scented the air one last time, then sneezed so hard he folded in half.

“It’s been quiet since we caught the boar last week.” Tetiana fussed with the sleeve of her dark blue uniform—she’d swapped over to the long-sleeved version given that the nights were getting chilly. “Whoever was playing Noah’s Ark with fae creatures might have moved on.”

“Or they’re waiting for things to quiet down,” Brody pointed out. “We never figured out a motive, much less a perp.”

I stood behind the pair, silent as I did another careful scan of the street.

Brody is right. We never uncovered anything additional—although we’re fairly certain the mantasps and the boars were released by the same person, and it seems like the location was deliberate given they were on the same street.

The open end bothered me—I liked closure in my work. But open cases were something I was learning to grapple with, as it came with the job. (Unlike my vampire slayer upbringing, where if we didn’t get the target on the first try, you just tracked them until you got them. Persistence was a key trait for all career vampire slayers.)

The presence of the blonde-haired man I’d briefly seen in the human neighborhood we’d slain the loose boar in still bothered me, but my paranoia aside, not even security cameras on Goldstein Street had picked up signs of whoever had dumped the creatures, so it’s not like he matched a profile we were looking for. If I was going to be suspicious of every

presence I felt, I'd have to consider if Ruin was behind the monsters—something I was sure he emphatically wasn't.

“We should keep moving,” Tetiana stretched her arms above her head. “Sarge said all teams needed to keep Goldstein Street on patrol, but we have to go cover downtown.”

She glanced at me for confirmation. I nodded, then realized I should practice verbally responding and a gurgled “Yes,” croaked from my throat.

“Sounds good,” Brody agreed as he started to saunter down the street. “Binx, Clarence, and April are set to check Goldstein Street in half an hour. Let's get a move on.”

Tetiana unhooked her radio. “I'll report our movements.”

Brody tensed. “No—I'll do it.”

“Let me,” Tetiana said. “I have my radio out.”

Brody yanked his radio from his belt. “No way. I don't feel like getting my eardrums blasted tonight.”

“I need to practice if I am to understand this strange tech,” Tetiana said as the duo strolled down the sidewalk.

“Practice on your own time.” Brody turned up a block, leading us north to downtown. “When no innocent shifters are around to be collateral damage.”

“That is very rude of you to say,” Tetiana made a show of sticking her nose up into the air. “I have a charming voice, you know. Because I am a charming person.”

“You? Charming?” Brody scoffed.

“I'm charming enough to distract you.” Tetiana pressed a button on the radio. “TEAM BLOOD LEAVING GOLDSTEIN TO RETURN TO OUR USUAL PATROL ROUTE!”

Brody dropped his radio and slapped his hands over his ears. He shouted gurgled words that were indecipherable, but sounded rather hostile. “*Tetiana!* How many times have we

told you not to shout! Also—you *didn't even press the right button!*”

“If I do not shout, it seems unlikely this delicate machine will pick up my voice,” Tetiana said.

“Except no one else shouts to be heard.” Brody glared mutinously at her as he rubbed his ears.

I picked up Brody’s fallen radio and passed it to him.

He paused, then muttered “Thanks,” before taking it. He aimed another barbed glare in Tetiana’s direction before stomping up the street. “Anyway, that was your chance for the night. You are banned from using the radio for the rest of the shift.”

“Awww, come on,” Tetiana ambled after him looking unrepentant. In fact, there was a bounce in her step that wasn’t there before. “It was an accident. I totally didn’t do it on purpose.”

Brody curled his lip at her as she bumped her shoulder into his. “You are a crazy old bat.”

“Nonsense,” Tetiana said. “I’m far too young for that.”

I stayed in the rearguard position, half listening to the werewolf and vampire bicker as we left the more business-y part of Magiford for the shops and restaurants downtown.

We were a couple blocks down from Main Street passing by the new construction zone.

I studied the signs as we walked past trying to figure out what kind of building was going in when I felt my slayer senses uncoil—another vampire had entered my detection area.

I yanked my gun from my shoulder holster. “Vampire,” I called to Brody and Tetiana before I swung around aiming at a splash of shadows just as Ruin emerged from them.

“Good evening, slayer and coworkers,” he said.

I flicked off the safety of my gun.

Behind me, I heard Tetiana and Brody shift into guarding positions.

“Such an unfriendly welcome.” Ruin laughed lowly—his voice raspy as he casually leaned against the pole of a streetlight.

“You expected a parade and friendship bracelets?” I asked.

“No, but I didn’t expect you to pull a gun before I emerged—you are a very well-trained slayer. What is your family lineage?”

I narrowed my eyes and kept my mouth shut and was more than a little insulted he thought I’d fall for such an obvious information grab.

“Run along, vamp,” Brody growled. “You’ve got no friends here.”

“Certainly not,” Ruin agreed. “There *is* the promise of fun!”

Aw, crap. He’s curious—that’s never good.

As a rule, vampires weren’t curious about slayers—we were too dangerous with our poisonous blood.

That Ruin was so interested in fighting me indicated my suspicion was likely right, and he was quite old. The older vampires got, the faster and looser they played with their lives.

Just how old is he? He must be older than the Midwest Vampire Eminence, so it’s extra odd, then, that he has no offspring.

Ruin took a step towards me, so I racked my gun.

He paused, raising his hands. “You’re very hostile today.”

“That happens when one has been attacked,” I said.

“Attacked?” Ruin paused, as if he was genuinely baffled. “You’re jesting. Our little match could have hardly counted as an attack.”

Oh, yeah, so that horrible road rash was just a fun party favor—vampires are so disconnected from reality. I held the

snark back—if I blasted him with too much, he'd be even more curious or he'd get offended and off me just because he could.

“It counted to me,” I said.

Ruin put his hands on his hips looking like a disappointed parent, but the power that oozed off him made the gesture feel like an empty motion he was mimicking without understanding. “Slayer. I'm not going to put up with any false modesty from you. It's not becoming in my foes.”

“*Foe?*” I asked, forcibly keeping my stance and breathing so I didn't give away my dread at the word.

“Foe,” Ruin declared. “I don't have many. Or rather, I have more than I want if I think about it from a practical standpoint but I actually like you, so I won't be putting up with any nonsense. Besides, we're on a pet name basis—don't think I've forgotten how you called me Ruin.”

“I already told you, the department labeled you Ruin for all your paperwork,” I said. “I had nothing to do with it.”

Another flash of white under his hood showed off his sparkling teeth—particularly his pronounced fang teeth. “But you are filing paperwork about me? Stop it—you're going to make me blush.”

“If you like her, then why don't you leave her alone?” Brody growled behind me.

“Yah,” Tetiana said, her accent thicker than usual. “We've got work to do. If you don't want her kicked off the task force, you'll go about your business.”

Ruin sighed. “Is the task force exclusively filled with fun-suckers? Fine. I have things to do—plans to ruin, supernaturals to maim. Vacations are never as relaxing as you imagine they will be, you know.”

He stepped back into the shadows, and I felt his presence fade before I could say anything else.

Still, I remained where I was—my gun drawn—for at least a minute until I finally relaxed, engaging the safety on my

firearm.

“You were right, Tetiana.” Brody shook his body like a dog fixing its fur. “You’re not a crazy old bat—Ruin is.”

“Very crazy, very old,” Tetiana agreed. “And it is a very bad thing he is so interested in Blood.”

“Yeah, I get the feeling it’s not a good thing he called you a foe, Blood?” Brody uncomfortably hunched his shoulders, his eyebrows pushing together.

“Not good at all,” I said.

Tetiana shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “You should tell Sarge.”

“I will,” I agreed. “It can wait until we finish our patrol.”

“Why don’t you call it in?” Brody asked. “Tetiana never did manage to tell the team we were back on our patrol route.”

I nodded, then added. “Okay. We can keep heading downtown, I’ll report in.”

“Excellent,” Tetiana said. “Let us be off!” She marched up the sidewalk swinging her arms.

“Hold up,” Brody called as he hurried after her. “We have to decide which way we’re going once we reach Main Street.”

I followed them—staying close to them for safety—and unhooked my radio.

I pressed the necessary buttons, then spoke in a lowered tone. “This is Team Blood. We left Goldstein Street about ten minutes ago to resume our normal patrol,” I hesitated, then added. “We have encountered Ruin.”

As soon as I released the button, Sarge’s voice crackled through the speaker. “*Damage?*”

“None,” I said, following Brody and Tetiana when they weaved around a planter of flowers.

“*Any combat?*” Sarge asked.

“No,” I answered. “He wasn’t hostile tonight. Although I’d like to request a meeting after patrol.”

“Ooohh,” Grove’s voice blasted from my radio. *“That doesn’t sound good!”*

“This isn’t a reaction news channel, Grove,” Sarge growled. *“Get off the line if you don’t have anything to report. Understood, Blood. Come to my office after you finish.”*

“Yessir,” I said.

By the time I hooked my radio to my belt, Tetiana and Brody had turned onto Main Street about four steps ahead of me.

Whatever they saw made them stiffen and Brody—his arms hidden behind his back—swatted his hand at me signaling for me to stay back.

“Well, what do we have here?” Tetiana asked, her voice dripping with all the charm Brody claimed she didn’t have. Her entire demeanor changed from casual and relaxed to something more calculating and dangerous as she stepped around the corner, disappearing from my sight.

Brody skulked after her.

I pressed myself against the brick building—we’d emerged on Main Street at the Irish Pub, The Lucky Clover—and carefully peered around the corner.

Tetiana and Brody had sauntered up to a pair of supernaturals—vampires, since they had blood red eyes, although they looked more orangey and bloodshot than Tetiana’s beautiful red eyes.

Both vampires were tall and sickly pale. One had a hookish nose and his long blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail tied at the nape of his neck, while the other’s hair was mostly covered by a beaver cap. Both were wearing fawn colored knee breeches, white silk stockings, black waistcoats, and jackets that I pinpointed as roughly belonging to the Revolutionary War era in America—the hook nosed one’s jacket was navy blue while the vampire with the beaver hat sported a green jacket.

The vampires were standing over a dazed looking young woman, whose eyes weren’t focusing right. She had to be

human—she was wearing jeans and a t-shirt that had the Lucky Clover’s logo emblazoned on the shoulder, and a cellphone hung from her limp grasp.

“Ma’am? Ma’am,” Brody barked, his voice loud.

The woman didn’t respond, instead her head tilted on her neck as if she didn’t have the strength to keep it upright.

Woah. Yeah, they were using pheromones on her. She is way too out of it.

Most likely they were intending to daze her and lure her off to feed on.

Vampires were strictly barred from that kind of thing, but it didn’t stop them from attempting it if they thought they could get away with it.

“Using pheromones on a human?” Tetiana asked. “How low.”

“And what do you care, betrayer?” the vamp in the green coat sneered. “You’ve sold yourself to the Cloisters.”

“I care,” Tetiana said. “*Because* I’ve sold myself to the Cloisters, and they consider pheromone usage on humans illegal.”

“What Family are you with?” Brody demanded, his voice deep and guttural.

“As if we would sully its greatness by sharing its name with common riffraff,” blue coat sniffed.

“If you don’t want the Curia Cloisters coming after you, you’ll tell us,” Brody said.

“We do not answer to the likes of the Curia Cloisters,” green coat sneered.

“If you say so,” Tetiana casually strolled closer to the pair. “But you *do* answer to his Eminence Killian Drake.”

That spooked the vampires. They exchanged looks over their victim’s head.

At least they aren't totally stupid. Only a fool wouldn't fear Killian Drake.

Tetiana was pointedly not looking at the human, so the vampires weren't prepared when she reached out and grabbed her, pushing the young woman behind her so the human stumbled into Brody, who stabilized her.

"Move along, you two. And if you want to keep your heads, I suggest you refrain from using pheromones on humans in the future," Tetiana said, her voice cold and icy.

Green coat crept forward, and I felt the faint pulse of his powers. "You dare?"

This is going to get ugly, I realized. So how do I take advantage of my location?

Brody—still holding the woman—staggered back down the sidewalk far enough that he could glance at me.

I motioned for him to keep going, then I glanced down my block and took off running back in the direction we'd come from praying my idea wasn't a stupid one.

If I can pin the vampires between Tetiana and myself, we'll be able to take them out easily. I just need Tetiana to keep them stalled while I get around the block.

I measured my breath and minded my running form—I needed to be as efficient as possible—as I turned up a block, running parallel with Main Street.

I gained speed the longer I sprinted, my body settling into the practice. I slowed down only so I could turn the corner without skidding out and headed back north toward Main Street.

I screeched to a stop when I reached the corner and peered around it.

Tetiana was holding her ground as the two vampires leered over her, while Brody bristled behind her and kept an eye on the young woman.

I ran again—this time opting for stealth over speed.

While vampires had better hearing and sight than humans, they weren't nearly as good as werewolves so they were easier to sneak up on—especially with vamps as arrogant as this pair.

They weren't even *listening* for a surprise attack!

“You can't even dream of standing up to the likes of us—you are a *fresh* vampire.” Green coat licked his lips like a creep and started leaking enough pheromones to tickle my nose.

Pheromones didn't work on slayers, but I could still sense them.

I slowed down as I fell into the range I wanted to be in, carefully drawing my handgun and one of my daggers. I had to adjust my grip on both weapons—it felt a little awkward, but I needed to threaten both vamps at the same time.

Meanwhile, blue coat stepped even closer to Tetiana. Tetiana backed up or their chests would have bumped.

Tetiana briefly met my eyes—confirming she saw me—before she scowled up at the vampires. “Stop it,” she snapped.

Behind her, the pheromones must have started setting in on Brody because he blinked slowly, then shook his head like he was trying to clear it.

“Why should we?” Green coat asked. “It was you who interrupted our hunt.”

“If you cannot enforce the laws you parrot, why should we listen?” Blue coat grabbed Tetiana's wrist.

I need to move—now!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jade

I held my breath as I raised my weapons pressing them into the vampires' backs with force so they'd feel it. "Back off."

"What *insolence*," Green coat snarled.

They whirled around faster than my eyes could track, but I matched their movements ending with my gun pressed into blue coat's jaw and the edge of my dagger resting against green coat's throat with just a touch of pressure so the weapon broke his skin.

The pair gaped at me, their eyes flicking from my task force uniform to my slayer standard gloves and mask.

I flicked off my gun's safety. "Boo."

In hindsight, I realized that was a very lame thing to say but both vampires paled anyway.

"S-slayer?" Green coat stammered.

"Impossible," Blue coat said. "There are no slayer families based in Magiford."

"Correct." I stepped closer, pressing the psychological advantage of my sudden appearance. "There are no slayers in Magiford, except for me. Because I've...how did you phrase it? *Sold myself to the Curia Cloisters*."

I kicked green coat in the shins—he was the bigger liability since I only had my dagger on him. He jerked, then gurgled as I kept my dagger in place.

“You, you,” he snarled.

“Leave the humans alone,” I said, my voice clipped. “As it stands, we’re going to report you to the vampires. If I find out you’ve done it again...” My shoulders burned as I used more strength to push my weapons into their throats.

The vampires leaped backwards trying to get away from me.

I moved with them, keeping pace, but Tetiana hadn’t been prepared so they rammed into her, sending her flying like a ragdoll.

She hit the brick siding of The Lucky Clover with a pained wheeze.

I hesitated, and the duo fled knocking into an addled Brody and the young woman they’d attempted to daze.

I probably could have caught the pair, but with Brody and Tetiana down task force protocol said I needed to remain in the area to see if they needed assistance. So I watched the vampires flee and tried to burn their features into my mind so I’d recognize them if I saw them again.

I bungled that—I didn’t even get their names.

I shook my head as I flicked the safety on my gun and holstered it—but I kept my dagger out in case the duo looped back—then crouched down next to Tetiana. “You okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” Tetiana winced as she rubbed the back of her head. “Just embarrassed that I let them knock me over. Dishonor on me and my vampire Family for certain.”

I reached out to squeeze her shoulder in assurance—I’d read it in a book that unobtrusive physical touch helped create stronger bonds—then paused, realizing Tetiana probably didn’t want a slayer touching her. So I backed up, retreating to check on Brody.

The werewolf was already standing, shaking his head, and rubbing his nose. “Ugh. Those pheromones are the worst!” His nostrils flared as he tried to breathe fresh air.

Offering a hand, I steadied the young woman—whose eyes still weren’t focusing, but at least now she was looking around—so she could stand.

“Should we pursue them?” I asked as Tetiana also stood up and brushed some dirt off her uniform.

“Why bother?” Brody asked. “They’ve gotta be long gone—I don’t think I’ve ever seen a vampire run away with so much enthusiasm before.” He eyed me.

I shrugged, as I finally sheathed my dagger, used to the fear. *Being the vampires’ personal version of the bogeyman might have made me a pariah on the team, but it had some advantages!*

Thinking of Ruin’s fascination with me, I winced. *It has some advantages sometimes, anyway.*

“What happened?” the young woman asked, bewildered as the numbness the pheromones inspired started to leave her. “Who were those guys?”

“They were bad people.” Brody looked her up and down, looking for any sign the vampires had done something to her. “Take it as a lesson—if someone looks like a historical reenactment actor within Magiford city limits, you should avoid them at all costs.”

“Okay,” the woman agreed.

“Man, she’s still pretty snowed,” Brody said.

“I agree with Brody,” Tetiana said.

“That she’s snowed?” Brody asked.

“No, that we shouldn’t bother to follow them.” Tetiana groaned as she stretched, and her back cracked. “We can make a report so the other shifts know to watch for them and report them to the vampires, but all we would have done is fight them for the sake of beating some respect into them. I think you managed to accomplish that with your presence.”

The young woman was coming out of it fast because she frowned at Tetiana. “Haven’t you ever heard of solving your problems with words and conflict resolution?”

“That doesn’t work for supernaturals,” Brody told her. “You gotta use force or power to get it through our thick heads.”

“Brody, stop it,” Tetiana said. “You’re making it worse.”

“Fine, Blood, you talk to her.” Brody stepped away from the young woman holding his hands up.

The young woman took one look at me in my admittedly creepy mask and nervously side stepped towards the pub. “That’s okay,” she nervously said. “I’m probably late for my shift, I’ll just go.”

“The vamp—er, men who tried to talk to you,” Tetiana started.

“Thanks for your help, goodbye!” The woman slipped past Tetiana yanking open the Lucky Clover’s front door.

Celtic music—fiddles, flutes, and drums mostly—blasted out of the open door into the night air.

The music abruptly cut off when the door shut behind the young woman, and Tetiana sighed as she ran a hand through her blond frizz-free hair. “Well, that works, I guess.” She turned and scowled at Brody. “Did you have to openly *tell* her that we were supernaturals?”

The Curia Cloisters generally encouraged supernaturals to hide the darker side of our society whenever possible. We didn’t want humans knowing vampires drooled over their blood or that the beautiful fae they so admired were more cruel than they were benevolent.

“It’s not like she’s going to remember this,” Brody said. “If we’re lucky, she’ll remember to be wary of weirdly clothed people in the future.”

“As you say,” Tetiana grumbled. “Shall we continue with our patrol?”

Our radios crackled and April's voice echoed from the speakers. *"This is Team Lightning on Goldstein Street. We've got fae magic present. No monsters detected yet."*

Sarge's voice barked next, *"All teams, report to Goldstein Street."*

"Oohh, sounds like we might get some fun tonight after all!" Brody bounded towards the corner taking the exact path we'd walked coming from Goldstein to Main Street. He disappeared around the corner, then gave a muffled shout.

"Brody?" I hurried after him, drawing a dagger before I checked the corner.

Brody was sprawled on the sidewalk. He waved me off as he peeled himself off the cement. "I'm fine. I just tripped on..."

I followed his gaze looking at what appeared at first glance to be a pile of clothes. It wasn't until I saw the beaver hat that I realized the tangled heap was the green coat and blue coat vampires—both knocked unconscious.

I blinked trying to make sense of it. "...what?"

"Looks like Ruin's work." Tetiana peered around me. "Nice to learn his micromanaging ways can sometimes work to our advantage."

"Maybe, but they didn't turn down this block so he must have dragged them over here after beating them unconscious." Brody nudged the unconscious vampires with the toe of his boot. "From a wolf's perspective, this looks an awful lot like an apology gift."

I stiffened when he glanced my way. "Apologizing isn't a thing in vampire culture," I said. "If he did it, it was for the same reason he's beaten everyone else up that displeases him—he's ruling over his territory."

Brody looked over at Tetiana, who shrugged. "She's right."

The two eyed the heap.

"Goldstein Street?" I asked.

“Ah, yes! Goldstein.” Tetiana smiled, flashing her elongated fang teeth. “Let’s be off!”



WE ARRIVED at the same time as Team Magic—comprised of Sarge, Grove, and Binx—who was in her cougar form. Most surprising, however, was Captain Reese, who rolled up in her personal car, parking on the street.

“Captain!” Tetiana trotted up to the captain’s car pausing to bow to her, Brody mimicking her. “Is the situation so dangerous you were called in?”

I wistfully studied Tetiana’s back. *I wish I could talk so casually to our teammates. Everyone gets along with Tetiana, and I can only imagine how hard she’s worked to hone that skill.*

“No, I just happened to be in the area when the radio call went out, so I thought I’d pop over—I don’t know what’s going on either.” Captain Reese slipped out of her car. She smiled briefly at Tetiana and Brody, but the wrinkles on her forehead and around her eyes were more prominent as she glanced up and down the street.

When her eyes landed on me, I bowed my head to her. “Captain.”

Captain Reese was wearing her electronic prosthetic today—the fancy one that made her look like a superhero as it had electronic elements to mimic a knee socket and it could glow if she switched the lights on. The electronics made it so that when she kicked back the prosthetic bent and popped up so she could step up onto the curb. “Hey, Blood. I hope you haven’t seen Ruin lately?” she asked.

I took a deep breath to stabilize myself—my general nervousness of speaking was starting to stir. “I have.”

Captain Reese stiffened. “What?”

“Captain.” Sarge joined our cluster on the sidewalk and bowed to the captain and then swiveled to frown at me, his

silvery hair glowing in the darkness of the night. “She saw Ruin. Tonight.”

“Yes,” I said. “There was no physical altercation.”

“At least not against us,” Tetiana said.

Captain Reese cocked her head. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sarge—and Captain!” April called from farther down the sidewalk where her team—comprised of Clarence, Juggernaut, and Medium-Sized Robert—were located, methodically searching the area. She said something to Clarence that I couldn’t hear, then started jogging towards us.

Sarge eyed her, then turned back to me. “I want a summary of your interaction before you go off shift tonight.” He glanced at Tetiana and Brody. “From each of you.”

“Understood, Sarge,” Tetiana and Brody chorused.

I just nodded.

April didn’t slow to a walk until she was a few steps away—I always admired her dedication—then she bowed.

“What was the problem, April?” Captain Reese asked, once again scanning the street.

“We—Juggernaut and myself—both sensed fae magic as we approached Goldstein Street,” April said. “We did a limited search of the area while waiting for backup, but we didn’t see anyone.”

“I’m not sure if that’s encouraging or discouraging,” Captain Reese grumbled.

“Brody, Binx, see if you can catch a scent—go ask for directions.” Sarge pointed up the street to April’s team.

“Yessir!” Brody saluted, then jogged off, Binx padding silently at his side.

Captain Reese narrowed her eyes. “Did you walk into the sensation because the magic was already active or did it start during your approach?”

“It started during our approach,” April said. “We believe our presence disrupted their plans because once our presence was announced, the magic stopped.”

Sarge raised his eyebrows. “Your presence was announced?”

April hesitated. “Juggernaut yelled.”

“Ah,” Sarge said. “Were you on Goldstein Street at the time?”

April shook her head. “No. By the time we reached the street, it was empty.”

“Grove, see if you can find any trace of the magic,” Sarge called to the potion master. “I’d like to pinpoint the caster’s location. We need to figure out why they keep returning to Goldstein Street.”

“M’kay.” Grove saluted Sarge, then trudged across the street.

“Tetiana, go with him,” Sarge said.

“Okay, Sarge!” Tetiana winked and sauntered off after the fae.

I stood with my hands behind my back waiting for him to order me off to help.

Instead, Sarge turned his back to me so he was pointed up the street. He held his arm out in front of him inviting Captain Reese to take the lead.

She smiled at him—again, briefly—before she started up the sidewalk. “Did you notice anything else during your approach, April?” Captain Reese glanced back at April, her wolf eyes intense. “Any noises? Unusual smells?”

April shook her head. “Clarence was the only one in our group with better senses, and he didn’t hear anything. However...Juggernaut’s shout surprised him, so it’s possible he missed something.”

I studied the office building we passed looking for any exterior cameras on the human-owned buildings.

I'd checked when we'd first encountered the mantasps—video footage would have been very helpful—and there hadn't been any. It was possible that, after the mantasps *and* the boars, one of the buildings would have sprung for the equipment.

It doesn't seem like it, though.

I paused when we passed in front of an unassuming brick building with red edging.

Tutu's...

I stared up at the gold painted sign.

It seems stupid that anyone would risk doing... whatever they're trying to do, so close to Tutu's.

Earning a dragon shifter's rage was no joke. They were powerful, long lived, and rich beyond imagination. If they felt attacked, they would act. And you didn't survive a dragon's enmity.

So why risk that? Unless... is Tutu's the target?

Now that I knew the fae who had been walking Tutu's seal was Orrin—the assistant of Tutu's sister—it was probable Gisila had sent him to check the building on behalf of Tutu.

It seemed odd that both sets of monsters had been released south of Tutu's Crypta & Custodia and were driven north, towards it.

“Blood?” Sarge called. “Do you see something?”

“Sorry, no.” I trotted, catching up with him, Captain Reese, and April in a few steps. “I was just wondering—was Tutu informed of the mantasp and boar incidences?”

“She was,” Captain Reese said. “Each time we gave her a courtesy call before business hours. Not that it mattered—she already knew.”

“How?” April asked.

“Both times her buildings' defense systems were triggered,” Captain Reese said. “The seals and the internal systems. Mind you, those systems are delicate. Rumor has it a

fly smacked into one of the office doors and it set the whole system off.”

“Tutu upgraded her system to this current model nearly two years ago,” Sarge answered. “Supposedly, she was dissatisfied with the old one after a third party tested it.”

Captain Reese shook her head. “Dragons. They are as protective of their hoard as they are paranoid that someone wants to steal it.”

“Could Tutu’s Crypta & Custodia be the target?” I asked. “We were already starting to suspect the monsters weren’t part of a fae succession war and that there was a target on Goldstein Street.”

“It seems like the most likely target,” Captain Reese agreed. “But you’d be bonkers to attempt it. No one can survive a dragon’s anger.”

On average, yes, but there must be some supernaturals strong enough to face it.

Ruin probably could have if he had a Family around to do his bidding. Given his penchant for violence, he wouldn’t bother playing around like this. He’d just break in and be done with it.

Which means whatever supernatural doing this has to be of the tricky variety.

Fae would be sneaky—obviously, as it was fae magic the team had sensed. But the new Queen of the Night Court—who was the fae representative on the Regional Committee of Magic—ruled over the Midwest fae with an iron fist. I didn’t see any of the Midwest rulers attempting something like this, and monarchs outside the Midwest couldn’t afford to leave their territories very long given the fae’s general appreciation of betrayals and coups.

I gave the golden sign one last look. “Are the alarms triggered now?” I murmured to myself.

“There’s no way we can tell for certain,” Captain Reese said, surprising me with her werewolf hearing. “Tutu won’t disclose all her security measures. However.” She narrowed

her eyes studying the innocent looking storefront. “I’ll call in the morning to check in with the buildings’ managers and ask.”

“Sir! Yoo-hoo!” Grove yodeled from the other side of the street, diagonal from our position in front of Tutu’s. “I feel some sneaky bits of fae magic. I think whoever cast the magic might have stood over here.” He patted the gray stone exterior of a human bank. Tetiana, standing next to him had her hands cupped around her eyes, her face nearly planted on the bank’s tinted windows.

Sarge held his hand up—gesturing he’d heard Grove—but a frown tugged at the silvery scales on his temples. “Next week we need to schedule a refresher course on how to properly convey information.”

Captain Reese patted Sarge on the shoulder, then put two fingers in her mouth and made a piercing whistle.

Binx and Brody looked back, and Captain Reese pointed at Grove.

Brody waved, and the two trotted across the street to join Grove. Binx sniffed the ground, while Brody had his nose up in the air.

The two walked to the front of the bank pausing at a driveway that led to a tiny parking lot behind the building and at the drive through.

I glanced at Sarge wondering if he’d give me the order now to go investigate with the rest of my team, but he and Captain Reese just watched Binx and Brody’s progress for a moment.

Captain Reese abruptly straightened, her body tensing as her lips curled back.

She must hear or smell—

I saw a black shape streak across the parking lot entrance.

“Runner!” Tetiana shouted as she took off after them.

“Blood—go!” Sarge shouted.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jade

I glanced up and down the road—even when pursuing perps, I didn't want to get hit—before I launched myself across the street.

I caught up with Tetiana, entering the small parking lot with her.

“There!” She pointed to a concrete paved path that stretched behind two of the human office buildings, which—unlike the street—wasn't lit by anything except for the night security lighting pointed at the buildings.

“Got it.” I kicked my pace up easily overtaking her.

“Good luck!” Tetiana shouted at my back.

The runner had an approximate two block lead on me and was wearing a black baseball cap that covered their hair. Their height and wider shoulders made me suspect I was chasing after a male, and they were too slow to be a vampire and too lean to be a werewolf. Chances were that he was a fae—which meant he might be our perp.

I was careful to use a good running form, making sure I landed on my whole foot and didn't run on my tiptoes, so my muscles felt limber and ready as I chased after him—my footsteps far quieter than his.

The fae didn't look back at me as he veered off the paved pathway and ran across a business's scant lawn, zigging east—towards a more residential area.

I followed—continuing to gain on him. The grass was so dry it crunched under my boots, but I managed to keep him within sight.

I would eventually close the gap between us—there weren't many supernaturals that could outrun a slayer—but the danger was he'd find a way to lose me while he had his temporary lead.

He seemed to realize the same thing because when he reached a street he headed due north: straight towards downtown, where he'd have the easiest time disappearing.

When I hit the street, I felt a brief flare of fae magic and a flock of pigeons took off from where they'd been roosting on a park bench, smacking into me, and filling the air.

Animal magic.

Well, that sealed it. He probably was behind all the animal attacks.

Only fae with natural animal magic could control animals like that, and it was a rare power.

With my mask to protect my face, I raced through the swirl of pigeons ignoring when they whacked me with their wings. Then, I also turned north.

I could still see the fae—his clothes were a deep black that stuck out. (In a city as well-lit as Magiford, the shadows were varying shades of sooty gray rather than the jet black of his clothes.) Unfortunately, he'd gained some ground.

If I don't close the gap fast, I'll lose him.

I gritted my teeth and switched from a steadier pace that I could handle for miles to something closer to a sprint, rapidly shrinking the distance between us.

The fae twisted around to peer back at me, nearly falling over his feet in surprise when he realized I was a block behind him and catching up. His black cap unfortunately shadowed

his face so I didn't get a good look at it and his hair was still covered but I did see the straight slant of his nose, which seemed to support my fae theory.

He dove down a street that would lead us back west—which struck me as odd as we were at the edge of downtown Magiford, so now instead of running *into* it we were running parallel with it.

Just where is he trying to go?

There was just half a block between us now and it dwindled fast when he turned around to look back at me, fumbling to grab something from a pocket on his shirt with his free hand.

His other hand was full, he was clutching something so tight it had to hurt—something silver.

A necklace, I realized when its silver chain flopped with the perp's movements. The necklace was simple—it had a single gemstone in a simple setting. I couldn't tell what color the gem was until he passed under a streetlight and I saw the purple haze to its surface.

I was *almost* on him; just a few heartbeats and I'd get him.

He finally pulled something free from his pocket.

I shifted my stance, ready to face whatever he threw at me, to my surprise he tossed it—a red gem—at a trio of humans heading towards their parked car.

A flare of fae magic and the humans dropped the coats and bags they'd been carrying, standing statue still in the middle of the sidewalk for several seconds before they abruptly split up. One walked straight into the street, another started robotically marching up the sidewalk, and the last one started ramming themselves against their car.

I skid to a stop next to the guy who was attempting to become one with his vehicle, torn. I could catch up with the perp and radio the gem into my team, but I had no idea what the humans would wander off and do in the time it would take for my squad to find them. If the one making drunken figure-

eight shapes in the middle of the street was a sample of what the gem was making them do, it didn't bode well.

I better grab the jewel. The spell was tied to the gem—if I take it out of range, they'll be freed of the spell.

I scanned the ground looking for the red gem.

The humans—as bright as a low-lumen lightbulb with the spell on them—kept wandering. I saw the ruby—which was about the size of a nail head—perched on the curb right next to the car just before the car smasher kicked it under the vehicle.

You've got to be kidding me!

I bumped the guy out of the way, then dropped to my stomach and thrust my right hand under the car. I held in a yelp when the guy—mindless from the spell—stepped on my left hand which I'd planted on the curb to stabilize myself. But the fae magic was like a magical marker so it was easy to find the gem. I scooped it up—along with a straw wrapper and two pebbles in my rush.

I yanked my hand out from under car-dude's foot, boosted myself to my feet, then started running.

The fae magic coming off the ruby is faint, so the spell on it shouldn't have a very big area of affect.

I easily overtook the woman that had wandered down the street, then glanced back over my shoulder.

The guy standing in the street had stopped his honey-bee-like dance and was scratching his head. "What was I just doing?" he asked his equally bewildered friend.

"I have no idea. Carla! Where are you going—the car is back here!"

The humans were safe—as long as I didn't bump into any others, or they'd likely fall under the gem's spell as I had no idea how to turn the spell off—I focused on running.

Unfortunately, the fae had turned off the road and was nowhere within sight.

I slowed long enough to strain my ears, listening for footsteps—he'd be the only one running at this hour.

I thought I heard the faint tap of footfalls going north, so I turned up an alleyway.

My senses came into high focus—I was on the edge of Ruin's territory, so it was possible he'd pounce on me with no teammates to back me up.

As I approached the entrance of the alleyway, I heard the faint murmur of voices and laughter.

A heavy door slammed shut—the echoes still bouncing off the walls as I reached the street, half blinding myself on the abrupt and bright lights cast on *Luxe Sejour*—Magiford's fanciest hotel.

The hotel's front doors were open, and hotel employees wearing either black trousers and vests edged with gold piping and a gold tie or a black dress edged with gold ribbon and chiffon scarves stood by the doors as a steady trail of guests flowed out of the tall building.

I clenched my jaw, the sour taste of defeat coating my tongue.

I lost him.

There was a good chance he was in the hotel—I was fairly sure the running steps I'd heard were him, which made me think the shutting door was him, too, since I could see at least one side entrance to the hotel from my viewpoint.

There was no way we'd be able to smoke him out. There were too many entrances and exits he could use before my squad caught up. Though maybe Sarge would want to try watching the hotel anyway.

I better radio it in. At least I managed to get a small lead.

I relaxed my shoulders and uncurled my hand, picking the red gem out of the grit in my hand. I opened a pouch on my belt and dropped the gem in, then snapped the pouch shut.

Maybe Sunshine or one of the other techs will be able to trace the magic.

I removed my radio, then started up the sidewalk. Based on previous experience, I suspected the red jewel had somewhere around a twenty-foot radius so I couldn't risk using the sidewalk in front of the hotel, but I could get closer—particularly if I looped around the back where guests weren't gathering.

“Blood, reporting,” I said. “I lost him. Outside *Luxe Sejour*.”

The radio crackled. “*Understood*,” Sarge said, his voice still pleasant sounding despite the crackly static from the radio. “*My team will come north to rendezvous with you.*”

“Understood,” I repeated back to him before I tucked my radio into my belt.

As I trudged up the sidewalk, I watched the guests pouring out of the hotel's front doors. I spotted a handful of vampires and some wizards dressed in white and blue coats, but the majority of the crowd were fae—beautiful and dressed to the nines, sparkling with illusion magic to enhance their natural beauty.

There must have been a late-night performance tonight. Studying the bright faced wizards and the fae whose satisfaction was so thick you could almost feel it, I raised my eyebrows. A fae performance.

The hotel had a gorgeous theater that occasionally some Magiford fae rented out for private performances. (Magiford fae, led by the Night Court, had become fixated on human pop culture, hence their newfound love of theater. Although, since fae couldn't lie, it made fae theater productions particularly interesting and usually involved inanimate objects playing the roles of murdered characters or love interests.)

I'd made it past the hotel and was contemplating if I could risk taking the alleyway directly behind it while still bearing the gem—when I heard a pleasantly husky voice call.

“Slayer? Is there a problem?”

I instinctively turned towards the voice pausing when I saw it was Gisila—the dragon shifter.

She stood on the edge of the crowd, eye catching in her dark purple floor length gown. It had a gold waistband that was stamped to imitate scales, and the trim around the neckline and hem of the gown were golden and swirly—reminiscent of flames.

Fearlessly, she crossed the street without looking—stepping in front of a fancy, luxury car that had pulled onto the street after picking up passengers in the hotel’s loading zone. Although she had a pleasant smile on her face, I felt the full force of her power and gulped.

“M-ma’am.” I ducked my head in a quick bow. “Everything is f-fine.”

Of course, I have to meet the dragon shifter when there’s no one else around to talk for me!

I briefly hoped my adrenaline would kick in—which might make me say something stupid, at least I’d speak more smoothly—but it seemed like her innate power didn’t press me as badly as Ruin’s did because I could feel my lungs settle into inactivity even though my pulse was pounding with fear.

“That’s good. You’re on a patrol, then?” Gisila asked.

I stared at the tips of her shoes—gold, to match her purse—that peeped out from the skirt of her dress. *Remember the jargon the Commissioner wants us to use—fall back onto training!* “I am on official task force business. If you’ll excuse me.” My voice was robotic but at least I’d gotten it out, so I could start edging down the street again without worrying about insulting the dragon shifter.

Why was she talking to me anyway? Supernaturals with her kind of power don’t notice peons like me!

Gisila followed me down the sidewalk “You said everything is fine? There’s no active threat?”

“No,” I confirmed. “Excuse me.” I waited for a black SUV with some kind of dragon emblem emblazoned on the side to pass before I risked darting across the street. We were far enough up from the hotel that there weren’t nearly as many humans, so it should be fine even though I had the gem.

I heard the click of Gisila's heels behind me, and the paranoia I'd been raised with began to stir in my stomach making the hair on the back of my neck stand.

Why is she still following me? Even if I'm the only slayer in Magiford and we exchanged greetings that time she visited the Cloisters, slayers are well beneath the notice of a dragon shifter. Plus, it's not like she could be concerned for her own safety—there's very few individuals in Magiford that she needs to fear, being what she is.

"I'm sorry, slayer," Gisila began.

My muscles tensed—if I started running, I could maybe get enough distance between us that I wouldn't be able to feasibly hear the rest of her sentence... freeing me to keep on with my job.

Just before I pulled on a burst of speed, I heard a slightly winded "Lady Gisila!"

I turned and caught sight of Gisila's assistant—the handsome, blonde fae—step around a pair of laughing dryads. He gracefully trotted down the last few steps, then bowed to Gisila before holding out a wrap made of gold silk. "Your shawl."

"Oh. Thank you, Orrin. Honestly, I don't know what's becoming of me. I don't even remember wearing that wrap tonight." Gisila chuckled deeply before she turned her back to her aide, letting him drape the fabric over her arms and shoulders.

Orrin merely bowed again and his hair—not as perfect as it had been the first few times I'd seen him—shifted with the movement.

I frowned as I studied him, folding my arms across my waist to protectively cover the pouch that held the jewel.

Orrin is blonde—like the man I saw when we finished off the boar. I've seen him outside Tutu's without Gisila, and he's clearly winded...is he the one doing this?

I eyed his clothes—dove gray trousers with a white dress shirt and a matching dove gray vest.

Did he have enough time to get changed since I heard the door shut? Maybe...if this whole thing was pre-planned. Gisila could have purposely left her shawl for him to fetch. Although she said she didn't remember wearing it, which is an odd detail to add if this is all planned.

“Oh—Orrin, you recall the slayer on the task force?” Gisila happily chattered. “I saw her across the street and was concerned there was a threat of some sort.” She smiled at her assistant, then turned back to me. “The Night Queen attended this evening’s performance, and I’d heard there were some attempts on her life several months ago.”

Her smile would have normally been enough to kick up my social anxiety, but the cool calmness of work had finally descended on me, normalizing my pulse as all of my instincts kicked in. “No, I’m here for an unrelated incident,” I said.

Orrin slightly bowed his head to me. “May you continue your endeavor,” he said, before turning to Gisila. “Lady Gisila, shall I pull the car around?”

Gisila, at least, showed no sudden desire to leave me. Perhaps she didn’t know what her assistant was up to? “You may as well wait—it seems the cars are lined up around the block. Might I ask what incident has brought you here, slayer? Or is that classified information?”

I weighed out her question trying to figure out if I could answer it in a way that would let me ask Orrin a question—as a fae, he couldn’t lie to me. Most likely he would just choose not to answer if it incriminated him, but this was an opportunity I’d prefer not to waste.

The fastest way would be to find out if Orrin has animal magic.

“The task force is still investigating the fae creatures that have been released in the city,” I said. “In addition to searching for the perpetrator, we’re trying to formulate a plan should more creatures appear particularly since fae monsters are roaming more as the fae realm continues to shrink.” I turned to Orrin and tried to keep my voice as innocent as I could. “Do you have natural animal magic, Orrin?”

Orrin's nostrils briefly flared—the only change in him that I could sense.

“Oh, it would be wise to find such a fae, but no, he hasn't such magic. Although he might know of someone with such powers—do you, Orrin?” Gisila asked before Orrin could respond, widening her eyes as she looked back at her assistant.

I slightly tilted my head. *Did she answer for him on purpose?*

A fae couldn't physically say a lie—or even write one. Any other supernatural—dragon shifters included—could. In answering for him, Gisila could have very easily lied.

“I don't know many fae within Magiford, much less any with animal magic,” Orrin smoothly answered.

Gisila sighed. “That's disappointing.”

Orrin rested a hand on her elbow. “If you say so. However, Lady Gisila, if the slayer is on duty we had best stop interrupting her.”

“Oh. Yes, you're probably right. Good night and good luck, slayer.” Gisila waved to me, then sashayed back toward the hotel's steps. “Is the car line any shorter? If not, we should head back into the hotel—I believe the bar is still open.”

“As you wish, Lady Gisila.” Orrin offered his arm, which Lady Gisila took, and he escorted her up the carpet covered steps back into the hotel.

I watched them until they disappeared through the doors, my slayer instincts still active and coursing through my blood with a cool calmness.

I checked my pouch, relaxing slightly when I saw the red stone within it.

I'm going to have a long report for Sarge. Hopefully, this means tonight wasn't a total loss.

I started trotting up the alleyway. I'd check and see what doors were locked and which were open. Someone might have witnessed Orrin come inside, if it was really Orrin I had chased.

One thing was certain. Of all the supernaturals crazy enough to take on Tutu's... a *dragon shifter* would be willing to risk fighting another dragon shifter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Considine

After a day of reading reports on the Dracos offspring and receiving updates from my own scant human staff—with quarterly taxes filed I had hoped my overly anxious accountant would be soothed, no such luck—I was feeling self-indulgent.

I stood in front of the sole window in my bedroom, carelessly lounging in the afternoon sunlight that so plagued the younger vampires, sipping at a glass of blood.

What shall I do today for fun? I could try to find the slayer's family of origin. I wasn't all that interested, but now it's almost a game—

I cut the gleeful thought off when I glanced over at the elaborate wooden end table next to my bed.

Ambrose's ring—gold with a red garnet—rested on a silver tray placed on top of the end table.

Immediately, my good mood soured.

The ring was both a cherished memory of my friend and a reminder of the promise that ruled my life—of what he had doomed me to.

“Ambrose...you were an idiot,” the words hissed out of me with an anger that had festered in me—growing over the centuries since Ambrose's death.

I still couldn't forgive him—that he'd died because he couldn't stand the shock of his One dying.

She'd been human! He'd essentially gone and fallen for a human and then had the audacity to be surprised when she *died*. The fool.

I approached the end table and picked up the ring to study it. “Humans die. It's what they do—the lucky cretins. How could you have expected anything else to happen?”

I wasn't even mad at his One—it was hardly her fault Ambrose was a moron with a positivity complex.

No, my fury rested with Ambrose, who'd meticulously chosen and turned vampire offspring over the centuries, caring for them and nurturing them so that when he left all of them, except Killian, they had been lost without his presence.

He'd created them—he'd sworn an oath of brotherhood to me—and then that weasel had escaped into death the first chance he had!

Of course, he hadn't done that before extracting a promise from me that I'd watch his Dracos Family and make certain they lived—that I wouldn't let them lose to the inevitable disinterest and melancholy that ate at all older vampires and caused them to sleep more and more until they simply never woke again.

A bitter laugh slipped out of me as I pushed the ring onto my right index finger.

It was ironic that I—who never wanted to sire a vampire Family—was stuck playing guardian to Ambrose's self-destructive offspring.

“I'm sure you'd have thoughts about such a situation, my old friend,” I said aloud—like a loon—as if he could hear me.

Surely Ambrose would laugh if he could see me now, playing financial spy on his brats. He always had a laugh that...

I paused, struggling to remember what Ambrose's laugh had been like and I couldn't recall.

We spent millenniums together. Surely, I can remember.

But I couldn't. As I struggled to bring up old memories, I couldn't think of how Ambrose's laugh sounded.

That wasn't something we vampires ever discussed—the eventual and inevitable loss of our oldest memories.

We were immortal, sure, but did nature really *mean* for beings to live so long? One could only hold onto hundreds of years' worth of memories for so long before time started to chip away at them. Stealing them one by one.

"I'll remember." I turned back to the window to stand in the sunlight that had hurt me when I was only a few centuries old. "I merely need to dredge up the right memory."

But my good mood had soured. This was another reason why being a vampire was more of a curse: you were fated to eventually lose everything you held dear. Fated to be alone and left only with memories that would eventually fade and leave you with a hole. You knew the pain of loss but couldn't remember what you'd lost—

A groan, followed by hurried steps, leaked through the relatively thin walls of my apartment.

I pulled away from the window and frowned at the wall I shared with Jade O'Neil.

What is she doing?

I heard a rattle that was likely her windows opening before more steps signaled she'd run back to the other end of her apartment.

I rubbed the back of my neck, glanced around my bedroom, then strode through my apartment heading for my front door.

I'd let myself fall into a foul mood. Observing my cheery neighbor would be a good mental escape, and then I'd go back to work, back to watching those Ambrose had left behind. In the meantime, at least, I'd amuse myself—with a human and a slayer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jade

I turned on my oven light and stared at my latest baking attempt, Scottish shortbread, as I held my phone pinched between my shoulder and my ear. “You’re *certain* they’re supposed to cook for a full 30 minutes? That seems like a long time, Nan.”

“Yes, love, it’s necessary—they should be a nice golden color. You poked the dough with the tines of a fork, yes?”

I squinted at my square metal pan filled with the shortbread dough, wincing at the very uneven lines of holes I’d pricked into the dough. “In a manner of speaking.” Nan’s and Mom’s holes had always been in perfect straight lines. Apparently, my aim with weapons didn’t transfer over to baking.

“Good—you’ll want to poke them again when they come out if you want the holes to be crisp and pronounced. Now, stop staring in the oven like I’m sure you are, throw caution to the wind, and tell me how you’re doing,” My grandmother ordered.

“I told you, I’m fine.” I backed away from my oven, but I left the light on.

“Not going to give up and come home to rejoin the family business?”

“Which business?” I asked, still distracted by my oven.

While both Dad’s and Mom’s families were slayers, it was only my dad’s family—the O’Neils—who worked full time as slayers. My mom’s family—the Carters—had chosen to partner with the O’Neils when my mom married my dad and had gone into semi-retirement as slayers and instead focused on their side gig, construction work.

My mom’s brothers had all specialized in various parts of construction work—drywall, plumbing, lighting, and so on—so they did a lot of building work for the supernatural community and fixed up any properties we O’Neil’s damaged while in pursuit of a vampire target for super cheap.

As an added bonus, if a target was especially difficult, the Carters would help—they all trained as slayers even if they weren’t on active duty.

“Either of them,” Nan said. *“I don’t much care what you do as long as you settle close to home.”*

I laughed. “I don’t think Dad would agree with you.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised! Fergus is fit to be tied these days without you.”

“Nan, please,” I said. “You make it sound like I was his right-hand man. I’m an average slayer.”

“Above average,” Nan stubbornly said.

I rolled my eyes. With my older brothers and all my cousins to compete with, I was aware that I rolled out in the middle of pack. Not that I was ashamed of it! I worked hard to rank even that well within the family.

My oven chirped—a warning that I had one minute left.

“I gotta go, Nan. The shortbread is almost done.”

“Very well—remember to poke it with a fork again!”

“Got it. Bye, Nan. Love you!”

“Love you too,” Nan said before my phone clicked and the conversation ended.

I set my phone aside, turned off my oven and grabbed oven mitts, cautiously optimistic that I'd *finally* correctly baked something.

“Who cares if my holes aren't straight, as long as the cookies aren't burnt—”

I opened the oven door to release a mushroom cloud of smoke.

I groaned. “Not again!” I sprinted across my apartment, unlocking the windows that my couch and TV were pressed against and throwing them open. Next, I grabbed the thin red blanket I kept out for this very purpose even though it was still too hot to use one.

I stood at the top of my kitchen, a foot away from my fire alarm, and flapped the blanket trying to drive the smoke towards my open windows.

“Don't you dare,” I warned my fire alarm, as if I could intimidate it into silence. “Don't even consider it!”

I flapped my blanket harder as the smoke clouded the air around me. “I should have turned on the ceiling fan!” Unfortunately, I couldn't run back to my little makeshift living room now. I was the last defense between the smoke and my fire alarm—I would *die* before I set it off. Again.

I knew from experience that my apartment fire alarms weren't tied into the main building's system, but they were still loud enough that almost every apartment on my floor would hear them, and the last time they'd gone off it had woken Mia up from her nap.

Because I have the best luck, someone knocked at my door.

For a wild moment, I wondered if one of my human neighbors was coming to check on me, or to talk to me, or maybe even invite me out somewhere!

My hopes were crushed when I heard a familiar “*Emergency Rations?*” through the door.

“It's open, Connor!” I shouted as I kept flapping.

Connor opened the door and stared at me. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to be a good neighbor,” I said. “Can you come here and do this for me?”

“Flap a blanket like a demented bird? If you wish.” Connor closed the door as he approached me.

“Here.” I thrust the blanket at him pinning it against his chest.

Connor reluctantly took it, and I dashed back to the oven. Still wearing my oven mitts, I grabbed the pan from the oven, then rushed towards my open windows.

“I don’t get it!” I shouted as I scooted between my couch and coffee table. “Nan said they’d be a nice golden color! They’re scorched!” I stuck the pan on the fire escape patio, so the wisps of smoke that lazily drifted off the shortbread dispersed into the outside air instead of further clouding my apartment.

“I still don’t know what’s going on,” Connor reminded me.

I pulled off my oven mitts and pushed some of my red curls out of my face, then finally looked back at Connor.

Somehow, he managed to look cool while he fanned the air with the blanket, snapping it with crisp movements as he raised an eyebrow at me, his red eyes glittering with bemusement.

“I was trying to make a family shortbread recipe,” I said. “I cooked it as long as my Nan said but somehow they burned.” I mournfully looked at the baking pan on my patio. “Badly.”

“I see,” Connor said. “What you’re saying is this is another one of your failed cooking ventures?”

“Another?” I asked.

“You groan loudly when you’re disappointed,” Connor said. “It’s easy to hear through the walls.”

I nervously twisted my oven mitts in my hand. “Do you think our other neighbors can hear me?”

“No.” Connor eyed the fire alarm as he snapped the blanket again, creating a gust of air. “I’m afraid that prize only goes to me with my vampire hearing. Thank you very much for your concern. I’m touched you care so much about me.”

“It’s not the same thing.” I peered out the window—the pan was no longer smoking. “We’re friends!”

“Oh, so it doesn’t matter if you abuse my ears because of our friendship? Good to know.”

“You know what I meant.” I retrieved the pan, then ducked back into my apartment. “I better take a picture and send it to Nan—she might be able to figure out what I did wrong.”

I set the pan on my counter and frowned at the dark brown shortbread.

Connor flapped the blanket one last time, then tossed it on the couch before joining me in my kitchen. “This is what all the fuss was for? I question why you went through all the effort.”

“When they’re correctly made, they’re really good.” I fetched a knife and grimly approached the pan.

“I will take your word for it,” Connor said.

I cut through the shortbread—it was a lot harder than it should have been—and pried a piece out. I had to grab it with a napkin—it was still too hot to handle. I waved it in the air to cool it down, then reluctantly brought it up to my mouth.

“Wait,” Connor stepped back, alarm flashing across his face. “You’re not actually going to *eat* that, are you?”

“I’m just going to take a bite,” I said. “I need to learn what I’m doing wrong.”

Connor rested his hip against my counter and loomed over me. “And you think the key to unlocking your cursed baking skills lies in eating shortbread that is charred?”

“I know what they’re supposed to taste like,” I said. “I might be able to taste what’s wrong.”

Connor raised an eyebrow at me. “Let me save you the effort: it’s burnt. That’s what’s wrong.”

“Obviously, but maybe I missed an ingredient or something.” I grimaced at the hardened shortbread, then experimentally bit off a piece.

Connor waited, tapping his fingers on my countertop. “Since you haven’t choked and died, I assume it’s not deadly?”

The shortbread was dry and tasted much how I imagined charcoal bits would—I couldn’t even taste the sugar. “I can’t taste anything besides burnt...burnt,” I said, failing to find an appropriate word for the charred bite. “Want to try it?”

“No,” Connor said.

“Are you sure?” I nudged the pan closer to him. “You have better senses than me. You might be able to figure out where I went wrong.”

“Flattery isn’t going to get you anywhere,” Connor said. “I might be a vain vampire, but I’m not stupid. And I’m certainly not going to make myself eat barbeque coals for no reason.”

I took a glass from the cupboard and poured myself a cup of tap water. “Not even for a friend?”

“Not even for a friend,” Connor firmly said. “My friendly duties ended with warning you not to eat charcoal.”

I shook my head and swished water around my mouth trying to get rid of the burnt taste.

Connor conveniently strolled out of my small kitchen and wandered over to my couch. “It does beg the question: why do you keep trying to bake and cook when your attempts end in failure?”

I took a few sips of water, then set my glass down on a coaster. “Well, I keep trying to make recipes my family made because I miss them.”

“Do they live far from here?” Connor reclined on my couch looking very much like a model for some kind of expensive luxury clothing brand—say what you will about vampires, their hunting instincts to look good to lull humans would make them excellent social media influencers if any of them had any inclination for technology.

“It’s a drivable distance,” I vaguely said, unwilling to part with any details about my family. “But I can’t really go visit them. My parents aren’t happy that I’m working for the Curia Cloisters.”

Connor sat up in his surprise. “Do they fear supernaturals?”

“Hah, no.” I chuckled at the idea of my fierce dad being scared of anything—except for maybe crossing Mom if he’d loaded the dishwasher wrong. “They’re just disappointed. They wanted me to join the family business.”

“Ahh, you’re rebelling, then?” Connor once again relaxed back into the couch. “I’d call you a radical, except your attempts at baking and cooking say otherwise.”

“In my defense, today I was trying to make the shortbread so I could share it with our neighbors,” I said.

Connor blinked at me. “Whatever for?”

“To be friendly? To try and make friends with them?” I suggested.

“Whatever for?” he repeated.

I rolled my eyes. “Look, you might be holed up in your apartment pretending to be antisocial when I know you’re sneaking out frequently, but I need to make more friends.”

“I’m not pretending to be antisocial,” Connor said. “I *am* antisocial—people bore me. Conversational interactions are pure drivel.”

“Pure drivel, sure,” I said. “That’s why you’re collapsed on my couch. Because social interactions annoy you.”

“Fine, then your way is better: tying yourself into knots attempting to befriend humans who haven’t returned your

offers?” Connor asked.

“It’s not that they haven’t returned it,” I said. “It’s just that everyone is busy. Like Shelby and her daughter, Mia. Shelby’s always running around for Mia’s activities on top of regular housework”

“If you say so,” Connor said. “Did you have such a hard time making friends in school?”

“I was homeschooled with my siblings and cousins.”

“And you still managed to go on dates?” Connor asked.

Surprised he’d remembered our conversation at Book Nookery, I shrugged. “We occasionally had large classes with other kids. All the guys I went on dates with were from those classes, and I saw them frequently while growing up.”

It was all true—though it probably looked very different than Connor was picturing, as the large classes were all with other slayer kids. (They were more like seminars so we could learn how slayer families could effectively work together, and gave us a chance to practice group combat.)

Getting along with slayer kids wasn’t difficult since we had the same background and similar family cultures that focused on weapons and fighting.

I’d fast learned when I moved to Magiford that humans weren’t typically into daggers, knives, or arguing about the best way to field dress a wound.

In a way, it’s that difference that makes humans so wonderful.

Instead, I’d learned that my neighbors discussed things like rescuing frogs from the apartment complex’s pool, exchanged recipes, or talked about local events.

There was something beautiful about the way they embraced life. I still missed swapping techniques and talking weapons with my cousins, but I also wanted to join the humans in their conversations.

Disgruntled, I sawed at my burnt shortbread. *Maybe it’s about time I give up on cooking, though, and try a different*

human hobby?

Connor gave a drawn-out sigh as he adjusted my couch pillow for his comfort. “You humans are all so weirdly sentimental. In the end it always destroys you—mark my words.”

“It’s being sentimental—letting yourself feel joy and pain through things like friendships—that makes life beautiful and worth living.” I started prying the burnt shortbread from the pan, dumping the pieces in the trash.

I thought Connor would roll his eyes and maybe pretend to gag or do something else to show his disapproval, but he was quiet.

He stayed silent so long I actually looked up from the mess I was making. I was scattering burnt crumbs everywhere. I’d need to clean my kitchen again after this. “Connor? You okay?”

“Of course,” Connor said. “Just ruminating that humans don’t understand how lucky they are, and how steep the price of immortality is.” There was something about the way his voice sounded—clipped and almost bitter—that was odd for a vampire as young as him.

I set my pan down and studied Connor, trying to interpret his blank facial expression. *Is this something I need to push and engage with him? It seems like a sore spot, and I don’t want to walk thoughtlessly through any hidden pains he might have...*

Connor made the decision for me. He glanced over at me and smiled—all charm once again. “Listen to me—I sound like one of those ancient elder geezers, croaking about how the world was better back in the Age of Enlightenment when everyone was busy dying of dysentery.”

“Sounds like you’ve heard that talk a lot,” I said.

“Too much,” Connor agreed.

I pried the last bit of my burnt shortbread out of the pan and trashed it, dusting my hands off afterwards.

Hmm, yep, he wants to change the topic but just in case...

“You know, Connor, if you ever want to talk, we can,” I said.

“I thought that’s what we were doing now, talking?” he asked, his voice still charming.

Well, that’s a rejection, and that’s okay. At least I told him.

“We are,” I agreed. “Do you know what we *could* be doing?” I asked.

Connor eyed me. “Something I’m not going to like?”

“Yes: cleaning the kitchen!” I turned the water on in my sink, plugged the drain, and then squirted a generous amount of soap in it.

Connor rolled to his feet. “Why am I getting conscripted into cleaning? I only came over here to make sure you hadn’t killed yourself with smoke inhalation.” Despite his complaints, he rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt as he approached the kitchen.

“It’s what friends do,” I said with a teasing smile on my lips.

“Great,” Connor said. “When do I get to start being on the receiving end?”

“I’ll take you out for ice cream once we finish,” I said.

“Ice cream? You think I like such a thing?”

I dumped my pan in the sink and shut the water off. “Probably not since you don’t seem to like anything fun, but you need to try Wisconsin custard. It’s life changing.”

“Even for an immortal?”

“*Especially* for an immortal!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jade

That night, I was still trying to figure out where I'd gone wrong as I waited for our regular pre-patrol meeting to start. I reviewed the family shortbread recipe, but I hadn't seen anything obvious that I'd done wrong, so I'd given in and started texting my mom—texts were safe with my parents, especially if I was just asking about baking.

MOM

If the shortbread burned, your oven must be too hot. What temp did you bake them at?

I glanced up to make sure I wasn't missing anything but since I was sitting at my usual spot in the meeting room, there was no one willing to talk with me. My teammates filled the other tables in their usual clusters. April and Juggernaut were playing a card game together, while Grove laughed at something Medium-Sized Robert said, and Binx pointed to a tuft of werewolf fur stuck to Brody's pants that he'd missed when lint rolling them.

I tapped out a response to Mom.

I set my oven at the temp it said on the recipe card—375.

While I waited for a response, I checked over my mask making sure it didn't have any chips or cracks in it.

Tetiana—sitting with Clarence—stood up, and I watched with curiosity as she marched across the room stopping by April and Juggernaut.

“I see you playing with cards all the time, but they aren't normal cards—they have people on them. What are you playing?” Tetiana asked.

“Old maid.” April showed the vampire a few cards, which had illustrations of humans in different work clothes—like firefighter, doctor, and fisherman. “This is a kid's deck, so the cards all have people with names. We take cards from each other to try and get as many pairs as possible. The player left with the old maid loses.”

Tetiana thoughtfully rubbed her chin. “Impressive, I didn't know these days that elderly maids were considered deadly in human culture.”

Juggernaut made a pained face. “Uh, that is not at all what April just said.”

My phone dinged—my mom had texted me back.

MOM

You're supposed to preheat it to 375, and then drop the temp to 350 after the shortbread is in the oven.

“Really? I don't think the recipe said that...” My eyebrows bunched together as I opened my picture gallery app.

“The pictures on the cards are quite adorable,” Tetiana said.

“Yeah.” April studied her cards, which she'd fanned out in her hand. “We're playing this game a lot at House Medeis because Ivy—one of the kids in the House—is the perfect age to play it with. The counting for pairs, reading the characters' names, and critical thinking skills are great for her. I've got about half a dozen of these decks as a result. Since we always

have some downtime before meetings, I brought a deck to work. It's the perfect game to slip in."

"Are there any other cards that kill you or just the old maid?" Tetiana asked.

"No one kills anyone," Juggernaut said.

"Very well, then how many people can play?" Tetiana asked.

April picked up the brightly colored card box. "It says two to eight players."

"And there is only one old maid card?" Tetiana asked.

"Yeah," Juggernaut said.

"Then obviously she's killing her victim," Tetiana said. "How else could you lose worse than the other players who didn't win?"

April tilted her head. "You know, you have a point."

"No—don't encourage this," Juggernaut wagged a finger at April.

Still listening to my squadmates' conversation, I tapped the picture Nan had sent me of the Scottish shortbread recipe card to enlarge it.

The temp 375 was scrawled across the top, almost unreadable thanks to a suspicious stain on the paper. No other temperatures were recorded on the card.

I texted my mom back.

The recipe card says 375, not 350!

I set my phone back down and waited for a response.

Tetiana was still lingering by April and Juggernaut, who were going back and forth choosing cards.

April glanced up at her. "Did you want to join us?"

Tetiana pressed her lips together and thought for a moment. "Yes."

Juggernaut dropped his cards in surprise, but April just nodded. “Okay. Pull up a chair and we’ll deal you in.”

I watched in surprise as Tetiana sat down with the wizards while Juggernaut collected and shuffled the cards.

It wasn’t that Tetiana was unfriendly with the wizards—our team got along quite well all things considered. But the different types of supernaturals didn’t mix unless they had to.

My phone dinged with another text from Mom.

MOM

Oops!

She included a line of emojis that had nothing to do with our exchange—a unicorn, a heart, and a dog.

Mystery of my burnt shortbread solved, I set my phone down and resisted the impulse to thump my head on the table. *I’m not sure if it’s a win or a loss that the burning is probably because of the recipe card and not me. Either way, all I’m left with is a batch of inedible cookies.*

“Why is the game called *old maid*? I understand she’s the killer but we’re stealing from one another, so it technically should be called *the thieves and the old maid*.” Tetiana asked as she took a card from April. She must have had the matching card because she plucked a different card from her hand and set them face down on the table, then fanned her cards out so Juggernaut could take a card from her.

“We’re not stealing from each other.” Juggernaut took a card from Tetiana, then turned to April so she could select a card from his hand. “This is just how we divvy cards up and pass them around.”

“I see. Well, it’s a good thing you’re humans and not fae.” Tetiana watched April take a card from Juggernaut. “If you were fae you wouldn’t be able to believe such a baldfaced lie.”

“We’re not stealing,” April said. “We’re... collecting.”

Tetiana rearranged her cards, then selected a card to take from April. “Frankly, that sounds worse.”

The door to the meeting room opened, so I silenced my phone and put it away while the card game trio tossed their cards in a pile and turned their attention to the front of the room.

“Bad news.” Captain Reese strode into the meeting room with Sarge, and I was surprised to see Sunshine behind them.

I hadn’t put my mask on yet—it sat on the table I was seated at—so I smiled at Sunshine.

She gave me a weak grin that lapsed immediately into a serious expression.

That can’t be good. Sunshine is—as Nan would say—always down to clown.

I sat up straighter in my chair and set my folded hands on my lap as my squadmates quieted.

Captain Reese marched up to the front of the room, her hands folded behind her back. She was wearing her chrome leg today, which gleamed under the bright blast of the overhead lights. “Our day shift worked tirelessly on the bespelled gem Blood procured for us. Unfortunately, the caster of the jewel is a different fae than the one releasing the monsters.”

Brody and Binx both launched out of their chairs.

“Orrin could have easily bought the gem off another fae simply to mislead us,” Binx said.

“Yeah!” Brody chimed in.

Captain Reese held a hand up. “We believe that is most likely what happened, because...” She taped a black and white printed picture of Orrin to a whiteboard. “Orrin’s registration with the national Curia Cloisters does note he possesses natural animal magic.”

“Then Gisila lied for him,” I whispered.

“What was that, Blood?” Captain Reese asked.

I awkwardly cleared my throat. “Lady Gisila lied for Orrin. She told me he had no such magic.”

“Or maybe she didn’t know he had it?” Tetiana suggested.

“Possibly, but it seems more likely at this time that Orrin is using her.” Sarge approached me holding out a color photo of a glittering silver necklace with a purple gem. “Do you recognize this?”

I studied it, mentally matching up the details. “The fae I chased had this necklace—he held it in his hands.”

“Good.” Sarge turned on his heels and strode back up to the front of the room, where he taped the necklace photo to the whiteboard. “It belongs to Lady Gisila. She wore this necklace when visiting the Curia Cloisters. It’s a known elven artifact from her hoard. It has the ability to create gates to the fae realm—limited gates; it can only open a single gate once, approximately every seven days.”

I was with Emi when she came to the Cloisters; did I see it? Yes—I had. I remember noting it as it hadn’t matched the diamond set she was wearing.

“The usage of the necklace would explain the foreign magic Brody smelled and Grove detected with the mantasps and the boars,” Captain Reese said. “Orrin appears to be working alone and using this necklace to open the gates and call fae monsters through it.”

There were nods of approval around the squad, but I wasn’t quite so certain. *I don’t think a dragon would so easily miss a treasure from her hoard, even if it is just for a few hours...*

Mercifully, I wasn’t the only one who doubted.

Grove dramatically planted his palms on the table he was seated behind and stood up. “Objection!”

Sarge stared at him. “What?”

“I’m trying to copy one of those human shows and use it for model behavior,” Grove said. “You know—Objection, overruled, she’s guilty!”

“The Commissioner is obsessed with police procedurals,” Sarge said. “Not court and law shows. But proceed.”

Grove brandished a finger in the air. “If the necklace is Gisila’s, doesn’t that mean she *must* be working with Orrin? If it’s from her treasure hoard, it’s unlikely she’d let him walk around with it.”

“Not necessarily,” Captain Reese said. “Since he works for her, it’s possible that he can slip it in and out of her proximity without her noticing. Dragons are notoriously protective of their hoards, and they only hire staff they trust or those they believe can be...*replaced* if a mistake is made.”

What she meant was that dragons frequently hired supernaturals and humans who had no other option. Desperate people were easier to control for someone as powerful as a dragon shifter. Gisila may not seem like the type, but dragon shifters in general were cunning and manipulative.

It still just doesn’t seem right, but I can’t quite say why.

April shifted in her chair and briefly raised her hand before speaking. “So, it seems like Orrin is our perp. He’s got the animal magic to call the monsters through the gate and access to Lady Gisila’s necklace to make said gates. Why is he dumping monsters on Goldstein? They haven’t done anything besides property damage.”

“Tutu’s,” I said without thinking.

To my embarrassment, the room went quiet and all my teammates turned to face me, their chairs scraping as they peered back at me.

“Correct!” Captain Reese beamed. “The most likely target is Tutu’s. Even if we ignore the vast amount of money kept in Tutu’s Crypta & Custodia, there are heirlooms, rare artifacts—I’m sure there’s even a few elven spells and weapons inside its vaults.”

Elven weapons and spells...that could be a powerful draw.

If Grove was right and an elf artifact had been used to create the gate the fae creatures were brought through, that indicated the would-be-thieves already had an interest in elven magic. Elven products had grown increasingly rare since the entire race died out centuries ago.

“The most obvious evidence that indicates Tutu’s could be the target is that their security systems have been set off every time there’s an attack,” Captain Reese continued. “We believe Orrin is doing this to measure the seals and magic protection systems on Tutu’s. The attacks have been gradually rising in terms of power, and they started after Orrin arrived in the city. Likely, there’s something in Tutu’s vaults that he wants—and he obviously has no problem with stealing as he makes use of Gisila’s artifacts.”

I sat back in my chair still not quite satisfied with the idea.

There’s no possible way a single fae could take on a security system like Tutu’s. Maybe he’s just trying to scout it... or maybe he has Gisila at his back and this is all for her.

“We have no definite proof that he’s targeting Tutu’s,” Sarge said, “Or that this is all his doing. Given that although we believe he’s acting alone, it is possible he could be working with someone else—Lady Gisila included—we’re opting not to approach Gisila to ask questions. We don’t want to spook him. Instead, we’re going to lay a trap.”

Captain Reese stared us down with werewolf intensity. “Starting tonight, one team will be on a stakeout on Goldstein Street watching Tutu’s. The other teams will continue to patrol as normal—keeping up the pattern of extra patrols on Goldstein, so Orrin will hopefully believe nothing has changed and will approach when he is ready.”

“As it has been only one day since Blood nearly caught him, it seems unlikely he’ll approach tonight,” Sarge drawled. “So our squad will be handling the stakeout and patrols this evening while the department gets organized. Starting tomorrow, however, we will be getting additional help from other squads who will take over constant surveillance, and we will continue with our previous schedule.”

That’s reasonable, and proactive. Even if it did seem short sighted to consider Orrin as the only perp, the stakeouts would ensure that once Orrin moved we’d get all the proof we needed.

“Since Orrin is particularly aware of Blood’s existence given their merry chase, her team will be patrolling the area frequently,” Captain Reese said. “With the hope that Blood’s presence will hide the missing third team, who will be on the stakeout.”

“This, obviously, will mess with tonight’s patrol routes,” Sarge said. “Each team needs to check in with myself or Captain Reese for your temporary route tonight. We’ll have the new schedules available tomorrow after the other squads select members to cover our surveillance shift. Understood?”

Everyone chimed in their approval.

“The groups tonight are Blood, Binx, Clarence, and Grove are Team Blood; Myself, Medium-Sized Robert, and Juggernaut are Team Tide; April, Brody and Tetiana are Team Watchers—they’ll be the surveillance team,” Sarge read off.

Captain Reese clapped her hands together. “Any questions? No? Then remember to see us for your new patrol routes before you leave. Be careful out there. Dismissed!”

Sunshine scurried up to me before I could even push my chair away from my table. “Jade.” She tried to smile again, but the dark circles under her eyes were so strong they almost looked like bruises. “Good job getting that gem. As usual, you are a priceless jewel.”

I rested my wrists on the edge of my table. “Were you the one who cracked it?”

Sunshine shook her head making her springy brown curls swish. “Nope. My boss did—though I worked on it with him.” She paused and licked her lips.

“Is something wrong?”

“No—well, in a way. I just don’t like this. Trying to stop a dragon shifter family conflict—since Gisila is *related* to Tutu—is way above the paygrade of anyone in the task force. That’s something for the Regional Council of Magic,” Sunshine said.

“Sarge and Captain Reese don’t seem to think Gisila is involved,” I pointed out.

“She has to be,” Sunshine flatly said. “There’s no way she’d lose track of one of her treasures or not notice if he swiped it, even temporarily.”

“Yeah.” I glanced around, most of the squad was bunching around Sarge and Captain Reese. “Dragon shifters are jealous of their possessions. I suspect Orrin is doing this all under her orders.”

Dragons cared for their treasures more than anything in the world—it was why there were so few dragon shifters. They cared more about their treasure than each other.

“You’re the strongest of your squad,” Sunshine started.

“No.” I shook my head. “Medium-size Robert is. He could bench press me—Brody could, too.”

“I didn’t mean literal strongest,” Sunshine said. “I mean that on your team, you are the most lethal and the strongest fighter.”

I tilted my head trying to measure out her guess. “Not really. Sarge is deadly since we’re by so much water with the lakes. And Tetiana—”

“For the love of—okay, okay, I know you think highly of your squad! Please, for once, just think of yourself without prejudice! You might be average for your family of slayers, but you’re an elite here. No one else trains like you do!”

Sunshine’s glare and twitching eyebrows said I shouldn’t push her, but I felt honor bound to point out she’d overlooked someone. “April practices with all the House Medeis wizards —”

“Jade!” Sunshine snarled, sounding surprisingly like my mom—a real feat because my mom had great lung capacity and you felt it when she was facing you down.

Sunshine sighed and abruptly deflated. “I didn’t want to get in a fight with you about this—all I want is for you to be careful. I know you. You’ll sacrifice yourself in a second for your teammates.”

I opened my mouth to point out that was expected conduct of slayers everywhere, but Sunshine held up a hand to cut me off before I could get started and continued. “*But!* Please. If something happens, please try to get help. Don’t just try to fix it yourself. Promise?”

I paused, surprised by the grimness in Sunshine’s voice. “...did something happen?” Fae didn’t have the ability to see the future—oracles were the only supernaturals who could, in theory, do that. But she sounded so...certain.

Sunshine hesitated, then shook her head. “It’s just what I said earlier. This is dangerous. That gem Orrin used—it’s not easy to fix a hypnosis spell to a gem. The gem alone cost more than you and I make in a year; add the spell on to that and it was a pricey thing to toss in an attempt to get you off his tail. And if Gisila is really directing this, and Tutu’s is the target... it might become a battle between dragon shifters.”

That thought was enough to make me feel ill.

I didn’t know much about dragon shifters, but general knowledge was all I needed to know the scale of damage they could cause.

Dragon shifters didn’t transform into tiny, delicate beasts. One transformed dragon was easily the size of a bus—and they could get *a lot* bigger.

Sunshine shifted. “So. You’ll be careful?”

“I’ll be careful,” I repeated back to her. “Thanks, Sunshine. I’m glad I have you for a friend.”

Sunshine relaxed. “Of course! And I know you’re strong. I also know someone must remind you to watch out for yourself since you don’t have your family around to save your neck.”

“No, but I do have my squad,” I said.

“You do,” Sunshine agreed, her voice growing lighter. “And they’ll do their best to help you.”

My heart warmed a bit at the thought. I might be a slayer without a family, but at least I’d found myself a trustworthy team!

“Blood?” Binx called from the door to the meeting room where she waited, with Clarence and Grove, holding a piece of paper—assumedly our patrol route for the night.

“Coming.” I finally stood up, scooping up my mask so I could start snapping it into place in my hood. “Thanks, Sunshine. Make sure you get enough rest.”

Sunshine swatted me off. “Yeah, yeah, you’re welcome. Text me when you get home in the morning. My mom is making scones—I can drop a few off for you.”

I waved to her as I crossed the meeting room to join my team.

“Ready?” Binx glanced at me, then Clarence and Grove.

“I’d like to run back to my locker real quick like,” Grove said.

Clarence worriedly tugged at his fancy white cravat. “Why?”

Grove balanced on the tips of his toes. “I want to grab a few—”

“Ah-ah—no!” Binx slapped a hand over his mouth. “If you were about to say poisons, don’t even start! We’re going!” She grabbed the fae by the ear and dragged him out of the room.

“You know, it’s never wise to manhandle your medic,” Grove complained. “I’ll remember this next time I need to heal you.”

“Please,” Binx scoffed. “You’ll just shove a potion at me, and I’ll have to hope it isn’t a poison.”

Clarence laughed weakly as he followed behind Binx. I looked back at Sunshine but she was approaching Captain Reese, so I ducked out of the room after my team.

Thinking of Sunshine’s worry for me and Connor’s wry concern, I smiled behind my mask.

It’s nice to have good friends.



MY TEAM'S first assigned check in patrol on Goldstein Street was around 11 PM.

We didn't have a problem meeting our timeline—the only scuffle we ran into on our patrol was a bunch of fae chasing a harassed-looking black cat, and we'd been sent to remind the wizards over in House Tellier that thunderstrikes violated city noise violations after 9 PM—they'd been using lightening magic, which struck me as a little odd because House Tellier wasn't known for its discipline and its members were more likely to be seen loitering downtown than practicing magic.

We were three minutes early as we strolled up Goldstein, our footsteps muffled on the sidewalk.

It had drizzled about an hour earlier, so the smell of wet hot pavement hovered in the air, filling my nose, and there was some mist on the street since the pavement was warmer than the rapidly cooling air.

We were in the last days of September and while the daytime temperatures were stubbornly staying higher, the nights were getting colder and colder.

“Team Blood reporting into Goldstein Street,” Clarence croaked into the radio, marking our progress for the rest of the squad.

Nobody responded back—as was the plan. We were supposed to look like we didn't expect to find anything and act casual—something Grove admirably illustrated as he ambled along, swinging his arms and humming under his breath.

Binx had too much deadliness to her to look “casual”. She prowled up the sidewalk, systematically scanning the street.

I tried to match her energy but my training had me continuously touching my belt to make sure I had easily reachable weapons and while Binx could saunter, the most casual pace I could make was a stiff march.

Not that it mattered. Clarence looked incredibly anxious, but that was less because of any worries about our shift and more because of my presence. He walked on Binx's far side, his skin color extra waxy and his eyes bulging whenever I moved my hands.

Binx bent over fussing with the top of one of her boots so, to an observer, her mouth wasn't visible. "I don't smell any magic," she said, her voice as loud as a whisper.

"I don't feel any magic either," Grove panted—he'd started hopping over all the cracks in the sidewalk.

I uncomfortably rolled my shoulders back. *Should I say something? They don't seem to expect an answer.*

I hesitated, losing the chance as silence once again overtook us.

The road was quiet—the businesses on it had long closed for the night, and it was too far from the handful of restaurants/bars on Main Street that were still open to have any kind of traffic.

Team Watchers—April, Brody, and Tetiana—were supposed to be huddled in a dark SUV parked on the street.

There were two SUVs and I recognized the license plate of the one registered to the Curia Cloisters—it was parked on the opposite side of the street from Tutu's covered in beads of water from the fine mist in the air.

When we passed by them, they were supposed to signal by pressing the talk button of their radio. This would give us feedback via the radio, and no one would need to speak and give away our plan.

They won't signal until we get up to Tutu's... should I try talking in the meantime? We're supposed to be casual, so this would be a chance to build a rapport with my teammates.

"Seems like the weather might finally be turning." My voice was thick, but I'd managed to at least spit the observation out.

Binx snapped a nod off to the empty sidewalk in front of us and Grove did a thumbs up when he jumped over a crack, but nobody said anything back.

Maybe I'm bothering them when I talk. Unless I did something wrong? Weather is a safe topic—did I sound stuck up when I said it?

Worries spiraled through my mind. It would have overtaken me, but my work ethic was too strong for that and I kicked the thoughts to the back of my mind—so I could stew on them from the comfort of my apartment when I went to bed in the early morning.

I checked the cuffs on my belt again, then looked back over my shoulder, stiffening when I saw a shadow flash under a streetlight.

“I saw a shadow—down the street,” I muttered, thankful my mask would hide my face. “I think someone is behind us.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jade

I assumed they'd question my observation, but Binx immediately stiffened, puffing up like the cat she was. "That's downwind—I can't smell them. How do we want to handle this if we don't want to let on that we've seen them?"

"Don't even worry about it." Grove took an exaggerated step over a crack in the sidewalk. "Just watch this!" He appeared to lose his balance and tilted, then wildly windmilled his arms before he tipped backwards crashing into Clarence.

Clarence squeaked and smacked into Binx's side making her steps falter so she almost fell into the brick side of Tutu's Crypta & Custodia.

"Grove," Binx growled.

Grove winked at her. "You're welcome!"

Binx pushed him—gently, for the shifter—so he twirled and staggered a few steps, cackling the entire time.

Clarence circled Binx like a worried mouse, first brushing off her shoulder and then brushing off Tutu's wall, as if they'd somehow defaced it.

I stood awkwardly in the middle of the sidewalk for the entire show, too stiff and awkward to meld into the scene they'd created for the benefit of the shadow.

Binx shooed Clarence away, then planted her back against Tutu's—an indication we weren't going to be moving anytime soon and pointedly looked away from Grove, giving her a clear look in the direction we'd come.

The pupils of her eyes grew as she stared into the shadows, her night vision adjusting to give her a better look. “Hey!” She barked, abruptly straightening. “Who goes there?”

The street was still but I caught sight of a shape in the shadows. It didn't move.

How do we want to approach this, when we're supposed to seem like we're not overly concerned about the street? I wondered. Maybe we should radio it in, so we can tell Team Watchers without walking up to their SUV.

I fought the impulse to glance at the van—they hadn't given us the signal yet. Probably because they were wondering what we were doing.

Enough time had passed, however, so I could reasonably turn around to look in the direction Binx was growling, which I did.

The mist rising off the warm streets gave the air a soupy consistency that was tough to see through, so I didn't spot anything that seemed off.

“Oooh, Blood—better draw your gun!” Grove all but shouted.

Orrin immediately stepped out of the shadows. “So sorry I alarmed you,” he said, an enigmatic smile hovering on his lips.

My magic swamped my system preparing me for another chase. Orrin, the fae we knew was behind the attacks, was here. On Goldstein.

Why? Was he really planning to try another attack?

He was dressed passably casual in a gray, tunic-like shirt with charcoal gray athletic pants—apparently, he'd learned from when I'd chased him that black was a no-no.

No hood today though. Why is he being so obvious?

“Orrin?” Binx whispered. “What is he doing down here? He can’t be that stupid to make another attempt when Blood almost got him last night!”

I drew my gun—Grove’s shout was a perfect excuse, and there was no way I was going to be weaponless around our perp—and swapped to a defensive stance.

Orrin, in response, raised his hands. He stayed where he was, directly across the street—almost close enough to the squad’s SUV that he could have touched it with his foot if he stretched enough.

“That was a nicely done intimidation tactic, Grove,” Clarence whispered. “It worked perfectly to lure him out into the open.”

I blinked trying to understand exactly what Grove had done and how it was an intimidation tactic—was it because he was announcing we were armed?

Supernaturals usually underestimated firearms—to their detriment.

I’ll ask later.

Binx narrowed her eyes as she pushed off Tutu’s and stood shoulder to shoulder with Grove. “What are you doing down here this late?” she demanded.

“Walking,” Orrin said. Since he couldn’t lie as a fae, he was going to be very selective with his words. “Is that outlawed in Magiford?”

Grove puffed his chest up and hooked his thumbs on his belt—looking all kinds of ridiculous that I was pretty sure was on purpose. “This area is under investigation!” he bragged.

Binx looked like she wanted to strangle him for saying that, but it wasn’t like his response was unexpected.

Of course the area was under investigation. We’d had how many incidents on it? If we tried to say it wasn’t under investigation while holding so many extra patrols, it’d look unbelievably sketchy.

When we're forthright and seemingly oblivious like this, we might be able to lull him into thinking we don't suspect him.

Clarence sighed, sounding weary. "Grove, you can't just go around telling people we're investigating the street." He turned his back to Orrin, all signs of fear gone as he massaged his head. "That defeats the whole point of trying to do this secretly!"

"What?" Orrin did a good job of sounding surprised.

"Well, boo. That's boring," Grove said.

Binx rolled her eyes and growled.

"Why all the alarm?" Orrin asked.

"I'm not yelling this all across the street," Binx flatly said. "Come here."

I eyed Binx with new appreciation—*that* was a tidy piece of manipulation!

Orrin trotted across the street—a smile still on his lips but there was a smug gleam in his eyes that made me think Clarence, Grove, and Binx's act might have fooled him. His gaze did, however, linger on my gun—which I hadn't lowered or put away.

Clarence, his back still to Orrin, bleated, "Slayer, you can put away your firearm." He started to bulge his eyes at me—I think to convey he didn't really want me to do that but I was ahead of him for once.

I racked my gun loading a bullet in the chamber. "No," I said, the flatness of my voice coming in handy for once as I sounded emotionless, giving Clarence an excuse to squeak and back away from me.

Grove patted Clarence on the shoulder, then eyed Orrin as he joined us on the sidewalk. "You're the dragon shifter's personal assistant, right? The flashy lady who wears a lot of purple," he said.

Orrin bowed. "It is my honor to serve Lady Gisila during my days," he said.

Behind my mask, I squinted. *Huh. That was a clear line in the sand he drew there. Why? There's no point in trying to differentiate himself for her sake, unless he's trying to protect her?*

I stared at him trying to engrain his appearance in my memory for the report.

“And during your nights you enjoy prowling around cities?” Binx asked, her natural disdain for anything breathing serving her well as she eyed the handsome fae.

Orrin chuckled. “I didn't mean to surprise you,” he said. “With a night like this, I merely felt that I had to be out and about.” He discreetly glanced at me, his eyes again lingering on my gun.

Oh, yeah. He is definitely wary of me after last night's chase. But he's not worried about the rest of the team, and he doesn't know about Team Watchers, so we can still pin him if he tries something.

I frowned—not because of his fear of me, that was good—because when he shifted, I swear I saw the chain of a necklace flash at the neckline of his shirt.

Was he wearing the necklace? Surely, he wasn't going to try releasing monsters on Tutu's tonight? Why would he risk it?

Grove frowned, then peered up at the sky where thin clouds passed in front of a full moon. “Why would this gross weather make you want to be outside?” he asked.

Orrin ignored the question and smiled politely at Binx. “Have I ruined your investigation?”

Binx scoffed and settled her arms across her chest.

I shifted to get Clarence's attention. I risked removing one hand from my gun to scratch at my neck hoping the vampire might get what I was referring to.

He has a necklace—it might be Gisila's!

Clarence glanced from my neck to Orrin's, then he sidled up to Grove.

“Nah,” Grove rocked forward and backward on the tips of his toes to his heels. “No way the perp is here—Blood just chased him last night, probably scared the magic straight out of him.” He paused, then glanced over at Orrin with a thoughtful expression. “That’s right—you know that. She saw you last night at *Luxe Sejour*.”

“Correct,” Orrin snapped off a nod to me before his eyes once again flitted to my gun. He missed it when Clarence and Grove exchanged looks. “Lady Gisila was there to attend a fae performance.”

“Is it a nice job—working for a dragon shifter?” Clarence asked.

“It is interesting work,” Orrin said.

“I bet,” Grove chimed in as he started fidgeting again, turning around in a slow circle. “Lots of traveling—and you get to see a lot of treasure!”

“Is it low stress?” Clarence asked. “With nice coworkers?” When Orrin looked at him, Clarence glanced at me and paled. He scooted closer to Grove bumping into him.

While I was pretty sure it was all a part of the show, I couldn’t help but feel that his anxiety seemed *too* real.

Orrin, however, relaxed a little—seemingly even more reassured by my squadmate’s obvious rejection of me. “There are many benefits,” he said.

“Oooh, are you paid in gold—oof!” Grove appeared to trip and he fell into Orrin jostling the other fae, hitting him just right so he tipped forward, and the chain of a necklace briefly hung from his neck. I saw the shape of the necklace pressed against his shirt. The imprint was shaped similarly to Gisila’s necklace.

Yep, he’s armed and ready for another attack. How do we warn Team Watchers? Also...why have they been quiet? They never gave us the check in signal...

I glanced at Binx and was surprised to see she was looking at me—as if waiting for a cue.

I don't know what to do!

Grove backed off so Orrin could stand upright, and he brushed himself off where Grove had touched him, his lip curling slightly.

Binx rolled her eyes at Grove, then turned to Orrin. “Did you see anything odd at *Luxe Sejour*?”

“Odd besides fae acting like humans?” Orrin asked. “No.”

Something felt off. I couldn't sense any blood, but the situation didn't feel right. I looked past Orrin at the SUV.

Why aren't they doing anything? Did Sarge tell them to stay silent because of Orrin?

“I think the plays are fun,” Grove grumbled.

“They are an excellent way to build rapport with humans,” Clarence said.

Orrin shrugged. “Regardless, I shall take my leave so you can continue on with your patrol.”

He's trying to get us to move on, but can we risk leaving him when Team Watchers hasn't acknowledged us?

Binx glanced at me, worry creasing the wrinkles in her forehead.

Time to use my status as the designated wet blanket! I kept my gun pointed at Orrin. “We will be staying here. Enjoy your evening walk.”

Orrin's slight smile fell off his face. “I see.”

The feeling of wrongness grew and my instincts screamed at me to prepare for a fight.

And still, nothing from Team Watchers. What's going on?

“Clarence,” I barked. “Radio.”

“W-what?” Clarence stammered.

Grove must have figured out what I wanted because he popped his radio off his belt. “What about our radios? They're cool—right?” He grinned winningly before pressing the button

that made feedback crackle through all our radios. He pressed it again, pointedly putting his back to the SUV.

“You’re going to upset Sarge if you keep doing that.” Binx shifted her weight back and forth, her worry growing as our radios were silent.

Something’s wrong. Team Watchers are either unconscious or unable to answer.

Orrin sighed. “It would have been easier if you just left. I already wasted enough time on your compatriots, I cannot afford to lose any additional minutes and I must finish it tonight.”

I had just enough time to flick my gun’s safety off before Gisila’s necklace glowed bright enough that it was visible under Orrin’s shirt. I felt a swell of magic—so much of it that I couldn’t tell the necklace’s magic from Orrin’s.

Half a block up a portal formed, crackling and popping with sparks of magic. A foggy haze surrounded it, and another wave of magic filled the air.

Clarence yelped and staggered into the street, while Grove started pulling bottles from his bag.

Orrin pulled a dagger—a big one about as long as my forearm—from thin air. He rushed Binx raising the dagger into a stabbing position aimed at Binx’s right side.

I lunged across the sidewalk releasing the gun with my right hand and raising it up to block his strike. His dagger hit the metal strip sewn into the top of my glove for this specific purpose.

My hand shook and turned numb—even if the edge couldn’t cut through my reinforced gloves, it was a lot of force for my hand to absorb. If I was a normal human, he could have broken my bones.

But, numbed hand or not, my training kicked in.

Maim him—so he can’t run.

Keeping my right hand up, I aimed my gun with my left hand and shot his foot. He was wearing simple leather boots,

so the bullet went through his foot.

Orrin yelled in pain and stumbled backwards.

Pain still vibrated in my hand, but I had enough control that I was able to grab Orrin's wrist. He tried to throw his dagger at Binx, but I caught it midair. Unfortunately, I had to catch it by the bladed edge, which cut through my glove like butter, biting into my hand.

Shoot!

“Binx—I’ve got blood on the weapon!” I warned her before I tossed it on the sidewalk—she’d have to handle the cleanup so Clarence wouldn’t get hurt.

Thankfully, the nervous vampire was about as far away from me and my poisonous blood as he could get at the moment. He scuttled across the street reaching the squad’s silent SUV. He tried the handle of the front door, which surprisingly opened. I glanced over just long enough to see April, seated in the driver’s seat, slumped over the steering wheel.

We can assume, then, that we don’t have any backup.

A grinding noise echoed from the portal, but I focused on Orrin.

I need to immobilize him in a way that won’t minimize my movements.

I could have shot him—the Cloisters probably wouldn’t have cared too much if he died and bled out in the process. Supernatural justice is a lot bloodier and less forgiving than the human version. The whole point of joining the task force was that I was sick of death, so it was going to be a last resort.

I jabbed my fingers in Orrin’s eyes—a move he wasn’t expecting and that provoked a pained yelp from him—then grabbed his wrist and slunk around to his back, holding his arm at an angle so it would be easy to wrench. (I might want to avoid killing, but I was still going to use the Slayer method of fighting—brutal and dirty.)

I was able to plant my gun on his back so I could flick the safety back on.

Binx carefully picked up the tainted dagger. Wrapping it in a cloth she pulled from her belt, before slipping it in a plastic bag she pulled out of her pocket. Clarence opened up the back door of the SUV revealing an unconscious Brody and Tetiana, while Grove sprinted towards the hissing portal.

Orrin tried to twist in my grasp as I holstered my gun, so I yanked his arm higher and hooked my leg in front of his so I could grind my heel on his injured foot.

Orrin sagged in my arms, buying me a moment to assess the situation.

I exhaled, expanding my senses, taking in the light pole about six feet away—too big to be of use unless I wanted to smack Orrin’s head against it—a bench, and—*perfect!*—a sign pole that marked a crosswalk.

Applying a knee to Orrin’s back, I pushed him into the sign pole and simultaneously yanked a set of cuffs from my belt. I slapped one of the wristlets on his right hand—he’d held the dagger in his right hand, so he was probably right-handed—then snapped the free end of the cuffs around the sign pole, leashing him.

Okay, he’s apprehended. Next step would be to incapacitate him so he can’t use his magic—

“Um, Blood? We’ve got a big problem!” Grove shouted.

With Orrin’s right hand cuffed to the light pole, I grabbed his left hand by the wrist and pulled back on one of his fingers so that if he tried something I could pull the finger further back and break it. (Brutal, and dirty, but still effective! On Orrin, anyway. This wouldn’t work on Ruin.)

With Orrin groaning and reasonably secured, I clenched my injured fingers together to minimize the bleeding—the cuts weren’t very deep, but cleanup would be a pain if I dribbled tiny droplets everywhere—then turned to peer up the street just in time to see a massive snake emerge from the portal, its molten orange eyes glowing in the misty night.

Half cobra, half prehistoric monster, the snake had a hood with a black scale design, and a forked tongue that glowed like lava. Its scales were plated—my gun was going to be useless on it—and it was so big it hadn't slithered all the way out of the portal yet. I could have climbed it like a jungle gym.

It was from the fae realm—it reeked with the burnt stench of the uninhabited parts of their realm.

I'd failed. Orrin had managed to use his animal magic after all, and he'd called the biggest monster yet to the street.

The snake flicked its forked tongue and its eyes traced over the streets—it was looking for Orrin.

I better make sure he doesn't give it any more orders!

“Grove, I need a knock out!” I yelled. I could have kicked or punched Orrin in the head but if I did it wrong, I could end up killing him.

“Duck!” Grove shouted.

A glass vial came hurdling towards me. I side stepped it, and the glass bottle hit Orrin in the face. It shattered on impact showering him with a golden liquid. He collapsed on the sidewalk in a heap—though I wasn't sure if it was because of the potion or the impact of the bottle.

I flipped him over to confirm he was truly out of it, peeling back one of his eye lids.

Oh yeah. He's out cold.

That issue solved, I turned towards the snake. “We have to lead it away from the van—”

The snake hissed and struck at Clarence.

He whimpered and threw himself out of the way, barely missing getting bitten, then the snake slithered over the top of him and turned its molten eyes to Binx.

It inflated its hood and rose up, its eyes hypnotically trained on her.

I yanked my gun from its holster, flicked the safety off, then shot—aiming at its underbelly. My suspicions were

confirmed—the bullet bounced off its plated scales.

The snake struck, its hiss a chilling sound in the air.

Binx dodged, and the snake smashed its head into the sidewalk leaving a spiderweb of cracks in the pavement from the impact.

There's no way the four of us can take this monster on, I realized. I'm the only one who could conceivably attack it.

Its eyes were likely its weakest point, but I was the only one with a firearm and trying to scale its body to stab it with a bladed weapon would be too tricky for Clarence and Grove who didn't have the right training. Binx could have done something in her cougar form, but we didn't have the minute it would take her to shift into that form.

We'll need to just lead it away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jade

I clenched my teeth as I flicked the safety on my handgun and shoved it back into my shoulder holster. “Come on!” I shouted, running down the street.

Clarence, Binx, and Grove sprinted after me. They couldn’t keep my pace—which I expected.

What I didn’t plan for was that the snake was faster than them.

The scraping noise its scales made as it slithered across the asphalt grew louder. When I looked back, I saw it was on top of my squadmates.

It struck at Clarence and almost managed to entangle Grove in the coils of its body.

It’s going to completely overwhelm them.

“Split up!” Grove shouted. He grabbed me by the arm and yanked me down an alleyway.

Binx and Clarence ran in the opposite direction, aiming for an enormous hedge bush that decorated the tiny square of lawn one of the human banks boasted.

I whistled trying to get the snake’s attention. It ignored me and followed Binx and Clarence.

It puffed its hood up and struck.

“No!” I shouted, hesitating at the opening of the alleyway.

Binx saw the snake and threw herself at Clarence, knocking him off his feet. They rolled a few feet barely missing the snake’s strike.

Binx then crawled under the other SUV parked on the street, dragging Clarence with her.

I must help them—but how? We can’t face this thing!

“Here!” Grove tossed me a roll of vet wrap. I used it, tying it around my fingers so I could still handle a weapon without bleeding everywhere. (I wouldn’t be able to move any of my fingers individually, except my pointer finger and thumb, but it wasn’t like I was going to punch the snake out.)

I flexed my hand and, satisfied with the results, called out to Grove. “Thanks.” I drew my shoulders back preparing to run back out into the street.

“And *where* are you heading?” Grove demanded, grabbing me by the arm and dragging me back into the alley.

“We have to go help Binx and Clarence!”

Across the street, the snake tried to wedge its head under the car but its skull was too thick. It flicked its tongue, and Binx screamed—a yelp of hot pain, not fear.

“No, we need to radio for help,” Grove said.

I put my weight in my heels, so he couldn’t pull me any farther. “We can’t just leave them—they’ll die!”

Grove shook his head, the near-constant dreamy air he had to him draining into the hard haunted lines of his face. “If we don’t survive, no one will be alive to radio this in. We *must* get the word out.”

The snake monster encircled the car, coiling its body around it. As it started to pull its body tight, it squeezed the car shattering the taillights and crushing the bumper.

The crunch of metal echoed off the buildings around us, and Clarence shouted. I could almost *feel* his terror.

Something settled in my stomach, and I turned back to Grove. “*You* must survive to radio Sarge. I’m going to help them.” I shook his arm off and stepped out of the alleyway.

“Blood—you’re going against task force policy!” Grove hissed after me.

“I don’t care,” I said. “I’m a slayer. And slayers never leave anyone behind.”

Grove cursed me out—at least I’m assuming he cursed me out. I saw his lips move, but I couldn’t hear him over the groan of the slowly compressing car.

I have about twenty seconds to come up with a plan. I can grab its attention, but Binx and Clarence are probably too hurt to help. And there’s no way I can take this thing on by myself.

The snake must have scooped Clarence and Binx up by this point because the car was about 3/4ths the size it was originally, and the snake had managed to get one of its coils underneath it.

Now. I have to distract it, now, or it will kill them!

I sprinted at the monster, jumping on one of its lowest coils and climbing as fast as I could.

Its body moved underneath me threatening to suck me in and crush me. I frantically climbed, getting to the top of the mound it formed around the car.

Approaching from the side, I threw myself at its face grabbing its cobra-like hood. Clinging to it with my knees and feet and holding as much of my weight as I could with my left arm—thank you, one-armed pull ups, I’m sorry I ever doubted you were necessary for my training—I yanked my gun from my shoulder holster with my free right hand.

The snake shook its head from side to side trying to dislodge me. I held on, my leg muscles burning, and flicked my gun’s safety off. I waited until the snake paused long enough to hiss, then shot it in the eye.

It reared back with a hiss. My knees started to slide on its scaly hood, so I flicked the safety of my gun back on just

before it flung me off. I was tossed across the road, hitting the street with enough force to make me roll.

I rocked my body to keep the momentum going, folding myself into one last roll that let me spring to my feet still holding my gun.

The snake abandoned the car and slithered toward me. Since snakes don't have eyelids both of its eyes were still open, and the one I'd shot was bleeding—I'd gotten him good.

Stop congratulating yourself—you still have no plan!

I sprinted down the street, going about half a block before I looked back to confirm the snake was following me.

It was—flicking its lava-like tongue and closing in on me fast.

Past the snake, I saw Clarence crouched next to a motionless Binx. Grove ran towards them, clutching his radio to his lips.

I was vaguely aware of my own radio blaring on my belt, but I couldn't make out anything over my heart pounding in my ears and the snake's angry hisses.

Plan. I reminded myself. *I can't just mindlessly run—I need a plan or it will get me.*

I flicked my gun's safety off again as I zigzagged out of the street hopping up onto the sidewalk—no sense making myself easy prey.

The snake followed me. It tried to strike at me—baring its fangs—as it shoved its head between a street light pole and a parked truck.

I sprinted out of its reach, then took a moment to raise my handgun and shoot at it. The bullet clipped the monster's plated scales but did no damage.

Eyes are the only weak spot. Got it.

I grimly flicked my safety back on and holstered my weapon, putting all my effort into running as I jumped onto the street so it had to slither around the light pole to follow me.

What kind of plan can I actually formulate?

Team Watchers was out of it, so Sarge's team was the only other available group. There was no way they were downtown—my team was scheduled to head there next—so I didn't have any additional squadmates I could go to for help.

Wait. Someone is downtown: Ruin!

There was no guarantee the micromanaging vamp would be willing to take on the snake even though he was definitely powerful enough to kill it.

I'd just have to convince him to do it.

Somehow.

The snake slithered around the light pole and followed me down the middle of the street. I sprinted to the opposite sidewalk, ducking under a scaffolding structure pulled flush against a brick building.

The snake tried to follow me but its head was too big to fit between the poles of the scaffolding. It pulled back and tried twice more while I kept running, clearing the low scaffolding, and buying myself a few precious seconds to widen the gap between us.

It's a five-minute run to downtown. If I'm fast, maybe three. I think I can stay ahead of it long enough to get there—and it's not like Ruin won't be able to hear us coming.

The snake was about as subtle as using a high watt, LED lightbulb in a nightlight.

Something crashed behind me, and I zigzagged again ducking behind a car.

The snake smashed into the car with enough force to make it rock, setting off the car's alarm. The car rocked, smacking me but I recovered my balance fast enough that I didn't trip. Instead, I catapulted myself farther down the sidewalk.

Behind me, I heard the crunch of glass as the snake took out its frustration on the blaring car.

Oohhh, the Cloisters isn't going to be happy with the repair bill on this.

I kept running—my breathing nice and solid.

The slayer training in me screamed at me to unholster my gun; with its eyes being its only vulnerability, there wasn't much point.

I turned a corner, the snake so close I swear I could feel the molten heat of its tongue flicking my back.

I was still maybe a block or two up from Ruin's territory.

Close enough.

"*Ruin!*" I shouted, counting alleyways as I went past—I couldn't risk getting cornered in one, but there were two that I knew of in this part of town that went all the way through the city block without any gates or buildings barring the way.

"*Ruin!*" My throat was hoarse with worry, and my hands were starting to sweat inside my gloves.

What do I do if he doesn't show?

The snake hissed behind me, and I turned up the alleyway I'd been waiting for. I wove through trash and recycling bins, a moped, and a rack of bicycles.

The snake plowed through it all, though it slowed down a little. By the time I came shooting out of the alleyway and into the street, I'd gained a bit of ground.

My boots barely touched the street sidewalk when something grabbed my right arm and dragged me to the side.

I inhaled sharply, then calmed when I recognized the embroidered design on the black sleeve. *Ruin.*

"Slayer," he said, his voice low and husky.

"Hi," I said, taking in a gulp of air.

"You're greeting me? Isn't this a night for surprises," Ruin said.

The snake shot out of the alleyway, passing us, and smashing into the brick building across the street.

Ruin kept his grip on my arm. “Dare I ask what you’ve brought, trailing behind you, into my territory?”

“A giant snake,” I said.

“Yes, I see that,” he said.

Across the street the snake reared up, stretching high overhead as it inflated its hood and hissed, flicking its fiery forked tongue.

“From the fae realm,” I added.

“*You don’t say,*” Ruin said. “How would I have ever known?”

“I thought you’d enjoy the entertainment,” I said.

“Now *that’s* a lie.” He cruelly chuckled. “You’re hoping I’ll get rid of it since your squad either can’t or won’t.”

“I’ll help you,” I said.

“Oh, I’m *so sure* you will,” Ruin snarled.

The snake’s bad eye was towards us, and we were standing in the shadows so it seemed like it hadn’t noticed us yet. However, it was slithering in a circle turning in our direction.

If I can’t get him to attack it, this is going to get ugly. I gulped. “Are you worried because you can’t defeat it?”

Ruin turned to face me; his red eyes were the only visible thing in the inky blackness of his spelled hood. “I’m too old for your psychology tricks, slayer. Don’t even try it.”

“Please,” I said. “If we don’t get it under control, it’s going to be a disaster.”

The snake caught sight of us, its’ good eye locking on me.

Next to me, Ruin was silent.

Did I guess wrong? I’ve known he was crazy, but I had thought...

I cut the thought off and pulled my gun from my holster. “Let go of me.” I flicked the safety off—I was going to try injuring its other eye before I ran back the way we’d come—I

couldn't risk staying in downtown where more humans were if there was no hope of Ruin killing it.

"You can't seriously intend to face it down by yourself?" Ruin's fingers slid off my arm.

I didn't answer him—I couldn't afford to waste the effort as I lined up my shot while the snake drew closer.

Do I have the stamina to make it all the way back to Goldstein?

I routinely went on multi-mile runs but I didn't *sprint* the whole way!

I squeezed the trigger, but the snake was up too high for my handgun to be all that accurate, so my shot dinged off the scales on its snout.

The snake struck. I threw myself to the side. Instead of landing on the sidewalk like I'd planned, Ruin yanked on me, throwing me against his chest.

I would have bounced off him except he swept my feet up to hold me princess style before he sped down the sidewalk, going so fast it made tears blur my eyes.

This speed! Vampires were fast but speed of this level was a power afforded to the oldest of vampires, ones who were well over a thousand years old!

When we were about a block down from the snake Ruin stopped abruptly, letting me go.

Without my slayer instincts I would have dropped in a heap, but I caught myself, still managing to point the barrel of my pistol at the ground.

"That was stupidly risky," I said. "I could have shot you."

"You aren't worried about risking me with a gun if you think I'm capable of killing this monster," Ruin drawled.

"Well, no," I agreed. "But gun safety."

"All of you slayers are absolutely insane," Ruin muttered. "Stay here. *Right* here. Don't even think about wandering off

while I'm busy or next time I find you I'll require more than entertainment!"

He ran back to the snake—harder to trace as he moved in the shadows, seamlessly blending in.

Rather than waste time staring at him, I took the opportunity to change my pistol's magazine, yanking my replacement magazine from my belt while simultaneously pressing the button on my gun to release the used magazine. It slipped from my pistol and fell to the sidewalk with a clatter while I slapped my new magazine into place with a click.

Rearmed, I yanked my radio from my belt. "This is Blood, about three blocks down from Main Street. Ruin is facing off with the snake."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Considine

It was official: I was going senile. Only a loss of mental faculties could explain why I was staring a snake down in a city I didn't care about, all because a *slayer* asked me to.

Give it another few centuries, and I'll be as bad as Ambrose! Then the end will be nigh. Finally.

The snake struck, its jaw dislocating so it could try to swallow me.

I stepped to the side, avoiding it. It bit the light pole I'd been standing in front of instead.

The snake was too stupid to realize it had missed and its jaws were locked around the light pole, so I took the opportunity to grab one of its fangs and pull.

I'd been hoping to rip the tooth free. I didn't bother to carry weapons on me, and I needed something able to pierce this monster's scales.

The snake was venomous or it had some kind of acidic compound in its teeth because I could feel a faint sizzling on my palms as it burned at my skin.

It made no difference to me. My healing powers were so fast that whatever damage the compound on its fang wrought

was instantly erased. There was pain. Maybe? I couldn't remember what real pain felt like anymore.

The fang started to give but it must have pained the monster because it retreated, its slippery fang sliding free from my grasp.

Well. There goes that idea. I'd either need to try again or come up with another plan.

The snake retreated, turning its head as it tried to look at me with its good eye—it seemed the slayer had wounded the other if the bullet wound was anything to go by. It flicked its forked tongue testing the air.

Why am I even doing this? Just because the slayer asked? She's fun to play with, but entertainment isn't worth all this trouble.

I'd be put out if she died, though. Competent slayers didn't grow on trees. I'd probably need to kidnap one if I wanted to keep up the fun fights.

The snake tried to wind around me, most likely in an attempt to constrict its body and asphyxiate me.

How trite.

I waited until it made a complete circle around me before I jumped, landing on top of the coil. I then ran up the length of its body all the way to its head, hanging tight to its scales when it shook to fling me off.

I made a calculated jump and managed to grab its fang, but the snake proved to be smarter than I estimated and bashed its head into the road to dislodge me.

Yes, this is far too much trouble for a slayer, I decided. *It's stupid. I can't believe I'm doing this.*

Dimly, at the back of my mind, in an insidious voice I would have liked to silence, I was reminded that I was a few blocks away from my apartment building. I didn't care if the building got trashed: Jade was probably at work tonight, anyway. But if any of the humans in the building got hurt, she was never going to stop sniveling about it.

I'd have to kill the rotten reptile.

I sighed as I watched the snake rear up and inflate its hood again—presumably preparing to strike.

I guess I'll just let it bite me. The inside of its mouth is likely sensitive. I could probably puncture it with my apartment key. Or at the most brutish, I could just choke it from within.

Neither option was particularly fun, but at least I'd get it over with. So, I folded my arms across my chest and waited for the snake to make its move.

It opened its mouth wide for another strike when a shot rang out followed shortly after by two more.

I stayed frozen for a moment, taking inventory of my body.

Assumedly the slayer had taken the opportunity to shoot me.

But I didn't feel like I'd been injured.

The snake, on the other hand, writhed. Waving its head back and forth as it bunched its body up in obvious pain, it slithered past me to worm its way up and down the street.

I blinked as I watched it. *What just happened?*

Something pressed into my back. "Are you insane?" The slayer shouted, her voice going squeaky. "I thought you could fight it!"

I peered back over my shoulder catching sight of the slayer standing back-to-back with me and clutching her handgun—with the barrel aimed at the road like the goodie-two-shoes she was—her masked face pointed in the direction of the snake.

"You shot it," I said, noting the additional damage she'd dealt to the snake's already wounded eye.

"It was going to eat you!" Even though her voice was muffled by her mask, I could feel a hint of heat in it.

"That was part of my plan."

“It was an insufficient plan.” She checked her gun, then swiveled to look in the other direction covering my blind spots.

She was upset, but I couldn’t quite figure out why.

“It’s vulnerable in its mouth,” I said. “And it’s not like I have a weapon I can use on it.”

“Then you should have asked.”

“You’d lend a weapon to a vampire?”

“I said I’d help!”

“Oh. I didn’t think you meant it,” I cocked my head. “Why are you angry?”

“Because I’m apparently worse at my job than I thought if you decided the easiest option of all the possibilities that I could help you with was to get swallowed!”

“No, you’re quite skilled,” I assured her. “That’s why I agreed to do this. It would be a pain to find another slayer with your talent and abilities.”

The slayer made some kind of half-strangled, angry noise.

I watched the snake—which had recovered enough that it was glaring at us once again. “Are you done raging? It’s about to attack.”

The slayer abruptly quieted herself, switching to combat mode with remarkable swiftness. “You distract it, I’ll aim for its good eye and mouth?”

“Fine,” I agreed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Jade

Ruin blazed towards the snake surprising both me and the monster.

I thought it wouldn't be too hard to fight with him since I've done it with Tetiana, but it still feels off.

It was just as well—there was a very real possibility Ruin might come after me once we were finished with this. Better to be on my guard than lulled into a sense of comradery. (Not that I was likely to forget how easily he'd chased after me before.)

Ruin ducked when the snake tried to smack him with its tail, and the appendage whipped over his head smashing one of the flower planters on the street.

I winced at the ruined wooden planter. “Could you also try to limit property damage?”

Ruin stopped, then turned around and stared at me ignoring the angry snake. “You not only want my help in beating this, you want to put conditions on the help?”

“You're obviously an older vamp, so you probably don't know how money works.”

“*Slayer.*”

“I meant that you’re probably independently wealthy, so you don’t understand if we trash downtown it’s going to be expensive—for the Cloisters, for humans...” I trailed off, struggling to find a way to put it in perspective for the old vamp—who, statistically speaking—had to be absolutely loaded with money. “It’ll be bad,” I concluded.

A deep sigh leaked out of Ruin. The snake struck, trying to bite him. Ruin side-stepped it. When the snake smashed its face into the ground, he kicked it in its wounded eye with enough force that its head snapped to the side.

“Fine,” Ruin said, sounding disgruntled. “But there is going to be a price for *you* to pay for all of this, Slayer.”

I didn’t like the sound of that but there wasn’t anything I could do about it at this point, so I waited for the snake to turn to face Ruin, then took a shot at its good eye.

My shot bounced off the tiny scales around its eye.

I need to get closer.

I pointed my gun at the pavement, then moved in.

The snake ignored me. It was reared up focusing on Ruin—the bigger threat.

It tried striking again and this time instead of attempting to swallow or bite him, the snake flicked its forked tongue at him.

I shot at the snake, holding back for Ruin when he passed in front of me—trying to lure the overgrown monster into the middle of the street—before taking another shot.

Both times I missed.

I stewed in the knowledge that my shooting skills had apparently atrophied—that was something I’d have to add back into my rotating practice schedule—and crab walked closer.

Ruin ran back in front of me, passing so close his sleeve almost brushed my mask. He climbed up the pole of a traffic light with little effort. He stood, balanced, on the pole, taller than the snake.

The snake followed his path with its head giving me a clear shot.

I raised my gun and squeezed the trigger, steadying my hands as the gun vibrated from the recoil.

This time my aim was right on, and I hit the snake in its good eye.

It flopped backwards, flipping so its head was on the ground. It bunched its body up and wriggled.

I switched to a crouch that was better suited for fleeing. “It should be blinded.”

“Seems like it.” Ruin jumped off the traffic light pole, landing in a crouch. “I’m rather impressed you didn’t hit me.”

“Maybe I tried,” I suggested.

“Nonsense, your timing is too precise for that.” He strolled up to me. I saw his red eyes flicker towards my gun so when he lunged for it, I jumped sideways out of range. “Ah—see? You’re agile enough to avoid me, so you purposely didn’t hit me.” His voice was thick with satisfaction. “That means you’re not a bad shot, you’re just honorable. Which is probably worse if we want to talk about bad character traits.”

I ignored his taunts and winced as the snake slammed its tail into a car, severely denting it and setting off the alarm. “We need to kill the snake—it’s getting too dangerous.” I started jogging down the street intending to pass the snake, then loop back and approach the snake’s head so it couldn’t smack me with its body.

Ruin kept pace with me. “See? What did I just say: bad character trait!”

The snake wildly thrashed back and forth, rapidly opening and closing its mouth. When we got close enough, I took another shot—hitting it in the bottom of the mouth.

It didn’t even react.

That’s not good.

“Let me try.” Ruin snagged a wooden plank—one of the timbers that had made up the frame of the planter the snake crushed earlier—then streaked back towards the snake.

When it flopped so its head was upright again, Ruin jumped *into* its open mouth. Using his bodyweight, he slammed the timber into a vertical position at the back of the snake’s mouth.

The snake tried to close its mouth on Ruin—nearly piercing him with one of its fangs.

Ruin started to slide out of its mouth, then the timber moved.

Ruin sighed, as if the snake was personally inconveniencing him, and shoved the timber back in place, this time staying in the snake’s mouth.

“Ruin, what are you doing?” I shouted.

“Killing it.” Ruin kicked at the roof of the snake’s head.

The monster slammed its skull on the ground, piercing its own head with the timber, so its mouth abruptly shut—with Ruin still inside!

“Ruin!” I sprinted up to the snake but had to jump backwards when it thrashed its head in the last of its death throes, its mouth briefly opening.

I saw the unmistakable flash of a furry black body and wings—a bat—streak past me.

Rooted to the road by the sight, my breathing slowed.

No. No—there’s no way.

There was a ringing in my ears, and fear—colder and sharper than anything the snake had inspired in me—swamped my body.

I’m tired—it’s making me see things. There’s no way Ruin turned into a bat.

“Ruin?” My tongue was dry, I had to be wrong.

The snake was down to small twitches making it safer to approach.

I hesitated, then took a step towards it.

“It’s dead now—hopefully done in a way you find *pleasing*, slayer-who-is-far-pickier-than-I-realized.” Ruin chuckled behind me, his voice low and husky.

My fears realized, I slowly turned around adjusting my hold on my gun.

Ruin stood about five feet behind me, his head cocked to the side, his stance casual and smug.

He thinks I didn’t see him. I need to keep it that way.

I’d been told stories of vampires that had the ability to shape shift—instantaneously—into a bat. It was part of my schooling on vampire lore.

Lore because it was considered a power that had mostly been used in the past as only the oldest of vampires had the ability, and any vampire that old had long since died or entered an eternal sleep.

If Ruin could turn into a bat, he had to be among the oldest and most powerful vampires alive and awake. Unfortunately, immortality—at least, the type vampires had—was not a kind power, and usually ended up driving them to insanity.

Either way, he was far more dangerous than I’d ever estimated.

“You got out,” I said, the surprise in my voice was real.

Ruin bowed mockingly. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“No—I mean, thank you.” I made myself turn away from him to briefly look back at the snake, even though all my slayer powers screamed at me not to look away from danger.

“I hope you’ve figured out who is responsible for this?” Ruin asked.

“Yes.” I kept my gun out and my stance watchful. “I left him with my team. The Curia Cloisters will handle the arrest.”

Ruin rolled his shoulders back. “How inspiring, considering they have such an impressive track record with handling violence within their own building.”

I blinked trying to sort out what he meant. “...sorry?”

“Nothing.” Ruin tipped his head the other direction. “Don’t make this a habit, Slayer.”

Yeah, you don’t need to worry about that!

I wasn’t eager to interact with Ruin the way it was but if he was as old as his recently displayed power implied, I’d be avoiding him at all costs.

I made a show adjusting the brim of my hood. “Don’t make a habit of what? Bringing snakes to you?”

“Bringing *anything* to me,” Ruin said, his voice going darker. “I’m letting it slide this once, but never again.”

Act normal, act normal! It shouldn’t be too hard—I was always pretty wary of him.

“Believe me, if I had any other option, I would have taken it,” I said. “Your warning is taken. You pick and choose who to beat at your whim, understood.”

“Now that makes me sound petty. Or insane.” Ruin ghosted closer to me making my blood pressure spike even though his steps were casual.

Well, chances are you are insane if you’re as old as I think you are!

I didn’t back up—that might trigger some kind of prey/chase instinct in him. Instead, I raised my gun at him.

“What, no emotional hug of thanks?” he asked.

“No,” I said, my voice flat.

Ruin shrugged. “I suppose your paranoia is part of what makes you a charming opponent. But you are alone, without —”

My radio crackled. “*Blood, we have you in sight.*” Sarge announced, his musical voice sounded even more beautiful

than usual in my terror. “*Tell the vampire we’ll shoot him if he takes a step closer to you.*”

I immediately breathed easier; the tension coiled within me melting away.

“So that is the thanks I get, is it?” Ruin sauntered towards the shadows a darkened storefront cast on the street. “I see how it is.”

Good. He’s leaving. I kept my gun out, happy to see him making his exit.

He’d just backed into the shadows—his dark gray jacket blending in perfectly—when the manners my mom drilled into me as a child kicked in.

“Thank you,” I called. “I couldn’t have killed it alone, and it would have done a lot of damage to the city before my team arrived.”

I saw the glow of Ruin’s red eyes, and then they abruptly disappeared.

He couldn’t so easily escape my slayer senses—I could still track his presence. I followed it, making sure he really was leaving—he was wandering west, possibly in his bat form. Most likely he was off in search of someone else to beat up.

Maybe that’s how he keeps the insanity at bay?

“Blood!” Sarge shouted. He sprinted down the street, swirls of water suspended around him.

“I’m fine.” I held my wrapped hand up to wave, frowning when I caught sight of the vet wrap.

The cuts hadn’t bled through, but it was going to be annoying to deal with. Slayers healed fast but the cut was on my fingers, which I flexed and used a lot.

“Fine?” Sarge snarled with the ferocity of a hurricane. “You’re injured, you just lured a fae monster halfway across the city, and you got *Ruin* to fight it with you. That is *not* fine in any sense of the word!”

Just as Sarge reached me, a car pulled up. Binx and Juggernaut piled out of it, Binx swigging a glass vial filled with a sparkling purple liquid I was betting was a fae potion.

I relaxed at the sight of Binx—if she made it, that meant Clarence was probably okay too. “Halfway is an exaggeration,” I said. “Goldstein isn’t that terrible of a run from here.” I holstered my weapon and drew out the spare set of bandages I carried, re-wrapping my hand so my bandages were so thick that I had a hard time bending my fingers. “And I meant I wasn’t further injured—this is from catching Orrin’s blade.”

“Also, not a *fine* thing to do.” Sarge’s beautiful face was stormy in anger, his eyebrows furrowed together.

He’s mad. I don’t get why. Unless...is it because I bled after I caught the blade? “I couldn’t catch it any other way,” I said. “Or I would have. I apologize—I didn’t mean to endanger Clarence.”

Sarge made a swiping motion at the waves of water that hung over our heads, and the water turned into a fine mist. “That’s not what I’m upset about.”

I would have asked for more details but Binx and Juggernaut reached us, each hurriedly saluting. “Sir,” they said.

Binx looked me over and pulled out a potion that was a seaweed green color.

Juggernaut stood extra straight and puffed up his chest. “Captain Reese has Orrin in custody at the Curia Cloisters!”

Binx handed me the potion. “It’s one of Grove’s, but it’s a good one.”

“Thank you.” I took the glass vial. “Is everyone okay?”

“Yes,” Binx confirmed. “Clarence and Grove are fine.”

“Team Watchers?” I uncapped the vial and took a swig. It tasted like honeydew melons with a twist of lime. I eyed the potion in surprise—Grove’s potions didn’t always taste the

greatest—and flexed my fingers when they started itching beneath the bandages.

“They’re okay. Brody and Tetiana were going to swap seats and opened the door. Orrin came out of the shadows and hit them with a knockout charm, then physically knocked April out before she could radio for help. Everyone is fine; April woke up first and told us what happened.” Binx said. “Grove gave her a potion, so she’s all good.”

Sarge turned in a circle. “She’s on backup duty here on Main Street with a werewolf hunter issued rifle. Medium-Sized Robert and Clarence are here as well.”

Woah. They really did bring the backup if April was given a rifle for the event.

My heart warmed—my team might not be the most social with me, but they had my back. That was what really mattered.

I paused in the middle of downing the rest of my potion. *Well, that and figuring out why Orrin was doing all of this.*

“I assume if Captain Reese has Orrin in custody, he was recovered from the sign pole I cuffed him to?” I asked.

“Yes,” Sarge answered. “He was awake and addled when my team arrived on the scene after Grove’s call. He was recovering. I don’t know his full condition as I left as soon as Reese arrived on the scene.”

“She’s prepping him for questioning,” Juggernaut offered. “So, he must be okay?”

Sarge nodded. “Has a cleanup crew been called for?”

“Yes.” Binx pulled out her cellphone to glance at the clock on the display screen. “They should be less than three minutes out.”

“Good,” Sarge said. “Blood, I want you checked over for any medical issues.”

“Um.” Juggernaut squirmed. “Captain Reese said she wanted her to return to the Curia Cloisters—for debriefing purposes.”

“Fine,” Sarge said. “She can debrief after someone checks her over at the Cloisters. Binx, Juggernaut, you stay here and help April, Medium-Sized Robert, and Clarence with the cleanup crew. I’ll use your car to take Blood to the Curia Cloisters.”

“Yessir!” Juggernaut snapped off another salute.

Binx handed Sarge the keys and then trotted off, circling around the dead snake.

April, toting a rifle that was about half as tall as she was, stepped out of the shadows. “Better call in a truck—we’re gonna have to tow this thing away.”

Juggernaut galloped towards her. “Unless maybe we can burn it up?”

“Don’t do anything without the cleanup crew.” Sarge prowled towards the car Binx and Juggernaut had driven. “Blood! We’re going.”

I checked to make sure I hadn’t bled through the bandage and hurried after him, sliding into the passenger seat.

Sarge adjusted the car’s rearview mirror and rolled the seat back before he started the car.

I shifted in my seat so my spare set of cuffs would no longer stab my back, then I nearly jumped in my seat when Sarge abruptly started talking. “Blood, you have been an excellent addition to the Magical Response Task Force.” He pulled onto the street and waved to Medium-Sized Robert when we passed by him.

I straightened my shoulders. “Thank you, sir.”

Sarge didn’t acknowledge my comment—he kept his eyes glued on the road. “You’re the deadliest and most efficient combat member on the team, and you’re excellent at working within a team. It’s why I don’t ever patrol with you—you don’t need guidance. *However*. You need to recognize that you’re fighting with other supernaturals, not fellow slayers.”

I blinked. “Have I done something to make the team think I don’t value them?”

“No,” Sarge said. “It’s just that your greatest advantage—your slayer training and upbringing—is also your greatest weakness. Slayers have a very specific fighting style of sacrificing *everything* to get their target and help their team. The task force isn’t designed for that. There is a greater emphasis on protecting.”

An uncomfortable silence filled the car as Sarge turned off Main Street.

I rubbed my knees trying to sort through the evening to figure out what he could possibly be referring to. “I’m not sure what that difference has to do with everything that happened tonight.”

“You put yourself at a huge risk—from both the snake *and* Ruin given his history with attempting to fight you.”

“I knew Ruin was potentially dangerous, but he was the best choice I had to limit the amount of damage the snake would deal to Magiford infrastructure—”

“I don’t *care* how much damage buildings and roads take,” Sarge interrupted. “The task force’s greatest priority is protecting humans, and each other. You are included in that account. You were more than capable of getting the snake’s attention, and then hiding. It would have ruined a couple cars while looking for you, but you wouldn’t have been put in danger. That is the change in mindset you need to have: Yes, your team matters but *you* are a vital part of that team!”

“Oh,” I said. “So... you’re upset because what I did was risky for my health?”

“Yes.”

I stared straight ahead hoping Sarge wouldn’t sense the rebellious thoughts floating through my head. *But that’s how I fight—doing what needs to be done. I am admittedly more careful with anything that would make me bleed—which, would also possibly make Sarge mad if he knew. I try not to bleed not because it’s really dangerous, but because I don’t want to harm my team—*

“Don’t think I can’t feel that mulish expression of yours even if I can’t see your face, Blood,” Sarge warned me.

“I’m not thinking anything mulish,” I said.

“Right,” Sarge sourly said. “Reese was right. We need to get you a partner—one who will keep an eye on you, so you don’t get yourself killed.”

“I work with a team,” I reminded him.

“A team that can’t keep up with you!”

“I am a slayer,” I said. “If you want someone with a similar level of agility, you’ll need to hire another slayer—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Sarge said. He heaved a big sigh. “Look. You were amazing tonight, Blood. If you hadn’t been there, it would have been a disaster. You’re *fantastic*. I’m right proud of you—even though I want to shake you. The bottom line is, I refuse to let you risk yourself like this again.”

Something pinched in my lungs. “...Am I getting fired?”

“No,” Sarge said. “But I am going to have you write up a paper about the design and culture of the task force.”

“To convince me not to take risks?” I guessed.

“To *teach* you not to take risks,” Sarge corrected. “I don’t know that anything is going to convince you not to.”

We pulled into one of the Curia Cloister parking lots, which were brightly lit as supernaturals—mostly vampires and werewolves this late—trickled in and out of the building.

Sarge parked the car in a parking spot and shut it off, then turned to me. “It’s not a punishment, Blood, but it’s important.”

Really? Because this feels like a punishment.

“I’ll give you until November to finish it, and you should use normal work hours to complete it. Whoever is on your team can take over your paperwork for a while,” Sarge continued. “It’s research—not a punishment.”

With those rules in effect, it did take the sting out of the situation. Though I still didn't really get what I'd done wrong.

So, I took more risks than the other members of the squad. Wasn't that my personal choice? And did it even matter if I produced results?

Sarge obviously felt this was important, and I was raised to mind my leaders, so I'd do this 'research' since he wanted me to. "Yes, sir," I said.

Sarge relaxed, and the silvery scales on his neck seemed to faintly glow. "Go check in with a medic. Reese or I will reach out with information on where your debriefing will be held."

"Understood."



AFTER GETTING CLEARED BY A MEDIC—HER only warning was to be careful with my fingers since the placement of the cut meant it would be easy to reopen, even with my advanced healing—and making an official recording of the night's events with a brownie who typed while I talked, I followed the instructions Sarge had texted to me and went to questioning room NUDONT (The Commissioner had named it so it sounded like 'no-you-don't'), which was the hidden half of the ICU (I-see-you) questioning room.

I knocked on the door, and bowed when Captain Reese opened it for me.

"Ah, Blood. Perfect timing—come on in." She stepped to the side, then closed the door after me when I slipped into the room.

As it was with most TV shows, the half of the room where Orrin was being questioned was plain—cinderblocks with a plastic table and chairs—which I could see through the two-way mirror.

Orrin was seated at the table, his expression guarded and his posture perfect. An irritated-looking werewolf and another fae noble were seated across from him.

The screened half of the room (Room NUDONT) had two rows of comfortable chairs, a mini fridge for beverages, and a popcorn machine. Apparently, the Commissioner had been under the impression that questioning suspects would be so entertaining that it would require snacks.

Instead, the popcorn machine usually just gathered dust as there was rarely an opportunity to question a suspect.

As stated before, the Supernatural justice system was sketchy at best. We didn't often process and question perps like the human TV shows. Tonight was a rare occurrence. While we'd captured Orrin, we still didn't know if Tutu's was his real goal. It was also important to find out if he was working alone.

Sarge was seated in one of the chairs, his hands folded on his lap. He nodded a greeting to me and held up a packet of papers. "Your debriefing arrived. Well done."

I nodded and stayed near the entrance of the room—I wasn't of a rank that would make me privy to whatever Orrin said.

"You can come on in." Reese slumped into a chair, then adjusted her prosthetic leg. "We're stuck in a standoff."

"A stand off?" I asked.

Sarge nodded at Orrin. "He won't talk. We're fairly sure he's got a geas on him."

A geas was a kind of binding fae magic. It was most often used to put the target under a compulsion spell that wouldn't let them talk about specific topics. (Fae were sneaky beings. Since they couldn't lie, they made workarounds to keep other supernaturals from being able to force the truth out of them.)

I shifted, glancing at Orrin again. He was still blank-faced and motionless. "So...there hasn't been any new information?"

"Nope," Captain Reese said. "We don't know if he was working alone or with someone, why he was targeting Tutu's—or even *if* Tutu's really was his target, though it's fairly obvious it was."

“That’s inconvenient,” I said.

“Yes,” Sarge agreed. “Lady Gisila has been called, and she’s on her way here. We’re hoping to see if we can get any information out of her.”

“So, there is a chance she really is behind it?” I asked.

“Personally, I’m inclined to think not,” Reese said. “Gisila would understand exactly what attacking her sister’s business would mean—it’d be an open declaration of war between them. But, as another dragon shifter, they’d be on a more even playing ground than a single lone fae like Orrin. Either way, I won’t rule out any possibilities as long as he’s not talking.” She nodded at Orrin. “Rudd said he’s not getting anything off him, either. Must be one powerful geas.”

Rudd was assumedly the werewolf, who would be able to sense any biological changes in Orrin—increased heartbeat, even chemical changes.

Werewolves were like Medical Service Alert Dogs on steroids with a bite force to make the most even tempered fae nervous, so it was pretty surprising Orrin wasn’t giving *anything* away.

Sarge’s phone beeped. He checked it, then stood up. “Lady Gisila is here. Come on, Blood.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Jade

Confused, I followed Sarge when he left the questioning room. “I’m coming with? To see Gisila?”

“I’d like to see if your presence throws her off balance,” Sarge said. “She has to know you’re involved in the case given she saw you outside *Luxe Sejour*.”

I glanced over at Captain Reese when she stepped into the hallway after us. “Your presence makes sense anyway,” she said. “You are our best task force member.”

People keep saying that, and it makes me deeply uncomfortable.

Either way, I kept my mouth shut—I didn’t want to sign myself up for *another* “research” paper.

Gisila was seated in a chair just outside Captain Reese’s office with Grove and Tetiana standing nearby.

“Lady Gisila—thank you for coming by in these less than wonderful circumstances.” Captain Reese smiled as she bumped open the door to her office. “Please, come in.”

“Of course.” Gisila’s smile was polite, but it seemed like the light in her eyes was overly bright and biting.

Sarge followed Gisila inside, and I reluctantly brought up the rear closing the door and awkwardly standing in front of it.

The Captain's office was a cozy room and a dead giveaway of her werewolf race as she'd decorated it with pictures of her Pack and sturdy wooden furniture that still smelled like varnish. It was painted a soothing green color that reminded me of a forest.

"A Cloister official told me what Orrin has done—the fae monsters he released on this fine city." Gisila shook her head. "I almost can't believe it—he was a wonderful employee."

Captain Reese gestured for Gisila to sit in a chair before she seated herself behind her desk. "Did he act any differently once you arrived in Magiford or give you any reason to be suspicious?"

"He was eager to visit Magiford when I announced my intension to come here." Gisila crossed her legs and rested her hands on her knee. "And once we arrived, there were times when I couldn't seem to get in contact with him but that didn't upset me. He's my employee; he can have his own life."

I—still standing awkwardly in front of the door—narrowed my eyes.

That seems sloppy considering dragon shifters are a bunch of control freaks.

"And you didn't notice any of your treasures missing?" Sarge asked as he moved behind Captain Reese's desk so he could stand next to her.

Gisila shifted in her seat. "No. Why?"

Captain Reese shuffled through the papers on her desk, then pulled out a photograph of the purple gem necklace.

Gisila leaped to her feet. "*Mine.*"

There it is—the famed dragon shifter possessiveness.

I studied Gisila, taking in the anger in her stance—her clenched jaw and shaking fists.

"Where is it?" Captain Reese asked.

"It should be in my hotel room with my possessions," Gisila said.

“We found it on Orrin,” Sarge said. “He used it to open the gates that he pulled the monsters through.”

Gisila sat down with great difficulty. “I see. I would be very interested in hearing how he came to have it.”

“He won’t say.” Captain Reese rested her elbows on the edge of her desk and leaned forward, her eyes gleaming as she studied Gisila. “I’m certain we’ll get it out of him eventually.”

They’re not telling her we think there is a geas on him? That’s interesting. It seemed Captain Reese was serious about treating Gisila as a suspect, even if she didn’t think the dragon shifter was involved.

“Thank you for recovering my treasure,” Gisila sat down slowly, as if she was having a difficult time controlling herself. “I will make a contribution worthy of showing my appreciation to the Midwest Curia Cloisters.”

“Don’t thank us just yet,” Captain Reese said. “The necklace will be staying in our custody.”

“What?” Gisila’s voice was pleasant but there was a tense, crystalline quality to it.

“As we haven’t gotten Orrin to talk yet, the case is still open,” Sarge said. “We will hold onto the necklace until we are certain the issue is resolved.”

“After that, we will send it to you wherever your travels take you,” Captain Reese said.

Gisila tried to smile again, but it looked brittle. “No need,” she said. “I intend to stay in Magiford for the next month.”

Was that the plan all along or is she staying because Orrin failed?

Orrin said he had to “*finish it tonight.*” As a fae he couldn’t lie. But did he mean there was something special about the night or was it just that he was under orders to end it?

I’ll mention this to Sarge. Later.

“Excellent,” Captain Reese said. “In that case, I hope you won’t mind if we call you in for additional questioning in the

future—questions about Orrin, of course?”

“Not at all. Thank you for your hard work.” The black slit of Gisila’s pupil shrunk as she stared at the photo. “You’ll be sending him to Ghost Prison, I assume?”

Captain Reese smiled pleasantly. “Orrin’s future is an issue for our Commissioner and the Midwest Regional Committee of Magic.”

“I see.” Gisila said. “Regardless, thank you for your work. I can’t believe I so deeply misjudged Orrin and that he dared to touch one of my treasures. He’s lucky you found him first.”

The threat matched typical dragon shifter possessiveness, but there was something more to the statement that bothered me.

Captain Reese’s expression was placid and Sarge looked downright bored. I was pretty sure that was the trap they were displaying for Gisila’s benefit.

Glad I have a mask so I don’t need to worry about my expressions!

“I believe I’ll be going—I shall inspect the rest of the treasures I brought with me on this trip as it seems I have rats in my staff.” Gisila stood up, her smile controlled again.

“We understand. Thank you for your cooperation, Lady Gisila.” Captain Reese stood and motioned for me to open the door.

I threw it open for Gisila.

“Grove, Tetiana,” Captain Reese called. “Please see our guest out.”

Tetiana put on a charming smile. “Of course. This way, please.” She guided Gisila down the hallway, Grove trotting after them.

I was going to step out, but Sarge waggled his fingers at me so I slowly closed the door again. “Yes?” I asked.

“Your impression?” Sarge prompted.

I hesitated, my hand on the doorknob. “I still think she might be involved.”

“Reasoning?” Sarge asked.

“Originally her Magiford trip was shorter, now she’s here for another month? That’s a big change for a supernatural dragon shifter, who depends on her hoard for her power.”

That was why dragons were so possessive of their hoards—they gave them power—and why they had multiple hoards. They needed a hoard to repower themselves if they expelled a lot of magic.

“Also, she seemed very interested in what the department will do with Orrin,” I added.

“He did steal from her,” Sarge pointed out.

“Or she’s pretending he stole from her,” Captain Reese grunted, leaning back in her chair. “But I didn’t see any substantial proof of that—did you, Blood?”

I shook my head. “No. Except Orrin said something about he *had* to finish the attack tonight. That seems to imply the timing was important for some reason.”

“A solid point,” Captain Reese said. “As it stands, Gisila is suspicious enough that we should keep an eye on her and continue to treat her as a suspect.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Reese exhaled and flopped back in her chair. “Ugh—no one warned me this job would be so much political pandering and busy work. I thought I’d get out in the field more often.”

“You *do* get out in the field,” Sarge told her. “When you’re not supposed to.”

“That wouldn’t happen if everyone just let me go,” Captain Reese complained. She winked at me to show me they were teasing. “You can go, Blood. Take a break before you head back to your desk. I’m sure someone in the department will have five thousand additional questions for you after reading your report.”

“Thank you, Captain. Sarge.” Still a little confused as to why I’d been included on the talk with Gisila, I gratefully slipped out of the office.

Forget having problems socializing, I’m terrible at reading situations. Maybe the research paper isn’t so terrible. While researching it, I can see if there’s protocol for making task force members who need social training sit in on meetings or something.

Shaking my head I headed down the hallway, freezing when I passed an evidence room.

“Shoot,” I said, as I stared at the door, reminded of my friend. “Sunshine is going to kill me when she finds out about tonight.”



I LICKED my lips and glanced at my dimmed laptop screen, which cast an eerie green glow on my surroundings. It was the only light in my closet—I didn’t even have my bedroom light on.

I’d pulled all my curtains and turned off every light in my apartment before climbing in here. This was a little drastic even by normal slayer measures, but it had been a long night, and after the feeling Gisila gave me, I wanted to confirm who at least *one* of my enemies was.

Still, as I stared at the login screen of the Slayer Online Database, I wondered if this was a good idea after all.

I need to figure out who Ruin really is. If he has a power so legendary, we slayers thought it didn’t exist anymore...I need to find out.

I gulped and rapidly typed in my ID and password, pausing with my finger hovering over the enter key.

Here goes nothing.

I hit enter. My screen blinked as it loaded before it showed me the welcome screen to the Slayer Online Database and a

search bar.

The Slayer Online Database was a secret list of vampires we slayers kept. It contained information about Families, and a record of every vampire elder in existence.

As a slayer, I was sworn to keep the database a secret. It contained knowledge that had taken generations of slayers to compile, and years and years to upload. If the vampires realized we had such records, they'd stop at nothing to destroy them.

I used the navigation menu on the left side of the screen to get to the advanced search screen I needed.

I have to be fast. Dad is going to get a notification that I logged on...and he's going to wonder why.

Technically, when I'd come to Magiford, I'd left the O'Neils and lost my slayer privileges. I had a hunch, though, that if I was quick, Dad would turn a blind eye to it.

"At least, that's what I hope." I batted at the sleeve of a blouse hanging from the rack above me, the comforting smell of the fabric softener I used on my clothes filling my nose.

Selecting the elder catalogue—the records we had of every vampire elder in existence—I started narrowing my search terms.

"European origins probably," I muttered as I tapped away on my keyboard. "Let's start with 1-1000 AD."

The advanced search fields worked, narrowing the list of possibilities from thousands to hundreds.

Each vampire elder's entry had a picture—an actual photograph for the more modern vampires or sketches or paintings for older, more rarely seen elders—as well as the elder's current state. (For example, a sleeping state was fairly common for the older elders.)

All the elders I was looking at were older and with the exception of Vígí Dreki, all of them had paintings for their profile pictures.

The entry also had the elder's name (first and last, though the last name was typically invented/chosen by the elder since many of them pre-dated the practice of last names), a list of their confirmed powers, as well as a list of the vampires they associated with, and—if we had it—a list of the vampires who belonged to their Family. (That list was less accurate due to the vampires' long lived and secretive natures. It was easy to miss the lower leveled members of a Family.)

The entry was finished with advised actions when encountering the vampire, taking note if they were safe to speak with, if they needed to be attacked on sight, etc.

I frowned as I scrolled through the profiles.

“They aren't powerful enough,” I muttered. “He really must have been turned in BC years.”

I reset my search terms, selected BC, then paused when I got to the spot where I was supposed to select the year range in which the vampire had been turned. I tapped the spacebar on my keyboard for a moment, then scrolled past the years section, opening it up to all BC years, and hit enter.

The search reset with the new terms bringing up less than a hundred profiles.

I studied them, carefully reading the names: Irshusin Ayyalu: sleeping; Ambrose Dracos: dead; Hrothgar Krieger: dead; Neven Hok: sleeping.

I frowned, then focused on the current state data field. “Dead, sleeping, sleeping, dead—alive?” I glanced at the entry and recognized the vampire as the USA Ancient.

The Ancient definitely wasn't Ruin, so I scrolled on. “Dead, dead, dead, sleeping, sleeping, dead, sleeping...” I whispered, my words eaten by the padding my hanging clothes created in my closet. “Sleeping, sleeping, dead...*unknown?*”

I clicked on the entry bringing up the profile for Considine Maledictus.

“Turned in either the Archaic or Classical period of Greece. No Family. No offspring. Was associated with Ambrose Dracos, deceased.”

I studied the picture that had been uploaded for Considine Maledictus. It was a painting in a Neoclassicism style with a dark, cloudy background. Considine was wearing a hooded cloak, and was turned to the side, only giving you an impression of his looks, showing little more than a few locks of his dark hair, his defined jaw, and his straight nose.

“What are his powers?” I clicked the tab, my eyebrows raising. “Powers... He has displayed the full powers of a vampire, and it is unknown what additional powers he’s developed. Survived several dozen slayer assassination attempts since the 1600s, including a usage of slayer blood in the 1800s?” I gaped at the painting one last time.

He survived being poisoned with slayer blood?

What were the chances Considine Maledictus was Ruin?

I glanced at the list again, my blood curdling in my veins when I saw the last one on the list. “Bat transformation—the power he used to sneak out of the snake’s mouth.”

There was a line under the power indicating it was a link. I clicked on it, flinching when I read the popup.

Less than ten vampires have displayed this ability, only two of them matching your search terms: the Ancient of the USA and Considine Maledictus.

That settled it. Ruin was Considine Maledictus.

How the *heck* did such an ancient and powerful vampire decide to come to Magiford, much less make up his mind to micromanage downtown, when he easily had the power to take the whole place over?

A sick, twisted sense of curiosity poked me, and I glanced at the advised actions to carry out when meeting him.

Run. Do not engage in combat. Do not attempt to attack. Run.

The air suddenly felt stifflingly hot and oppressively silent. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears, and it was hard to swallow.

I leaned back, pushing a skirt out of the way so I could rest my head on the wall of my closet and close my eyes. *Breathe.* The order—another product of practice—bloomed in my mind, beating down the desire to panic.

I took several deep breaths through my nose, letting them out through my mouth.

When I felt like I could look at my computer without throwing up, I cracked an eye open.

Okay. Considine Maledictus is Ruin. What am I going to do about it?

Sitting alone in my apartment closet, without a single friend on my squad, with my closest ally probably being Connor—a *vampire*—and without the support of my slayer family, which had been a constant in my life, I was more aware than ever just how alone I was.

I was a lone slayer, and I'd gotten the attention of a top-level vampire.

Surrounded by the unnatural quiet of my closet, I set my shoulders and lifted my chin. *I might be alone, but I'm still an O'Neil. Magiford is my home, and I'm not going to back down from it. Not even for Considine Maledictus himself.*

EPILOGUE

Considine

The afternoon light was duller today and the air wasn't so blasted hot. Not that I could really feel it anyway, but it was an indication that the world was officially changing seasons. *What day is it, anyway?* I didn't keep track—my days were endless, and seasons were fast passing just like the lives of humans.

Pedestrians—humans, of course—jostled me as they strolled down the sidewalk.

A few stopped to stare, noticing my red eyes.

“Wow—did you see?”

“He's so handsome!”

“What's a vampire doing out during the day?”

“What indeed,” I muttered, agreeing with them. What *was* I doing out in downtown Magiford during the human lunch time, when I didn't even need to eat?

Between the reason for my lunchtime stroll, and the interesting night I'd had in snake charming with the violent-minded slayer, I was feeling...*contemplative*.

Why did a slayer think to lead a monster to me, and trust me to help her beat it?

The idea was so outlandish, it was laughable.

Slayers weren't the vampire assassins they had once been—or perhaps the better way to phrase it would be to say they still were, but now they were available for hire.

Regardless, no slayer would ever willingly fight *with* a vampire, much less fight anything besides a vampire.

Is she really so stupidly noble that she was willing to risk it...just to save the city?

It fit with what I knew of her—not that I knew much besides that she was well trained to the point where she hadn't used any recognizable combat system unique to any of the slayer families.

What was perhaps even more shocking... was that I had helped her.

It was very out of character for me. Which, in hindsight was likely a good thing. It was perhaps the only reason why Killian wasn't calling me demanding to know why I'd killed a snake—because it was something I'd never do.

This is Jade's fault.

Yes, that was a safer thing to do: blame my chirpy, invasive neighbor.

All I wanted from Magiford was the chance to not be required to *be* anything, to not have to manage anyone, to be without responsibilities.

And then Jade had gone and dragged me off to festivals and shoved more burnt food at me than I'd seen in the past two centuries combined.

It was her fault that I was even being somewhat thoughtful where the slayer was concerned.

I paused in front of my designated place—a small restaurant named “*The Flying Curry.*”

She said she was in the outside seating? They don't have any sidewalk tables.

There was an alleyway next to the restaurant, and I could hear voices echoing out of it. Venturing far enough up the sidewalk to look down it, I saw iron gates that were locked in an open position, a handful of tables and chairs, and those tiny lights humans are overly fond of zig zagging over the top of the alleyway.

Sitting at a small bistro table and chair set was Jade.

She had a pile of four ceramic cups mounded in front of her. She looked like a nervous wreck as she took a sip from her water glass.

I watched her for a moment and wondered if the entertainment value of my oddball neighbor was bordering on something a little *too* close to friendship.

I'd come here—surrounded by humans, in the middle of the day, for a meal that I didn't consume—because she'd summoned me.

Nah. I know better than to grow attached. This is all just temporary—I won't be in Magiford more than a few months. The snake-brats wouldn't let me. Besides, her lifetime will be equal to a blink of an eye for me.

Humans died too fast and were terribly fragile. Margarida—the youngest Dracos daughter—had spent centuries yammering at me that they brought such happiness and love. Whenever one of her pet humans passed away, she was inconsolable for years. Her heart broken by the pain.

I knew from years of observation to those who loved them, humans were thieves: stealing shard after shard of a vampire's heart. To those who tolerated them, like myself, they were ants building their nests in areas they didn't belong and commonly getting crushed under the foot of a world that was far bigger than they ever imagined.

Still. Jade was entertaining.

I sauntered up to her table. “You look like a wreck, Tea Time.”

She scowled, the paleness of her skin making her freckles pop. “Thanks for the support.”

“Always.” I looked at the chair arranged opposite her—the only other chair pulled up to the table—and frowned at the brown and gray tiger striped feline occupying it. “What is this?”

“Oh, that’s Rajiv.” Jade checked each of her empty tea cups. “He’s the restaurant cat. He sits with me whenever I eat here since I never come with anyone.”

“How cozy. Move,” I said to the cat.

The uncooperative animal wrapped its tail around its paws, then meowed.

“Here, we can grab an empty chair from another table.” Jade stood up and peered up and down the meticulously cleaned alleyway, but all the other tables were occupied.

“I’m not letting an animal take my seat,” I said.

“Fine, I’ll hold him.” Jade picked the feline up, then sat back down in her chair.

The striped cat settled on her lap and started purring, then smugly twitched its whiskers at me.

“He’s such a good boy.” Jade peered in her cups again. “I need another masala chai.”

Eyeing the line of four cups, I shook my head. “No, I think you’re done with caffeine for now. Did you order any food?”

Jade clutched the cat to her as if he were a toy—he didn’t seem to mind as he rubbed his head on her chin—and looked at me with wide eyes. “No. Maybe. I have a usual order, maybe I told the waitress?”

I watched her for a moment. Her reactions bothered me—not the way any of the snake-brats annoyed me and got under my skin. It was more that I didn’t *like* that she was off. “Is there a reason you are up and awake when I know you worked last night?”

Jade nudged one of the ceramic cups. “Nightmares, probably. Not all epiphanies are good ones, you know,” she grimly said.

I tilted my head, zeroing in on her. I couldn't read her biological reactions as well as a werewolf could, but as a vampire I was naturally more dialed into the scent of her blood and her heart pumping it through her veins.

"What has you so upset?" I asked.

"I'm not upset," Jade said.

I snorted.

"I'm not." Jade set the cat back down on her lap and started petting him again. "It was a long night, and I learned a few things that are stressing me out." She sighed and the slope of her shoulders relaxed. "Thanks for meeting me here."

I nodded. "Might I assume this is all work related?"

Jade puffed her cheeks up as she released an exhale of air. "Yeah. But. Stewing on it isn't going to help anything." She rubbed her hands together. "Man, I underestimated how chilly it was going to be today."

"You're the one who dragged me to the Autumn festival. Were you not prepared for the seasonal change?"

"It's been so hot, though." She shoved her hands under the cat—probably for warmth.

I watched for a moment, then sat up. *I can't believe I'm doing this.* I slipped off the jean jacket I wore over my red Henley shirt and offered it to her.

"Thanks, are you sure?" She asked.

"Jade, I'm a vampire," I patiently reminded her. "We don't get cold."

"I know *that*. But you're fussy about your things. Thanks, though. I appreciate it." She shrugged on my jacket, which drowned her surprisingly athletic shoulders. "You know, I've always wondered about the cold thing. Does that mean you could go help scientists in Antarctica and not be bothered by the cold? If you went when it was dark all day long, would it be a power boost?"

“We might be able to help, but no vampire would do it,” I said. “We’re too selfish. And we don’t care about scientific discoveries. The world is lucky most elders are too musty and crusty to emerge from their homes or there would be lots of screams about witchcraft and wizardry.”

“Yeah, I guess that sounds about right. Oh! I texted my mom! I figured out where I went wrong with the Scottish shortbread.” Jade rubbed her hands together one last time, and the warm scent of blood pierced the air.

“How delightful,” I said. “Does that mean you’re going to attempt making another batch today?” I glanced around, unbothered by the smell—I was too old to be affected by blood.

“No.” Jade laughed. “I know better than that—Nan always said you shouldn’t bake when you’re tired or sick. Since baking needs love to make things turn out right.”

I traced the faint smell of blood—which smelled so average it bordered on bland—and realized it was coming from Jade.

She must have a papercut or something. It’s a miniscule amount of blood, anyway.

I leaned back in my chair. “How nauseatingly human of her.”

Jade rolled her eyes. “You say that, but I know you’re secretly a softy.” She reached across the table and patted my hand.

She unknowingly left a smudge of blood on my hand. I deftly slipped my hand under the table as I glanced at her fingers, seeing a thin cut that sliced across them. The wound looked mostly healed—she’d just opened a corner of one of the cuts when she’d rubbed her hands, probably.

She patted the cat on the head and reached for her ceramic cups—as if peering in them yet again was going to magically create more caffeine for her to consume. She paused, and something in her eyes changed when she looked down at her fingers.

“Shoot, I have a cut that just opened up. I didn’t get any blood on you, did I?” She wrapped her fingers in a paper napkin, which was hardly necessary as I doubted more than a single drop of blood had oozed out of the cut.

“No,” I carelessly lied.

“I’m serious, Connor. I didn’t leave any on you, did I?” I waved a hand at her—the one that didn’t have the drop of blood. “No. I’m fine.”

“Okay, good. I’m going to go wash my hands and then put a bandage on—I knew these cuts were going to be a pain in the butt. Here—hold Rajiv while I’m gone.” She stood up and dumped the cat on my lap, then grabbed her purse.

I looked down at the abandoned feline. “Since you asked so nicely.”

Jade laughed as she slipped through the side door into the restaurant, wafting the flavorful scents of turmeric and cumin into the air.

I expected the feline to immediately jump off, instead the contrary creature hunkered down pressing its paws against my leg. “If you unsheathe your claws, I will immediately dump you on the ground,” I warned him.

The cat purred and shifted to sitting on its side, getting its fur all over my trousers.

The cat managed—as much as a cat could *be* managed, that was—I finally pulled my hand out from under the table, studying the tiny smudge of blood Jade had left on my hand.

She’s quite emphatic that I don’t drink any of her blood... in a weirdly intense way.

I could respect her request to not be bitten. A vampire could secrete a variety of chemical cocktails when biting a victim—mostly because feeding was a potentially hazardous time for a vampire, though we kept that a secret from everyone else. Fresh blood from a living human knocked most vampires out in a sort of hazy food coma.

However, once a vampire got to be old enough, it would take a great deal more blood to achieve the feeling so I could remain levelheaded and still feed as long as I didn't go overboard.

But Jade's insistence about her blood was more than a dislike for the idea of getting bitten. She was... intense about it.

Is she ill, and she means to hide it?

Werewolves could smell some illnesses, but certainly not all. Vampires, however, could taste anything from vitamin and mineral deficiencies to some illnesses through blood samples.

(One of Vígi's blood donors was a fresh-faced, youthful medical student who was using the money he earned to put himself through school. He spent at least thirty minutes every day trying to recruit vampires to the medical field, myself included, without any luck.)

The blood had almost dried on my skin, but I could still smell it—Jade's blood smelled so average, she bordered on boring.

She didn't want me to bite her, she was the one who bled on me.

I shrugged, then raised my hand to my mouth—I'd mind her boundaries, but this was—

My thoughts froze when the drop of her blood spread across my tongue.

It tasted different from the familiar, metallic yet sweet taste of human blood. It had a slightly bitter aftertaste that turned into a hot, boiling sensation that invaded all my senses.

This...this is the poison of slayer blood.

With my healing abilities, my body repaired itself faster than the poison could damage me, but to a younger vampire it would feel like being boiled alive.

To me, it felt like liquid fire spreading through my veins in a heat I hadn't felt in centuries.

I stared at the table in shock.

Slayer blood is the only thing in the world that tastes like this.

Not that I made a habit of tasting slayer blood—it was an instant death sentence for any vampire less than two thousand years old, which was almost all vampires still alive and awake.

I'd survived an encounter with vampire slayers before, which had introduced me to the rare but not entirely unpleasant sensation.

I sat in my chair nearly stupid in my surprise. I didn't even react when the blasted cat put holes in my trousers by kneading its paws on my legs.

She must be a slayer. Not a slayer descendant, a full-blown slayer—her blood is too potent to be anything else. And there's only one slayer who exists within Magiford...

“Slayer,” I breathed. “You were never very far from me, were you?”

There was something almost comforting in the hot sensation of Jade's slayer blood. I didn't feel much these days, but the heat produced by her blood...I felt it in every fiber of my being.

I stared across the alleyway, not seeing the humans crowded around the tables as I considered all the implications of this realization.

How had she managed to hide herself from *me*? And that didn't touch on how ridiculous it was that I'd managed to become neighbors with the city's sole vampire slayer.

I burst into laughter leaning back in my chair and upsetting the cat, so he flatted his ears at me.

It was so *ridiculous!*

Jade O'Neil was a vampire slayer, and she lived next door to me.

Even better: there was no way she knew that Ruin—the vampire she feared—was harmless Connor.

Still chuckling, I rested my hands on the table. “Oh, this is going to be entertaining!”

My phone rang. Still amused by it all, I pulled my cellphone from my trouser pocket and glanced at the caller ID—it was Killian.

I swiped to accept the call. “What do you want?”

“Ideally? For you to leave Magiford.”

I was so full of myself; I actually pet the striped cat—who still hadn’t left my lap. “Why? I’m not causing any trouble.” None that he knew of, anyway.

“Maybe so,” was Killian’s flat reply. *“But your presence is causing plenty of trouble. My siblings are coming.”*

“Impossible,” I scoffed. “They’re too wrapped up in the drama of longing for the past or carrying on over the death of whatever pet human they stupidly got attached to.” The cat was shedding all over my trousers, so I stopped petting it and rested my hand on the table. “I had to set Vígi’s mansion on fire to get him to wake up. No one is coming here.”

“They are,” Killian grimly said. *“So far, the twins, Baldwin, and Margarida have informed me of their plans. More may join them.”*

“This sounds like a you problem,” I said. “Because there’s no way they’re staying with me.”

“Correct,” Killian said. *“However, I will make it a you problem if you don’t meet with them and get them to leave. Apparently, they’re concerned you’re losing it since you’ve insisted on all this secrecy of your location.”*

I paused. “Me? I had to bankrupt Baldwin not even a decade ago to roust him from his stupid coffin, and he thinks I’m losing it?”

“I have never claimed to come from a particularly intelligent vampire line.”

I drummed my fingers on the table of the bistro set. “Ambrose always did have a weakness for sensitive souls—curse him. Whatever. We’ll deal with it. None of them will put

up with being parted from their precious routines and homes for very long anyway. They'll probably set foot on the tarmac and then immediately start whining when they see how modernized Magiford is."

"It's your gamble to take."

"Oh, no. We are in this together. I might be stuck watching you all but they are *your* siblings. I'm not related to any of you."

The door opened bringing another waft of spices, and the nose-tingling zing of antiseptic.

Jade was back with her treated fingers.

"I have to go," I said. "Call me later."

"Have to go?" Killian repeated. *"Go where, and for what?"*

"You're far too young to try wheedling info out of me," I said. "Later." I ended the call, smirking at Killian's sputtering, then smiled at Jade as she approached the table. "All good?"

"Yeah." She held her hand up showing off her bandages.

"Perfect. Then let's settle the bill for your caffeine consumption and leave." I tapped the cat, who obligingly got up—although he left a halo of hair on my trousers.

"I wanted to eat," Jade said.

I stood up, brushing off my clothes. "Fret not, I'll see that you're fed." I smiled at her, then tapped her nose.

There was a new level of amusement to our interactions, knowing that she was a slayer and oblivious to who I was.

Jade blinked in surprise but didn't object until I draped an arm over her shoulders. "Back up, you're stealing my heat." She held the door open for me to soften her words. "Why do we have to go?"

"I thought we could grab something to eat as we walked on the boardwalk," I said, inventing the idea. The reality was, we needed to leave the restaurant.

Killian wasn't just the sharpest out of his very powerful, very wealthy Family, he was *lethally* intelligent. There was a good chance he'd recorded the call and was playing it back as we spoke trying to pick up on the background noise and pinpoint my location.

“Oh. Yeah, that would be fun.” Jade smiled at me, her green eyes warm with all the happiness and friendship she'd lacked when pointing a gun at me mere hours ago.

Perhaps this isn't much of a vacation after all, but one thing is for certain. This is vastly more entertaining than anything I've done in centuries.

I chuckled deep in my throat. “It will be,” I said.

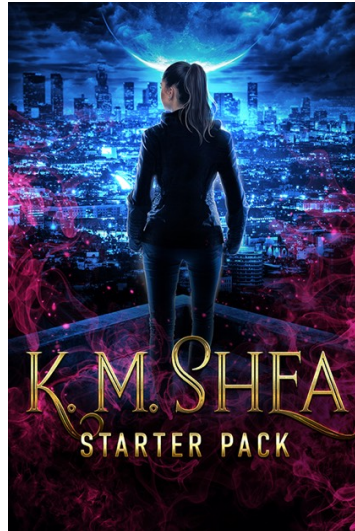
THE END

*Jade's story continues in *The Games of Enemies and Allies: Magic on Main Street Book 2.**

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AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *The Lies of Vampires and Slayers*, 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.



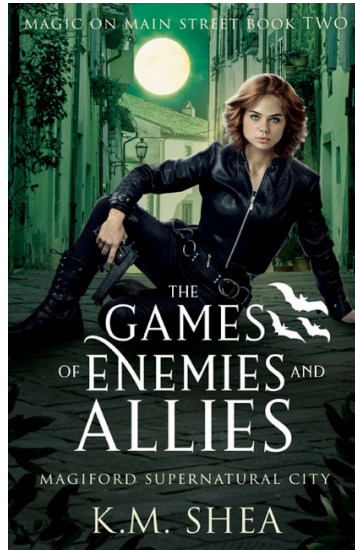
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K. M. Shea is a fantasy-romance author who never quite grew out of adventure books or fairy tales, and still searches closets in hopes of stumbling into Narnia. She is addicted to sweet romances, witty characters, and happy endings. She also writes LitRPG and GameLit under the pen name, A. M. Sohma.

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