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EVE LANGLAIS



HIDDEN
MONSTER
RUINS

EARTH'S NEXUS - BOOK TWO

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Also by Eve Langlais

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INTRODUCTION

HIDE ALL YOU WANT. I WILL FIND YOU.

I might not wear a cape or a mask, but as an agent for the SMU—Special Monsters Unit—I am plenty heroic.

Most of the time.

Accidents tend to happen a lot around me since I'm what they call a null witch. Someone who basically murders magic.

Sounds cool, right? Not when it causes cursed folks to explode—literally—in my face. Gross. Not to mention I hate shopping for new clothes.

Still, I love my job even if it is dangerous. Other parts of my life could use some help, though.

My parentage is still a mystery.

The guy I liked, well, let's just say things got complicated.

The boss hired someone new and annoying, and did I mention hot?

Oh, and there appears to be ancient ruins under our town. I'd be more excited if the Cryptid Historical Society hadn't shut us out of our own investigation.

Whatever. There are plenty of monsters to go around in Nexus. Secrets too. Time for me to cause trouble in the name of good.

PROLOGUE

I AM NOT ALONE.

The certainty hit me as I lay in bed—a thin mattress of foam on the floor inside the closet. My fingers clutched my blanket tight to my chin. My knees were tucked, but still my toes peeked. The room didn't have the chill of our last house when the winter winds blew through every single crack in that shack off the snow-covered corn fields. It proved quieter than the attic we lived in for a few months with its terrifying moans. The business under us offered massages twenty-four hours a day and needed better sound proofing since we could hear people cry out randomly through the night.

Our current apartment might be old, but it wasn't a rathole like some other places we'd lived in. On the third floor, the one bedroom came freshly painted and with a closet big enough to fit me. Look at me with my own space and a door!

Sarcasm didn't change my reality. Even at the tender age of nine, I understood this treatment wasn't normal. I just didn't know what to do about it.

At the same time, I had a roof over my head, actual food in the cupboard—a rarity—and a tiny space of my own—a first! The walk-in closet proved a huge surprise in the apartment. An old house converted into several units had resulted in an eclectic space.

Old didn't mean haunted.

I lay there huffing, trying to convince myself of that. A putrid stench rose and had me tucking my mouth inside my shirt. Why did it smell so bad all of a sudden?

Maybe there was a bathroom right below us and someone had a poop. I should open the door to the closet, get rid of the stench.

Creak.

I'd have sworn someone stepped on the floor right beside my head.

I held my breath, listening. Wishing I had a light.

Scratch.

Again that sounded close, as if it was inside the closet with me. Mostly likely mice. We'd had them before.

But what if it was the bogeyman? I'd read about him in the library, my favorite place in the world because I could sit quietly in a corner reading about more interesting places and escape my life.

Scratch.

My eyes stared unseeing at the dark in front of my face.

A stuttering wheeze froze me completely.

Only for a second. Then I popped up, flailing for the knob on the closet door. As it turned, something touched my ankle. I fled with a shriek, racing to the bed, wanting my mother.

Foolish of me. She didn't appreciate me waking her.

"What do you want, wicked child?" she exclaimed as she rose to a sitting position, her thick blanket pooling in her lap. It looked so nice and warm. I could only hope one day I could have one as large as hers and a room of my own with a window.

"There's a monster in the closet," I exclaimed, pointing.

"The only monster I see dared to wake me." She pursed her lips in disapproval. I tried so hard to not be wicked, but according to my mother, I was born that way.

I ducked my head. "The bogeyman is in the closet."

She snorted. "There you go lying. The bogeyman wouldn't be interested in someone like you. He likes to eat good little

boys and girls, not the Devil's spawn."

"I am good," I hotly insisted.

"And yet every word out of your mouth is a lie. There is no bogeyman in the closet. You just want attention. Get back in there and don't you come out until you hear me moving around. Got it?" No hug, no gentle reassurance like the mommies did in the books and movies.

"Yes, Mother."

"Don't you sass me, or I'll get the spoon."

My bum clenched in reminder of the last time I'd gotten it.

"I'm going." My shoulders drooped as I trudged back to the closet by the kitchen. My feet dragged, my head bowed, my fists clenched. My stomach remained tight with fear, yet what else could I do? I didn't want the spoon.

But if I went back in the closet, I might die.

Might. Mother seemed to think I was too wicked for the bogeyman. Guess we'd soon find out if she was right.

I slipped into the dark closet, listening for the huff of its breath. Sniffing for the stench of its presence. The closet felt normal. Maybe I'd imagined it.

I dove back onto my mattress and tucked the blanket around my toes, leaving my shoulders bare. I closed my eyes and did my best to breathe in and out, slow and steady.

The wheezing returned, as did the smell.

I barely slept that night.

Or the next.

Nothing happened, and yet I couldn't sleep at home, but I did in class, which led to the teacher sending me to guidance to chat. Mrs. Burnette asked me why I wasn't sleeping well. I knew better than to complain, but she seemed so kind. I told her about the monster in the closet keeping me awake.

"Why are you sleeping in the closet?" she asked.

"Because that's where my bed is."

Which led to more questions and, finally, Mrs. Burnette told me to stay in her office while she made a few calls.

My mother showed up, her face with that look I knew so well. Looking so nice on the outside but boiling inside. She'd wait until we were alone to explode.

The guidance counselor told me to stay off the internet and try reading instead of screen time. My mother promised to not let me have sugar after seven. As if we had that kind of sweet luxury.

She said nothing as we walked out. Nothing as we marched the several blocks to our apartment.

We got to our home. She locked the door before turning to look at me and hissed, "Making me sound like a bad mother. Such a wicked thing to do. Go to your room."

"It's a closet," I hotly retorted.

Wrong answer.

Many tears later, and my bum tender, I lay on my belly in the closet, snorting into my pillow, which I'd made myself out of my clothes. I didn't want to be in here, but she gave me no choice. At least it remained light out, meaning the sliver of space under the door gave me some illumination. Enough to discern the closed space. I checked the walls for a secret door. The floor for a hatch. A glance overhead didn't show anything but a single bulb light, burnt out.

Nowhere for anyone or anything to enter.

I had no under-the-bed space, which was very popular with the bogeyman and monsters.

Maybe it was my imagination. Our teacher said it could be a powerful thing.

My dinner arrived in the form of an opened can of pasta with a spoon stuck in it.

"I'm sorry," I stated as Mother thrust it at me.

"Don't come out until morning and then go straight to school."

The door slammed shut, leaving me alone in darkness once more. But at least I had something to fill my belly, and then I'd fill the can since I had to go so badly.

I tucked the full can in the farthest corner from me and lay down in my bed. If I had a light, I could have read the book I borrowed from the library. It told of a girl who suddenly discovered incredible powers and went on a quest. Wished I could be that girl.

Maybe I could scrounge some coins, enough for a flashlight at the dollar store.

The stench came first. Probably someone pooping same time every night. I like to poop before school.

Wheeze.

The noise sounded like someone breathing, but I was alone. I'd seen it. Explored this closet. It had to be something like a furnace. We had a basement apartment once with one that constantly clanged and clamored.

Must be the pipes.

Ping.

The noise made me think of a can tipping. Not the one I'd peed in. It couldn't have. Heavy cans didn't fall over.

My foot got wet.

My stomach a tight knot, I scrambled to a sitting position. Something had knocked over the can. I wasn't alone.

I didn't care if my mother would punish me. Let her. I had to—

“Ack!” The fingers that grabbed me by the throat squeezed tight enough to steal my voice.

I scratched at the scaly hand, trying to free myself. It held tight and hissed, “My closet.”

Since I couldn't reply, I kicked, missed the bogeyman, but somehow thumped a foot off the door.

As the monster lifted me higher with a shake, the door opened, and my mother stood framed. “Are you doing this on purpose to wake me?” A second later her eyes widened as the bogeyman flung me in her direction.

Rather than catch me, she shoved me midair so I landed on the floor. My mother grabbed a candle from a dresser and waved it, yelling, “Begone creature of darkness.”

Her bravery awed me. Especially since she protected me. A first.

Her candle didn’t withstand the bogeyman’s slap. He advanced on her. My mother retreated, hand fisted to her chest, lips moving in prayer.

I ran to her aid, fists raised to pummel.

The bogeyman didn’t turn from my mother as he reached for her. Her eyes widened in fear. My stomach hurt something fierce in fear. Still, despite it, I flung myself at that arm, and the moment I connected, I wrapped myself tight.

He shook me, but I hung on. I couldn’t let the bogeyman go, or he’d just go around spreading his evil magic. To think I’d let him make me afraid.

I wasn’t scared now.

He was.

The bogeyman began to whimper. “What are you doing?”

I didn’t know what he meant. Although that tightness in my belly was easing. And the more I felt better, the more he got agitated.

He began to smoke. Literally. Parts of him fogged away until there was nothing left. Nothing but me and my mother.

“I did it,” I exclaimed, turning bright eyes on her. “I killed it. I killed the bogeyman.” Surely now I’d see acceptance and love in my mother’s eyes.

Instead she snapped, “Get to bed.” And pointed to the closet.

Before I went, I cleaned up the pee and took a lightbulb from the trio in the bathroom.

Mother never mentioned what I'd done. But I remembered and was never scared of the bogeyman again.

CHAPTER 1

“GET BACK HERE AND LET ME HUG YOU!” I YELLED TO THE fleeing bogeyman. His long-legged stride forced me to sprint. Sweat might make some women glisten. Me? I stank and looked like I was having a heart attack.

People on the sidewalk screamed as the monster raced past with me hot on his heels. I’d come a long way from cowering in fear from the monster in my closet. Now I chased them.

“Does he have great big fangs?” asked Kyana—the new tech girl—in my earpiece.

“You sound like Monty Python,” I huffed.

“Why thank you, Ruby” she quipped.

That was me, Ruby Garcia, special agent who wasn’t paid enough to chase monsters. At least I loved my job.

“The bogey is turning into the alley between that place that sells the Cowabunga Kitchen Sink burger and the store that sells crystals,” I huffed, pounding the pavement harder than I liked. Used to be monsters let me stroll right up to them, goading me on, thinking I was weak. But then word got around that I wasn’t someone to fuck with. Never thought I’d ever be thought of as badass.

The alley proved to be narrow enough I could have trailed fingers on both sides with my arms only partially extended. The bogeyman clung to the shadows within. As if he could hide from me. Most of his tricks didn’t work.

Shadow concealment, voice projection, intense fear. All spells. All useless. The only thing I couldn’t avoid? The smell.

Bogeymen didn't believe in bathing.

Scree. A squeal of tires had me glancing over my shoulder to see a Jeep parked with a front wheel on the sidewalk. In a moment, Nelly—my best friend and sassy coworker at SMU, Special Monster Unit—would be hobbling to join me as backup. She'd sprained her ankle last week chasing a horny satyr. She'd slipped on a puddle of jizz he'd shot in our direction. Needless to say, it left her in a bad mood since she had to throw out her adorable ankle boots when the emergency folks cut the one off her swelling foot.

She refused to take time off or stay in the Jeep, despite the fact I didn't need help dealing with the bogeyman. One hug from me and, poof, he'd be back to whatever nightmare place created him. Bogeyman were creatures of magic created out of fear. It had nothing to do with good or bad at all.

I ran for the back end of the alley, watching for the shift of shadows to let me know where the bogey went. A hint of moving darkness disappeared around the corner in a crisscrossing alley that finished in a dead end and a pool of light.

The bogeyman shrank in its bright glare as I advanced, losing its size, as it found no fear to feed it. Thin gray arms crossed over its face.

“Where is your lair?” I barked, right away getting to the meat of the matter. We had a monster problem in Nexus. They kept cropping up all over, and yet no one could figure out where they lived when not causing trouble.

The bogeyman showed its teeth but didn't speak. Too weak to form a coherent thought.

I strode toward the monster, peeling off my glove, frowning, given the bogey didn't even flinch. It knew I was about to send it away, and it didn't seem worried. Didn't try to escape. Or even fight.

My lips pursed, but I didn't stop moving. Nelly would be limping into sight any second. Two of us should be able to handle it. Had to because we didn't have any other muscle.

Baptiste was off with Clive. Kyana kept us organized within her machine web. We needed more bodies.

Renarde, the boss, kept saying she'd get us some more team members. We were still waiting. In her defense, we were a weird crew to work with.

You had me, a null witch, with the ability to cancel magic. Nelly, who could make anything a weapon and pretty much never missed when she aimed. Clive, a wizard with so much extra magic he wasted it on dumb stuff like an actual animated broom, mop, and bucket. He also had a feather duster that did amazing on ceiling fans. So long as I didn't stick around and suck out all the magic. In exchange for magical free cleaning, I spent a few minutes with Clive every few days, where we sat lotus-legged, knees touching, hands atop each other. A Zen moment to ease the pressure of his magic.

There was Yvonne, our resident seer, who tended to pop up at random when least expected and the newest recruit, Kyana. She'd replaced Joe, our previous tech guy, who got swallowed by the Earth, literally. And finally, Baptiste, AKA beefcake. AKA the wolfman, who acted as muscle. He was also the dude who currently played a key role in my masturbation fantasies.

Life was good, and as an added bonus, I got to rid the world of monsters.

"Ba-bye." I reached for the bogeyman, who snarled, a lip pulled over prominent teeth, eyes sunken in a pallid face.

As I put my hand on the bogey, it almost immediately faded away, unlike the first time I met one, before my powers had truly manifested. It took puberty for my ability to explode.

Before I could celebrate my victory over the bogeyman, a net dropped on me from above!

To say I was shocked would be an understatement. Especially since I tangled right away in the roped webbing. "What the fuck," I exclaimed, struggling to free myself and only making it worse.

Nelly yelled, "Duck!"

My knees buckled as I headed for the ground and tucked best as I could. The rapid *pop, pop* let me know she'd fired.

At what? Bogeymen couldn't be shot. Before I could peek, she yelped.

"Nelly!" I pushed at the rope and somehow found an edge, crawling free to see my SMU partner and friend fighting off flying monkey imps. Annoying buggers. They had the ability to hover and had dexterous fingers and enough intelligence to make groups of them more than just a nuisance. Roving gangs of them were dangerous, and we'd been struggling to react quickly enough to take action when they appeared. We'd not been doing well on the threat removal aspect thus far, usually arriving too late.

Not this time.

The gang of imps darted in from more than one direction. Nelly yelled as she pulled the long dagger she'd worn down her spine—"just in case," she'd told me as we left. She wielded it with grace and precision, slicing wings, taking off paws with claws.

At least she came prepared. Me, I had a baton, an electrified one but still essentially a whacking stick, as Yvonne had warned against letting me have weapons meant to draw blood.

Our resident seer did not explain what she meant, and I didn't argue when I got demoted to baby status when it came to equipment. I didn't like weapons, although I will admit to a certain satisfaction in hitting things. *Thump. Whack.*

I swung my baton more wildly than with forethought, I was ashamed to realize. But I at least hit some stuff. I paused and a small but wiry body landed on my back and dug in. It was the size of a large cat but with wings and sharp teeth.

"Ow." I reached for the imp, my power against magic useless against it since an imp used none. Annoying creatures.

Why were they attacking? What did they think they'd accomplish? We'd killed so many of them already.

I flung and thrashed, bucking against the teeth that tried to bite, shaking free before claws could hook in and hold on. For the one on my back, I retreated until my back slammed into the alley wall.

The imp squealed and let go. I whirled and whacked it with my baton. Fucker stopped moving.

I huffed and tried to put my back to the wall and readied my rod. “Let’s go, fuckers.” The imps hovered in front of me, flashing angry teeth and eyes, but they didn’t attack. It took Nelly yelling, “They’re stalling for something,” for me to realize that steady thump I heard, the tremor underfoot?

“Fuck me, I think we’re about to meet the troll we’ve been getting reports about.” A troll that had been stopping cars on a road going into town and demanding toll.

Boom.

You’d think a being ten feet tall would have been easy to find.

Boom.

You’d be wrong.

The imps suddenly fled, rising straight up.

Boom.

“Is it me, or does that sound close?” I asked.

“Grab the rope,” Nelly demanded, as if I ever packed equipment.

“I don’t have rope.”

“The net then, the one they tossed on you.”

I’d forgotten about it but had no idea how she thought it would work, given trolls were massive.

Boom.

I dragged the mess of rope over, and Nelly wasted no time slicing it in a few spots. She handed me a knotted piece. “We’re going to trip it. Whatever you do, don’t let go.”

“I’ll try.” Our best chance at taking out a troll was getting it to fall since they were wickedly tall with very tough exterior skin. Only vulnerable spot? Under the chin, in that small crease between neck and jaw. Eyes could be blinded, but that left their strong sense of smell. Which was ironic given their stench. The only good thing? Trolls lacked speed.

Boom.

Nelly began running with her end of the rope, and I followed, but only to the mouth of the alley. I stood and braced as the netting stretched across the road. Nelly planted herself and began pulling in the slack. I moved just as fast to tighten the rope. We quickly looped it behind our backs to brace.

Just in time.

The troll approached with ponderous feet and swinging, pendulous breasts.

A female troll? Fuck. That meant even once we took her out there’d still be a male to handle, as our reports on the one demanding money from people very clearly reported a massive, swinging dick.

The monster saw Nelly first and roared, beating her chest and letting loose a hot gush of piss that oozed ammonia strong enough to water the eyes. A clear signal to her mate.

Fuck, if she waited for help, our plan would fail.

Nelly must have realized that since she screamed, “Over here, you ugly twat.”

The troll stomped for us—*boom, boom*—each step a rumble to the ground. We braced as the troll’s foot swept forward and caught on the netting, jerking it. It forced me to dig in hard to hold. The troll unbalanced, flailed her arms, and started to fall.

The tremor underfoot when she hit almost knocked me off my feet. Nelly raced for her, going for the kill shot. Missed, as the female rolled, protecting the soft underside of her chin.

Boom

Why did I hear more footsteps?

Boom.

A glance behind showed the missing male coming at a rapid pace, roaring in rage, an electrical pole clenched as a club.

“Oh shit,” I muttered. “Kyana, you still there? We’ve got two, I repeat, two trolls.” I waited for the male with long greasy hair and a bulbous nose to get closer before darting to the side, knowing it would take him a moment to follow.

“I’ve been listening and have already contacted the other team.”

“How long until they arrive?” I asked, the booming vibration much too close for my liking.

“Five minutes tops.”

“Five?” I huffed. I was so fucked.

“Maybe less depending on the lights and traffic.”

A badly limping Nelly, who’d aggravated her wound, dodged the fist of the very angry female troll. Me? I had my own problem.

I veered again and lost sight of my friend.

“Wow, they really move. Two minutes out.” Kyana sounded impressed. I knew when I wasn’t in the vehicle Clive could do stuff for travel to move fast.

Two minutes. My legs wouldn’t last that long. A lamp post came flying past.

Fuck me. I glanced behind me to the troll plucking another to use as a spear.

I could use Clive and his magic right about now.

“An accident just in front has them stuck literally thirty seconds away!” Kyana exclaimed.

And they obviously weren’t wearing their earpieces, or they’d be yacking, given they were in close range.

Thirty seconds by car was nothing for a certain guy I knew.

A distant roar brought a smirk to my lips. Reinforcements were coming.

Someone screamed as the troll stomped past them.

Why they brought attention to themselves I couldn't have said. Like literally, he would have ignored them.

But, no, the person freaked out, the troll started to bend, and I did a very foolish thing.

I stopped running and whirled around, fingers in my mouth to make a firm whistle.

TWEET!

The troll halted in its reach for the screaming idiot, who had yet to run.

“Hey, you ugly fucker. Come and pick on someone more your size.” Childish and weird, but I drew its attention long enough for Nelly to race for the backs of his legs, aiming to slice the tendon that held things together.

The stroke barely scratched the skin. She needed a magical sword, and unfortunately, I broke them often just by being near.

Boom. A glance showed the female had found us. A surprise. “How come you didn't kill her?” I exclaimed.

Nelly sighed. “She's preggers. I was trying to be nice.”

Commendable if it were anything but a killer troll. “I'll handle her. You take out her male companion.”

Meanwhile I could only hope Baptiste and Clive would arrive soon with a plan to handle the threat. Mine consisted of avoiding getting smushed because I had no idea what else I could do.

Mimicking the idiot on the sidewalk, I screamed and drew the female away. Turning down a wide street, I gave myself room to move.

My foot hitting the solid yellow line in the middle of the road coincided with Kyana muttering, “So slightly bad news. Your backup has been in an accident. Everyone is okay.”

“Good for them.” I exhaled through gritted teeth. “But I kind of need help now.”

“Don’t worry. Our newest team member says he’ll be there shortly.”

Shortly meant Nelly and I remained on our own. Fuck me.

I stopped and eyed the troll and her swinging tits. I had to keep her away from civilians because casualties caused attention. Attention led to firings, which usually meant me. And before you got pissy about me being selfish, I would like to add that any idiot outside with a camera trying to film a troll attack deserved whatever happened to them.

I waved. “Hey you, thanks for loaning me your lover last night.” Pure nonsense and yet it seemed the troll understood and even believed. As if that would physically work. She rushed me, and I ran in the opposite direction.

Legs pumping, arms tucked. Head up.

Boom. Boom. The vibration of her chase kept her going for now, but I’d never last at this rate.

Which was when I thought of the sinkhole. Actually, seeing the crime-scene warning tape reminded me. It fluttered about a hundred yards from the edge. I ignored the tape and busted through. The troll followed.

The next part of my hastily derived plan would be trickier. I had to rely on my speed and maneuverability as I raced straight for the edge of the hole. I slowed as I neared, faking fatigue by staggering, even partially leaning over as if gasping for air.

Boom. Boom.

She got faster. Closer. Close enough that a glance over my shoulder showed those meaty fists swinging almost within range. I darted sideways, drawing her gaze.

Her head turned to watch me. Her body didn’t swivel as quick. Her momentum kept her going forward. Right off the edge into the abyss. She fell with a bellow that ended abruptly.

I’d done it. I’d slain a troll.

I might have celebrated more if I'd not turned from the hole to see the biggest freaking troll ever, his face grizzled with gray fuzz, and wrinkled. He pounded his chest and roared.

Seriously? How many fucking trolls were there running around in Nexus? Once more, I bolted rather than get crushed. I was faster than an old troll.

Wrong. He had a long-legged lope that quickly caught up to me, and his fingers gripped me firmly, pinning my left arm to my body, and yet not crushing.

Because he planned to kill me a different way.

He stopped running and lifted me, bringing me to his mouth, full of sharpened pointy teeth.

He's going to eat me!

This would hurt. Holy fuck would it hurt.

Before I could scream, a bird dropped from the sky and, with a long talon, slashed at the troll's eye!

CHAPTER 2

SAVED BY A BIRD!

Wait, that wasn't some avian predator.

My mind went through a few blinks of trying to identify what I was seeing and finally settled on an angel with ebony wings matching his flowy hair and gaze. Even the sword that I'd mistaken for a claw glowed with the mind-bending brightness of a black hole. A description that made no sense until you saw it.

Where this sword-wielding angel sliced, flesh parted, the troll's tough skin unable to stop its sharp edge. Very cool. I could only imagine Nelly wet her panties at the sight of her dream weapon. I would have watched with more awe if the fist holding me aloft didn't suddenly drop me due to a slice to the bicep.

My head survived hitting the pavement without crushing like a melon. The gritty road dug into my hands, the sting of it unpleasant but better my palms than road rash on my face.

I celebrated too soon.

Whack.

The unexpected kick sent me flying again, and this time, I landed hard, slamming into the ground, uttering a sharp exhalation. I lay there stunned and trying to remember how to breathe. As I gasped for air, I watched the battle.

The giant swung ponderous arms—one of which dripped blood—at the rapidly darting angel who kept slicing and dicing. Nicks appeared all over the troll, rendering his flesh

slick with blood. The monster roared and stomped—in my direction, I should add. Time to boogie. I rolled to my knees and pushed to my feet.

I wavered, a little more dazed than expected. The dark angel swept in and, with a swipe of the blade, parted the tendons of the giant's knees, the magic of it working despite me being nearby. Unsupported, the legs buckled, and the troll reached for the closest building, crumbling brick in its desperate grip. The angel wasn't done. He alit lightly on the ground, only to spring and twirl, wings making a whistling sound along with a metallic ring from his blade. Beautiful, every move fluid and precise. His sword arced and sliced across the short neck, separating the troll's head from his body. It toppled and rolled, the macabre sign of victory stopping by my feet rather than bowling me over

With no will to fight against gravity, the body began to weave and then fell—in my direction of course—but I was out of crushing reach, so I watched and only winced a little at how hard it hit the road. The head wobbled and I moved my toes before they got crushed but still managed to get wet in a puddle of slobber.

Gross. I retreated and looked for somewhere to wipe my shoes. Maybe I'd go barefoot.

The man with wings landed on the far side of the body and strode toward me. He was taller than I would have thought, handsome, too, with his chiseled face. Alas, he opened his mouth and showed himself to be an ass. "Get out of the area."

"Excuse me?"

"Are you hard of hearing, ma'am? Everyone is to evacuate the area immediately."

"Why?"

"Because I said so. Get moving," he snapped, coming to a stop a few paces from me, his bulky arms crossed over his chest. He wasn't quite as tall as Baptiste, nor as wide. He also didn't intimidate me at all.

"You don't have the authority to order me to do shit."

“Actually I do. This area is off-limits as of now.”

“According to who?” I exactly.

“Me.”

“And you are?”

“Cryptid Authority special agent.”

“Really? Where’s your badge?” Because I wasn’t just going to believe some random claim that he worked for the CA.

“I’m new.”

“Sure, you are,” I drawled.

“You’re awfully unappreciative of the fact I saved your life.”

“Is your ego pricked I didn’t gush over your bravery?” I clasped my hands and batted my eyes.

“I don’t have time to deal with a crazy human.” Insult delivered, he turned away.

My jaw dropped. Of all the arrogant—

The ground underfoot gave a little shiver. Barely noticeable. Possibly nothing.

Unghhh. The ground literally groaned and drew my gaze to the decapitated body. How much did a troll weigh?

The next moan from the earth came with a crack that spread from the body.

Not again.

I didn’t need the angel to yell, “Move!” to start pumping my legs. I pushed myself away from the zigzagging line and ran. I might have even escaped the danger zone if the loose troll head didn’t suddenly roll, a bowling ball into my pin-like legs. Down I went.

My hands came out and hit hard on my already scraped palms. Ow. Ow. Ow. Of all the times to not be wearing gloves. I’d be picking gravel from my flesh for weeks. If I lived.

In good news, the ground didn't move, nor did I feel the crack under me. I was pushing to my knees when the asphalt dropped, taking me with it!

Panic immediately set in. I'd opened my mouth to scream like I'd never screamed before when I got grabbed midair. That might have been cause to lose my shit—*I'm gonna be eaten by a monster!*—only the arms gripping me smelled rather nice. It took a second of rubbing my face free of hair to realize I'd slobbered onto a firm chest.

Only one naked chest around here.

The dark angel with the rude attitude lifted me past the edge of pavement sheared clean by the sinkhole.

“You saved me!” I exclaimed my surprise aloud.

“Too much paperwork if I didn't,” he grumbled. He didn't go too far with me. Didn't even bother landing to set me on my feet. Just kind of dumped me, and without a word, he took off.

I'll admit I stared.

Someone else whistled. “Hot damn, he was hot. Why couldn't he save me?” Nelly limped up to me, looking remarkably pretty despite her designer outfit being torn from the imps' claws. Her lips were full and red. Her eyes with their dark lashes sparkling.

Me? My red hair stuck to my sweaty face, which probably was only a shade lighter than my head. My clothes also had rips, showing a body that never saw the sun, lest it also match my red locks.

“Do you know who that was?” I asked. I'd never seen the guy before. I'd have remembered.

“No idea but I totally want to find out.”

Baptiste arrived in that moment with Clive, in an SUV with a smashed hood and missing windshield. They spilled out, ready for action.

“You're too late,” I announced.

“No shit,” Baptiste growled, stalking toward us.

“You look like you got hit by a truck,” remarked Nelly.

“Close. Just as we were pulling onto the road to park, someone ran a red light and smashed into us,” Clive replied, whereas Baptiste appeared taut and angry.

His stiff-legged prowl stopped him in front of me. He sniffed and scowled. “What happened?”

“Bogeyman drew us into a trap with imps, which turned into an ambush by trolls,” Nelly summarized.

Which led to me protesting, “None of which are connected. Monsters don’t work together.”

“Sure looked like they were to me,” Nelly exclaimed.

“I’m more interested in the fact there ended up being three trolls.” Clive glanced past me at the hole where the body had disappeared, but the head remained on the edge. “They’re not supposed to be able to get out of the Silverback Mountain Reserve.” One of the most protected Cryptid habitats on the planet, it spanned most of what used to be Russia before Rasputin had his revenge.

Since no one wanted to live on the site of the disaster, it turned into a free-range option for those too dangerous or rare to be left to live in the wild with humans. The reserve hosted a range of species. Why, in the caves inside the mountains themselves, there were five dwarven clans, two types of moles, and some rare species of worm that could cure cancer. Unfortunately, it was so rare only the really rich and usually one feel-good charity case per worm ever enjoyed the miracle.

“How did trolls manage to make it this far into Nexus without being noticed?” Nelly continued Clive’s initial comment. “Kyana, what time did the calls start and where?”

The answer came in my earpiece. “Like within the last five minutes.” A reply Nelly repeated for the boys.

Me, I thought back. That would have been when the battle started. Odd how it seemed like much longer.

“That can’t be right,” Clive protested. “Trolls don’t move that fast, and it’s a good mile from the town’s edge to here. Surely someone noticed trolls tromping through town.”

“The only troll calls I’ve seen in the last twenty-four hours have been about your altercation,” Kyana informed us.

The reply led to me saying, “It’s got to be some kind of invisibility spell, which poofed when I got near.”

“It’s more than that. Trolls leave marks of their passing, and they’re too big to simply walk down our streets and sidewalks and not be noticed even when invisible,” proclaimed Clive.

He had a point. A look around showed people had begun emerging from buildings with their phones. One person even rolled out from under a car, phone also in hand. Great, my ignoble capture and plummet would be online. Hopefully I wouldn’t become a meme: Stupid Girl Confronts Troll and Loses.

“So if not an invisible spell, then what?” I asked.

Clive shrugged. “Dunno how they’re appearing out of thin air. Most likely magic is involved but of a kind I’ve never even heard.”

“I think the bigger concern is if three trolls can suddenly appear with no warning, then that makes it even harder to prepare for a worse threat.” Baptiste offered a dark outlook.

I didn’t disagree, but at the same time, I had a more pressing concern. “Are we going to discuss the fact the town is sitting on ground that is riddled with more holes than Swiss cheese?” I waved my hand at the sheared pit.

“I think this might tie into the whole trolls-appearing thing because I know we had people in to survey the ground after the church fell into that sinkhole. They claimed it was a fluke and that the area under it and the spots they randomly checked were fine. As in packed rock and dirt,” Clive offered in explanation.

“What about that house in the burbs that also went down?”

Clive answered again. “If it’s magically induced, then it could happen anywhere.”

Not a reassuring reply.

“Mysterious holes aren’t as interesting as the guy who saved Rubes,” Nelly slyly interjected.

“He wasn’t that interesting,” I mumbled.

“What guy?” Baptiste practically barked.

“The one with wings who saved Rubes from falling forever in that pit. I thought she was a goner when the asphalt caved, but he dove in and flew out with Rubes.”

“I thought the eagle shifter was taken into custody?” Clive questioned.

We’d captured the male last week and charged him with indecent exposure. The drunken eagle kept flashing his junk in front of high-rise windows. The only reason he got caught? A woman, disgusted by it, brought a pistol onto her balcony and shot him in the nuts. He was arrested upon emerging from surgery, effectively a eunuch since they didn’t have enough of his nut sac to reattach.

“It was not that perv Johnson.” Nelly wrinkled her nose. “This guy was hot. We’re talking sexy dark angel ala Lucifer. You know from that show.”

The boys appeared clueless, but I snickered. “My rescuer was way hotter.”

A comment that, for some reason, drew a growl from Baptiste. Jealous? I didn’t know why. After all, he was the one who ignored me completely after the kiss. I’d been more than ready and willing to smooch again, but he’d been keeping his distance, if you ignored the way he scowled a lot when around me.

“Angels don’t get involved in human affairs,” Baptiste snapped.

“You don’t think he’s a monster, do you?” Nelly mused.

“A monster who saves people and fights trolls?” I queried.

“Who cares?” Baptiste once more had a disgruntled tone and expression.

Clive soothed things over. “He’s right. We have a bigger mess to handle. Kyana, have you called the disaster folk?”

“They are on their way. People located in the nearby buildings have been sent notice to grab what they need and leave while a ground study is completed.”

“They should be thinking of evacuating all of Nexus,” I muttered under my breath. This was the third sinkhole in the past few months. Despite what the previous study claimed about the ground underneath being fine, I had to wonder if the town courted disaster.

“Might need some regular cops to enforce the edict. Doesn’t look like people are in a rush to leave,” Nelly noted as a crowd of gawkers grew and, in the search of the perfect video and shot, approached the dead troll and sinkhole. Idiots.

“It’s a surprise nobody but monsters have died in these holes yet,” Clive pointed out, only to add provocatively, “One might say it’s almost a miracle.”

“There is no way anyone could plan for these sinkholes to happen without casualty.” I didn’t believe in miracles.

“Gods work in mysterious ways,” Clive argued.

“You think a god is causing sinkholes just for shits and giggles?” I shook my head. “I’ve got news for you. God—and that includes every single one of them—isn’t real.” I’d tried to believe, even visited holy places. Sacred churches, grounds, and blessed artifacts were all just magically hexed. People claiming to be touched by a god? More spells. I touched them, and the magical psychosis disappeared—which led to some very irate believers. Never mind the fact they were being grifted. My theory was that gods were magical constructs created by people who wanted there to be a divine power. I’d yet to be proven wrong. Show me a real god, someone who could actually perform miracles that I couldn’t dissipate, and I’d believe.

I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting.

CHAPTER 3

NOT EVERYONE IGNORED THE EMERGENCY EVACUATION ORDER pushed out to phones in the area. Joining the crowd already outside were people with bags and suitcases, some with cages and pets on leashes. A few pretended to not look at us. Others didn't hide their interest. Most likely a good chunk had been plastered to their windows, watching when we fought the trolls, capturing my ignoble failure. In better news, that meant there were videos of my rescuer. I might have downplayed his role, but like Nelly, I did find myself curious.

Who and what was he? Not to mention, how did he happen to be in the area and ready to fight trolls?

I'd be looking into him more once I got home. Speaking of which... "Think we can drive your Jeep out of here?" I asked, looking past Nelly to where I'd popped out of the alley. I couldn't see our ride from here.

Baptiste interceded. "You are not driving. I am."

I could have argued—after all, as an SMU agent, I should help and process the scene—however distant sirens meant emergency services would be here shortly to secure the scene. I'd lived it. I didn't need to sift rocks on the ground and take pictures to remember. I still wore the stench of the troll's sweaty fist.

"Let's go then." Because I wanted to get the smell off me. I couldn't wait to get home. Kick off my shoes. Have a nice bath, where Wally felt a need to make fun of my bobbing boobies, and then maybe a glass of wine as I watched *Ozark*

again. Most people loved Ruth. I wanted to be the ruthless Wendy Bird.

To my surprise, Nelly came along too, but Clive remained to monitor the situation. He'd probably use magic to temporarily shore the sides of the new pit. I'd have to make sure I didn't go near that hole, lest I destabilize any spells he placed.

As Baptiste drove back, with Nelly as his shotgun partner, I sat in the back on my phone looking for videos. Kyana, one step ahead, had my phone beeping with YouTube and TikTok links before I could even type in the words "angel versus troll."

Nelly flopped over the middle to shove her phone in my direction. "No way that hunk of winged hotness is a monster."

I replayed the video of him swooping as he saved me, an avenging angel hotter than anything I'd ever seen. Hard to see anything bad.

"Who is he?" I mused aloud. "And why is he flying around with a sword?" Nexus might be turning into the Wild West for weirdness, but we still had laws when it came to weapons in public.

"I'm going to bet he's a fallen angel here to do penance by fighting evil." Clive had obviously been reading too much D&D.

I winced. My mother had spent a good portion of my life telling me I was that evil. "What makes you think he's an angel? He could also be a harpy."

"Harpies are female," said in a scoff by Nelly.

"That we know of. Information on them is sparse." Trust Clive to know. "Our info says they steal human husbands with large families to fertilize their nests of eggs."

"Okay, so maybe not a harpy. But he could be some type of hybrid. Like maybe a swan shifter?" I offered.

"They don't exist," Nelly exclaimed. "And before you say it, the movie you saw doesn't count. It wasn't real."

A strange thing to say, given how much the world started changing once we hit the technological evolution. From clunky rotary phone to cellular in the palm of our hands. From hexes to unsour milk to spells to massively increase production in cows while making their poop super eco-friendly. From fairies and goblins weren't real to a now accepted part of our world. There was even talk about offering them the vote.

"I don't know what he is, but he's not an angel," I stated.

"If you say so," Nelly sang. "Want to wager on it?"

I pursed my lips. "What are we wagering?"

"Next shipment of treats to the office, I get the bag of sour cream and bacon chips."

"Ditto if I win." We shook on the deal. One of us would get to greedily stuff our faces. As to why we didn't ask to add more bags to the order? Then we'd both be eating way too many chips. Might seem weird, but it worked.

We made it home, and my evening went exactly as planned except for the part where I went to the rooftop for a few drinks with Nelly and Wally, only to find Baptiste also there, barbecuing.

He said nothing as he flipped a few burgers on the grill. The table held condiments, paper plates, buns, and cheese. There was also some beer chilling on ice.

"You might need to marry me," Nelly teased. "You'd make a good summer husband, given your knack for barbecuing."

He slewed a gaze her way, a lock of hair falling over his forehead. "I'm even better when I'm stuck inside in winter."

The innuendo rounded Nelly's mouth but gutted me with jealousy.

Fucker.

A possessive rage fell over me that I had no right to. We weren't dating. He could tease and flirt with whomever he liked.

But not in front of me.

Unlike him, I couldn't forget our kiss. I'd masturbated way too many times to the memory.

Clive ended up joining us, along with Kyana, the pair of them entering and drawing Nelly's eye. She glared.

I had to wonder why. She liked Kyana, the newest member of our group since we lost Joe, our last resident tech. A sinkhole took him when we busted a cult. Kyana took over his role, and while good, she wasn't I-can-control-machines-with-my-mind Joe. As far as I knew she hadn't done anything to piss off my best friend. Unless it had to do with the cute wizard she'd entered with. Couldn't blame Clive for noticing her. At just over five feet, and curvy all over, Kyana had the cute thing down pat with her pixie-cut pastel hair, pouty lips, and almond-shaped eyes that she liked to accentuate with liner and mascara.

Baptiste handed out burgers. When I grabbed mine and mumbled, "Thanks," he uttered a soft, "I need to talk to you."

Wait, what? My shock almost had me demanding he explain himself right away. He sounded so serious. This had to be about us.

"When and where?" I replied, hopefully not too eagerly.

"Later when we're done eating and shit."

"Sure." Nonchalance in that one syllable.

I slathered my burger and sat back down, my mind whirring as I chewed.

No surprise the dinner conversation centered around the clusterfuck we'd encountered.

Nelly started it off with, "How does a bogeyman team up with imps?"

"We don't know that they were working together," I argued.

"That freak tricked you into following it in that alley where those imps were waiting to drop a net on your ass!"

Nelly reminded.

“It’s a good thing I fell into their trap and not someone else.” Someone without any kind of ability or training might not have fared so well.

“I don’t think they wanted anyone else,” Kyana said with a wave of her veggie burger.

Trust Baptiste, the vegetarian, to have some on hand. A guy his size should need more than veggies, fruits, nuts, and cheese. I didn’t have it in me to give up meat. I enjoyed everything about it too much.

“Why would a bogeyman and imps—”

“Don’t forget those trolls,” Nelly interrupted.

I rolled my eyes. “I wasn’t their target.”

“Really? Explain why they weren’t coming after me, then,” Nelly threw back in challenge.

“What are you talking about? I saw you fighting one of the trolls,” I said.

“It only fought me because I kept standing in its way. It tried to go after you.”

“Did not,” I huffed.

Nelly shrugged. “And yet it kept stomping in your direction.”

“Only because I was tangling with its friend.”

Baptiste had remained silent until now. “Why would someone want Ruby dead?”

“Or captured,” Kyana offered. “After all, she never actually came to harm.”

“Because the angel saved her,” Nelly exclaimed and clapped her hands. “I am so fucking jealous. That was the most epic thing I’ve ever seen.”

I grimaced. “Yes, because being fisted by a troll was great fun.”

Baptiste coughed. Nelly wide-eyed me then laughed.

Heat filled my cheeks. “You know what I mean. I thought I was getting crushed or eaten. And then I got dropped to the ground. Kicked. Had a head goober all over my feet, and I fell into a hole and that asshole saved me again—”

“Why is he an asshole?” Kyana interrupted.

I paused. How to explain his treatment of me had pricked my ego? Yikes. Yeah. Not saying that. “He’s not. I’m just a little wound up from the whole thing. It was fucking terrifying.” I swigged my beer, downing more of it than was probably wise.

Blame my friends. They had me now wondering; was I being hunted?

I couldn’t help but hear my mother’s voice. *“You just keep drawing the evil. A magnet for it, just like your father.”*

Were the sins of the father passed down to the child? I’d never even met him. I possessed no name, no image. Just the rantings of the hateful woman who raised me. Which led me to wonder how my mother could even draw that comparison. Had she actually met the man whose sperm helped create me? Because the story she’d told me indicated she hadn’t, yet she’d been firm in her belief he was the devil.

I drank more beer, and my crew kept talking. Luckily no one noticed I didn’t add much. I’d said more tonight than I used to say in weeks, sometimes months in the winter when everyone was shut in.

I glanced at Baptiste, and as if he sensed it, he looked my way. Our gazes met. I couldn’t hold it. I looked away.

This happened a few times, and I had to wonder why he wanted to talk. If this was about today’s mission, then I had nothing more to add. Was this about the kiss? The one we’d shared and then pretended never happened?

I’d like to blame him for not repeating it, but the truth was, I’d waited for him to try again. Waited, and when he didn’t, I thought of initiating a date of some kind with him. Only...I didn’t. Because I convinced myself he would never be interested.

Three beers in, and feeling a little lightheaded, I stood and waved. “Bedtime for me.”

Wally squawked. “It’s early.”

“I agree. Wanna hang with me a while longer?” Nelly offered. My traitor of a bird chose her over me. Which was fine because Baptiste suddenly rose.

“I’ll walk you to your apartment.”

“Pretty sure I can make it on my own.” I gave him an out.

“You’ve had a few, and the stairs are steep. I’m taking you.”

I opened my mouth, but Nelly yelled, “Let the man give you a hand so you don’t wake up in the stairwell slobbering in a puddle of puke.”

That was a little too specific for my liking. “Fine.”

We took several paces to the rooftop door before he spoke. “I need you to leave Nexus.”

I froze in place, but he kept moving me. “Excuse me?” I must have misunderstood.

“I should have told you earlier, before you’d had a few, but usually you stick to one, maybe two.”

And tonight I’d been thinking about what he wanted to tell me, and so I gave myself liquid courage. It felt like churning sludge in my stomach. “Why do you want me to go? Is this about the kiss? Because it was nothing. I’ve completely forgotten about it.” I huffed indignantly while lying.

“The problem started well before the kiss. I can’t work with you around. It’s getting harder and harder to resist.”

“Resist what?” I asked, my mouth dry as we headed down the stairs, our clomping feet a strange accompaniment to the conversation.

“You. I can’t be near you without wanting something I can’t have.”

“I’m confused. You sound like you’re saying you want me?”

He nodded.

“And why is that a problem?” I didn’t throw myself at him and say “take me, I’m yours.” Because something didn’t add up.

“Because I am engaged to someone else.”

The shock hit me hard, but I didn’t faint. Or fall. See, I’d been hit all my life. Physically, emotionally. I knew how to take a shot.

I also knew how to fight back.

I stood up straight, stared Baptiste in the face, and managed a very cold reply. “Let’s get something straight. I am not leaving Nexus or quitting my job. The fact you can’t control your base urges isn’t my fucking problem. And to help you, let me make something clear. You are nothing to me. I have no interest in you beyond this job.”

“Ruby—”

My head shook as I interrupted. “No. I cannot believe you didn’t say anything about your fiancée before. How long have you been engaged?”

“It’s been in the works for a few weeks—”

“Weeks!” It would explain why he’d not repeated the kiss.

His lips turned down. “The engagement only became official three days ago.”

On the full moon. I frowned. “What are you not telling me?”

“Let’s just say it has to do with my uncle and the fact I’m his heir.”

“Are you saying it’s an arranged marriage?”

He nodded.

I gaped. “And you’re going through with it?”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Well, congratulations then. Don’t invite me to the party, and do me a favor at work. Don’t talk to me.”

“Ruby—”

“Goodnight.” I entered my apartment and leaned against the door before sliding down.

What a clusterfuck of a day.

CHAPTER 4

I SLEPT BETTER THAN EXPECTED. MASTURBATING AFTER watching a few videos of the dark angel—damn Nelly for making me call him that—really helped to relax me. I needed a handsome new face to fantasize about given my annoyance with Baptiste. I'd not misread him. He had the hots for me. But he was getting married.

Son of a bitch.

The next morning, Nelly arrived with coffee and donuts and Wally on her shoulder.

“Morning,” she chirped.

“Why are you looking so smug?” I asked.

“Why aren't you? How was your night with Baptiste?”

“It ended with him telling me he was engaged.” I took a sip of coffee and enjoyed her dropped jaw.

“To who?” she managed to whisper amidst her shock.

“No idea. He said something about his uncle and it being arranged.”

“So it's not like he's in love.”

“Doesn't really matter, though, does it? He's engaged and has no intention of backing out.”

“Why would he agree? I didn't even know he had an uncle.” Nelly's nose wrinkled.

“Guess they're closer than he let on.”

“Well, lucky for us there is a new fish in the sea, like our winged avenger.”

“I thought he was an angel.”

“Does it matter what we call him? The way that sword moves and slices...” She sighed.

I laughed. “Almost sounds like you love the sword more.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Because I do. He’s pretty and all, but I’ll bet he’s high maintenance. And I’m the jealous type. Guy like him probably has men and women tossing themselves at him. I’d end up in jail on murder charges.”

“Don’t tell me your type runs more to the geeky type?” I joked and yet didn’t miss the pink in her cheeks. Did she have a crush on someone? Maybe Clive? A good friend would probably know. In my defense, the whole having-friends thing remained rather new.

I waved my donut. “These aren’t our usual.”

“Mimi’s Coffee Shop closed, so I had to get Ivan’s to deliver.”

“What happened?”

“She relocated.” Nelly’s lips turned down. “Says it’s time she took her human ass somewhere she won’t end up collateral damage.”

“Was she having problems with cryptids?” I asked.

“More like everything kept going wrong. Said she was losing too many batches of dough. Ingredients not acting right. Milk going sour.”

“That sucks. I was in love with her blueberry fritter.”

We toasted to the departure of our favorite breakfast place then toasted again to the new guy. His breakfast bagel hit the spot.

Breakfast done, Nelly and I headed for the office, which used to be a car mechanic’s garage. Still looked like one on the outside, but inside, desks and tables and chairs of all types were spread out. Only the very last bay still acted as a repair

one. Baptiste claimed he did his best thinking under a car. Today that suited me just fine since I remained a bit pissed—and hurt. You’d think I’d be used to disappointment by now. It still stung sharply.

We refilled our cups at the coffee machine then headed for our workstations, which sounded more formal than simply logging onto a computer. It was as I read a summary for the previous day that the hunk who’d saved me walked in, minus the wings. Today he wore a battered brown leather jacket, jeans, and aviator glasses.

I blinked.

Nelly whispered, “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

Baptiste came practically bounding from the back to glare at the newcomer, but before he could open his mouth, Yvonne suddenly stood in front of the stranger with a smile. “You’re three seconds early,” she declared, obviously expecting him.

“Hello, Yvonne.” The now wingless man bussed her cheek and held her hand, seeming like a nice guy until his gaze swept over me. Cold eyes. A hard expression. He assessed and dismissed me in the same moment. “Who’s in charge?”

Baptiste bristled, but Nelly stalked forward with thumbs in the loops of her pants. “Are you lost, sugar?” she drawled. “I think the bar you’re looking for, the one with the stripper pole, is that way.” She pointed and smiled.

Not a nice smile.

His proved even meaner. “Glad to see you know the address, because you ever talk to me like that again and you will be looking for a job.”

She recoiled, and Baptiste snapped, “Why are you being a dick?”

The man lifted a brow. “Me? She’s the one with the insults, so calm your puppy ass down.”

Baptiste flexed and trembled. It was like the stranger wanted to die. But despite my annoyance, I didn’t want

Baptiste getting in trouble, so I threw myself on the grenade next. “If you want to kill yourself, I know a bridge.”

He turned, gaze unimpressed as he sneeringly said, “Next time you confront a troll, maybe have an actual weapon.”

My lips thinned. “I wasn’t expecting a troll, let alone three. And for your information, I handled one of them on my own. Without a weapon, so there.” Never mind I lucked out because of a hole in the ground.

“One out of three. If not for my timely arrival, you’d be dead.” A blunt, yet truthful observation.

“Yay for you. Would you like a medal? Is this your way of asking for sexual favors after the fact, because I’m going to admit right now, I give a terrible blowjob.”

Poor Baptiste choked and coughed so hard he bent double. Nelly outright laughed. Yvonne...Where the fuck had she gone? Someone really needed to put a bell on her, given her cat-like ability to appear and disappear.

The dude—where had he put his wings?—gaped at me. “What is wrong with you?”

“According to my now dead mother, so many things.” But I was beginning to realize some of my quirks were just fine.

Nelly stepped to the plate next. “Now that we’ve had fun trading insults, you still haven’t said who you are and why you’re here.”

Renarde swept in before his reply. She saw us all standing united against the man and clapped her hands. “Excellent. You’ve met.”

“Met who?” Baptiste growled.

“This is Huego. Our new liaison.”

“Liaison with who?”

“The God Odin.”

While everyone looked properly impressed, me? I laughed.

I laughed alone. I swallowed my mirth and pointed to Nelly. “Not an angel. I win.”

“He looks like one when he’s got his wings on,” Nelly sulked.

“There is nothing angelic about me.” Huego bristled. “I am Odin’s raven.”

“Ah, raven, that explains the wings. So you’re a shapeshifter.” It explained why we didn’t plummet to the ground when my face met his bare chest. Had he used magical wings, we’d both be dead.

He looked even angrier than before. “Are you stupid? I am Odin’s right hand. His soldier on Earth.”

“Shouldn’t that be sky since you fly?”

Maybe I was evil given the pleasure I derived in poking him. Next time he should try being less of a dick in the first place.

“By insulting me, you’re disrespecting Odin.”

“First off, you’re a big boy. Pretty sure you can handle some rough humor about your wings. And second, this god you supposedly work for, you ever met him? Had dinner? Shook his hand? Or is this another one of those burning bush, I had a dream, look a stone tablet with writing kind of life missions?” I’d asked these questions many times of religious believers because I wanted to know. Was their god real? Did they have solid proof?

“I don’t have to answer you.”

“How about you just introduce me to your god then. I’d love to shake his hand.” I stripped my glove and waggled my fingers.

He met my gaze, and his lip curled. “You must be the null witch. Expecting to just touch things to win the battle. Explains your stupidity with the trolls yesterday.”

“It wasn’t trolls when I started,” I grumbled.

“No, it was a more complex trap than the monsters usually use. For you. One wonders why.” His gaze flicked up and down.

Remaining unaffected proved hard. I kept my chin high. “Everyone is only assuming it was meant for me because I’m the idiot who walked right into their trap.”

“Do you think they were working together?” Renarde asked Huego.

Huego shook his head. “We’d better hope not. If the monsters are now allying themselves in order to ambush us, we’re in a lot of trouble.”

“What do you think we should do, Mr. Raven?” I said it nicely.

“I think we need to test the theory of them working in cahoots. And at the same time, see if it’s only one person they’re after.” The way the bird man stared at me...

It took me a second before I exclaimed, “You want to use me as bait!”

He crossed his arms and gave a single nod.

I would have replied, only Baptiste jumped in. “How about instead of dangling Ruby, we send her away. If she’s drawing them, then they’ll follow.”

“Not happening,” said with a glare in his direction. He apparently still thought he could make me leave.

Renarde took my side. “Ruby’s not going anywhere. We need to keep the problem contained.”

“And we have the advantage here of setting a trap,” Nelly, the traitor, added. She winked at me. “No, I am not throwing you to the monsters. This is about saving you. If we control the battleground, we control the outcome.”

“Unless they come in greater numbers,” I mumbled.

There might have been more discussion of dangling me like a delicious raw steak in front of starving lions had we not gotten two monster-sighting calls at once.

I couldn't wait to escape. To my annoyance, they paired me with the new guy.

Actually, Huego pointed and said, "You with me." Then he stalked off.

I might have balked or outright laughed, only Baptiste growled, "You aren't going anywhere with him."

That was definitely a jealous statement if I ever heard one.

I turned my back and followed the raven.

At least he had a nice ass.

CHAPTER 5

THE MOMENT WE EXITED THE SMU GARAGE, MY PARTNER AND I split into different directions, which led to Huego whistling.

Seriously? “I’m not a dog,” I declared, half turned to direct my ire.

Mr. I-Don’t-Give-A-Shit Huego straddled a motorcycle I’d not noticed on the opposite side of the exit. “If you were a canine, you’d listen better.”

I blinked. The man had a quick insult for everything. “You did not just say that.”

“Are you hard of hearing? Let’s try again. Come here, null witch. Here’s a good agent.” He patted the seat behind him, a thin sliver that would force me to wrap around him like an anaconda if I wanted to stay alive and road rash free.

He was out of his fucking mind if he thought I’d be riding bitch.

“I don’t know where you’re used to working, however, here in the United States of America, what you’re doing right now falls under the umbrella of sexual harassment.”

“Asking you to get on a motorcycle?” He scoffed.

“Asking me to ride in a way that forces me to be in extremely close proximity to you is wildly inappropriate, and I have the right to say no.” I turned and headed back for the building.

“Stop.”

I kept going.

“We’ll take a fucking car,” he snapped.

I paused. I could march in, file a formal complaint, get his ass fired or reassigned. I could realize that I’d been pushing his buttons and he had a right to retaliate in kind.

Both idiots. But we were also professionals. Now that we’d both metaphorically pissed on each other, maybe we could get past this and work together.

I glanced at him. “Awesome. I’m driving.”

He glowered. “Don’t push it.”

The smile got bitten before it could emerge with a giggle. See, I didn’t actually want to drive, but I did get pleasure from annoying him.

“I wouldn’t dream of pushing you, Raven.”

“Name is Huego.”

“I don’t know if we’re on a first name basis yet.”

His scowl warmed my evil heart.

I dangled the keys I’d snared earlier since I planned to go grab some things at the store after work. We took the four-door sedan because nothing says motorcycle dude like driving something easy on mileage with great trunk space.

He said nothing, and neither did I as I read the 911 dispatch on the location we headed for. Something about the house eating people. Folks went in. No one came out. I had to wonder what hid inside.

He broke the silence. “Earlier you implied you didn’t believe in gods.”

“Not implied, outright stated.”

“Why?”

I glanced sideways at him. “Because they don’t exist.”

His gaze flickered between me and the road. “You can’t actually believe that.”

“It’s not a belief, it’s the truth. If it makes you feel better, I wish I was wrong, but if you knew the religions I’d

explored...” The people who’d almost killed me as I shattered their beliefs. “It’s never divine but rather wishful thinking that shapes magic to make it appear as if there is a miracle.”

“Gods aren’t sorcerers casting spells,” he stated. “They have the power to make their will reality.”

“No, they’ve brainwashed people into thinking they can.”

“You only think that because you’ve never met a god,” he declared.

“Exactly. I’d love to. I keep trying, but not one has come through yet.” Then, because he brought up the subject of gods, “Maybe you could hook me up. Let me meet your Odin.”

“He is very busy.”

“Of course he is.” My words dripped with sarcasm. “Let me guess, rather than see you in person, he sends you messages in dreams and you act on them. Or do you hear a voice?”

“Your cynicism is unbecoming.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Your truth. Religion gives people a belief system. For some, it’s a map to how they want to live their lives. For others, a lifeline so they don’t end theirs abruptly.”

“But none of it is real.”

“Does it matter if it is?”

Interesting question to ask. I’d always viewed religion through a personal lens. I couldn’t see the supposed gods and their miracles therefore they didn’t exist, which, in turn, demoralized me. Hundreds of deities and, through no choice of my own, I had to be agnostic.

It wasn’t fair.

It led to me doubling down. “Sounds like you’re admitting your god isn’t real.”

“Odin exists. He’s not some magical golem.”

“And yet the moment I asked for proof, you had an excuse why we couldn’t meet. Everyone always has an excuse,” I exclaimed.

“Or maybe you’ve not done anything worthy enough to meet one. Why should you, who pays the gods no respect, who does nothing in their name, get recognition over others who are true disciples?”

The perspective had me shutting my mouth. I’d not thought of it in those kinds of terms. Still, it was yet another rationalization as to why I couldn’t meet Odin or any other deity.

Huego pulled the sedan to a curb.

I eyed the house, muttering, “That’s hideous.”

The multistory home must have started out small because the demarcation of the many additions proved hard to follow. My left eye twitched. What kind of nightmare of rooms and pointless halls were inside?

“What did the report say?” Huego asked, looking up.

I also eyed the precarious turret with a slight lean about fifty feet above ground. “You might not want me getting close. Looks like this place might have skipped building codes in favor of magic to hold it up.”

“Keep your gloves on then and don’t touch anything,” he advised.

“It’s not just my touch that causes magic to lose its power but a radius around me.”

“Wait, you’re leaking your ability to nullify?”

“I’m not doing it on purpose,” I huffed.

“Have you even tried to rein it in?”

“I can’t,” I exclaimed, only to suddenly wonder. Could it be controlled? I’d always assumed I’d just be an oozing blackspot for magic all my life. It might be life changing if I could figure out how to suck it back in.

“There is no can’t. Just try,” he declared as he marched away from me.

“Wait, did you just quote Yoda?”

“Stay there,” was his non-reply.

Exactly what I’d wanted, and yet I fidgeted as I eyed the house. The many windows hung at different heights, some with curtains, some blinds, one with newspaper. I leaned against the car rather than the rickety fence.

How long had he been inside?

What had the report said? I flicked through the notes on my phone, all kinds of mentions of people going into the house. All currently missing. And those sent in to investigate opened the door and managed to say something about webs before the portal slammed shut. And another person went missing.

As I stood there, I glanced at the neighbor’s house. The grass was kind of long, but more oddly, the car in the driveway was covered in leaves from a storm that happened a week ago. The house to the other side had a pile of boxes in front. Both had an air of abandonment. A peek over my shoulder showed two more houses on the cul-de-sac, both with packages piled outside. A minivan had its side door open.

I faced the house where my partner had disappeared. He’d been in there a while. Long enough he might be in trouble and here I pussied out. I set my jaw and strutted to the front door. I knocked and prepared my speech.

Agent Garcia, SMU, I’m here to assist my partner.

Only no one answered.

Fear for my partner’s safety? Grounds to enter.

The door opened silently, unlocked and well-greased. A surprise in the mishmash house.

Nothing collapsed as I crossed the threshold. A positive sign, I hoped.

I entered the hall to see four staircases branching off in a space that went several stories high. It might have looked more impressive and less panty-wetting without the cobwebs.

The sticky strands weaved back and forth across the space, forming a network that would shudder and warn its maker the moment I touched them.

Yet, Huego was in here.

I should call for backup.

The door behind me slammed shut and locked. I whirled, whipping off my glove to grab the knob. I could counter its spell. Only it didn't budge. I fumbled for the latch, only to realize it was the kind that needed a key, and I doubted the person on the other side giggling was going to use theirs to let me out.

Not when they whispered, "Yummy, yummy in mummy's tummy."

Creepy? You have no fucking idea. I had no counter for a non-magical trap.

I checked my phone. No signal. Fucking lovely. Wasn't this how many a horror movie started?

The webbing all over had me treading carefully, wondering which way to go until I noticed the disturbance going up the staircase. Severed strands parted to carve a narrow passage. Had to be Huego.

I kept inside the swath he'd left, wondering what the hell I'd do once I found him. Maybe the spider in this place was magical. Which led to me breathing hard as it occurred, *I'll have to touch a spider.*

A true nightmare. I might just run screaming.

But then I'd be leaving Huego without a backup. He deserved better than to die his first day on the job. In my defense, he'd insisted on going inside. I glanced upward. How much higher could I go without having to touch something to keep my balance? Would the house collapse the moment I did?

I could only hope they'd built more securely than expected. I kept climbing and circling the strange, jagged spire. At the very stop, a balcony with a wooden rail circled a space full of dangling cocoons. Some of them squirmed.

Inside, I screamed. On the outside, I squeaked and breathed really, really fast.

Which did nothing to help anyone. What could I do? I couldn't tell which one Huego might be, and cutting them down would send them plummeting to their deaths.

The railing circling the writhing shapes didn't seem all that sturdy, so I steered clear of it and held out my phone. The greater height didn't give me any service. Bloody hell.

"Which one are you, Huego?" I muttered.

One of the cocoons swayed violently, a big one on the far side. I jogged over and bit my lip at the wiggling body wrapped in thread.

"Stop moving," I hissed. "I can't grab you." As he calmed down, I slipped my glove back on.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I leaned out over the rail and reached for him, slapping my covered fingers to the sticky web and dragging it toward me. I had a hard time trying to lift him enough to get him over the rail. Groan, heave, and ho. I grunted as I bumped him over the bar. But in good news it held, and now he was in reach for me to actually help him.

My gloves stuck tight to the webbing, so I slipped my hands out and left them there. I then knelt, eyeing the webbing on his face, wondering what to do to rip it.

A quick glance showed there were no tools available but my hands. After a slight hesitation, I dug my fingers into the cocoon covering his head. To my surprise, it didn't stick to me at all. The strands felt slightly warm and soft as silk to my touch. I ripped them apart, exposing part of Huego's face. He took in a breath.

"Free my hands," was how he said thank you.

Since my touch turned the sticky to silk, I had a good reason to grope and skim my fingers over the cocoon, my tummy tight as if hungry, before stopping where I assumed his hands were. I got his thigh. I tore upwards until his fingers wiggled free. Then I stood back as he began to work through the strands. And by work, I mean he tore out of that cocoon!

He freed his upper body and reached for the webbing tying his feet. His hands got stuck.

He growled, “A little help.”

I darted forward and put my hands on the strands, turning them into silk. With his hands unfettered, he tore the rest of the web apart and fell onto the balcony.

“Let’s get everyone else. I’ll hold, you lean.”

I didn’t grasp what he meant until he pointed to the next dangling body. I eyed the railing, and the fall if he didn’t hold on.

Gulp.

This was what I’d signed up for. Being a hero. Huego didn’t let me down.

I grabbed the cocoons, and he had me run my hands up them quickly, head to foot. Then he tore through the webbing, and we moved to the next.

Gasps and sobs emerged as we freed those trapped. Their steps thudded in panic as they ran down. I assumed they made it out. I didn’t watch as I reached for the farthest dangling cocoons, leaning over so far my heart stopped as I looked down. Way down.

Huego held me firmly, not once wavering or scaring me into thinking I’d fall. Once I got the body close enough, he—

The webbing suddenly snapped and sent us off balance. While I let go of the cocoon, we still fell backwards, with Huego cushioning my fall.

I bounced to my feet immediately and moved to free the last person. The webbing pulled away from their face, but it

was too late. I stepped away from the corpse. A glance showed two other cocoons also not moving.

Huego had his sword out, and he glanced over the railing.

“Do not tell me the spider is coming.” I’d like to be somewhere less precarious if that happened.

“No, but we should move. That hole in the floor just got wider.”

“Another one?” I grumbled. “Should have called this place Swiss Cheese.”

We sped down the steps, skipping and thumping as if chased. We hit the main floor, and as I watched, a tile cracked and fell into the widening pit.

“Watch your step,” he cautioned.

“No shit.” A draft drew my glance to the room adjacent to the front door, the bay window broken. Those we’d rescued had smashed their way through. Smart since the door remained locked.

Huego knelt on the edge of the pit and peered down.

“Dumbass, what are you doing?”

“I have wings.”

“Too wide for that hole. Move back before you fall and I have to explain why I am not climbing down to haul your ass out.” I pivoted to head for the room with the broken window.

I never even noticed the spider, its gray-white carapace blending in with the webbing it weaved.

It slammed into me, and we fell into the pit!

CHAPTER 6

TERRIFYING DOESN'T EVEN START TO COVER BEING HUGGED BY a spider while plummeting. It felt like a shit-ton more than eight legs.

We didn't fall straight and hit the side of the hole, making the arachnid spasm. I took advantage to shove and fight, pushing it away.

And then I fell in darkness. No idea of when I'd land. Where the spider was.

If I'd live...

Something grabbed me! Terrifying until a flail of my hands encountered smooth, warm flesh and Huego whispered, "Nail me in the nuts and I will let go."

Yeah, that calmed my ass mighty quick. He tugged me to his chest, but he didn't fly. How could he? The pit I'd seen from above didn't span more than eight or ten feet across. Not even enough to half spread his wings.

Was it getting lighter?

The dark turned to light that showed a widening shaft leading into a massive cavern. The moment he had clearance, Huego snapped his wings open, and our free fall suddenly went sideways.

I yelled. In my defense, I didn't like roller coasters either. He held me tight to his chest, and I closed my eyes until things felt smooth and not like I was about to die. I turned my cheek to see we were coasting down to the floor. The tiled stone was spread evenly, the top of it intricately carved.

Before we could land, our flight jerked. I gasped as Huego muttered, “Try to not break an ankle,” and dropped me.

Luckily not far. Even luckier, nothing twisted or snapped. A glance overhead showed Huego fluttering in front of the dangling spider who spat more webbing at him. He blocked the shots with his sword and then sliced the strand holding the arachnid.

It hit the floor and scuttled for me!

I screamed and ran. I’d dare anyone not to.

The high-pitched squeal didn’t sound promising, and I half whirled to see Huego pulling his sword from the spider’s body.

Dead. Thank fuck. I caught my breath as Huego joined me.

“Where are we?” I huffed, glancing around at the pillars rising in the large space, their surface glowing enough to make out shapes and walls. I could only assume the darker holes were openings to other spaces.

“Temple.”

“To whom?”

“Does it matter? You don’t believe in gods,” he mocked.

“Even I’ll admit this place is impressive, though.” I craned and saw the detailed carvings continued overhead. Too much to take in at once. An incredible amount of delicate work. I whirled and said, “This is yet more proof Nexus is built atop porous ground.”

“I think you mean ancient ruins that got buried.”

I shivered. “Please don’t say that word when we’re so far down and can’t get back up.”

“There is no such thing as can’t.”

“If you say so, oh wise one,” I muttered in reply.

“It might be challenging but not impossible.” He glanced around. “Odd there’s no sign of the spider being down here.”

“Maybe they don’t like living underground.”

“Then where did the one in the house come from?” he remarked.

A good question. Giant spider monsters didn’t just appear inside inhabited homes. Most homes also didn’t have a hole in their floor that went hundreds of feet into a long-abandoned ruin.

“Now that we’re down here, what next?” I tried to sound tough, even as I wanted to hug myself. Because, hello, stuck a few hundred feet underground and I couldn’t climb worth shit. Nor did we have food or water. What if I had to pee?

He appeared nonplussed as he stood there, thumbs looped in his jeans, drawing attention to that etched chest. The man had impressive abs. He’d sucked his wings back in somehow. He lifted one hand to point. “I say we see where that tunnel goes.”

“Why that one?” I asked.

“Because, one, it’s not blocked like the others, and two, you can see a dirt trail going into it, showing signs of use.”

“And that’s a good thing?” I walked quickly to keep up with this long stride. He remained just ahead, leaving me to stare at his back. Not a single mark on it or even a tattoo or scar on his skin to show where his wings emerged. His feathery appendages were solid like a shapeshifter, and yet they seemed to appear and disappear out of nothing. Literally a blink of an eye, which wasn’t my experience with shifters who usually agonized when they changed shapes.

“If a tunnel is being used, it’s because it leads to somewhere with something we need. Animals, whether two-legged or more, go where they are most likely to survive and thrive.”

“Or they set traps to fool their next meal into bringing themselves to them,” I remarked, noting a large pile of scat that stank with freshness. What pooped that big?

“I doubt there’s much to feed even the smallest creature down here. This dusty place has no life.” He waved a hand. “Which is why I imagine they created those holes to the

surface. They found the perfect way to hide and yet be able to feed.”

“Wait, you think the monsters are causing the sinkholes?” I quickly added, “I didn’t see any piles of dirt, not a single rock where we landed.”

“How do you think those other tunnels got blocked?”

I’d actually not thought of it. In my defense, I was still kind of freaked out about being so far underground, following monster poop. “How do they know where to dig?”

“Air shafts.”

“What?”

“I’m going to bet the whole town is ribboned with access points to this ruin. Air shafts that the monsters are widening for more widespread use. It’s brilliant really. Moving around unseen underground, choosing an access point to the surface, most likely sending one of the smaller minions first to scout a location.”

“Like those houses and the church.” It made a twisted sort of sense. “Which means they could be digging more right now somewhere else in town.” Not very reassuring.

“Most likely. But now we know what we’re looking for. Once we account for people as we evacuate them, we should be able to narrow down the access points.”

“You think we should evacuate Nexus?” I repeated in surprise.

“At the very least, the populace needs to be properly informed so they can make a choice.”

“Can’t inform them if we don’t get out,” I grumbled as he entered a hallway so big I couldn’t touch the ceiling even if standing on someone’s shoulders.

“We’ll get out. Using one of those air shafts. We just need to find one that’s flyable or climbable, and out we go.”

He made it sound so easy. It made me feel a bit better.

The massive tunnel, tall enough even for a troll and dotted with more poop, had me mulling over his theory the monsters were using this underground ruin to move around Nexus. It explained how they kept appearing. Only one thing didn't make sense.

"How did the monsters get in here in the first place?" We had a great number of captured cryptids claiming they'd woken up in or around Nexus. Weeks of time lost with no memory of in between.

"We might find the answer if we look."

"Here? Now? Alone?" All three words popped from me. I couldn't help myself. This was terrifying.

"Trepidation from the woman who faced down trolls?"

"Because I had no choice."

"Exactly. Just do it again."

"You told me I did a shit job."

"Do better this time, then," he stated as we entered a new room, also illuminated, the glow more green than the warm white of before. The very stone provided the light, and because I had to know, I traced my bare fingers over an illuminated part. It remained lit.

"Risky," he admonished. "Next time wait until we scout the room before you try to put us in the dark."

"It's not magic based," I offered with a sheepish grin.

"Because it's a stone that reacts to breath. The exhalation of living things feeds it and causes it to glow as it processes the gas."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"Because this is your first ruin."

"You've seen others?"

"Only two with stone like this. This one is in much better condition. Look at the benches."

My gaze went to where he pointed. The benches he spoke of lined the chamber on either side of four evenly spaced doorways. They were of various heights, from super short to giant as if to accommodate many lengths of legs. Over the doors, the walls held hooks, or should I say perches? A room meant to hold many types of beings.

Right now, there was no one, just a puddle in the middle of the space. The water lay dark and unmoving, reflecting nothing.

“Don’t touch it,” Huego warned unnecessarily.

I had no intention of going near it. Especially since I noticed not a single track went into the center. Every single shit-covered step left by a troll, and what I was pretty sure were giant rats, skirted to the last row of benches as if wanting to hide as they made their way across.

What did they sense? I saw nothing. Overhead, the fresco showed the mouth of a creature wide open, a gaping hole. One of those shafts Huego mentioned!

Could he fly us to it? Even if he could, then what? It was barely big enough to handle one of us at a time. Could I climb that much?

I’d have to if I wanted to escape. Surely the monsters had an easier route. I thought of the last hole though. It didn’t have a staircase or a ladder, and its dirt walls were unstable. So how did they get up there?

Sticking to the front row of benches, I kept a wide berth as I went around the puddle, hit by a pang of intense hunger as I crossed to the other side with the only other doorway. It had glyphs around it, the kind I recognized. Structural magic. Soon as I saw it, I backpedaled. Last thing I wanted was to accidentally deactivate it.

“Keep going straight,” Huego said, emerging from a center row of benches. “Let’s see if the next room has something better.”

“That tunnel has a hex to hold it up.”

“Actually that is a hex to collapse. Commonly used in the past to prevent the enemy from penetrating too deep if they breached outer defenses.”

“That’s not reassuring.”

“It means it won’t trigger easily, meaning keep your hands to yourself.” He swaggered inside. I followed but kept well away from the edges of the doorway, glad of its massive size.

It took only a few paces before I said, “There’s webbing up ahead.”

“I see that.”

“You never did say how you got captured by the spider.” Suddenly it seemed important.

“A spider baby distracted me while its mother attacked.”

“I’m surprised it caught you off guard, given you had no problem handling it after our impromptu dive.”

“That was the baby.”

I blinked at him. “You mean there’s still an oversized spider out there?”

“One probably mad because we killed its child.”

Which was when the webs we could see gave a little tremor.

“Oh shit,” I whispered.

“Run.” He pulled his sword.

“Don’t be a hero,” I yelled, snaring his arm and tugging him with me. We ran, and the spider shot gobs of webbing. It spun out and hit me, the stickiness turning to silk the moment I half twisted to touch it.

It fluttered to the ground. We made it to the entrance of the cave.

As if that would provide protection. I made the mistake of looking inside the tunnel and seeing the spider, massive in girth and terrifying. Mostly because of her bulging sac. She

spat more of her goo as she came for us. A freight train of nightmares.

I did the only thing I could think of to save us.

I yelled, "Move back," and then I slapped my hand on the hex holding the tunnel intact. My stomach clenched and roiled. For a second, nothing happened.

"Get away from the door," Huego hollered, and now it was his turn to pull me away, because, of course, he'd not scooted off when told him to.

We bolted and had our backs to the carnage that started, but we heard the cracking of stone. The shaking and trembling had me praying I'd not just killed us.

I closed my eyes just before the collapse and the inevitable puff of dust. I kept them shut until the shudder underfoot stopped, and then I peeked cautiously.

Grit hung in the air, clouding the wall with the doorway, but I could see lumps and indications of collapse.

But even better... One limp spider leg.

I'd saved us. From being eaten by an arachnid at least.

CHAPTER 7

HAVING ESCAPED BEING COCOONED AND EATEN BY AN arachnid should have been a good thing.

Instead, Huego grimaced. “With that tunnel gone, guess we need to find another exit.”

“Why can’t we just use the one we came down?”

“Too narrow to use for flying, too wide and unstable to properly climb.”

“The team will come looking for us in that house and see the hole. If we wait, they’ll save us.”

“I’d rather get out on our own,” he muttered, stalking back to the center of the room and staying outside of the puddle.

He stared overhead at the opening in the fresco. “That should work. Enough room to brace, not too tight.”

“Says you, and you’re assuming it goes somewhere,” I remarked, coming to stand by his side.

“I didn’t realize you were so keen to remain down here.”

As I opened my mouth to refute, the gentle lap of a wave provided the warning. The water shouldn’t be moving. Huego yanked me, even as I’d already moved—in the opposite direction he tugged. I snapped out of his grip and hit the floor, rolling a few times before stopping. Not injured, I nonetheless remained flat to the floor as a tendril extended from the slick puddle. It lifted and then rotated, as if searching.

This thing couldn’t be a monster. Puddles weren’t alive.

Tell that to the rope of water that shot out to wrap around Huego's legs. He swung his sword and severed it, only to have it reform.

Again, not the actions of something alive, meaning it was animated by magic.

I stuck two fingers in my mouth and whistled.

The watery appendage froze in its swaying search.

"Over here." I waved.

The tentacle shot in my direction. I somehow grabbed hold, but the slippery surface didn't collapse. I got flung.

Holy shit, the puddle *was* alive. I popped to my feet and sprinted just ahead of the seeking water rope.

"Chop it with your sword," I yelled.

"You know that doesn't work," he hollered back.

"Then can't you freeze it with magic?"

"Why don't you un-animate it?"

"I tried." I darted past him, annoyed the water stayed on me rather than changing to him so I could have a second to think.

"You barely touched it. Given its age, it will need a bit more than a slap and a tickle."

I thought of other spells I'd encountered recently that also required more than just my presence or a quick touch. "It will just throw me again," I stated as I dodged yet another strike.

"Ignore its arms. Go for the source."

My gaze went to the original puddle. Not too deep given the level tile. I could do this.

I sprinted for the pool of liquid on the floor, dodging tentacles. I dove at it, expecting to splash and hit hard. I had my hands out to brace. I hit the puddle and kept going, submerging into the liquid, a pure dark place that caused instant panic.

I'd gone in face first. Which way was up?

I thrashed, feeling nothing around me, even as my whole body tingled. The liquid touched all of me, soaking my clothes, bathing my skin. Eyes, ears, nose, even my cooch.

I thrashed and panicked, especially since my lungs got tight. Even my stomach reacted, hungry and too full at once. It wouldn't be long before I'd be unable to resist opening my mouth. The pressure built, and I remembered being a child.

She pulled me up by the hair. I gasped for air, ragged sharp breaths, as she screamed.

“Renounce the devil.”

“I renounce,” I croaked, desperate for it to stop.

“Liar.” My face was shoved down again into the tub filled with cold water. Once more I saw spots, my lungs spasmed, my body readied to die—

NO!

I convulsed as my mouth opened to gulp, but I didn't down, as there was no fluid. No bottomless well of water. My soaked ass lay flat on the floor, blinking up at Huego, who shook his head. “I can't believe you jumped in.”

“You said to touch it.”

“Touch it, not jump in and almost drown. Good thing you nulled it before it killed you.”

“I've never encountered anything so strong.” I sat up and had a hard time reconciling the experience I'd just had with the reality.

“A common thread that is increasing with each unique encounter.”

“Meaning what?” I asked, having lost some brain cells during my lack-of-oxygen moment.

“We are facing threats unseen or unheard of for centuries. Not only that, but they are stronger, wilier, organized.”

“Great. Just what the world needs, super monsters.”

“A good thing they have us to keep them in check.”

I snorted. “Because we’re doing such a good job.”

“Says the woman who just vanquished two rather large threats.”

I blinked. Guess I had, but still... “If we get out of this, I am asking for a new partner.”

“Come on, aren’t you having fun?” he asked, glancing upward.

“Not really.”

“I am. Your town is much more interesting than expected.”

“Well la-di-da for you. And it’s not my town. I only recently relocated here.” Although technically I’d been conceived in Nexus, given my surrogate was inseminated somewhere in town. I’d yet to find out by who. My whole birth remained shrouded in mystery, and I’d kind of decided to leave it there.

“I’ve never returned to my place of birth,” he admitted, not looking at me but the damned wall again.

“Why not?” I asked because I had nothing better to do.

“Infidels burned it to the ground.”

“Oh.”

“My mother barely escaped with me and my brother.”

“Is he a raven too?”

“He’s dead.” A flat reply.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He was a craven traitor.”

“How did you go from fleeing death to working for Odin?”

“I was rewarded for valorous acts.”

“You don’t seem like the hero type.” My honesty ran away with me. It also served to help avoid our current situation.

“There is a difference between heroism and valor. One looks good, the other does good.”

“Why do I get the impression you use that to justify doing things folks won’t like?”

“There are always some who will dislike and complain about the actions of those who would help.”

“Speaking of complaining, any idea how to get out of here? Because I’m already not liking these wet clothes. Not recommended for spelunking.” I shivered, and he pursed his lips.

“As I mentioned before, the access we used to get down can’t be climbed without aid. There is the spot above us.” He pointed. “But it will be onerous. It will be at least an hour of climbing, more if you’re inept and take too many breaks.”

“Do I have a choice to escape?”

“Not really.”

I sighed. “Your pep talks need work. Lead the way.”

“Hold on,” was my two-second warning before those wings popped out of nowhere.

I knew to grab hold before he thrust into the air. He flew upward with several mighty strokes to the mouth of the monster in the fresco. A dark hole that wafted air. A good sign.

“When I toss you up, grab hold,” his instructions.

Before I could scream, “Are you insane?” he’d flung me. I was halfway through the hole before I arched and reached out. A lip on the inside saved me, but I dangled.

“Pull yourself up,” he advised.

“No shit,” I huffed. Since a pullup wasn’t happening, I had to scissor my leg up until I could hook my toe and grunt my way upward. The ledge proved wide enough to stand and get back my breath.

A moment later Huego joined me, easily gripping the lip and pulling himself in. An already tight hole became tighter. Barely arms’ width, the slimy walls would be difficult to navigate, until I saw the faintly illuminated dents.

Toe and fingerholds. Great. A built-in ladder. More climbing. I went first because, as Huego said, "If you fall, I might be able to stop you."

Might.

Better not fall.

I started, my fingers slipping and scraping at the same time. The footholds at least proved large enough for my feet, if also slick. I might not have made it if not for the regular ledges breaking up the tunnel.

After the second one where I rested my tense calves, I asked, "They built this to be climbed?"

"How else would maintenance workers upkeep?"

A good reply, but I wanted to know who built a kingdom so far underground. Wouldn't it have been easier to stay above?

In better news, there was no magic inside the tube. After the way I'd collapsed that side tunnel, I'd worried. I'd lost my gloves, which meant I left skin and blood on the stone as we inched our way upward until I reached one last ledge and a metal cap blocking our way.

"It's stuck," I hissed, trying to shove and push it.

"Squeeze back," Huego demanded, this last section having narrowed to being barely wide enough for one, let alone two.

I flattened myself best I could as he joined me in the tight space, the two of us wedged, hopefully not for eternity. I'd hate to die like this. Face to face with a half-dressed handsome man.

His hands brushed parts of me as he lifted them to brace against the lid. I joined him, and together, with much grunting and cursing, we eventually realized the lid needed unscrewing.

It came off easily after that, spilling us into a dry sewer junction with a rattling grate overhead leading to a busy street. I almost hissed like a vampire at the sliver of daylight that hit me when he lifted it for a peek. Hours down there felt like days.

“We’ll need a quieter spot to come out,” he advised, lowering the lid.

We headed down a branch that didn’t shake as cars kept passing. We emerged from the grate to find ourselves on the side street close to the Christmas store and that bakery I loved run by an Earth witch named Mindy. The one place that probably wouldn’t look too askance at our appearance and let us use their phone because mine got murdered in the puddle.

Despite the fact we stank and probably looked wretched, I grabbed him by the arm. “Let’s hit the bakery. We can grab a donut while we wait for the cavalry to pick us up.”

“No.” The only thing the grim Huego said before shooting into the sky.

His loss.

The donut was delicious.

CHAPTER 8

REIVER, EX-CA AGENT AND HALF OWNER OF THE BAKERY, offered me a ride and use of his phone since mine didn't survive the puddle. The second phone in as many months to be destroyed on the job. I hoped the SMU got a special deal on them.

Once he dropped me at the apartment building, I didn't even hesitate to hit my pad first for a shower. I'd done a preliminary report using Reiver's phone, and a more comprehensive debrief could wait until I'd rinsed the cursed puddle from my skin. I threw my sewer clothes right out. Some things couldn't be washed away.

Only once I'd scrubbed and rinsed twice did I finally emerge in a cloud of steam. While I let my hair drip dry, I typed out a report for the SMU, detailing the situation and all the observations I'd made inside the house and down in those two giant caverns. Even mentioned the puddle that almost got me. Once I'd filed it, I leaned back with a sigh.

From that report, the house would be condemned and a barrier placed over the hole down to the ruins. Just like the sewer entrance we found would be secured.

Which made me wonder, how many more of those openings littered the city? Huego implied many. While it pained to admit, he might be right.

What exactly was that place? A ruin, yes, but built by who? And with at least one access point in the sewer, how had it remained undiscovered for so long? It made no sense unless someone actively hid its presence.

That was when it hit me like a bolt of lightning.

Since I couldn't text Huego—we'd not gotten that far yet since we just met—I could contact Renarde, my boss, the one who brought him on board. I might not have a phone, but my Apple laptop could still message.

Without any preamble, I wrote, *Did you know there were ruins under Nexus?* Send.

As I paced, waiting for a reply, Wally paced with me on his perch. He no longer randomly shouted obscene things at me. I took it as a sign he felt comfortable. A few years back, I'd rescued him from abuse. It took a while before he stopped flinching every time I got near. The fact we both loved food helped. I just wished his food didn't wiggle.

We'd reached the point where he seemed to be thriving. Why, that recipe Baptiste's mom had given me appeared to be helping some of his feathers return. I saw sprouting tufts.

A reply arrived. *I was recently made aware of the ruins. They're why Huego was sent here. He was exploring the one under the church when the troll came crashing down.*

That explained how he'd come to my aid seemingly from nowhere. *When were you going to tell us?*

The Cryptid Archeological Society asked we not say anything and to block access to the holes lest unsavory sorts compromise the locations.

I thought of the puddle. *There are dangers below.*

We're aware, but the historical society is insistent. They did say that SMU might be called in to assist should they encounter something they can't handle.

Was it wrong that I felt a little miffed another department got first crack? Huego was right that it had been rather exhilarating. After the fact. Now that I could think back upon it in the comfort of my home, it hit me that we'd come across something epic. The proof of a new society, possibly a forgotten religion. A religion that died when it ran out of believers, and now monsters used those tunnels.

This town is sitting on a time bomb, I typed.

Yes.

No denial? *And?*

Her reply chilled me. *I'll explain everything at the briefing. See you in the morning.*

She was done. Way to end a conversation. Rattled, I needed to get out and talk to someone.

“I’m going to find Nelly. You coming?” I asked.

Wally hopped off his perch and fluttered to my shoulder. I opened the door to the hall to see Nelly standing there, hand lifted.

“Where are you going?” she asked, arching a brow.

“To find you,” I said on a laugh.

“Did you hear? Renarde’s got some kind of big meeting planned in the morning.”

“I did. But check this out. I’ve got more dirt.” I showed her the text messages.

Her eyes widened. “Nexus is sitting atop an underground city?”

I shrugged. “So it seems.”

“I read your report. Sounds like there were quite a few rooms down there.”

“No shit. In just the first room we found, there were at least four tunnels. The room with the puddle, though, only had two.” One of which I’d collapsed, hopefully not blocking off access to something important.

“A network of tunnels and access points below would explain how some of the monsters are getting around. But not all. How are they getting inside?” Nelly tapped her lower lip as she walked into my apartment.

I shut the door. “Exactly what I said. How would they even know they’re there, given many of the monsters are from distant lands?”

Nelly chewed her thumb, and it was Wally who said it best. “Who can think on an empty stomach?”

“He’s right. I could use some food.”

We ignored his suggestion of Strippin’ Chikkin, where the food came with a topless waitress, and settled on a burger joint made to look ‘50s style. To me it appeared shabby and unkept, but no one else seemed to notice, so I could only assume a glamour to a grandeur long lost. I wore my gloves again so as not to ruin the illusion for anyone else, although I could do nothing for the bubble of reality when I sat down in a booth in the far corner.

We ordered from a menu that offered sandwiches that moored to those that needed spankings. I would never again repeat the name of mine, but it had barbecue sauce, cheese, bacon, and other mouthwatering stuff on top of my crispy chicken breast.

I was just taking a big bite from my sandwich and having a mouth-gasm when he walked in. Baptiste, unmistakable in appearance, if shocking since he wore a smile. A smile for the petite woman by his side. Tiny, blonde, and perfect. Unlike me. The way she clung to him left no doubt as to who she was.

The fiancée.

“Why are you murdering your sandwich?” Nelly exclaimed as my fingers crushed it. She turned to see where I was staring then huffed, “Holy shit.” She flipped back to facing me. “She’s ugly.”

I snorted as I set my mangled burger down. “No need to lie. I have eyes.” My napkin turned gross as the condiments smeared it. The barbecue sauce stretched up my thumb, so I brought it to my mouth to lick, which was, of course, when Baptiste noticed us. He stiffened and then, instead of doing the right thing, steered his way toward us, fiancée in tow, and me with my thumb in my mouth.

I finished my slurp. Might as well. I had no need to impress anyone.

“Nelly. Garcia.” The use of my last name didn’t slip by me.

I leaned back. “Hey, Beefcake.” The name had the blonde by his side laughing.

“Isn’t he, though?” She squeezed his bicep and held on, staking her claim, all the while smiling at me in challenge.

She could have him.

His gaze focused on me. “I heard about the incident. You okay?”

“Yup. Huego’s useful when falling into big holes in the ground. Which reminds me, stock up on arachnid spray. They’re big this season.”

The cute girl’s nose wrinkled. “I hate bugs. Which is why we’re aiming for a winter wedding. It’ll be so beautiful. Snowy trees. Twinkling lights.”

Winter wasn’t that far off.

“Sounds chilly.” I couldn’t help myself. So help me god, I was such a bitch.

The blonde deflected. “A good thing I’ve got this hunk to keep me warm.” She turned and pressed herself against him, tilting her head back, parting her lips. Looking like she was going to make him the happiest man alive the moment she got him alone.

Damn him for soaking it up. He stared at her, slack jawed.

“We should get a table,” she murmured. “I am so starved.”

“It’s so amazing we finally get to meet Baptiste’s fiancée,” Nelly exclaimed. “How awesome is that. You’ll have to excuse me, though, I am horrible remembering names. What’s yours?”

“Didi. Short for Diandra. Diandra Graphite.” She held out her hand, and I took it, maybe a little too enthusiastically. I was disappointed by the lack of flinching. And she remained just as freaking cute. Baptiste just as enthralled.

Nelly most likely gave it a grip of death, but Didi Diandra too-fucking-cute Graphite, didn't once flinch.

"See you at the office," Baptiste mumbled before dragging her away.

Once they moved off, Nelly whispered, "Holy shit, he's engaged to a Graphite."

"And? Is she important?"

"Her family is. Dad is worth big money in these parts. His granddaddy used to own the mine in Nexus. The one that shut down."

"You think he's marrying her for her wealth?"

Nelly snorted. "Not likely. Don't let his mom fool you. His father's side of the family is filthy rich."

"Then why?" A blunt question.

Nelly waved her hand. "Way I see it, it's something to do with his family or bloodline."

"He once told me he was descended from a god."

Nelly shrugged. "His ability is rare. It's why they gave him the title Garou."

"I thought werewolves were led by an alpha."

"They are. A Garou is sacred to them in a different way."

My years of reading had me blurting out, "Are they doing it for breeding?" It sounded gross even suggesting it.

"It makes the most sense." Nelly actually agreed. "I wonder if she's cryptid."

"She looked human and was fine shaking my hand."

"Doesn't mean shit. Rich folk tend to keep their abilities on the down low."

"Whatever her power is, it certainly has him wrapped around her little finger." He had his back to us as if we didn't matter, which, after the weeks we'd spent as a team and I thought friends, kind of hurt.

Nelly patted my hand. “Forget him. Let’s talk about the hot new guy you got to hang with.”

“He’s arrogant.”

“Un-huh.”

“Rude.”

“Sounds like someone I know.”

I frowned. “He’s a real know-it-all.”

“As opposed to a cynic like you. Sounds like you have a lot in common.”

“We do not,” I huffed.

“Me thinks you protest too much.”

“What’s protesting is my whole body after climbing so far.” I moaned, and yet I didn’t feel as bad as expected. Weird. I’d been feeling energized since emerging from the puddle.

“Excuses. Excuses.”

“Getting involved with coworkers is a bad idea. If you think he’s so hot, why don’t you go after him?”

“Because I’ve got my eye on another man,” was Nelly’s sly reply.

“Clive,” was my riposte.

Her lips pressed tight. “Clive isn’t interested in me as more than a friend.”

“Then who?” I asked in surprise.

“An older man. Quite distinguished.”

“How am I just hearing about him?”

“Because we only recently met. We’re going on a dinner date this weekend to some fancy restaurant.”

“Ooh. What are you going to wear?” Because I might not have had many friendships, but even I knew this was of utmost importance.

When she said she didn't know, our evening was set. We spent it with wine, discarded outfits, and bawdy talk that would have made even a satyr blush.

An evening of relaxation that didn't prepare me for Renarde's declaration the next day.

CHAPTER 9

THE GANG ASSEMBLED IN THE GARAGE FOR RENARDE'S briefing. It started out well with many donuts and coffees. I liked sugar in the morning.

Our boss of the pink hair, small stature, and big presence stood before us and announced, "The town and a perimeter of fifty miles around has been placed under isolation."

I almost spat out my coffee, which would have been a calamity. Thankfully, I swallowed it before I wasted the precious nectar.

"Excuse me, what?" Nelly exclaimed first while I took a more leisurely second sip. No point in freaking out yet. I'd let the others do it for me.

"The town is under quarantine," Renarde baldly stated.

"Fuck off," huffed Clive. "Since when do you joke?"

"She doesn't," growled Baptiste.

"Why?" I asked.

"The Magical Authority believe there is something seriously wrong in Nexus. In order to ensure it doesn't spread, they've cordoned us off," Renarde said as if it weren't a big deal.

Um, hello, yes it was.

"We're prisoners?" Nelly blurted out.

"Hardly." Renarde waved a hand. "Everyone will have free movement within the perimeter."

“What if someone wants out?” Clive asked.

“They won’t be allowed to go past the set boundary.”

“And if they try?” Nelly asked softly.

“What do you think?” Renarde asked with an arched brow.

“If we’ve been quarantined by the Magical Authority, then that means there will be no warning to those who attempt to breach.” A sobering declaration by Baptiste.

“Meaning, what, sharpshooters taking out those trying to flee?” I joked.

“Only if the magical defenses fail.” Renarde’s reply shocked.

It seemed kind of extreme. Exactly what did those imprisoning our town fear?

“What about the things that come in on a regular basis? Food? Medicine? Gas? Everything?” Because I had a standard of living, dammit, and it involved cheese. The processed kind and chips. Also highly processed, salty, and delicious.

“Supplies will still be provided, but exports have been placed on hold until they can be sure the problem in Nexus is contained.”

“And what exactly is the problem?” I asked.

“That’s not yet been determined,” Renarde said, and I wasn’t the only one who snorted.

Clive leaned forward, slapping his legs. “That’s some crap. If they don’t know what’s wrong, then how do we fix it and how will they know it’s been fixed so they can let us out of quarantine?”

Again, her shoulders rolled. “I am just following orders.”

“Orders that make no sense. Come on. You have to admit this is kind of wonky.” Clive wasn’t content with her reply.

“I believe the word we’re looking for is challenging, but in good news, I handpicked this team because you are good at what you do.” Renarde smiled at her compliment.

“You mean good at fucking up?” It slipped from me by accident and drew Renarde’s narrowed gaze.

“For getting the job done, no matter what.”

“What’s the plan then?” Kyana asked the most logical question.

“Huego thinks—”

“Where is Huego?”

I was so glad Nelly asked so I didn’t sound like the stalkerish one.

“Huego is dealing with the ruins under the town because we believe they hold the answer to why we’ve seen so much cryptid and monster interest in Nexus.”

“Meaning you think it’s a curse.” My specialty. “We just need to find the source of it, and I can disarm it.” I only hoped it wouldn’t be as tough as that puddle. I’d have nightmares about drowning for a while.

“When you say Huego is dealing with the ruins, what do you mean?” Clive asked.

“The Cryptid Historical Society has sent their most esteemed scholars to study the ruins. Huego accompanied them into the first sinkhole under the church,” Renarde informed us.

“Is that safe?” I asked.

“The CSA knows how to protect themselves.” Renarde didn’t seem worried.

“If you think the problem is coming from underground, then what are we supposed to do to help?” Kyana asked.

“I don’t know if I want to be exploring underground.” Nelly echoed my sentiments exactly.

“A good thing the CSA has forbidden it then. As of now, only authorized CSA personnel are allowed in the ruins under Nexus. As to what you will be doing, the same thing as before only with one added item. When not handling a monster crisis,

you will be seeking other entrances to the underground ruins that we might monitor them.”

“More sewer diving?” I wrinkled my nose.

“Perhaps. But I don’t want to restrict our search, especially considering the active holes were all under structures. It occurs to me we should start our search in areas we’ve already had problematic cryptid sightings. Baptiste and Ruby, you’ll check out the library where you had that run-in with the doppelganger. Clive and Nelly, you’ll take the mall.”

Both Nelly and I opened our mouths to protest the teams, only to have Clive say, “What if we find an entrance?”

“Call it in but don’t enter.” Renarde turned to Kyana. “I want you to coordinate their efforts from the office. As well, provide an analysis of the police reports, especially missing persons. Note the location of anything about weird occurrences, lights, noises, odd stuff happening. It might lead us to a breach to the underground. We need to find the next large point of entry before something is unleashed.”

“This would be easier without civilians,” I reiterated. If we ever went under review, I wanted it on record that I’d suggested evacuating folks.

“Given we can’t be sure if the nature of the problem is contagious, they’re stuck in here with us. Make an effort to avoid casualties, but if it happens, try and make sure no one is videoing it.” Because eyewitnesses could be hypnotized into believing something else.

Renarde demanded the almost impossible. Could we find the next hole that would cause a problem? I couldn’t even find the doctor who inseminated the woman who bore me.

As the group broke up, I mustered my courage and followed Renarde to her office. I knocked despite the door being left ajar.

“What is it, Ruby?” Renarde glanced at me.

“If this thing causing problems is a curse, shouldn’t I be with Huego in those ruins?” After all, I had the magic fingers to break all spells.

“If your aid is required, then you will be contacted.”

“But—”

“I’m afraid this isn’t my decision.” She cut me off. “In these types of matters, CSA takes precedence.”

“Why would historians be in charge?” I exclaimed.

“Because they are a subset of the Magical Authority, meaning they are better equipped to handle these types of older phenomenon.”

“Better equipped than me? I just have to touch a curse and problem solved.”

She arched a brow. “And what if in doing so it causes a larger issue? We don’t know what we’re dealing with and, until we do, best to let the experts handle it.”

Meaning shut up and do my job. A job I didn’t want to lose by continuing to argue with the boss. Which was why I didn’t whine about the fact she’d paired me with Baptiste. I didn’t like it, but then again, this wouldn’t be the first time. I could be a professional about it. I’d have to since I wasn’t leaving. If Baptiste didn’t like it? Too bad.

I exited her office to find Baptiste waiting. “Ready?”

“Yeah.” We headed for the parking lot and the SUV Baptiste preferred. It was an awkward drive, and I rendered it worse by saying, “Your fiancée seems nice.”

“She is.”

Annoying. I don’t know what I’d expected. Perhaps more fight from a guy who’d earlier indicated he had no choice. “Sounds as if the wedding is going to happen quick.”

“I’d rather not talk about it.” A crack appeared.

I wedged myself in. “Cold feet already?”

He turned to shoot me a glare. “You know this wasn’t my choice.”

“Yet you seem to be going along without issue. Can’t say as I blame you. I hear her family is worth a hefty chunk. Heck,

I'd marry her too, and she's not even my type."

Baptiste said nothing, but he faced forward, his jaw tight, fists clenching the wheel. "It's not about the money."

"Then what?"

"It's complicated."

In other words, none of my business. Time to distance myself. I'd known better than to hope. "Don't care. Your personal life is your deal. Was just making conversation."

"Don't."

"Trust me, I'm not in the mood to talk to you anymore."

"Good."

I sulked in my corner of the truck as we finished the drive in silence. How had I so misjudged him? Then again, story of my life. How many people could I count on to help me? I'd thought I sat beside one. Did that mean I shouldn't trust the others at SMU? Nelly, Clive, even Kyana? I most definitely didn't put it past Renarde to double cross me. She had a sly, vixenish edge to her.

Baptiste parked in front of the library despite the fire-lane no-parking warning. Living dangerously.

"Grab a kit from the back," he ordered, swinging out of his side.

By kit he meant a knapsack with a few essentials, given our ever-expanding encounters with things supernatural. Not everything could be touched into submission. Actual creatures whose very nature caused chaos, like the Puffer Frog with its poisonous breath that required us wearing a mask. There were fire lizards, which—as their name said—burned things. For those, we had flame- and heat-retardant gloves and a can of fire extinguisher. Due to the recent holes popping up everywhere, we also carried a five-hundred-foot coil of rope the size of a spool with a metal ball on the end that sprang open into a grappling hook. I kind of loved it.

A bottle of water, protein bar, and vial of holy water, because vampires were created via virus, not magic. The holy

water burned them long enough to hopefully grab a stake and slam it through their chest. They died quickly, too quickly to dodge their final foul exhalation before they collapsed into a putrid mess. That, as well as other hazards, explained the one-size-fits-all bodysuit we all carried.

The bag hung heavy on me because the charm of light-as-a-cloud didn't work. Boo. But I could carry it. I definitely wanted it, seeing as how the library looked as spooky as I recalled. Gothic and lacking only some kind of carved monster for its rooftop.

Wait, I spoke too soon. It now had a gargoyle clinging to the roof's edge. I craned and squinted. "Real or statue?"

"Both," Baptiste replied. "Gargoyles are alive and do move but turn to stone if you look at them."

"Just like the toys in that movie."

"What movie?" he asked quite seriously.

"Wow, and I thought my childhood was bad."

A mom and her kids, clutching some books, exited as we approached. The mom tucked her children close and did a side-eye as we crossed. I said nothing and kept my gaze straight ahead.

The red hair. Did it every time.

It was only as we passed that I heard the hissed, "Nasty beast. Just like the rest of his family."

No mistaking who that insult regarded. She disapproved of Baptiste. I glanced at him. His expression remained blank as he moved single-mindedly into the building.

I followed him to a place that hadn't changed much since my last visit. Old-school library with lots of wood and lamps sitting upright and glowing at each table. A young woman manned the desk, where, before, a doppelganger in the guise of a septuagenarian had lured in its prey. While Baptiste flashed his badge and told her we'd need access to the basement, I glanced around at the wooden tables, most of them empty. Those scholars that did sit had books open beside

laptops and worked quietly. None glanced with the slightest curiosity at me and Baptiste. I found that odd, I'll admit. Most people didn't ignore a seven-foot beefcake, and in my experience, my red hair drew eyes—and signs against evil.

At times it was as if Nexus didn't care. Here, my difference wasn't any worse than anyone else's. I kind of loved the place for it, even as I knew it was only a matter of time before I did something that got me tossed out.

At the same time, I had to act and help Nexus prevail against whatever lurked and caused trouble. I could only hope my actions didn't worsen the situation.

The basement had vastly changed since the last time I'd visited. For one, the shelving units were now ranged in straight rows and not the labyrinth where I'd lost my partner and found him roasting over a pile of dusty tomes. He didn't cook long enough to find out if he tasted like beef or chicken.

You couldn't even tell there'd once been a throne of books for the doppelganger preying on the studios. We paced each row one by one, the quiet broken only by the scuff of our feet. Once we'd covered every inch, we met in the center aisle.

“Anything?” he asked.

I rolled my shoulders. “You should know by now I don't feel magic.” I affected it, but I never could see when I broke it.

“I don't even know what to look for,” he admitted, kicking at the floor. “I didn't see any hatches in the floor. No doors. Didn't smell shit either.”

“Maybe there isn't an entrance underground,” I muttered, but I had to wonder. The doppelganger had originally escaped from a cryptid prison hundreds of miles away, only to reappear in the library, which then became its lair. Given the condition of the basement, and its attachment to the place, it made a strong case for the doppelganger having found a way in.

“We have to look again for a spot that seems too perfect.”

“What's that mean?”

“It means it’s a spell strong enough even I can’t see through it.” A few months ago, I would have laughed at the very idea. But slowly I’d come to experience, if only briefly, some of the glamours that affected others. Was it that magic was stronger in Nexus, or had I been so convinced of my own ability it never occurred to me that some spells might be more powerful than others? At times I wished my strange skill came with a handbook.

“If you can’t see through it, then how can I?” he grumbled, raking his hands through his hair.

“I don’t know. Nose to the ground and sniff?” I offered.

“Ha. Ha.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know how your wolfman thing works. But I do know mine works best with contact.” I kicked off my shoes before I’d finished talking. The socks went next, leaving me barefoot on cold stone.

I then started my search over again, performing a gliding walk, which, for the curious, was sliding my foot forward at an angle, then the other. A skater without blades on my feet. The motion put me in contact with more of the floor’s surface.

Turned out I could have kept my shoes on because I noticed the cleaner-looking section just as my tummy rumbled. I held off stepping on it and cocked my head, observing the oddity that had this one spot scratch-free.

“I found something!” I hollered.

Baptiste joined me a moment later and cursed. “How did I not notice it before?”

Because we’d been looking for an actual hatch or door. Not what appeared to be seamless flooring.

“This has to be it.” I dropped to my knees and knocked. Solid, solid, hollow. I put my hands on it even as Baptiste growled, “Don’t open it. We’re supposed to mark it off.”

“What if I’m wrong? We should be sure.”

“Garcia—”

“Too late,” I muttered as I closed my eyes, imagining I could see the magic leaving the ground before me, drawn to my fingertips and then disappearing. I couldn’t, just really wished I could. I also wished I’d grabbed some more snacks. Maybe we’d stop for some lunch after this.

While I mulled over if I wanted a burger or sandwich, Baptiste murmured softly, “There’s a hatch.”

We’d found another entrance.

CHAPTER 10

WE'D FOUND A HATCH, AND BY WE, I MEANT ME. AND WHAT did my partner do? Baptiste knelt and leaned in for a sniff, both hands palming it and his nose literally a hair from the surface. Freaky. And to think I'd wanted to hit that.

Okay. I still did, hence why I kept needing to find reasons to not like him.

“You going to make nasal love to it all day, give it a lick?”

“I'm looking for scents and finding none.”

“How does it open?” I mused aloud. There was a round cutout in the floor with an intricate lock on the top and us missing the key. “Seems to me someone had to have let the doppelganger in.”

Rather than agree, Beefcake just had to argue. “Might be it knew how to unlock it from the other side. Could be it's as simple as pulling a handle.”

“Maybe.” Plausible. I'd had many an apartment door that needed a key on the outside but could be unlocked from inside with a simple turn of a thumb bolt.

“Although I think your theory is more likely, given what I smelled.”

“I thought you smelled nothing?”

“Exactly. Which is the problem and should have been my first clue when we entered the basement. This whole area's been wiped down and sprayed.”

“Someone cleaned the crime scene?”

“De-scented it at any rate,” he corrected.

“Someone on this side is helping the monsters.” I wasn’t surprised. Why only recently we’d busted the incubator and her husband for breaking the laws when it came to cryptids. Kidnapping, killing, cursing. They’d been doing perverse rituals to get cryptids to do bad things in order to advance their religion, which stated humans were the only pure ones that would survive when the monster apocalypse hit.

Or so their religion claimed.

Baptiste gestured. “Step back so I can send pics to Kyana. Could be she has something in those databases of hers.”

“I thought you didn’t want to open it.”

“I don’t. But we should document our find.”

He had a point. Yet I didn’t want to move out of his way, because I wanted to open the hatch.

Needed to.

Even as I didn’t want to. People used complicated locks for a reason. To protect by keeping bad things away.

But I had to see. Had to know what lay under. If I had the ability to be ensorcelled, I would have blamed magic. Blame my lack of impulse control. I’d had issues all my life, like with that little girl who always wore pink ribbons in her hair and teased me for having mine cut boy-short. The fat braid proved easy to cut when I sat behind her in art class. It was worth the three hours of prayer denouncing Satan, my father.

I ran my hands over the strange mechanism with its slot in the middle. Missing a key.

Or was it?

I pressed down and pushed with my fingers. A piece around the supposed lock slid, as did the one beside it. All of the intricacy on the hatch? Part of a puzzle. I liked puzzles when I knew the end goal. With this, I could only guess what shape it wanted to take and hope it didn’t require a strict order. I kept sliding and clicking pieces into new spots, moving every single pattern out of place into a chaos of no shape.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Baptiste asked.

“No.” *Clack*. I slammed another piece, which split into two and started a chain reaction of me going back through the parts, separating them.

“Is this wise then?”

“Probably not.” *Click*.

The pieces kept moving, because of me and not. It was as if my fingers had little minds of their own. They were the ones to press and push, splitting sections apart, my hands moving without me willing them, faster and faster. A pattern took shape, an image more complicated than I could have imagined.

But I wasn’t done and somehow moved faster as my sliding pieces split into four, creating a whole new round of clicking and clacking as I moved each one to their final spot.

The last piece clicked into place, and Baptiste whispered, “It’s a flower.”

Such a tame word for the many nuanced petals with the center that unfurled an even smaller fringe with a single gleaming button in the center.

“Don’t push it,” he said.

I ignored him.

My finger poked that tempting button, and it sank. It went past the surface without a sound and kept going. The edges of the hole around the button collapsed, drawing the hatch inwards in a depetalling of metal that made no sense to my mind. In the end, though, the one solid metal piece retracted to leave a hole over which I precariously balanced.

It might have been more dangerous if not filled in with concrete.

“It’s plugged?” I couldn’t help my surprised lilt. I reached to touch it, convinced it had to be an illusion, but several seconds of pressing yielded no change.

Baptiste knelt and knocked on it with one hand, while the other held his phone, recording. “Solid.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” I grumbled. This wasn’t a magical illusion. “The question is, who filled it in? The plug looks recent.” The concrete had a freshness about it still.

“Maybe the library?” he offered with a shrug. “Could be their staff found it when they cleaned up after the doppelganger and took care of it.”

“And forgot to mention it to the SMU?” I couldn’t help an incredulous note.

“Humans can be weird.”

I pointed to the concrete plug. “Humans could never have found this or unlocked it or had it filled without us knowing.”

“Humans tried to kill you twice last week, but you didn’t notice.”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“Some people in town recognized you, and that started some local sharing of resurfaced clips of you. Not very flattering ones.”

A wince pulled my lips flat. I’d seen some of those videos, some horribly edited but also all essentially true. “In my defense, many of those incidents occurred because I followed orders.” By the time the Cryptid Authority called me in on cases, they wanted the problem gone. Like yesterday.

The terrorists holding a bank hostage? They had me break the spells layering the underground access so that SWAT could get inside. Turned out some of those enchantments were related to the plumbing. No way I could have known. Tell that to the owners of the flooded safety deposit boxes.

Then there was the time that a guy had asked me on a date. He took me to the zoo. A zoo run by humans, hence no magic. I should have been okay.

Unbeknownst to anyone, they had a caretaker who’d been dabbling in hexes on the side. He’d been using dribs and drabs of magic to hold stuff together rather than spend more time doing actual maintenance.

The monkeys that escaped were amusing, as was the army of penguins waddling down the street. The elephants, though, caused some panic.

Thankfully, there was only one casualty. My date, who, upon realizing what my ability did, tried to save himself from a stampede of animals by throwing me in their direction. I tripped, hit the ground hard on my bare hands and knees. Ow. It had stung but not as much as my tears of shame at being humiliated and rejected once again. Later on, I was thankful he'd been a jerk and thrown me to the ground, as the soaring lion slammed into him.

Which led me back to the problem at hand. "How do you know people were trying to kill me?"

"It's my job."

"And here I thought it was to show off bulgy muscles and occasionally grunt in a macho fashion." I sighed. "Sorry. That was uncalled for. I should be saying thank you."

"Why would you thank me for doing the right thing?"

"Not everyone would agree my life is worth saving."

"Those people are idiots."

Be still by beating heart. "Those idiots, as you call them, are everywhere. I'd hoped I'd have more time before they ran me out of town."

"Why run?"

"Because I'm not wanted here."

"According to who? Some faceless yahoos?" He snorted. "I didn't take you for a coward."

"And what do you suggest?"

"Stay."

"This from the guy who tried to get me to leave."

He hung his head. "And that was wrong. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, you might still get your wish."

"Does running away ever fix anything?"

My lips turned down. “For a while, until my past catches up again.”

“A past I don’t care about.”

“You will when you get harassed for even working with me.”

“Do you not know us at all, Garcia?” The use of my last name still jarred. “None of the folks at SMU have a perfect past. I’m banned from Australia and a good chunk of Europe. Nelly’s on a no-fly list. We all have things that haunt us. But here’s the thing, because we all have our own baggage, we don’t give a flying fuck about yours.”

“Eloquent.”

He grinned. “Just the selfish truth. You’re not the only one who isn’t welcome in many places.”

“I’m assuming yours has to do with the wolfman thing.”

“In Europe, yes, they banned me because I make the local Packs uncomfortable. Australia, let’s just say I punched out someone who turned out to be a big deal.”

The vagueness only made me more curious. “Sounds like you used to be a rebel, and yet you were ready to just take some pictures of that hatch and leave.”

“Because being a rebel means I’ve done my share of stupid things, and opening a hole onto a possible monster nest is one I’d like to avoid.”

“Guess that concrete plug means we don’t have to worry,” I muttered, kind of miffed. I’d hoped for a discovery. An exciting adventure where I got to test my limits.

I blamed Huego for feeling this way.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. This cap could be a trick to lull us into a false sense of security. Either way, I’m going to drop this little baby right here.” He popped a wireless camera onto a shelf with the lens aimed at the floor. He tapped his ear. “Let me know when it comes online.”

I heard Kyana’s reply. “Camera three is online.”

Implying there were others. “Where are we planting one and two?” I asked.

“Already done. Main floor and stairs.”

I’d not even seen him dropping them. “Do I have cameras?” I unslung my pack to dig.

“Don’t bother. You don’t have any. Your pack is heavy enough as is with the essentials.”

No shit. Lucky me, when I went to haul it back to my shoulder, Baptiste grabbed it by a strap and strode off.

We left the library, but there was no rest for the wicked and her beefcake. Next, we went to the scene of a brawl between goblin tribes. Not exactly SMU’s usual gig, but the human authorities were refusing to handle it and the regular CA detachment for Nexus thought it below them.

The moment Baptiste said, “We need to order a shit-ton of pizza,” I had no problem helping out. The SMU had the authority and the budget to buy enough food to satisfy both sides and then offer one of the goblin groups a gig at my apartment building. We had a dumpster in need of recycling management. None better than goblins. They ate everything.

We saved one for ourselves and ate it in the truck.

“Busy day,” he remarked.

Guess we were doing small talk. “Yup.”

“Listen, about the other night, when I told you to leave—”

“You mean when I told you to fuck off?” said with a lilt.

His lips curved. “I deserved it.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“I’m sorry. It was wrong.”

An apology? I could be a snot and tell him where to shove it, but I liked to think I was more mature. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I wish things could have been different.”

“Me too.” I didn’t lie.

As I reached for the last slice of pizza, I knocked hands with Baptiste.

Our gazes met.

Held.

He leaned in.

He was going to kiss me.

I'd hate myself if I allowed it, hence why I blurted out, "What's your fiancée think of your job?"

CHAPTER 11

I DIDN'T JUST KILL THE MOOD BY ASKING BAPTISTE ABOUT HIS fiancée just before a kiss. I murdered it. Ran over it with a semi then rolled back and forth a few times.

Silence reigned as we got back in the SUV. What could we say? This was why there were rules about coworkers and relationships, because crossing those boundaries led for awkward rides. Baptiste couldn't dump our asses back at the office quick enough. I did my best to walk fast without sprinting into the office. I ran into Huego the moment I walked in.

“There you are. Just the person I need.”

Closer on my heels than expected, Baptiste uttered a sound.

A jealous sound.

I strutted to Huego with a cheery, “What can I help you with, Raven?”

“The CSA have found something and require your assistance.”

I could see what he wanted from a mile away. “You want me to defuse a curse.”

“Is that not your specialty?” he replied sarcastically.

“Yes, but I have other skills you know.”

“Such as?”

I froze. Mostly because, what could I say? All the other things I could do, so could everyone else. The only thing that

truly made me special was the fact I made magic go away.

When I didn't reply, he added, "Are you going to mope now? Because if you are, I'll tell them you're unavailable."

"I don't mope."

"Good. It's an irritating trait."

"So is your bossy attitude."

"My mother called it my commanding air."

I snorted. "Your mother must love you."

"She did." The soft reply reminded me of her death. Some people actually mourned their mothers.

I changed the subject. "What am I nullifying?"

"A cursed jewel. It's animating a stone statue and preventing entry into the next section of the ruin."

I pursed my lips. "You're sure it's magic animating it?"

"Yes, given it's not a naturally occurring creature."

"You've seen it?"

"I fought it. Took its head off. Twice." Then in a lower tone, "It reassembled."

"Really?" I couldn't help a surprised lilt. Golems were usually a simple animation spell that couldn't heal themselves from injury. "Betcha you were cursing up a storm when it happened."

"Just a little," he replied wryly.

I laughed. "Die, evil stone monster. Off with your head. Oh damn, don't stitch it back on!" I giggled some more.

"It wasn't funny," he grumbled.

"And yet you did it." I paused then said, "Twice."

He grimaced. "Really rethinking asking for your assistance."

"You probably should. I can't guarantee the results."

“We only need you to annul the magic animating the statue.”

“There could be collateral damage,” I warned. I always warned. It did nothing to stop the blame.

“The area around is free of support spells, so there should be no issue.”

“That you know of,” was my ominous counter.

Which was when an eavesdropping Baptiste stepped in. “She’s not going.”

Huego turned a cold gaze on him. “You weren’t asked. Nor is it your decision. It’s between me and Ruby.”

I liked that he used my first name, unlike someone who howled at the moon.

“I’m head of security,” Baptiste argued.

“And yet I outrank you. Do you really want to push me on this?”

A pissing contest over me. Between a guy who couldn’t have me and a guy I wouldn’t let have me. Huego was much too arrogant, and he didn’t think much of me. His insults ranged wide. Kind of like mine for him. Was it wrong I enjoyed that kind of witty—if savagely accurate—ribbing?

“You can’t just commandeer agents.”

“Actually, I can. But in this case, I shall defer to the lady. Would you like to help?” Huego asked me.

Fuck. Now I had to make a choice.

Saying no to Huego meant either bumming around the office or possibly being sent on a job with the glowering Baptiste.

No thank you.

“Can I change before we go?” I asked Huego, rather than admit I wanted to check on Wally. Wally hated it when I coddled. Said he was old enough to fend for himself.

Technically true, but I preferred to come home to a fridge not dumped out on the floor.

Huego waved a hand. “You can even shower since we’re not going until the morning.”

The reply planted my hands on my hips. “I thought this was urgent.”

“It is, but at the same time, no one should play with magic at night, not even a null witch, especially on a full moon.”

“It’s a full moon tonight?” I’d not even noticed. Then again, why would I?

Huego wasn’t done. “I would recommend not emerging from your home once twilight hits until dawn.”

I’d not planned to, but being told I couldn’t... “Why would I keep myself locked inside my apartment? What if I want to get some food or barbecue on the rooftop?”

“Don’t. For one night. Surely you can handle it?”

“It’s not about handling it. It’s about not fearing monsters. If they’re out there, then I’m supposed to investigate or arrest them if they pose a danger. After all, I am an agent for the SMU.”

“Who says this is about monsters?” Huego appeared confused. “Did that overgrown furball not brief you on the assassination attempt?”

My turn to frown. “Baptiste said something about stopping two attacks on me from malcontents.”

“Did he mention the one planned for tonight?”

I pursed my lips. “No. Explain.”

“Kyana intercepted some messages in a private social media group indicating you’ll be a target this evening.”

“Why?”

“A fringe gang thinks you’re helping the humans to suppress cryptids and have decided to make an example of you.”

“Wait, are you implying cryptids want to hurt me?”

“Werewolves to be exact. Not a pack, but four loners who were drawn to Nexus and found each other.”

“And then of course had to come after me.” I rubbed my forehead. “This just never ends.”

“You done being dramatic?”

I glared at him. “No, I am not. I *will* be dramatic because, you know what? It never matters. I try my damndest, but it’s like people just can’t let me live in peace. And it’s not fair. Yes, I know my hair is red and my mother—I meant that incubator who birthed me—said my father was the Devil, and, yes, I kill magic, and sometimes bad things happen because of it. It doesn’t mean I’m a bad person. And I don’t have to be mistreated. I can demand respect, and if I don’t get it, I can say no.” My therapist made me repeat it over and over until I started practicing it. I especially enjoyed the day I told her to fuck off with her chanting.

“I see we’re back to the moping.”

I shook my finger at him. “You know what? Fuck you and the stone golem. I’d rather stay above ground.”

“Bor-r-ring.”

“You are infuriating.”

“Only to others.”

I flashed him a finger as I stalked off, ass shaking and vain enough to wonder if he looked. I stalked across the street, paying more attention than usual, wondering if the wolves had already staked out my home.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise. I’d been targeted before. Beaten. Bruised. Even dropped into a river once. Yet somehow, I always survived. On my own, I should add. I’d never had a team or friends to watch out for me, so I quite enjoyed Nelly appearing at my place within two minutes of me closing the door, practically huffing with fake casualness as she waited for me to answer.

“Hey, I was just going to take a bath.”

“Really? ‘Cause I’m thinking we should order in.” She barged past me, and I closed the door, shaking my head.

“Way to be smooth. I know about the wolf gang that wants my ass.” And I was giddy she wanted to protect me.

Nelly frowned at me. “Baptiste told you? I thought for sure he’d pussy out.”

“He did. Huego mentioned it.”

“Who told him?” Nelly wondered aloud.

“Doesn’t matter. You don’t have to babysit me.”

“One, it’s not babysit. You’re much too old to be in my lap. Two, there will be food and drink involved, along with talk, so that’s more like a date, except we don’t want to fuck, so that makes it a bromance.”

“We’re not bros.”

“Sismance doesn’t have the same ring though.”

“You really think they’ll be dumb enough to actually come after me in an SMU-owned building across from SMU headquarters?”

“It’s the full moon.”

“So I heard.” I rolled my eyes as I pulled out my phone, the newest one that would hopefully last a few months. “If we’re going to do this, let’s do it right and get all the finger foods on the menu.”

While Nelly mixed up virgin margaritas—because no getting drunk on a full moon when werewolves are after you—and Wally told us to take off our clothes since it was hot, I ordered way too much food. A good thing because Kyana joined us the moment Nelly texted her we were getting her favorite, deep-fried pickles.

Then Clive randomly showed up. Or not so random, given Nelly was here and we had food.

At the next knock, I expected Baptiste. It was Huego, who stalked in and glared at everyone.

Nelly muttered, “Looks like daddy’s mad.”

“No shit I am,” Huego snapped. “These miscreants will never come close if they see she’s surrounded by an army.”

“She shouldn’t be alone,” Nelly stubbornly insisted.

Huego crossed his arms in reply.

“Party pooper,” was Wally’s mutter as we packed up the remaining food. Everyone departed with some leftovers until only Huego remained.

“Hungry?” I pointed to some pastry thing, deep fried and stuffed with yumminess.

He popped one into his mouth, chewed, and then said, “Want to go out?”

“What?” Of all the things I expected him to say, asking me on a date wasn’t anywhere close. “I thought I was supposed to stay in?”

“That was before you threw a party. Not to mention, it occurred to me afterwards that cloistering yourself will make drawing out your attackers harder.”

“Okay. Where are we going?”

“Doesn’t really matter. Even a walk should work. Anything that gets you outside. I’ll be close by.”

It took a second to process his meaning. “Wait, you want me to leave here, by myself, to act as bait, so that what? You can swoop to the rescue?”

“I’m glad you grasp the element of the plan.”

“Are you insane?”

“Yes.” Spoken so seriously, I chose to ignore it.

“Oh, hell no, I am not dangling my juicy butt—”

“I don’t think it counts as juicy.”

I glared. “You interrupt me to insult my ass?”

“Your ass looks fine, but it’s not juicy.”

“And it’s comments like that which mess with a woman’s psyche.” I tapped my temple. “I am now reminding myself I have a great-looking butt and to not listen to the opinions of people I don’t even like.” Another thing one of my shrinks taught me.

“You do have a great-looking butt. It’s perfectly shaped and thankfully not the least bit juicy.”

“Do you even know what juicy means?”

“Probably something that requires medication.”

I bit my lip. I could have explained, but this was way more fun. “Telling me I have a nice ass still won’t convince me to go out and play the tempting treat.”

“Ah yes, because you’d rather it happened at random when you least expect it.”

“I really hate it when you use logic,” I said dryly.

“At least you recognize it. There’s hope for you yet.”

I had to admit, his insulting was on point. “Since you want me to look natural and not like I’m being shadowed by an annoying dude, I will walk to the ice cream shop three blocks over.” Far enough to draw someone out, thinking I had no backup. Close enough I wouldn’t get annoyed walking back.

“Make sure to buy some ice cream for the charade in case they hit you on the way home.”

“It won’t be a charade. I am getting caramel crunch drizzle with whipped cream, cherries, and some crumbled honey-roasted peanuts.”

He arched a brow. “No banana?”

“I’m too picky about my bananas. They have to be long, of course, thick around the middle, but no wider than a mouthful, and firm so it doesn’t come apart too quick in my hand when I grip it and bite it to pieces.”

He winced.

I smiled innocently.

Not having friends or much luck in relationships left me watching lots of television. I had all kinds of comebacks. I especially liked the dirty ones.

“You did that on purpose,” he said, but more out of bemusement than accusation.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You’re always tough, always the one with the last sharp word, because it gives you a semblance of control.”

“I am in control.” I patted his cheek. “I now have an escort to get ice cream. Don’t walk too close in case I run into someone cute.”

Wally chortled as I left, grabbing a jacket and a twenty from my purse on the way. I’d shrugged on the coat by the time I hit ground level.

Twilight had come and gone, leaving behind night. A night bright with a full moon. I glanced up at it, just a glowing ball. Funny how something so far away could affect an entire species. Even some magic required it.

I felt nothing as I walked. Well, maybe a little self-conscious knowing Huego watched. Did I swagger too much? Less hip? More? How was my ass in these pants? All important questions if I cared what Huego thought.

Which I didn’t. He had a good point, though, about controlling when an ambush occurred. Not to mention, if enough of them got stiffed in the attempt, then maybe they’d stop trying.

Wishful thinking.

My entire life people had been out to get me. They were lucky I’d not ever decided to get them back. It wouldn’t be too hard to destroy this world stitched together in so many crucial places with magic.

The dark thought had me ducking my head. I blamed ideas of world domination and vengeance on being raised with the concept of the Devil being my dad. Was it any wonder I had antichrist tendencies?

The walk to the ice cream store proved uneventful. I got my favorite in a waffle cone to make it easier to eat while walking. I retraced my steps home, not purposely licking the cone in a lascivious manner but managing to, nonetheless.

Slurp. Lick. Suck the top. So maybe I over did it a little bit.

The first wolf stepped out from between two buildings, his dark fur blending with shadow but his eyes a baleful yellow.

“One, one vere-volf,” I counted in a very bad Count von Count voice.

A scuff at my back showed two more. “Three, three furry werewolves. Do I see a fourth?”

I didn’t, which appeared to surprise not only me but the leader, who glanced across the street.

“Oops. Guess your buddy met mine. Did I mention my friend has a sword?”

Apparently, that proved unacceptable, given the dark wolf lunged.

I dodged to the side, ice cream outstretched. Saved!

Another wolf nudged into me from behind, and I stumbled forward, again, my cone reaching as if it could find me safety.

Perhaps it did since I managed to remain upright and even snuck a quick lick before my hand got covered in melted cream. Did I mention I wasn’t really worried? Why would I with an avenging angel on my side?

Huego strode across the street, no wings, and yet his long duster gave him a similar flair. It swayed with his stride, gleamed brighter than his sword, and with his arrival, no one paid attention to me. The wolves turned on him with bared teeth.

I sucked on my ice cream. Might as well. Huego had things under control. He danced with his blade, darted and slashed. A wolf hit the ground, hamstrung, and at his mercy. He went after the next and had him well in hand as I started walking home. It wasn’t as if he needed me anymore. He’d found the werewolf gang despite my lack of juicy butt.

My ice cream cone and its massive three scoops remained rather tall as I came in sight of my building. I might have overreached with three giant balls of frozen deliciousness, but how could I resist when the guy behind the counter said I should try their new flavors: salted caramel crunch, caramel kiss, and creamy butterscotch. My belly protested. Too bad. I couldn't quit until I'd tasted them all.

As I worked on demolishing the ice cream without giving myself brain freeze, he stepped out from the shadow beside the building. More than seven feet tall, a furred monster wearing gym shorts and nothing else. Recognizable, though.

Baptiste rolled toward me in a lanky walk that had me quivering, and not just in fear. He appeared rather primal tonight. Dangerous.

Hungry... And for more than one type of food.

"Hey, Beefcake, you out having a nice evening stroll?"

His curled lip bared a tooth that would hurt if it bit.

"Shouldn't you be running in the woods with your canine bros?"

He growled.

"If you're in the mood for a fight, Huego is tangling with some lone wolves that a way." I pointed behind me. "If you hurry, there might be one left."

He took a step toward me, and I didn't think he had any interest in the other wolves until he said, "Whose scent?" Growled but I understood and then deliberately fucked with him.

"This is called the cheapest soap I can buy that doesn't make my skin burn and a hint of my baby-powder-fresh deodorant."

"Who. Touch." He snarled each word distinctly.

"I told you, those wolves that came after me. Don't worry, though, Huego was there to save me." Probably not my brightest idea taunting him.

“Mine.” He pounced as he declared it, and I had nothing but my ice cream, so I threw it in his face.

It hit and left a creamy, sweet streak that did nothing to help. He grabbed hold of me, his fingers long and sharply tipped. He dragged me close and sniffed. Back and forth, he dragged his nose down the length of me and back before stopping to stare at me.

I couldn't help but tremble.

He leaned in closer.

Would he kiss me or bite off my face? I wasn't quite sure.

His hot breath huffed on my skin.

“Awoo!”

The distant howl brought up his head. His claws dug into my arms.

I must have hissed or made some sound because he suddenly looked at me.

And I mean really looked.

His eyes widened.

He recoiled. Like literally reeled back from me, letting me go like the hottest potato ever.

I barely caught myself from falling and then still almost collapsed at the sight of him racing away from me.

As if he'd almost kissed the devil.

In his defense, he almost had.

CHAPTER 12

THE TRAUMA OF BEING REJECTED BY A WOLFMAN HURT LESS with a few shots of tequila. It didn't lessen my sadness over the loss of my ice cream. I'd pulled out a second shot glass, given I half expected Huego to show up and give me shit for walking away.

He didn't.

Another disappointment.

At least Wally was there to keep me company and commiserate when I told him what happened. I found his muttered, *Aw* comforting.

I slept like shit. No surprise. My dreams were full of werewolves chasing me. Only instead of one trying to kiss me and do things illegal in most states, they tore me to shreds. Did you know getting eaten hurts? Even if only a nightmare, I woke in a cold, shivering sweat. So nasty.

The shower went a long way to reminding me I was alive. Wasn't sure how I felt about that yet.

What a night. A night I'd rather forget. Hopefully, the carnage of my ice cream got removed in the night by rodents and bugs. I'd hate to emerge outside and be reminded of the tragedy. Later I had plans to get more ice cream, a full-on banana split this time, in a carry-out container. I wouldn't take chances.

Blame my need for food for being ready to open the door before Nelly even knocked with our morning stash of coffee and donuts.

She also bore a scowl. “I can’t believe the nerve of him.” She slammed our stuff down on the counter.

“Did Clive finally make a move once you guys left last night?”

“What?” She sounded startled. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

She had to mean Baptiste. “Yeah, it was pretty ballsy for him to pull a wolfman intimidation thing on me and then run off like I’d promised to neuter him.” Which I still might.

“What are you talking about?” She blinked at me.

“Who are you talking about?”

“Huego I-think-I’m-so-awesome.” Her voice lilted in mockery. She shook her hands in agitation. “First, he kicks us out of your place. Then he uses you as bait to single-handedly capture the werewolves who were after you. Bastard took all the glory.”

I almost laughed. Nelly would be upset she’d missed out on the action. I took a sip of my coffee before saying, “He gave you the night off. You should say thank you.”

She pouted. “It’s not fair. He’s getting all the fun stuff.”

“Such as?”

“While you and he get to go ruin diving, I’m stuck with the boys checking out the sewer grates in seventeen alleys today.”

“Sounds horrible.” I wouldn’t lie.

She grimaced. “I know.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ll find a way to trip Huego, hopefully into a puddle of something slimy.”

Her lips curved up. “That would make me very happy. Especially if said incident were captured in a pic.”

“I’ll do my best,” I solemnly swore.

After giving Wally a kiss on his head, something that I swore made the feathers growing in on his head turn a light pink, I headed to work.

As I crossed the road, Huego emerged from the SMU building, which looked less like a garage these days. When had they spruced up the outside, properly replacing all but one of the garage doors with privacy windows? The fresh white stucco made a nice contrast to the dark trim around doors, windows, and roof. A barrel of flowers sat out front, and I caught movement in the leaves. A flash of something. Most likely a gnome. They loved security gigs.

The office had evolved. It felt more official now. And I was a part of it.

Yay me. For once, I didn't mean it sarcastically.

"Morning, Raven," I chirped as I neared the scowling Huego.

"Hardly morning. It's well after eight."

"You're lucky I didn't come in at nine like I initially planned."

His lips flattened. "Don't start, Void."

"Excuse me?" I blurted out.

"It occurred to me that while you have a nickname for me, I had nothing for you. So I went with Void."

"Surprised it wasn't Avoid."

"It came a close second." His dry delivery was spot-on, and I snorted.

"Glad to hear you're thinking of me, Raven." I flirted without even thinking.

He pointed some keys and caused a car to beep and flash its lights rather than reply.

"Going in style I see." A plain gray sedan but with all the luxury. A new addition most likely at Huego's behest, given I'd refused to ride the crotch rocket.

"I packed you an emergency bag in the trunk."

"Lovely." I couldn't believe I'd agreed to go back underground. My last visit had been harrowing. But I'd

prevailed. Explain my trepidation then.

“How are we getting down to the ruins?” I asked. Would he be carrying me again?

“The CHS has erected a scaffolding system and hooked up an elevator.”

“How deep is the hole?” I’d gotten the impression it went rather far.

“Just under half a mile.”

“Just?” I rolled my eyes.

“It’s a much wider shaft than the one we fell in at the house. I’ll be able to fly.”

“Yay for you. I don’t have wings.”

“Which is why there’s an elevator.”

I pinched my lips. “Run by magic most likely, given how quickly it went up.”

“While magic might have helped assemble it, the actual structure is not using any hexes to hold it together.”

“Sounds unlikely.”

“This is the CHS. They know better than to install anything with magic near an ancient ruin.”

The statement teased me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sometimes things are buried and forgotten because they’re dangerous and can’t be destroyed.”

“And yet here you are, bringing me to open up more of the ruins. Maybe that spell preventing entry is there for a reason.” I don’t know why I felt a need to be contrary.

“You’re mostly likely correct, and yet it’s already been decided. We will go past the guardian and, if lucky, find a way to save Nexus.”

“Damn, that kind of speech really needs some ominous music,” I stated as he pulled to a stop on a street jammed with vehicles, many of them parked behind some yellow crime

scene tape. Beyond it was not just the sinkhole that swallowed the church but the one that tried to eat me too.

“Did the hole left behind by that huge troll have ruins too?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s part of the same massive cavern as the first collapse.”

The confirmation had me clenching the seat in the car rather than exiting. “Is it safe to be parked here?” What if the entire street collapsed?

“The structural engineering wizards marked off the weak spots. There’s two, and we won’t be going near them.”

I was only partially reassured.

“You going to bail on me?” he asked, having noticed my grimace.

“No.” I tried to not say it with a sulk, but I felt it. It was encouraging to see, though, that the CSA didn’t appear worried at all given how many vehicles they had parked in the area. We exited the car and strolled past two RVs with satellite dishes on the roof and a cube van. Past the tape, a pavilion-style tent hummed as a generator powered the machinery inside. They really were serious about not using magic.

“What’s in there?” I asked, jerking a thumb.

“Command center. They’re monitoring the pit.”

A pit transformed.

No longer did it have jagged edges. It had been cleaned to sheer straight down, which helped the scaffolding system, since it braced against the wall. A railing around the hole meant I could grab hold and look around without falling in. A good thing I held on tight because it proved quite disconcerting. The hole went down and down. It should have been dark, and yet, lights lit the whole length of it. The CHS had certainly been busy.

Between the scaffolding—which looked a hundred times more solid than some staircases I’d had to climb—a cage hung on a thick cable. People entered it, and once a door closed, it

went down. I could hear the grumble of a motor. Something with combustion and not magic. Mildly reassuring for my safety. I still had my doubts as to the integrity of it all, though.

People converged on us, two of them looking rather serious, given their uniforms, steel-toed boots, and the guns holstered at their hips. I also spotted sword hilts rising from their backs.

“The CSA hired mercenaries to protect them?” I asked Huego rather than meet their gazes tracking our movements.

“Those are CHS Knights. Given the nature of the society’s work, they require protection that can’t be bribed.”

“Everyone can be bought.”

“Agreed, hence why it’s easier to trust no one. Give me a moment.” Huego left me to head off the knights. He had a few words with them before returning to me. “Let’s head for the elevator.”

The knights fell in behind us, and the spot between my shoulders itched. Some people hated me on sight. And I meant *hated*. The way I could make someone suddenly snap shocked me to this day. Meaning I didn’t like or trust the people at my back. Would it be a bullet or a sword between the ribs?

I didn’t die, and we circled the pit until we reached the area with the elevator and someone holding a clipboard.

“Odin’s Emissary.” She offered him a bob of her head.

“Hello, Nanelle. We’re expected.”

She eyed me head to toe, and I could see disapproval. “This is the null witch?”

“In the flesh.”

She stared at my hair. “That’s not a common shade. Bottle or natural?”

“Natural. It doesn’t take well to dye.” As in it wouldn’t stick. I’d wasted money trying.

“What part of Europe are your ancestors from?”

“Does it matter?” I asked, getting annoyed. I didn’t want to admit I didn’t know.

“Ancestry goes a long way to explaining things. I did a thesis paper on how who we’re descended from controls our lives even centuries later.”

“Thanks for the tip. I’ll be sure to get my genes tested.”

“Use code NAN2000 at Merlin’s Twenty-nine and Counting. Not only will you save twenty percent, they’ve got the most mapped genetics for cryptids ever.”

I didn’t mention I wasn’t considered cryptid. Or human. Did that make me a monster?

Huego glanced down. “How long before the cage returns?”

“Fifteen to twenty minutes at least.”

“Too long.” Before I could protest, Huego’s shirt disappeared, literally, and his wings popped out.

Must save him a fortune on commuting. Guess I’d be waiting for the elevator alone. “See you at the bottom.”

He held out his hand. “Come with me.”

At least he asked.

I eyed that naked chest. Nice and smooth. I needed to make better choices with my coworkers. I opened my mouth to say I’d rather wait when motion to my left caught my attention. One of the knights had their hand on their gun.

For me?

I’d rather not find out.

I held out my arms and grumbled, “Don’t drop me.”

“Don’t tempt me midflight then,” he replied.

He swept me against his chest and held me tight as he launched himself to stand on the railing and dove over the edge. I squeaked but kept my eyes open as he glided in a spiral downwards, slow enough for me to see more details. The scaffolding appeared solid, attached to the wall in a few places. Climbable if the elevator were unavailable.

It was in that moment I remembered. My stupid emergency pack remained in the car. Fuck me.

Too late now.

A glance upward showed the sky just a pinprick. We were deep now, the tunnel slightly darker, as the lights affixed didn't completely dispel the gloom. I held tight as the temperature changed, getting a chill to it.

"Almost there," he murmured.

We landed at the bottom in a room not as tidy as the one we'd found together in the house. Here, debris piled up, parts of it recognizable. A section of asphalt from the street, a lamppost, chunks of brick from the church. And dirt. Lots of it spilled from the pile into the massive cavern.

A glance overhead showed a hole rimmed in light, no real sign of the sky. The opening quite small in comparison to this gigantic space. There were no buildings or structures, nothing but more of those frescoes. They glowed like the other ruins had, showing strange scenes that made little sense, such as the giant with its eyes closed, sleeping, while tiny people stood over the body praying.

A glance around showed three exits. There might have been a fourth, but the wall had suffered a cave-in. Two wizards stood in front, their robes jiggling as they gesticulated before lifting and moving a boulder with magic. I was far enough away to not affect it.

Two tunnels had only what appeared to be large spotlights parked in front.

Huego saw me looking at them. "UV lights linked to a motion, magic, and pressure sensor."

The last tunnel had a knight on either side guarding it. "I take it that's the one we are interested in."

"The other two are literal dead ends." Huego led the way to the tunnel of interest, and I followed, aware of the curious stares. There were more people in the ruins than I expected.

“How big is the historical society?” I murmured when I’d matched his stride.

“Big enough you don’t mess with them,” was his quiet reply. “Keep in mind they have access to all the secrets of this world. Knowledge is power.”

“Why is an old ruin like this of such interest?” To me a civilization or religion long ago forgotten seemed useless.

“Treasures.”

“This is about jewels and gold?” I wasn’t impressed.

“And statues and armor.” He glanced at her. “For you, magical totems have no value, but to everyone else, they are worth money. The right object can give status, and some artifacts even make kings.”

“Seems like those kinds of items are best left forgotten. World has enough problems as it is.”

“Once a place like this is found, you can’t just walk away because others will swoop in.”

He had a point. “Doesn’t look like they left anything behind.”

“I wouldn’t say nothing. After all, we’ve yet to truly explore. Most likely the most valuable items are hidden. Even if there are no physical treasures, the artwork alone is fascinating.”

He sounded enthralled. Huego, the archeology nerd. “You sound like you should be working for the CSA and not the SMU.”

“I do.”

“Er, what?”

“Where do you think Renarde poached me from?”

My mouth rounded. “Holy shit, you’re a historian? Don’t you need like a sweater with patched elbows?”

“I’m not a scholar,” he scoffed.

“Then where’s your bullwhip and hat?” Because I knew how I liked my archeologists to look.

“Is there a reason for your poor humor?”

Actually, there was. “Doesn’t it freak you out being underground like this? Knowing you’re trusting the rock over your head won’t suddenly choose that moment to collapse.”

“No, because I’m not ready to die.”

As if his wishes would matter when the Reaper came for him.

We reached the massive arch with its guards, and I craned to eye it, looking for hexes. The vine inscribed on its edge didn’t appear to be a spell.

The knight on the left stepped forward. “Odin’s Emissary.” She tapped her sword hilt to her chest.

“Hello, Fiona. I trust there were no casualties overnight.”

“Nothing serious. Kendrick wanted to try his luck at defeating the beast.”

“And?” he asked.

“He got tossed out in seven seconds.”

“Didn’t you last nine?” he replied.

Fiona grinned. “I did.”

To which the other knight muttered, “I slipped.”

“Sure you did,” Fiona cajoled.

Huego gestured in my direction. “This is Agent Garcia with the SMU. She’s going to try and nullify our stony friend.”

“Hey.” I didn’t offer to shake even though I wore gloves.

She eyed me and pursed her lips. “You sure she can handle it?”

“Magic isn’t a problem. People are,” I grumbled as I headed for the arch. Only as I stepped past did I realize Huego didn’t join me. I paused to look over my shoulder.

“You coming?”

“This is as far as I go. The sight of me antagonizes it.”

“You’re sending me in alone to deal with the monster?” I couldn’t help the high pitch.

“Didn’t you handle a troll on your own?”

“Because I had no choice.”

“You keep indicating you’re capable. I have the same faith in you as you did in me last night when you left me with those wolves.”

So he had noticed. “I would have just gotten in your way.”

“Exactly. Glad you understand.” He trapped me with my own words.

I scowled. “I hate you.”

“Take care of the stone golem and I won’t report your hurtful remark to HR.”

“Unbelievable,” I huffed. Guess I was going alone. “How big is this thing?”

“About this high.” He indicated between pec and waist. “Big squash.” He held his hands apart for the head. “Watch its tail.”

“Sounds like a dog.”

“More feline, actually.”

“Always wanted a cat.” I eyed the tunnel. Be brave. Be bold. I could do this.

I walked into the tunnel.

Hoped I’d walk out.

CHAPTER 13

TUNNELS UNDERGROUND WERE SCARY. YOU COULD PUT UP AS many lights as you liked, make it bright as day, and it didn't change the fact that I was surrounded by stone. If something happened, I couldn't smash a window and escape. Nor could I burrow my way out. Which led to me wondering about the air.

Surely the CSA had already done quality checks. I just hoped they didn't use canaries. Wally lost his shit when we watched a movie where the characters thought it was okay to—in his words—“*Sacrifice the feathered for flesh bags.*”

Nothing trembled. I didn't see any cracks, but then again, the illumination didn't extend all the way. While unhappy about my situation, I couldn't turn back. Huego would mock me if I did.

So much for him being some kind of hero. He'd shown not even a hint of remorse at sending me in alone. Sure, I faced magic, the killing of which was my specialty, the problem being, until I removed the spell, the animated statue could hurt me. If this stone kitty swiped, I could get knocked out.

Or worse...

Did I explain I could use someone to distract the cat while I laid my hands on it, though? Nope. Pride would be my downfall. Only if I was stupid.

I whirled around and prepared to march back to tell Huego I'd need at least one other person to assist, only to pause mid step.

“I thought you were staying outside the tunnel,” I accused, spotting Huego trailing me by a few paces.

He shrugged. “I changed my mind.”

“Good, because remember how you needed bait yesterday?” I smiled sweetly. “Your turn.”

“Okay.” He didn’t even argue, just strutted past.

I grabbed hold of his arm. “We can stick close for now.” And not because the scratch of stone on stone had me wanting to pee my pants.

It’s just a moving statue. I’d dealt with worse, like the kid who’d animated his mom’s collection of porcelain dolls. He’d cried when I touched him and sucked his ability dry. Which led to his mom yelling at me for traumatizing her son. His mom then almost died when a beam in her designer kitchen fell on her head. A judge found me not guilty because the builder lied on his application permits. He wasn’t supposed to use any magic.

I didn’t admit my relief at not being alone when the lights ended. Unlike other parts of the ruin, the stone didn’t illuminate, leaving us in darkness.

A few paces of us walking and not talking frayed my nerves. “How far?” I whispered.

“Depends. Sometimes it comes after folks the minute they step past the string of lights.”

I paused. “You mean it could attack at any time.”

“I told you it guarded the tunnel.”

“How long is this tunnel?” And why did it feel like it got darker?

“We don’t know. No one’s reached the other side. When I confronted it, I’d walked close to a mile.”

“Mile?” And me wearing hiking boots—aka black combat boots that were the toughest thing I owned.

“Or so it seemed. It’s easy to get disoriented. Once we handle the golem and get some proper lighting and drones to

scout ahead, we'll have better info."

"In other words, find the stone kitty." I stuck my fingers in my mouth and whistled, before singing out, "Here, kitty, kitty." Probably not too bright. What if it moved faster than I could remove magic? I had enough flaws without adding scars.

I glanced ahead. After all, I knew it wasn't in the tunnel behind us, and yet tell that to the hairs on my nape. They lifted, and I spun, even as I dove to the side just in time. A glowing shape soared past where I'd been standing. It hit the floor on the other side on four paws of stone that scraped jarringly.

I scrambled to my feet and huffed, "It's a sphinx." Kind of. Only without the weird haircut. It had the body of a cat, the face almost human in shape. Its hair was shorn short, almost punkish.

It hissed in my direction and coiled its legs for another spring. A stone pulsed orange in the middle of its forehead, a darker shade than the glow surrounding it. Magic for sure, meaning beatable. I just had to get close enough.

Huego darted in. "Eyes on me, golem."

Only it had no interest in Odin's emissary. It kept its gaze on me. It didn't attack but cocked its head side to side as if curious. It no longer hissed, but it did stalk toward me, body low to the ground.

"Nice kitty." I held out my hand. Dumb? Yes, and yet the instinct was real. I saw a cat and wanted to love it. Alas, they didn't love me. Even the black cat no one wanted at the shelter freaked when I got close.

This one didn't flinch, bite, or claw me. It paused a mere foot from me and sniffed.

The stone in its forehead flared, and it recoiled, which was when Huego lunged for it with an upraised sword, yelling, "When the head comes off, touch the stone."

I gaped.

He was going to kill the kitty!

I threw myself in his way, arms lifted, not even thinking of my own safety. “Don’t hurt it!”

He paused his down swing and yelled, “Out of the way, you idiot.”

The feline at my rear hissed. In that moment, it could have swiped me when my back was turned. Knocked me down or run. It chose to flank me and turned a baleful glare on Huego. It growled and showed some stony teeth.

I arched a brow. “I don’t think it likes you.”

“Told you,” he grumbled. “Now can I decapitate it?”

“No.”

“I thought we had a plan.”

“It changed,” I said, turning to the golem kitty. I held out my hand again.

It stretched as if to butt my hand, only to recoil. The stone in its head pulsed, and it shook its noggin as if in pain.

“The magic is hurting it,” I murmured.

“It’s a golem. It doesn’t feel pain.”

“I’m not so sure,” I replied. “Let me try and help you,” I whispered, reaching for the stone sphinx. It quivered—hell, I quivered and wished I had some chocolate to soothe my nerves. It allowed me to press my hand to the glowing jewel.

It glowed so bright I had to shut my eyes. Even then, I could see the orange of it through my lids. As it started to fade, the jewel under my hand turned hot, almost hot enough to burn. Then it flipped to frigid, enough I worried my hand would get stuck.

But I didn’t pull away. I kept my hand on that rock as the statue stiffened and the life leached out of it. I held on as the jewel against my palm vibrated, shaking violently before disintegrating into dust. The remains of the jewel fell to the floor in a powdery shower, and as the curse on it ended, the

tunnel took on a faint glow, meaning I could see the statue standing before us.

A stone monument that began to tremble.

I stepped back, and Huego flanked me as we watched the stone crack and fall in chunks, revealing a shape inside.

A sphinx, the size of a horse, no longer encased in a carapace of rock. The fur appeared ruffled and dusty, like the hair on its head. It heaved in a ragged breath. Its eyes blinked, bright blue jewels in a powdered face covered in a thin fuzz.

Its gaze met mine, and I saw thanks in it. Then alarm. The sphinx turned to eye Huego approaching with his sword, wearing an I'm-gonna-kill look on his face.

For the second time that day, I stood between him and the cat. "Don't you dare."

"Stand aside."

"I can't let you kill an extinct species."

"Can't be that extinct since it's standing behind you," he drawled. "And I'm not going to kill it, but I also can't let it roam free."

"Why not? It's harmless." To prove my point, I slung an arm around the sphinx. It stiffened but didn't maul me.

"It attacked the CSA knights."

"Attacked or defended itself?" I pointed out. "Poor thing was probably so scared." The sphinx uttered a noise as if agreeing.

Huego's mouth moved, but it took a moment for him to utter an exasperated, "Exactly what are you going to do with it? Set it free? You do realize given its rarity, it will be caught and sold to the highest bidder."

"That's illegal!" I huffed.

"That's reality," he snapped.

"Then I'll protect it."

"How? Going to take it home?"

“Why not? My place can handle one more.”

“I’m sure that bird of yours will love sleeping with one eye open,” he offered with a smirk, thinking he had me beat.

“The sphinx isn’t going to eat Wally, are you?” I asked as if it could understand. Maybe it could because I’d have sworn it winked. “As a matter of fact, I’m going to wager they become great friends.” Because misfits and outcasts liked to stick together.

“You’re being ridiculous. The best-case scenario is that it’s taken into government custody so it can be studied.”

“Actually, the protective act of ’89 prohibits the incarceration, even for science, of species with less than five subjects left.” Mating and procreation worked best in the wild. Even if that wild was a specially protected nature reserve.

“Why are you so determined to keep it?”

I couldn’t have said other than it felt right. “I just want to help it.”

“It’s not a domestic cat.” Huego waved his sword for emphasis.

“I’m aware.” I rubbed my hand over its furry cheek. The sphinx leaned against me and uttered a purr to put all felines to shame. It rumbled me so hard every single muscle got a massage.

“Pretty sure the CHS will have a problem with you stealing it.”

“It’s not stealing since Finny is a living, breathing creature.”

“Finny? You can’t name it.” He shook his head.

“Too late. I already did. What do you think, Finny?”

I got a large rumble in reply.

“It’s like you want it to eat your face. Don’t you remember what’s documented about them? Sphinxes are known killers.”

“Protectors,” I corrected. “And this one isn’t protecting anything anymore now that the jewel controlling it is gone.”

“You have an answer for anything.”

“I know.”

He growled.

I laughed. “Give it up, Raven. You know this is going to happen.”

Huego snapped his fingers in front of my eyes. “What is wrong with you? You’re not supposed to fall for spells.”

“No spell, just a love for cats. Especially misunderstood ones. Now, shall we get a peek at what Finny was guarding before the historical nerds kick us out?”

He glanced behind then forward. We couldn’t see either end. “Just a quick glance.”

“You don’t have to come, Finny, if that place holds bad memories.”

My new sphinx kept close to my heels as I headed for the end of the tunnel. The wrong end. We saw the light of the cavern beyond, and Fiona parked in front.

I paused, and so did Huego.

He muttered, “Odd.” He flipped around and went in the other direction. I turned just as quickly, Finny matching my movement as we marched into the tunnel heading for the other end—

I blinked, and yet the result didn’t change. We’d somehow gotten turned around again.

“There’s a curse on this place,” Huego declared.

“Let me handle it.”

I re-peeled my glove and knelt on the floor to touch it. Then the wall on each side of the tunnel. Then we walked a few paces, and I did it again. And again. Until we were right back in front of the tunnel opening.

I glanced at Huego. “Is it me, or is tunnel doing a full roundabout?”

“It is.”

What I couldn’t figure out was how we kept not noticing the branch we must be entering and exiting. Weird.

Might as well go get some lunch. I was starving. We exited the tunnel to the knights facing off against us. Okay, facing off against Finny, who was under my protection. I stood in front and shook a finger. “Bad knights. You don’t have to kill everything that moves you know. All it wanted was to be freed from its curse.”

Someone with an eager expression and red-rimmed plastic glasses came running for us, only to halt. “What is that?” She pointed.

“A sphinx.” I didn’t add “duh,” but my tone said it.

“Where did it come from?”

“The tunnel.” Again, I didn’t say it but...

“Is that what the statue guarded?”

“It is the statue. I freed it from its curse,” I announced, quite proud of myself.

“You broke the statue?” Her lips turned down.

“What part of ‘it was cursed’ did you not grasp?” I didn’t even try to hold in my sarcasm.

“This is why I hate bringing in outsiders,” she complained. “No respect for the process.”

Huego finally stepped in. “You wanted the tunnel accessible. You’re welcome.”

Her lips pinched. and I swear it hurt her to say, “Thank you, Odin’s Emissary.” She then turned and let out a hollered, “I need an exploration team, pronto!”

That had me worried about the stone around us. Nothing came crashing down, but a trio came jogging, dressed in hazmat suits, including helmets.

Red Glasses pointed. “Tunnel is clear.”

“On it,” said one of the hazmatters. They marched into the tunnel.

I blinked. No one had offered me a protective suit.

Huego said nothing about the fact they were exploring a dead end.

The lady in red glasses pursed her lips as she turned her annoyance on me once more. “Sphinxes aren’t supposed to be in this part of the world.”

“It’s probably here because of the other problem. You know, the monster Nexus one,” I said in a low whisper.

“Most likely.” She frowned. “We don’t have a cage to contain it.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get Finny somewhere safe.”

“Really? Great.” Glasses turned away to bellow at someone else. “You. What are you doing to that wall?” Off she stalked. Good riddance.

“I can’t believe she was more worried about the statue than the fact this cutie was trapped.” I tickled the sphinx’s chin.

“I’m not,” Huego replied. “Luella’s always been more interested in the old and dead.” He glanced at the knights eyeballing us. “We should get out of here.”

“Sounds good to me.” It would be nice to walk off a job, given how many usually tossed me off the site or demanded my arrest.

The knights shadowed us to the elevator because I couldn’t exactly expect Huego to fly me and my new kitty to the top. To my surprise, he got into the cage with us. No one else did, though.

He stared long enough I finally said, “Do I have a booger?”

That caused a grimace. “More like I’m trying to figure you out. You’re not like I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“From the reports I read, someone reckless and mouthy with no regard for property or people.”

I could have winced, but I owned it instead. “Sounds about right.”

“Mouthy? Yes. Reckless? Not so much. As for the rest...” He shook his head. “You took a big chance back there with the sphinx. It could have easily killed you.”

“But didn’t.”

“How could you be sure?”

I shrugged. “Call it gut instinct.” I’d been on the ostracized side of the fence enough times to know better than to judge anyone, or anything, by their appearance.

The elevator jolted as it hit the top and stopped. We exited into the sunshine, and I smiled.

“Come on, Finny. Let’s go hit a drive-thru and get some lunch. Cheeseburger, French fries, and caffeinated soda with so much sugar you’ll be giddy for hours.”

Huego coughed. “You make it sound wretched.”

“If by wretched you mean delicious. I am well aware that kind of food is absolutely horrible for me, but goddamn, it tastes so good.”

“You’ll make it fat if you start feeding it that crap,” he argued.

“Not if Finny exercises.”

“It better because, as it is, I’m not sure we can fit it in the car for the ride back.”

Finny had obviously not only listened but understood and suddenly went from horse-sized to pony to jungle cat.

Huego gaped.

I grinned. “Let’s get that cheeseburger, shall we?”

CHAPTER 14

HUEGO DIDN'T SAY MUCH AS WE PILED INTO THE SEDAN, although he kept a wary eye on the rearview mirror. Finny lay sprawled in the back, eyes shut, napping happily on the seat. Or so it seemed, given the loud purring. Could be because I'd activated the seat warmer. After all sphinxes usually lived in warm places.

Which led me to wonder how Finny got cursed. How long had Finny been trapped in that tunnel without company or light? Absolutely horrible. I planned to do my best to help Finny recover and live its best life.

We drove to the nearest double arches. Comfort food that never changed. We ordered a shit-ton on the company dime: burgers, fries, drinks, even a salad for Baptiste in case he was at the office.

We carried all the food bags into the SMU office with Finny by my side, nose twitching with interest at the smells. I'd not been allowed to give it more than one fry before Huego barked, "No eating in the car."

As we entered, Nelly spotted us first and yelled, "Lunch!"

While I could see they were curious about Finny, we stuffed our faces first. Not knowing what a sphinx ate, I offered Finny a little bit of everything, the favorite being French fries with ketchup. Those got eaten with great gusto. I just hoped Finny didn't throw up later. Belly full, the strange feline then curled up near me as I briefed the others on our adventure, seeing as how Huego had disappeared.

Clive grilled me for details. “Did you see both sides of the tunnel the entire time?”

“I think so.”

Clive had a whiteboard pulled over, and he drew a slash on it. “Starting point. The archway to the tunnel. Did you touch it?”

“No.” I could have slapped myself. “Do you think that caused the disorientation?”

“Maybe.”

He drew a line. A single straight one. “By your description, I don’t think the tunnel looped.”

“It had to since we didn’t turn around.”

He pointed to the top end of the line. “You didn’t. More like space bent back on itself.”

That made me frown. “You mean magic spun us around?”

He shook his head. “This is more than magic. Dimensional warps, while rare, do happen.”

“Is this warp what kept Finny prisoner too?”

“Possibly. Most likely some kind of ‘stay put’ command was keyed into the stone cursing the sphinx.” A sphinx watching with one eye as Baptiste leaned over Kyana to look at something she showed him.

“When I broke the stone, I broke the curse keeping it prisoner.”

“In more ways than one, yes.”

“Is there a way to find out how long it was down there?”

Clive rolled his shoulders. “Maybe. Huego brought a sample of the stone that once encased it, and I’m having it analyzed.”

He had? I’d not even thought to grab any, even when we passed by the rubble.

“I thought sphinxes were only ever seen in the Middle East.” I offered the extent of my knowledge.

“That we know of,” Clive replied. “This discovery, along with the ruins, might change that.”

Nelly neared us. “Unfair. You’re now up to two pets.”

“More for Auntie Nelly to spoil.”

That brought a grin to her lips. “And no accidents to clean up.”

The mention reminded me... How did a sphinx go to the bathroom? Did I need an oversized litter box? Food bowl? Water? Collar? Did it need shots?

Maybe I should have thought this through a bit more.

“Why create a tunnel that goes nowhere?” Clive murmured.

“Not just that one. When we were down there, I noticed two other tunnels that Huego claimed dead-ended. They were working on accessing a fourth.”

“What about the sinkhole where the Pures’ pastor’s house used to be?” Clive very diplomatically didn’t mention the incubator used to live there.

I shrugged. “We’d have to ask Huego or Renarde.”

“Or someone with the CHS.” Nelly had a better idea. “I know what hotel they’re staying at, and it’s got an attached bar.”

“Now you’re thinking. Shall we go buy some historians some beers?” Clive asked.

I wanted to go with them so badly, but I couldn’t just dump Finny on Wally and run. Then there was the fact crowded places and I didn’t get along.

I bowed out. “Not me. I’ve had a big day already.”

“Are you sure?” Nelly pouted.

“Very sure. Try to not get in trouble,” I admonished.

Nelly smirked. “We both know I’m better in a tight bind.” She then glanced at Clive. “We should go separately, so we’re more likely to get hit on.”

Clive didn't quite frown and nodded quickly.

The two of them kept dancing around their attraction. I wasn't quite sure why. Then I thought of me and Baptiste, and I totally got it.

"You two have fun. I'm going to take Finny home to meet Wally."

The moment I walked in the door Wally let me know what he thought.

"Ack, murderer! Stay back, feline, or I will peck your eyes out!"

Yikes. As first meetings went, that wasn't the best starter. I entered, hands outstretched, and cooing, "It's okay, buddy. Finny ain't going to hurt you."

"My name is Aziza." The soft lilting claim didn't come from me.

I blinked. Wally didn't, but we both went still before I pivoted to look at the sphinx.

"Did Finny just speak?"

"*She* did." The sphinx spoke with a bit of a burr and emphasized her sex. "And as I said, my name is not Finny but Aziza."

"You can talk." I shook my head. "Is this some kind of magic?"

"Most assuredly not, *alsahyr*."

I frowned. "What's that mean?"

"*Alsahyr* is a title for one like you. It translates to wizard killer."

"I don't kill wizards," I huffed.

The slinky sphinx prowled farther into the apartment, taking in the space as she replied, "But you do take their magic. Strip them of their power. Their essence. Their strength. Take everything that they are."

I pursed my lips. "It's only temporary. The magic comes back." I muttered a much lower, "Most of the time."

There was a reason I always wore gloves and wrist-length sleeves even in warm weather. People got pissed when they brushed against me and suddenly, poof, no magic. If lucky, it started trickling back as soon as they got some distance from me. A few never recovered from my touch and, to this day, wanted me dead for what they claimed I'd stolen.

It didn't matter how many times I explained I took nothing. They blamed their loss on me as if I intentionally set out to cause them harm. I didn't, in case that wasn't clear. The three who never got it back? They'd placed their hands on me when they should have respected my bubble.

I cocked my head at Aziza. "Why did you wait until now to let me know you could talk?"

The feline managed to shrug. "Curiosity as to my new mistress." Her gaze slanted in my direction as she purred, "You're not what I would have expected. I imagine your commands will be interesting. I am ready to do your bidding, Mistress."

The way she spoke rocked me on my heels. "Whoa. I am not your anything."

"You insisted on keeping me."

"I rescued you," was my quick correction. "They would have tried to hide you in a lab for testing or trapped you in one of their nature reserves. I thought you deserved better." I finished with a roll of my shoulders.

"Compassion from a mistress? Fascinating," the sphinx murmured, her tone and demeanor freaking me out.

Wally, too, since he said nothing, but he watched her like a hawk, his feathers flat to his head, his eyes narrowed. His claws gripped his perch, ready to launch him.

"It's called doing the right thing."

"In exchange for a boon," Aziza added.

“No boon. No nothing. You don’t owe me anything. You’re free to do what you like. And while you’re figuring that out, you’re welcome to stay here. I have the space.”

“This isn’t Egypt,” she remarked, having made her way to the windows and looking out.

“It’s America. Are you from Egypt?”

“I had a home, a lovely den in the ruins of a pharaoh’s temple long forgotten outside Luxor, Egypt.”

“You could travel to see if it’s still there. Now that you’re free, I can help you get across the ocean.”

The sphinx somehow managed a moue of distaste. “That is too much water. Besides, you can’t get rid of me that easily.” Aziza sprang to sit on a stool. If she tried to walk on the counter, should I chastise? After all, I liked my food prep area not trod upon.

She had manners enough to stay sitting and tucked on the chair, still the size of a jungle cat, but so dainty.

I had to ask. “How did you shrink? Before, you were like the size of a horse, and now...” I waved my hand in her direction.

“How do you remove magic?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because some things you can just do. Not everything has an explanation.” A wise reply.

“How are you so smart?” I blurted out.

“Why would you automatically assume I’m dumb?”

“I didn’t assume—”

“You did,” she interrupted.

“Only because most animals can’t have conversations,” I huffed.

“Your caladrius speaks,” Aziza pointed out.

“Wally’s special. As are you. You seem very intelligent.”

“As if you can judge.” Aziza snorted.

It led to Wally chortling—at my expense. “Give sugar tits here a chance, pussycat. She’s dumb about a lot of shit but means well.”

I shot a glare at Wally.

He blew me beaked kisses.

How could I stay mad? Especially since he’d just cahooted with Aziza. Look at that, they were bonding—over dissing me.

Aziza addressed him and spoke of me as if I weren’t there. “I am aware of some of Mistress’s shortcomings, but I think they’re manageable. All things considered, I believe she’ll make a suitable mistress as long as you can confirm she’s not responsible for the damage to your plumage.”

“I would never hurt Wally!” I exclaimed.

“I didn’t figure you had,” was Aziza’s dry reply. “You did, after all, almost get cut in half trying to save me.”

Wally uttered a noise. “Told you. Dumb. I’m still working on her. Right, sugar tits?”

I gave him a finger. Glared at my new pet who wasn’t a pet and inwardly chortled at the bonding going on. My first cat. I wondered if she’d be okay with letting me pet her sometimes.

As Wally explained to Aziza the feeding schedule, and how he got the remote since he had seniority, I wandered to the kitchen and thought about dinner. Then what about after?

An exciting night of which show? A glance at the television had me chewing my lower lip. I’d gotten used to having company that wasn’t just my bird, who meant well, but a lot of his conversation tended to veer to the dirty.

Nelly and Clive planned to hit the hotel bar and see if they could glean any info from the CHS folks staying there. I could join them and help. After all, I’d met a few today in that sinkhole. None had flinched from me. A good sign, especially considering they knew my ability. Or so I assumed.

It would be nice to go out for a change. Usually, we hung out here on the rooftop or in each other's apartments.

I just needed permission first. I cleared my throat. "Hey, guys, seeing as how you two are already such good friends, you won't mind me popping out for a few hours this evening, right?"

Wally did a waddle in place. "Depends. What's for dinner?"

"I think your worm garden is ready." A claim that had him hooting.

Aziza understandably wrinkled her fine feline nose. "I'll pass on the worms."

"I could grab you some kibble from the store."

She recoiled. "What foulness is that? I take back what I said about you being a good mistress."

"Would you prefer raw meat?"

"Would you?" she sassed back. "Why can't I have what you eat?"

I beamed in delight. "That I can do. I have tons of food." Anxiety from my youth led to me overstocking the moment I had any extra money. "There are leftovers in the fridge. Pizza, some Chinese, even some sandwich-making stuff. Tell me what you want and I'll nuke it for you."

"I know how to use appliances," she scorned.

I lifted my hands. "No offense meant. Wasn't sure how the paws would work the buttons."

"I assume you'll keep asking questions until I show you." She leaped from the stool to the kitchen floor. Her tail whipped around to yank the handle on the fridge door. Then she snared a leftover carton of noodles with that same dexterous limb. She used a paw to press the big button on the microwave, popping it open to place the container inside. The tip of her tail then punched in numbers and Start.

I almost clapped. Her prehensile tail reminded me for some weird reason of satyrs and their dicks. Independent movement. Part of the reason why they kept getting the girls despite being verbal pigs.

Aziza's ease in using appliances struck me as odd. "How long were you stuck in that cave?" I'd assumed hundreds of years.

"According to the calendar I peeked at while you were yapping to your coworkers, somewhere around three months."

"Only three months?"

"Didn't feel like only," she snapped back.

Even Wally whistled. "Dumb."

"Sorry. I just assumed you'd been there much longer. A guardian left behind, lost and forgotten until we found you."

"Hardly." Aziza snorted. She'd returned to her perch on the stool, with me across from her behind the counter. "One minute I was living my best life, the next, bam, trapped in stone."

"What happened?"

"I touched something I shouldn't have," she grouched.

"That's kind of vague."

I'd have sworn she glared. "Fine, if you must know, I have no idea. I was drunk at the time. Partying with some friends. We went into the forbidden section of the pharaoh's temple. We wanted to check out the rumor it was haunted. I woke in that stupid tunnel." She pouted. Impressive given her feline jaw.

"You don't remember what you saw in that excavation?"

She shook her head. "It's a blur."

It only occurred to me then. "Do you know if you have the hex?" The one that infected a good many monsters and cryptids was magic based, as in remove it even for a second—say with my touch—and boom, they exploded like an overripe tomato. Not recommended. We'd seen less of that happening

once we destroyed the Pure Church. The pastor and his disciples seemingly the ones placing the curse.

“I would never mar my flesh.” She tossed her feline head, and a bit of dust shook loose.

I coughed. “You need a bath.”

“I thought you’d never offer.” She sauntered from me into the bathroom and shut the door. Apparently, she required no help because the water turned on. Sphinxes were nothing like I’d have expected. Or was she an exception? She certainly was impressive.

The microwave beeped.

“Hand it over, sugar tits.”

“But Aziza—”

“Was proving a point. Now gimme.”

I turned to Wally with the steaming container. “You sure you’re okay hanging with Aziza?”

“Pussycat and I will be just fine.”

“Not if you keep calling her that.”

“Then she can suck my—”

“Don’t you dare say it,” I interrupted sternly.

Wally cackled.

I sighed.

And then sighed again, as I had to wait two hours to take my own shower so I could get ready to go out. My new roommate took her sweet time before she emerged, draped in a towel.

I jumped in the shower next. After, I dressed in jeans and a cute top, blow dried my hair, and even threw on some mascara.

As I rejoined Wally and Aziza, I noticed something interesting. Aziza lay on the couch, watching television with Wally. Her dust-gray fur was now a deep auburn in a shade slightly lighter than mine. Another redhead in the house. Was

that the equivalent of crossing a few black cats? Guess I'd find out how my luck was tonight.

As I left my apartment, I called out to my roommates, "Be good while I go and seduce a historian into telling me his secrets."

Trust Wally to yodel, "Not with those granny panties you ain't."

CHAPTER 15

THE HOTEL WAS A FEW BLOCKS FROM THE SINKHOLE I'D visited. Big enough to handle a few hundred people with a convention center, restaurant, coffee shop, and bar attached.

I could hear the music from outside, booming hard. The thump almost got my hips to shiver and shake. It should be noted I'd never clubbed. The fear of touching the wrong person kept me from those venues. But this was a bar. Bars had stools and tables and usually empty dance floors except for the truly drunk later at night. I could totally do this.

The door opened and offered a peek inside. A glimpse of many people clustered together.

I froze on the sidewalk, gloved fingers clenching and unclenching, knowing my flesh was covered everywhere but my face. Didn't matter. I couldn't go in there. Too crowded. Too dangerous. Too...

...much.

Not for the first time, my anxiety turned me away from something I wanted to do. If only I had a way to turn off my ability so I didn't have to be afraid all the time. It would be nice not to panic in crowds.

I tucked my sweater tight and headed for the coffee shop next door for a hot cocoa with marshmallows. I could console myself sugar while I waited for a taxi to swing by and pick me up. I'd expected to have some drinks and hadn't driven over. I should have known better. I don't know why I thought this time would be different.

A bell chimed as I entered the store. Inside, a long counter about boob height offered a display window beneath showcasing treats. Across from it, against the wall, were several bistro tables with only the farthest one occupied, the person sitting with their back to me.

“Welcome to Frothy Licks and Sips. What can I get you?” a handsome guy asked with a wink.

“Hot chocolate with whipped cream and marshmallows. Plus whatever that is.” I pointed to something in the display case that might finally kill me with sugar.

“Nine oh four,” he quoted, ringing it up.

I tapped my card and waited for my order while staring out the shop window. It took a moment to register someone was speaking to me.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said, are you here with the historians?” It was the barista asking.

“No. I live here.”

“Never seen you before,” he remarked, serving me the treat first, a tart with a caramel-looking filling topped with toasted coconut and some kind of drizzle. He slid it toward me on a cardboard plate.

I snared it, replying, “I’m not usually in this part of town.” I’d always avoided the more crowded downtown areas when possible, which made my decision to come tonight even more ironic.

“What brings you slumming?” he said with a grin that showed off slightly crooked teeth. It took a second to realize he was flirting with me.

“I, um, heard you had great cocoa?” It was lame. Like me.

“The best.” He winked as he slid the mug over but didn’t let go. I reached for it, my gloved hand not quite touching his but getting close. He frowned.

He retreated, pulling his hand to his chest as if stung. He rolled the ring on his index finger with the dull stone before he glanced at the mirror on the wall behind and gasped.

Uh-oh.

His tone held more than a hint of accusation as he turned to me and huffed, “What did you do?”

“Nothing.” Not technically a lie. I’d not touched him. I grabbed the cocoa.

“My ring charm is dead. You stole its magic,” he accused.

“I didn’t take anything.” Technically true. I had no idea where the magic went when I made it disappear, but it sure made me hungry. I just wanted to eat my treat and drink my cocoa.

“You did. Give it back.” He came around the counter, his face blotchy with anger. No longer handsome at all.

“I can’t give it back because I don’t have it!”

“Liar! Not to mention cruel to take away my charm. Do you think it’s easy living with this face?” He pointed.

“What are you talking about?” I stared at him and wondered what he meant. I never saw whatever glamour he had in place. He seemed fine to me with a rugged nose, slightly bent as if once broken, a small scar above a brow, and teeth a smidge offset.

“Don’t play stupid. Fix my charm.”

“I don’t want any trouble.” I knew the right words to say. It didn’t matter.

He came at me with clenched fists. Ugh. Getting punched would suck, and yet, I had to let the barista hit first; otherwise, I’d never be able to claim self-defense.

“I don’t want any trouble,” I repeated.

“Then you shouldn’t have stolen my magic. It cost me a whole week’s pay, you redheaded whore.”

Ow, that stung, seeing as how I could count on one hand my sexual encounters. “Maybe it was defective.”

“You’re going to pay for it.” He stood between me and the door outside.

A slide of a chair, metal leg on tile floor, made me realize the other patron had neared. A voice emerged from behind, low and firm. “Back off.”

I assumed the guy at my rear meant me, until he flanked me and drew the barista’s glare.

“She stole my charm.”

“I was here. She took nothing from you. Seems more like your hex ran out of juice.”

“I just bought it,” huffed the whiny barista

“And? You’ve never heard of a faulty hex?” the man cajoled.

Meanwhile, I stood there in disbelief. I couldn’t believe a stranger stood up for me.

“Whatever.” A sulky reply. “You need to leave. Both of you. We’re closed.”

In other words, get out. I didn’t point out the sign that said it was open until midnight. I had my treat in hand but had to leave the mug of cocoa in a real ceramic mug behind. Better to mourn its chocolatey sweet loss than stay a moment longer.

The bell tingled as I exited. Hopefully alone. I didn’t turn to look. Better to not antagonize the barista. Talk about an evening ruined.

Well, maybe not completely. I did still have the sugar-coma treat in hand. I took a bite as I walked. The groan that escaped me didn’t do justice to the pleasure in my mouth. A scuff of a step let me know I had company. The stranger who’d stood up for me in the café.

I half turned to see him by my side, a full foot taller, wearing a hooded sweater. His features were those of an older man, maybe in his fifties, possibly sixties.

With a mouthful of orgasm teasing me, I mumbled, “Thanks for sticking up for me.”

“The guy was being a dick.”

My lips twitched. “He was.”

“Does that kind of thing happen often?” he asked, his voice deep and gravelly.

Rather than admit I’d actually done what the barista accused, I shrugged and said, “It’s the hair. People have a tendency of assuming the worst.”

“And yet most of the redheaded are benign and harmless.”

“Most?” I couldn’t help but tease.

“Then there are people like you.”

“Excuse me?”

“You are the reason why people fear the redheaded.”

My jaw dropped. “I’m sorry, but what the fuck, dude? That’s kind of rude to say.”

“Do you have a problem with the truth?”

“Truth?” I exclaimed. “You don’t even know me.”

“You’re Ruby Garcia, the SMU’s null witch.”

Never mind the shock he knew my name, I hastened to say, “I’m not actually a witch.”

He waved a hand. “Agreed, because a witch controls her power.”

“Hard to control something that just happens,” I stated, even as I remembered Huego mentioning something about me not having a handle on my ability. Why did people keep assuming I could?

He snorted. “Just happens? You can’t be that oblivious to the fact you’re literally sucking at all magic within feet of you.”

“How could you possibly know?”

“How could you not?”

“The magic-sucking just happens. I’m not doing it on purpose.”

“That’s the problem. You’re not doing anything. It’s ridiculously irresponsible, and before you argue or give me some piss-poor excuse, here’s a little secret. You’re not the only one who can nullify magic.” He pushed back his hood, revealing deep red hair with some salt sprinkling it.

For a second, I froze, and, yes, I did wonder given his age. *Is this my father?* Instead, I gasped. “You’re like me?”

“I am nothing like you because I control myself rather than cause chaos wherever I go. It’s ridiculous that you’re reining it in so poorly at your age.” He had a slight accent on his words. Not American but somewhere with strong English roots.

“How am I supposed to control something I don’t feel?”

“Don’t feel...” He stared at me. “If that’s true, then you are a danger to society and should be confined.”

My mouth rounded. “That’s a fucked-up thing to say to someone you just met.”

“You carry within a dangerous and powerful gift. But if it’s wielding you rather than you controlling it, then you pose a threat to everyone.”

I wanted to declare him a liar. I would never hurt anyone.

Then, I thought of all the incidents in my career, and I admitted to this stranger, “I don’t know how to rein it in. Didn’t even know it could be. You’re the first person I’ve met who has my ability. How did you figure it out?”

His lips pressed into a line. “The hard way.”

“That’s hardly helpful.”

“As you said, we’re strangers. I don’t know what I should reveal to you. How do I know you’re trustworthy?”

“You already know I’m an SMU agent.”

He snorted. “Hardly a recommendation, given your department is only a few months old.”

“And making a difference,” I retorted.

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. Can you say the same?” My feisty side emerged.

“I’m with the Cryptid Historical Society. Professor Xannon.” He extended his hand, and I noticed he wore a thin leather glove.

Rather than shake it, I pointed. “For someone promoting control, why are you wearing gloves?”

“Because it comforts those around me. But make no mistake, I am always in complete command.”

“How do I know you’re telling me the truth?” I threw his words back at him. What if he claimed the power but didn’t actually have it? Why anyone would do that eluded me. People did weird shit all the time, though.

“I don’t care if you believe me. But you’d better listen, seeing as how, right now, I’m tempted to declare you a menace to society and have you detained in a safe location.”

“Excuse me? Why don’t you take your judgment and shove it where the sun don’t shine.” My rebuttal was eloquent.

“Don’t blame me for your lack of mastery,” he chided.

“Fuck you.” Again, the perfect comeback from yours truly.

“You know, instead of feeling angry and threatened by your own inability, there is a solution.”

“Oh really, and pray tell what is it? Does it involve padded walls and Jell-O eaten with a paper straw?”

“Learn to rein in your ability.”

“Because that’s so easy,” I said with a roll of my eyes.

“Have you even tried?”

“No, because I don’t know how.” Until recently, I’d not even thought it was possible. “Not to mention, it’s not like there’s anyone who can teach me. I thought I was the only one.”

“Not quite, but those with the gift are rare.” He paused then, with his mouth pinched, added, “I could attempt to teach you.”

I blinked at him. My brain couldn't process his words. “You, teach me?” I couldn't help but giggle “We met like five minutes ago and hate each other.” Not a mature response, I'll admit. At the same time, why should I accept his offer? What if it was some kind of a trick? Given my history, trust didn't come easily.

“I would have said I disapprove of you, but you raised a good point when you spoke of a lack of teachers in your life. Sometimes it takes an outsider to show us what we're not seeing. To make us reach our full potential.”

I jabbed my finger in his direction. “Aha. You had someone to show you how to use the force!”

“In a sense.”

While arguing, we'd reached the end of the block. I paused, unsure of where to go when I saw a familiar car. A moment later, movement from behind us showed Clive trudging along, head down.

The professor stiffened, whereas I muttered, “He's a friend and also SMU.” Then more loudly, “Hey, Clive.”

His head lifted, and he offered me a crooked smile. “Hey, Ruby. Wasn't expecting to see you here.”

“I got a hankering for a fancy dessert, and this gentleman was seeing me to a taxi.”

Clive caught on. “I can give you a ride home if you want.”

“Yes, please.” If I expected my nonmagical counterpart to argue, he didn't.

The professor's parting words were, “If you want to learn, you know where to find me.” He strode off without another word.

“Who was that?” Clive asked as we got into his car.

“Professor Xannon with the CSA.”

“Intense dude.

“No shit.”

“What’s he a professor of?”

I didn’t know, but I planned to find out.

CHAPTER 16

ON THE RIDE BACK TO THE APARTMENT, I QUICKLY COMPOSED a message to Kyana. Told her everything I could about Professor Xannon and asked her to do a deep dive on him.

Only once I hit Send did I ask Clive, “What happened? Why were you leaving so early? That bar was rocking.”

He grimaced. “History buffs are drinkers. Hard liquor mostly, so you don’t want to be there too late.” Clive drank light, a few beers here and there, never to the point of getting drunk.

“You left Nelly alone?” Girl code said to always go in pairs, not that it ever applied to my loner ass in the past. But Nelly had been teaching me.

“Hell no. She left like twenty minutes before me, looking all pissed.”

I wonder if some guy had tried to cop a feel.

The drive didn’t take long, and I waved goodnight to Clive as I headed up an extra flight of stairs to my apartment. Inside, Nelly waited, feet tucked up on the couch, glass of wine in hand, chatting with Aziza and Wally.

I shut the door, and Nelly exclaimed, “How come you didn’t tell me the sphinx could talk?”

“It happened after we left the office and you’d already taken off for the bar. I heard you ditched looking pissed. What happened?”

“How do you know?”

“I ran into Clive outside the coffeeshop next door.”

“Wait, you came to the bar? Why didn’t you tell me you were going? We could have gone together.”

“It was a last-minute decision.” And I’d not texted Nelly because I’d known there might be a possibility I wouldn’t step foot inside.

“Ugh, wish I’d had you there as my wing woman. You would have probably stopped me from being so stupid.”

“What did you do?” I asked with arched brow.

“I might have dragged one of the history nerds into the ladies’ room and given her a lecture about feeling up men without permission.”

“How do you know it wasn’t her boyfriend she was groping?”

“It was Clive.”

“Oh. Isn’t Clive capable of saying no himself, though?” I arched a brow.

“He’s too nice of a guy. Besides, it was wildly inappropriate for her to sexualize him like that,” Nelly huffed. Any excuse other than the obvious.

“Holy shit, you had a jealous fit.”

“Did not.”

“Please.” I blew a raspberry.

Wally said it best. “You two should bone and get it over with.”

She sniffed. “I think not.”

“Me thinks thou doth protest too much.” This from Aziza who’d been listening the entire time.

Nelly bit her lip. “Me and Clive? Don’t be ridiculous. I’m seeing that guy, remember?”

“Seeing doesn’t mean you can’t keep looking,” my sly reply.

“Looking at what? Clive and I are just friends.” She spat it almost angrily. “I need more wine!” She held out her glass, and I realized I was expected to fill it. Probably best. As to Wally’s chirp of, “Me too,” I replied, “No.” I’d seen him tipsy before. It involved even less aim in the bathroom than usual.

I poured Nelly some wine and some water with floating watermelon chunks for Aziza, Wally, and myself, before flopping onto the couch and saying, “I met another null witch or wizard—whatever you want to call a guy with my power—tonight.”

Nelly spat out some wine. Good thing I had dark fabric for my furniture and carpet.

“Say that again?” she sputtered mid-choke.

“I met Professor Xannon in the coffee shop by the hotel. He has the same power as me and knew who I was. Says he works with CHS.”

“Someone like you? That’s amazing. You must have so many questions, and now you might get some answers.”

In that respect, she wasn’t wrong. Finding out how to be a true null witch, someone with mastery over her power... It would be life changing.

“He says there’s a way to control my power.”

“Awesome.”

“He wants to teach me.”

“Great, what’s the problem?”

“I don’t think he likes me. He’s so rude.”

“So are you. Meaning you have another issue.” Nelly stared at me before blurting out, “He’s too hot, and you’re afraid you’ll try and bone him.”

“Ew. He’s old enough to be my dad.”

“*Is* he your dad?” she asked jokingly.

Me, totally serious, said, “It’s a distinct possibility given the color of his hair.”

She managed to hold on to her wine this time. She swallowed and blinked back tears from the aborted coughing fit to rasp out, “So when do you see him again?”

I would have liked to say never, but I had to do something about my ability. If there was a way to muffle it... Why, I might actually blend in.

“I don’t know. Maybe this weekend if we’re not busy.” Or would I get a chance to see him sooner, given Huego had drawn me in once already to help with the CHS investigation of the ruins?

“At least your evening was more productive than mine. I learned nothing other than the historians are a tight-lipped bunch who think it’s okay to molest people.”

“If it’s any consolation, Clive left not long after you. Alone,” I added to make it clear.

“As if I care.” She sniffed.

She did. But I wasn’t going to push her on it. Instead, I joined her in having wine.

I regretted the third glass when I had to get up in the morning.

The next day, at headquarters, rifling through reports, I kept waiting for Huego to come by and fetch me. He didn’t. After lunch, Nelly and I got to check out the sewer near a day care center that reported a slime monster. It wasn’t slime, though. Poop, toilet paper, and things flushed comprised the creature made of magic. A monster I had to touch.

An hour of showering didn’t take the stench away.

My mood wasn’t improved when Kyana didn’t find out much about the professor other than he’d been working with CHS for eighteen years. He had a degree in archeology and was classed as a wizard, which surprised me. Yes, he was male, but wizards had magic. If he spoke the truth and was like me, then that made him the opposite of one.

As to his role in the CHS, Kyana couldn’t find much other than he was considered a senior advisor who appeared to do

whatever he liked and reported to no one. Doubtful. Most likely he answered to the people who ran things but remained out of sight.

The one thing that didn't come up in conjunction with his name? Anything about his power to cancel magic, which we would have expected to show up in his employee profile. It led to me wondering if he'd lied, even as I couldn't see why he would. Perhaps he was just a wizard with some fancy-schmancy spell that did the same thing I could.

Fuck calling him. I convinced myself there was no point. A bad habit of mine. It was easier to avoid disappointment if I never tried at all.

Besides, I was too busy. The SMU team was dealing with a crime wave among our transient population. The cause? Exploding tempers combined with wrong-time, wrong-place scenarios. Such as the basilisk wanting to squat in the same park as the Bigfoot who'd recently appeared. While Nelly lassoed them, Clive bound them in magic for transport, and I sat on the sidelines waiting for a reason to get tossed into the game. The only thing I got to do was change someone's dog from stone back to fur—and get bitten in the process because said dog didn't like me.

All in all, a shitty end to a shitty week. I wanted to do something, anything, to feel actually useful, so when the weekend hit, and Clive said, "I think we should check out the sinkhole at the pastor's old place," I didn't hesitate.

"I'm in!" Because nothing said fun weekend like climbing into a big hole. Maybe we'd find something magical, and I could prove I wasn't a menace to society.

"Aren't you going to ask why?" Clive asked. We were sitting outside on a picnic table by a food truck, waiting for our order to bring back to the office.

"Do we really need a reason to go investigating strange holes?"

His lips quirked. "Guess not, but in this case, I do have a reason."

“Care to share it?”

He leaned close to whisper, “Because we’re not supposed to go near it.”

That made me laugh. “I didn’t take you for a rebel.”

He shrugged. “I’m not usually much of one, but it occurs to me that once the search for Joe concluded”—Joe being our friend and coworker lost on a mission by the pastor’s place—“that there was a concentrated effort to divert our attention elsewhere.”

I frowned. “I hadn’t noticed.” Then again, we’d been so busy. I’d barely given the place another thought.

“Neither did I at first, until I happened to ask Renarde if the CSA had done any poking into the holes left behind under the pastor’s house and that temple you found.” Left unsaid was the hope Joe’s body could be recovered that we might do better than an empty casket in his grave.

“And?”

“She told me the area was off-limits.”

“Most likely because they’re worried about further erosion of the ground.”

He shook his head. “That’s just it. The ground is fine. They checked it before allowing the recovery teams in to look for Joe. I think they’re hiding something.”

My lips pursed. “You think there’s another ruin? But why would they care if we knew about it?”

“I don’t know, but I find it curious.”

And like cats, now there were two of us who wanted a peek into those holes.

It didn’t take long to assemble a team willing to bend the rules. It included me, Nelly, Clive, Baptiste, and Kyana. I didn’t inquire if anyone had asked Huego. We’d barely seen him since our excursion to the ruins under the church. He hadn’t called. Texted. Nothing.

As if I cared. I didn't need him or his attitude. My life was great right now. I had friends. A job I loved. And a sphinx who insisted on calling me mistress, to my discomfort. So long as I ignored that part, Aziza fit well into my life, and I knew Wally certainly appeared a lot happier. His feathers had filled in quite a bit since he'd started taking a healing serum made by Daisy, Baptiste's mother. Although I was a touch concerned at the dark red line bisecting his plumage.

When I asked about it, Wally had squawked, "Family crest." I wondered who he meant, as I'd assumed his family was long gone given how I'd found him.

That Friday night, on the apartment rooftop, while swigging beers and devouring barbecue-sauce-slathered ribs—because everyone knows the best plans are hatched that way—we plotted.

We set out an objective: Explore the sinkhole we dubbed Pure A-hole on account the pastor of the Pure Church used to own the property. The pastor—who happened to be married to the incubator—ran a cult church for humans who considered themselves the only pure race. Which would have been fine. They were allowed to believe what they wanted. But when they started harming others, they had to be stopped.

We'd put a halt to the sadistic cult. Us. And yet, despite that, we didn't have permission to access the site. Absolute bullshit. Also, obviously a sign there was something there we needed to see.

In good news, despite the ban on visitors, Pure A-hole didn't have much security, just some wooden sawhorses with signs marked *DANGER!* across the road leading into the executive neighborhood with its million-dollar properties each sitting on a few acres of land. I wondered how hard the authorities leaned on those who balked at evacuating.

Way back when, I'd once asked who regulated the Cryptid Authority and all the other branches that extended from it—the CSA, the new SMU, then there was the Cryptid Biology Department and the Cryptid Law Services, plus others that were niche and sometimes had only a single employee. It

wasn't a simple answer like the government since they were a worldwide organization. The reply? No one actually knew, and no one seemed bothered that some faceless people were pulling the strings.

But those nameless entities weren't part of our discussion when it came to breaking the rules. Passing the simple wooden barriers wouldn't pose a problem; they'd only take seconds to move. The most pressing issue? Not getting picked up by any eyes and ears—both electronic and not.

With this area being declared off-limits, we needed cause to enter. Alas, we had no active reports to justify even going near.

“You do know it's easy to fake a call, right?” This came from Kyana. “All I have to do is clone a few phone numbers close to the neighborhood. Have them all freaking about the unicorn that went bolting through. The cops will turn around and dump the complaint on the SMU, giving us legitimate cause to enter. We can be in and out before the higher-ups notice and order us to retreat.”

I hated to be the one poking a hole in the plan. “I like the idea, but we need a different monster. Word of a unicorn will draw all kinds of civilian gawkers. Not to mention, if we're going down a hole, we need equipment. How would we explain having climbing gear when we're supposed to be chasing something with four hooves?”

Nelly snapped her fingers. “We could say the unicorn jumped in the hole.”

“No one could see that from the zone outside the cordoned area,” Clive stated. “And we've got to generate a sense of urgency, which means a lot of phone calls. Kyana is good, but if we're going to come out of this clean, we can't fake that many.”

Aziza woke long enough to drawl, “Why would you pretend? People will call on their own once they see a saber-toothed, monstrous-sized lion trampling their front lawns.”

“We don’t have...” Clive started to say, only to trail off as he stared at the very innocuous-looking Aziza, currently a primly sitting house-sized cat. “You can project a monster?”

“I won’t be projecting,” she said with a toss of her head and a supercilious smirk. She had partial human features, as well as cat, meaning her speech and facial expression could disconcert at times.

I jumped in. “It’s great if you want to help, but what you’re suggesting will have some risk associated with it.”

“Obviously, but it will be real, which is why it will work. I run around. People call for help. The team comes with their most capable vehicle, and a good thing since you’ll chase me into the forbidden zone.” Aziza had it all planned out.

“Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t offer if I wasn’t, Mistress.” Sassy. But confident.

“Just making sure.”

“I’m not an amateur. How do you think I remained without a master for so long?” she scoffed.

It was Baptiste, of all people, who did say at one point, “You realize we could get in trouble for this.”

We did. The fun thing about being a group of misfits? We didn’t give a flying fuck.

We did our best to plan and assign roles. Kyana volunteered to be our outside liaison. She appeared giddy at the idea of using some drones she’d enhanced that wouldn’t just provide visuals but also some limited firepower. For a moment, I thought of the missing Joe, who’d saved my life only a few months ago with some flying robots. He’d been in the forest not far from Pure A-hole when the ground collapsed. A search in the pit of dirt, asphalt, and uprooted trees never did recover the body, but it did completely bury the temple we’d found.

This time we’d be checking out the area where the house had sunk, a place we’d not explored at the time and then never

bothered with, as we got busy with other things and it was made off-limits. Given we didn't know what to expect, we had to guess at our needs. The SUV we took came equipped with dual winches, each holding thin but strong rope, each several hundred feet long. It might have seemed rather lucky we had the equipment. Not really. Baptiste had modified his truck given recent incidents so we could mount quicker rescues in the future.

Every time I wanted to hate him, he did something incredible and I wanted to hump him. Yes, hump. I was so fucking horny it hurt. Masturbating provided limited relief.

“So, looks like we have a plan,” Clive announced, rubbing his hands.

We did, and yet my sleep that night proved restless. I woke abruptly, not because I'd dreamed I was falling but because Huego wasn't there to catch me.

At least the splat was only me falling out of bed.

I hoped it wasn't an omen for the day.

CHAPTER 17

SATURDAY, I WOKE NERVOUS AND EXCITED. TODAY WE PUT our plan in motion. I couldn't wait. After all, I'd conquered threats in two ruins. Would we face something dangerous again today? Could I prove my worth? What would we find?

It took forever for it to be time to go. We'd settled on late morning so we'd have the most daylight shining down in the pit as the sun began its arc overhead. We still had head lamps and flashlights, plus Clive, who could conjure up some light balls so long as I didn't go near them, but best to hedge our bets because being in the dark sucked. Poor Aziza, a creature of sun and sand, had found that the most difficult aspect of her imprisonment.

The plan started off without a hitch. I sat in the back of the vehicle with Nelly and a currently lap-sized Aziza, dainty and small. It amazed the others, who murmured about it. Me, I really didn't care how the science worked, seeing as how she allowed me to pet her sleek fur. Unlike actual sphinx cats, she had hair and not the wrinkly skin they were known for.

Baptiste drove, and Clive sat shotgun, which alleviated the need to speak. I'd not been alone with Baptiste since the night of the full moon. He avoided my presence. I pretended he didn't exist. Harder to do in a shared vehicle.

I'd gotten past my anger at his forced engagement to indifference. If he truly was into me, he'd have fought against his family's demand. That he didn't prove we'd never been more than flirt buddies, and I deserved better. Despite what one of my therapists said, I didn't have to settle. One day I'd find someone who loved me and would be willing to fight to

be with me. The older I got, the harder it was to keep that hope going.

Blocks away from the forbidden zone—in an area with no cameras, according to Kyana—we slowed enough for Aziza to spring out.

“Be careful,” I shouted.

“There is no such thing as caution on a rampage,” she said, her voice shifting from lilting to low grumble that matched her massive size with the promised saber teeth. All accomplished without magic. The how of it baffled and awed. She winked. “I’ll see you shortly, Mistress.”

With those parting words, off she bounded, her size increasing but also blurring along the edges as an ominous pall seemed to fall around her.

Fascinating.

It was tempting to follow, but to make this look real so we stood at least a chance of avoiding trouble, we had to wait for the call from dispatch. A call that would find us nearby getting some specialty waffles from a food truck. It wasn’t weird at all for us to be all out together getting something to eat. My own mind gave that a sarcastic lilt.

We did our best to make it look real, joking and jostling as we piled out of the SUV and ordered waffles. Nelly did the PB and J with bacon, mine was a classic with maple syrup. Baptiste asked for plain after I innocently asked if the trees screamed much when they were bled for their sap to make syrup. Clive had fruit and whipped cream on his.

We’d gotten three out of the four orders when the text came through from Kyana: *Monster sighted. Pls investigate.* Followed by some coordinates.

Baptiste was the only one missing his food, and he waved us to the truck. “Let’s go.” I couldn’t blame him for ditching his plain waffle. Talk about being cruel to himself.

He drove while we ate. It was worth every bite. I managed half of it before he turned onto a street and said, “Found her.”

Indeed, we could see a shadowy shape holding on to a house and dangling upside down to stare inside. Freaky as hell, so I kind of understood why someone stood outside aiming a gun.

I might have gasped, “My kitty!”

Baptiste saw the threat and floored the gas, lurching the vehicle forward. The rampaging beast paused its terrorizing for a glance in our direction. I saw Aziza’s face, a monstrous version in a blurry, furry cloud with giant, glowing eyes.

I swear she grinned before bounding off, giving us an excuse to chase while getting her out of reach of those with weapons. She loped down the road and easily soared over the barrier in her way. The plan was for her to shrink and sneak into the vehicle once we got to our location.

We paused only long enough to move the sawhorses to continue our chase. As we drove past the danger sign, Nelly remarked, “I thought the no-go border started farther in.”

“It appears they extended it,” Baptiste remarked.

They who though? Wasn’t us. Wasn’t the CA. Could it be the Cryptid Historical Society? Or was it the shadowy group above us all manipulating things?

I whistled as we passed a veritable mansion with closed wrought iron gates. “Bet that made a lot of people unhappy.”

“Better relocated than dead,” Baptiste replied. He drove slowly, his demeanor cautious as we neared the hole that had swallowed a good chunk of a wooded area and part of the road. I still remembered the moment of disbelief when I’d seen it drop—with Joe. We’d barely escaped with our lives.

And now we had returned. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea?

Upon seeing that gaping pit, my nervous ass asked, “Should we stop and walk the rest of the way?”

Kyana, listening in from her web of machines, replied, “You should be fine. Environmental reports show the ground

solid all around and not likely to collapse any further. Still, you might want to stay away from the edge.”

No shit. My nails dug into the back seat as Baptiste rode the shoulder less than ten feet from where the ground sheared off. The pavement became whole again as we turned into the driveway for the ex-pastor’s house, only the house was gone. Eerie seeing as how the interlocked stone path from the driveway still led to it. The shrubs in front hadn’t fallen into the hole either.

Emerging from the SUV, I was struck by the silence of the place. No birds. No breeze. Not even the hum of an insect.

“Feel anything?” Nelly whispered, standing beside me. She had a hand on the butt of a gun.

“Other than creeped out?”

“The place is oozing a certain ominous vibe. I was wondering if you sensed any magic?” Nelly asked.

The question made me think of the professor saying I posed a danger since I couldn’t feel anything. Or was it I didn’t recognize it? Like that pile of junk on the counter I kept meaning to put away, had I become inured to its presence?

Clive answered. “Actually, this place feels pretty dead for magic, which is a novelty.” He spread his arms and breathed deep. “If it weren’t for the hole in the ground, this place would be perfect.”

Too eerily perfect. I didn’t trust it. Maybe we just didn’t see the problem. And by we, I included me. After all, I’d been coming across magic strong enough to fool even my senses, meaning I shouldn’t be complacent. I peeled a glove and crouched to the ground, placing my fingers firmly on the asphalt of the driveway. Warm from the sun. Hard. Abrasive. I crab-walked to the edge and the grass, repeating the grope. Cool and dewy still, the stalks clung to the last of the season before deep frost killed it until the spring.

Did I dispel any magic? I honestly didn’t think so. I didn’t even get hungry like I usually did when I got rid of a spell. Nothing better than a fast-food run after draining a few hexes.

I blinked. Holy shit, had I just found a clue to my power?

“Rubes, are you taking your pack now or waiting?” Nelly asked.

It had already been decided what order we’d descend in. Since we all wanted to be first, we drew straws. I lost and got last place. Even knowing that, I wanted my pack on my back, just in case. I didn’t trust the quiet around us.

“Better prepared than fucked,” I quipped.

Nelly handed the backpack over, and my sweaty fingers clutched the strap.

Baptiste already had his and was yanking on the winch to give the rope some slack.

“You sure you want to go first, Beefcake?” I asked.

His scowl almost incinerated. “I’m going, and don’t argue. I won fair and square.” Baptiste didn’t leave it open for negotiation, and only my dumb ass thought to challenge him on it. He snapped himself into a harness and clipped it to a ring tied to the rope, which fed into the winch on the front of the truck. I noticed he’d wedged blocks under the wheels to prevent sliding. Would it be enough?

Baptiste showed no hesitation as he walked to the edge and jumped right off. I slapped a hand to my mouth lest I scream.

Nelly grabbed my hand and squeezed. “He’s fine. Look, the rope is moving.”

It unwound slowly, and morbid curiosity had me creeping closer for a peek over the edge, wishing we’d not lost our bright sunshine to a layer of thick clouds. The grayness cast a pall on everything.

Craning over the rim, I could barely see a bouncing light as Baptiste made his way down. He paused, and my earpiece crackled.

“I’m here.”

I frowned since I could still see an ant-sized version of him. “You don’t seem like you’re far down.” I hadn’t forgotten

how far Huego and I had to climb to escape the spider hole or the flight-into-the-church one.

“This pit is shallow compared to the one at the church,” Baptiste confirmed.

“What do you see?” Nelly asked.

“I found the house. What’s left of it.

“Any tunnels? Ruins?” Clive’s turn to query as he hitched himself into a second rig.

“Haven’t looked yet.”

“Wait for me. I’m coming.” Clive, who’d been slower to cinch himself in, clipped onto the second winch. Unlike Baptiste, he eased himself cautiously over the side before he rappelled down.

Soon he, too, stood at the bottom, while I remained stuck at the top with Nelly. She didn’t seem as perturbed as me, but she did appear leery of the nicely manicured yard that ended in a forest. Everything looked so normal from here, and yet just up the road, that same wooded area dropped straight down into the hole that swallowed Joe and the temple where curses were being placed on cryptids.

“What’s wrong?” I asked my friend as she pulled her gun from her holster.

She turned her face left then right, eyes half shut as she tested the air. “Something’s coming.” Her other hand suddenly held a knife.

“Don’t!” I yelled as it occurred to me who joined the party. I threw myself in front of Nelly. “It’s probably Aziza.”

Nelly’s eyes widened and kept widening as she stared past me. I turned and saw my giant kitty still wearing her scary costume.

“You did it! I see someone getting a special dessert tonight.” I’d no sooner finished speaking than Aziza shrank. Right back down to normal cat-size in sleek red fur and her uncanny face. I knelt, ready to scoop her up, but Aziza instead bounded onto my bent knee then perched on my shoulder, her

weight not bothersome at all. I rose to see Nelly arching a brow.

“What?” I went on the defensive.

“That’s not something you see every day.”

“I’m sure Wally would ride you if you wanted to give it a try.” I said it with a straight face.

Nelly burst out laughing. “He would. That rascal.”

Our earpieces burst with sound as Clive huffed, “I’m at the bottom. Not sensing any magic whatsoever.”

“No scents either,” Baptiste declared on a more ominous note.

It seemed unlikely there’d been no exploration by the local wildlife. What of those who’d searched and the CHS? Surely, they’d been by to check it out.

Then again, maybe not. The sinkhole we’d done our best to explore when Joe disappeared had been a veritable dump of ground, trees, and dirt into a hollow space. The temple had been completely buried and would require some fancy excavation. We’d not actually gone down Pure A-hole at the time, given our concern about Joe, but would have surely heard if it contained any kind of ruin.

Then again, we’d not been involved in the whole cordoning off of the area or the quarantine of the town. For all we knew, there were many discovered ruins and we just weren’t being told about them.

I returned to the edge of the hole and peered down, wishing I’d done a better job drawing straws. Jealous? Hell yeah, I was.

A drone zipped down suddenly, and I jerked, almost losing my balance.

Aziza tightened her grip on me, without claws, a thing I was thankful for having seen many videos of the result: screaming.

It was Nelly who chastised Kyana. “Way to almost scare my ass into jumping into the hole! Next time a little warning before sending in the robot.”

“Sorry,” a contrite Kyana offered. “I got a little excited.”

“Then you need to get out more,” Nelly grumbled.

“More like I need to get laid,” Kyana stated.

To which Clive cleared his throat, a sound that came through our earpieces as he mumbled, “Um. Maybe not the right time.”

Baptiste brought us back to business. “Not smelling any hazards. Sending up the hook so Nelly can come down next. Garcia, that leaves you to keep watch.”

“What?” It never occurred to me I wouldn’t be allowed in the hole.

“We need someone monitoring the winches and the property so we don’t get any ugly surprises.” He sounded almost smug. That fucker. Thinking he could keep me away from danger.

My grown ass wanted to stomp my foot and whine. I might have if Nelly hadn’t said, “Rubes should be the one to go down. I’m better equipped to handle a threat, not to mention I know how to unsnarl a winch.”

“Don’t care so long as someone is watching our ass.” He sounded angry. He didn’t want me down there. Too bad.

Since I already had my knapsack, I just needed to harness up. I pulled one out of the cargo area with a jingle. Aziza leapt from my shoulder to the truck.

“You coming?” I asked. “I can empty out a knapsack and carry you.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going down there, and neither should you.”

“Why?” Nelly asked.

“I can smell the danger from here.”

“Baptiste says he can’t smell anything.”

“Exactly.”

“If that’s true, then it’s even more important we find the threat in that hole and contain it,” I declared as I harnessed myself, the buckles going around me in a loop that I couldn’t fall out of but allowed full range of motion. I wouldn’t be removing it at the bottom in case we needed to do a quick extraction.

“One can only hope that’s true, Mistress.”

“Thanks for your optimism,” I mumbled as I sat on the edge. I’d attached the cable to my harness. I already wore gloves. What was I waiting for?

The courage to actually do this? Maybe I shouldn’t be so eager—

The cobblestone I sat on collapsed, and I plunged into the hole!

CHAPTER 18

I FELL INTO THE GIANT HOLE AND SAW MY LIFE FLASH BEFORE me. A terrible life filled with so much regret. I should have slept with Baptiste when I had the chance. Or at least banged Huego before he ditched me. I should have called the professor. And—

Snap. A sudden jolt stopped my descent, leaving me panting and spinning slowly in the air. My harness held, as did the rope attached to it.

“You okay?” Nelly hollered.

“Yeah,” my fainter reply, unsure about my underwear. Talk about a holy-shit moment.

I extended my fingers and scabbled at the exposed rock and dirt. Caught a root and managed to stop my movement and hug the wall with all its nooks and crannies. Carefully, I eased my hands to the cable and my feet to the wall. I knew how to do this. Remembered the park I used to visit in the summer. Run by humans, no magic at all. It had a rock-climbing wall that you rappelled down after you reached the top.

I pushed back and soared, dropped a few feet as the winch released some slack. I swung into the wall. My feet hit, and I adjusted my gloved grip on the rope. Again, I pushed out, feeding the slack through the ring, keeping my bounces steady until I hit the ground, where I staggered a little. I quickly recovered and caught Baptiste literally standing a pace away, hands behind his back. Before his fiancée, he would have been there to catch me.

His strained expression had me asking, “Do you need to do a number two?” I unclipped myself from the rope.

“Can you ever do things the normal way?” he complained.

“No-pe.” I popped the p.

Clive hadn’t even turned to watch me come down, too busy erecting light balls high enough overhead I shouldn’t affect their magic. Smart. Wish other people I’d worked with in the past had shown me that consideration.

“This place doesn’t appear made by people.” A glance around showed we’d fallen into a true cavern and not an ancient ruin. The walls were rough and jagged. No sign of workmanship anywhere.

“Which seems odd given the nearby temple,” Clive remarked.

I glanced overhead to where the tunnel that allowed access from the basement of the house used to be. A house that appeared spread out all over the place. Door over there. Part of the roof in another corner.

“It exploded like a bomb,” I remarked.

“Weird, right? I would have thought it would have landed and compacted,” Clive stated, sweeping his hands.

“Maybe something moved the pieces around?” It made sense, given the way the pieces lay scattered.

Baptiste shook his head. “Nope. Nothing’s been down here. I’d smell it otherwise.”

“Aziza says she scented danger.”

He snorted. “I doubt her nose is as keen as mine,” his arrogant reply.

“Not to mention there are no entrances other than up there.” Clive pointed. “Most animals large enough to shift anything wouldn’t be able to do the climb, and I hardly think some oversized birds bothered.”

The replies led to me frowning because a glance around showed several tunnels boring in and out of the collapsed

cavern. Not to mention the bones of animals scattered around. The biggest appeared to be a bear and what might be a minotaur. The skeletons left behind were not aged or weathered, but freshly stripped, indicating a predator of some type roamed this pit. I'd have been more worried if I'd been alone, but I had Baptiste and Clive, who apparently didn't see what I did.

“Are you sure you can't smell or see anything?” I asked, kneeling to touch the ground, my gloves peeled and tucked in my belt. Probably best I kept my “guns” out in the open, ready to act. The dirt felt gritty, as expected.

My fingertips strayed to the remains of what might have been a deer. The moment my fingers brushed it, my stomach rumbled. I could use a snack. We should have had a bigger breakfast.

Baptiste cursed. “Where did those bones by your feet come from?”

“It would appear they're hidden with a cloaking spell,” I declared as I rose to my feet with a frown. Why would someone individually spell them, though? Or could it be whatever ate them hid its tracks with magic? I'd never encountered such a thing, and yet if I'd learned one thing in Nexus, it was that everything I knew didn't count, as we kept discovering new and strange exceptions to the world we thought we understood.

I headed for the nearest wall, keeping an eye on the holes Swiss-cheesing it. Mmm cheese... I'd have to get something with extra gooeyness when we were done.

The walls with their many tunnels appeared untouched by artistic or builder hands. Rough like the floor, yet my belly gave a lurch as I neared and reached with a hand.

This time I was looking for it. That clue I'd been ignoring a good chunk of my life. The sudden hunger that hit when I touched magic. *I could go for some fries with gravy.* How could I have been so stupid?

The guys cursed, Baptiste the loudest. “Fuck me, this place is riddled with caves.”

Sure enough, my touch had broken the spell camouflaging the area. I removed my hands and realized my food craving disappeared once the magic was gone.

How had I never noticed the link? Interesting and annoying because I’d never before thought to truly examine my power. It was just something I did. But now I had to wonder at my limits and what other tricks the professor could teach me.

Clive and Baptiste argued behind me, the pair of them getting agitated, with Baptiste finally snapping, “That’s final.”

“Excuse me?” I walked toward them. “Is there a problem?”

“We need to get out of here,” Baptiste declared.

“I take it you smell something?” I cocked my head.

“Yes, and I don’t like it.”

“You don’t like a lot of things,” Clive mumbled, flicking his hand to send some light into an opening.

“What are you doing?” Baptiste yelled. “You trying to let whatever is down here know we’re here?”

“Says the guy bellowing.” I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t start, Garcia,” he grumbled. “You and Clive go. I’ll follow the moment you’re up top.”

“I don’t think so,” the wizard argued. “I’m the better choice to leave behind. I have magic to subdue a beast.”

“A beast that’s using magic to hide itself. It should be me,” I stated.

“No!” both men yelled.

“Um, guys.” Kyana’s voice came at us hesitantly, but it drew our attention.

“What is it?” Baptiste asked.

“I sent the drone into one of the openings, and it’s intense. There is literally a honeycomb of tunnels.”

“Did you see what made them?” Clive’s question.

“No, but the pattern of them seemed familiar, so I looked it up. I think you’re in an ant nest.”

I eyed the many dark maws.

Baptiste snorted. “Are you insane? They’d have to be the size of a horse based on the width of those holes.”

“Actually, if I’m right, these are most likely *myrmekes indikoi*, which is Greek for Indian Ant,” Kyana stated. “According to myths, they were supposedly dog-sized, but given they’ve been extinct thousands of years, it’s possible history got it wrong.”

“Or they grew,” I muttered. Then louder, “I take it these aren’t natural to this area?”

“No. When alive, they tended to be most often spotted in deserts.”

“Then what are they doing here?” Baptiste asked.

To which I snorted, “Same thing as all the other monsters would be my guess.”

It was Clive who asked, “Do these legends mention them using magic to hide their kills and lair openings?”

“No. Sorry. There’s not much known about them.” Kyana sounded apologetic.

I eyed the holes with more trepidation and couldn’t stop my wayward tongue. “What do they eat?”

“Anything.”

Baptiste pursed his lips. “Okay enough yapping. You two, out of here.”

“Leaving you down here while we climb makes you vulnerable,” I pointed out.

“I’ll be fine.” He pulled the alpha-male card.

Nelly called him on it. “Stop being a hero. As the two lightest, Clive and Rubes can share a rope. The winch can handle it.”

“Sorry, but Ruby should ride up with Baptiste. If we’re going to face trouble, I probably should hold on to my magic,” Clive suggested.

A good point, even if I didn’t like the suggestion.

Judging by Baptiste’s expression? He wasn’t happy either. We had no other real choice, though. I couldn’t leave him down here, not with the ground trembling slightly.

“Stop arguing. Get moving. They’re coming.” Kyana’s ominous declaration. The use of “they” the most ominous part of her sentence.

Clive flung out his hands, and while I didn’t see anything, he nodded and said, “That should hold them for a few minutes while we get top side. Let’s get going.” Clive grabbed his dangling clip, leaving the second for me and Baptiste, who opened his mouth to argue.

“If you stay, I stay,” I declared.

The ground visibly shook, and the remains of the house rattled.

“For fuck’s sake,” he muttered. “Drop the pack.”

I shrugged it off while he reached for the rope and clipped it to my harness. Before I could say anything, he wound the slack section around his arm and gripped the line above my head, which put him against my back, spooning me.

This was not the time for panty tingles.

Or panty pee-pees.

The rope jolted, his free arm came around me, and we started rising, rappelling in reverse. He walked us up the wall with his longer legs, braced on that rope, which at least took my weight and part of his.

Over the sound of the winch grinding, the crack of rocks falling and hitting below worried, especially since some of that

dirt was falling on us as we climbed. A good thing I had the hard-on poking me from behind to distract me. Someone still had the hots for my ass, but he didn't grind it. Didn't touch me anywhere. Didn't even try to nibble on my neck.

I know, not the time or place, but it didn't mean I didn't crave it. What did it say about me that I felt like this? The man was engaged.

The vibration got more noticeable, and Nelly shouted, "I'm going to reverse the truck. I don't trust the ground."

Not what I really wanted to hear. I noticed the jerk as the winch kept winding while she moved the truck farther from the hole.

"Hold on," Baptiste grunted, having a hard time keeping us from slamming the wall and twisting.

The jerking stopped, and the smooth cadence of before returned. His frame blocked me from seeing down, and yet the hunger that hit me let me know magic neared.

Let me at 'em. I could fight whatever chased but not midair while dangling from a rope.

The only problem? Baptiste. I could almost hear his intention to bustle me off to safety.

As if I'd run. My hunger grew, making my mouth water and heightening my belief this battle was mine to handle.

We reached the edge, and once more his bulky ass impeded my view of what we faced. He unclipped me from the rope with a grim expression. "Get in the truck."

"Like fuck. The monster coming out of that pit is my job, and yours," I pointed out. "No one is running. Might as well fight it while we've got the high ground." A lesson learned from *Star Wars* in one of the most tragic scenes.

"How you gonna fight with your bare hands?" he grumbled as he flanked me.

"If I'm right, this battle will be over in seconds." I rubbed my hands and tried to maintain that firm belief as I saw the first ant climbing for us. The clouds overhead had thickened,

creating deep and dark shadows around the massive bug with its segmented body and huge mandibles. A monster.

My stomach ached. What I wouldn't give for anything to eat right now.

"You still have time to get to the truck. Move." Baptiste pointed at it.

Cliff and Nelly flanked the hole a few paces back. They weren't running.

Neither was I.

I approached the edge of the pit and held out my hands. Time to shine.

The ant exploded from the hole, its beady eyes seeking me out. The bug clacked mandibles at me, but I dodged and gave it a tap on a hinged leg digging for traction. It used another limb to knock me off my feet. I barely had time to raise my hands to protect myself as I rolled and dodged its attack.

Was I wrong about magic making them bigger? My wrenching stomach seemed to disagree. Could it be the ant, like the statue that once encased Aziza, was solidly made and required more than a brief or fleeting touch? To find out, I needed to hold on.

Bang. Nelly shot it.

But the fight wasn't over. More heads poked over the side as ants of monstrous size emerged. Baptiste wolfed out and went on the attack.

Poor Clive had to stand away from me so he could lob lightning, which caused a bug to spasm and fall back into the hole.

A leg appeared on the rim where I stood. I committed to my next attempt. I slapped my hands on its digging limb and clenched tight. The bug tried to fling me off, but I persevered. As I got waved around like a flag on Memorial Day, my stomach gurgled and felt sated all at once. Look at me, eating magic.

Hot damn. I should have a cool name like devourer of spells. Aziza called me *alsahyr*, wizard killer. She could add bug zapper too!

The ant shrank until it was small enough I could finish it with a stomp. I readied for the next bug. It edged into view over the rim, another right behind it. Mine to handle since my team all had their own ant problem.

Rather than wait for them to come to me, I moved quickly to touch one then the other, holding on long enough to dispel the magic making them so large. What I didn't expect? By the fifth, I was sweating and feeling the effort.

Weird. I'd never run into issues taking magic before. Then again, I'd never faced a wave of magic-infused monster bugs.

A good thing my friends were here. They fought hard. Baptiste the wolfman tore into spindly legs. Clive lobbed magic that turned what it blasted into ice. It didn't take much to shatter. The never-ending gunfire by Nelly dropped an insane number of monsters.

So many ants. How many more? I staggered on my feet, tired and blinking. The world wavered around me.

Another ant appeared, and though it shrank as it neared, I could grab hold of it and make it smaller faster. My stomach roiled, and I hit my knees.

I really didn't feel good.

The next bug poured over the edge. I had nothing but my touch. I tried to shrink them all. Grabbing hold and feasting on their magic like a glutton. Hungry, so hungry it hurt and yet full to bursting. I got the I ate-too-much-food sweats. But I couldn't stop, even as nausea tumbled inside me.

More. I want more.

I could hear yelling, but the ant bodies were all around me, pressing in close as if they wanted my touch. As they shrank, I got tighter and tighter inside my body. My entire body shivered, and I vaguely realized I lay on the ground.

I really don't feel good.

I'm going to—
I puked into oblivion.

CHAPTER 19

I HUGGED THE PORCELAIN OF THE TOILET AND THREW UP AGAIN. Heaving my guts. My own fault for getting drunk the first time I tried alcohol. Thirteen, feeling rebellious, and so I'd gone out with some older boys who fed me beers.

My mother never accepted any excuse. She just couldn't be happy I'd not been hurt. Because those boys had other plans for me. Things got blurry after one of them tried to remove my shirt. I remembered my mother arriving, her face a rictus of rage as she screamed, "Satan's whore. You are the seed of evil."

On the one hand, she'd saved me from something really bad. On the other, I knew what my nickname would be at school this Monday. Not a big deal. I wouldn't have to endure it for long. Mother would have us moving again within the year, guaranteed.

My puking appeared done, but my body ached.

I floated from it and observed the scene from above. This was a memory of the first time I got drunk, making this a dream.

Thinking it lifted the head of the younger me in that bathroom and I'd have sworn she stared at me. The door opened and both grown me and young cringed.

Mother entered, scowling, with her bible. She was in a religious phase again.

"Demon child. I should have torn you from my womb that you might not be able to spread your evil."

What happened next was me praying for hours on that tile. The marks it left took days to fade.

But in this dream, young me said to Mother, “Why did you save me from those boys?” Because I had no doubt they would have raped me. That wasn’t the first time she’d saved me from harm. Odd given her hatred of me. Even odder how each time she’d known where I was. I most definitely never gave her an address. It made little sense in retrospect.

Mother eyed me and said, “I had my orders to keep you in good health.”

“How did you know when and where to find me?” Back then, that kind of tracking device was unheard of, especially on our budget.

“My god spoke to me. He is the one who has kept me sane all these years I’ve had to care for you.” Her lip curled. “If not for his word, I would have drowned you the first time I gave you a bath.”

I knew it was a dream, and yet hearing her speak gave me a chill. “I was a baby. A baby you carried in your body. How could you hate me so much?”

“Because you have the Devil’s taint.”

“Lots of people have red hair.”

“It’s more than that, and you know it.”

Young me was gone and adult me got to confront her. “You were a sadistic abuser. I should have killed you when I had the chance.”

Her lip curled. “You had so many chances, but you were soft then. Soft now. And to think they’re betting on you.”

“Who’s betting?” This made no sense. Some kind of weird mumbo-jumbo created by my mind.

Mother’s laughter chilled. “You don’t even know you’re just a pawn in the next step of the revolution.”

“Does this have to do with the Church of Pure?” With its manifesto that would see only humans and dumb animals left

alive on the earth.

“God is taking back his land. The one stolen from him by lesser deities.”

“Pretty sure the other gods out there will have a problem with one trying to dominate.”

“They won’t be able to fight once their power is gone.”

“And how will you get rid of their power?” I asked the dream version of the woman who’d hurt me so much and never explained why.

“I won’t. They’re betting you will. But given you’re here, on the border of the dead, I’ve won.”

Dead? “I’m alive,” I huffed. “This is just a dream.”

She uttered a giggle. “So dumb. I knew you weren’t the one they’d been waiting for.”

“I’m not dead.”

“Soon. Look at how close you are to crossing the veil.” She stepped aside, and the room disappeared. Mist prevailed, a swirling mass beyond the incubator. She wasn’t alone. From the fog stepped other specters of my past. All the dead, the ones accidentally touched by my power. The only one I didn’t see? Joe.

“I haven’t died yet,” I muttered, looking behind me as if I could find my way out of here.

“It would be kinder than what you face,” she stated.

I snorted. “As if I’d believe you. Kindness wasn’t in your repertoire as a shitty mother.”

“Die in agony later or die now. I don’t care. At least I am free of you.”

She faded.

How dare she get the last word?

How did I get so close to the edge of the mist? I could have reached to touch the clear side. I retreated. Not dying. Not today.

I turned and ran. Away from the border. Almost dove right in when it suddenly appeared in front of me. I veered and bolted again and again, running to escape, always coming back to it.

Tiring until I collapsed.

I woke in a bed. Not mine, I should add, but better than the afterlife. Or had I died? The springs poking through the mattress had some torturous aspect. The ceiling overhead could use a scrape and paint. Maybe a woodstove or something that emitted heat. A cold damp had me hugging my body.

Where the fuck was I? I rolled to a sitting position and swung my legs over the edge of the bed, taking in the room lit by an electric lantern. A braided rag rug on the floor. The bed covered in a patch quilt. Quaint. Still no idea where I was or what happened.

Last I recalled, I'd been in some dream talking to the dead incubator. But before that—

My eyes widened. The giant ant attack, more like massacre given we'd been overwhelmed.

I glanced down at my body, free of harm if gaunt. No damage. No way.

Goddammit, I was in the afterlife because no way had I walked away from that unharmed.

The door to the room opened. The professor walked in and drawled, "I knew you were a danger to society."

And my reply. "Fuck you too, asshole."

CHAPTER 20

I'D BEEN INSULTED ALL MY LIFE. YOU'D THINK I'D HAVE A thicker skin.

Actually, I have less patience with it. The professor spoke as if I were a menace to society. I told him where to shove it.

The annoying professor from the coffee shop arched a brow. "Eloquently spoken and also lacking. I believe the words you were looking for were thank you."

What was his name? Xanax? No, Xannon because it rhymed with Cannon.

He stared at me, waiting.

"What do you expect me to thank you for?" We'd only ever run into each other the one time. It left its mark. No wonder I'd been putting off calling. He annoyed me.

"You could start by thanking me for not letting you die," he said bluntly.

"Are you sure I'm not dead? Because it kind of feels like I'm in hell. I guess my eternal torture is you lecturing me about how I fucked up."

"You should have taken my offer to teach you," was his dry rebuttal.

"I was planning to until I got murdered by ants. I really hope no one puts that on my epithet." Wait, would I even get a grave? Who would plan my funeral and bury my body? I hoped they didn't bury me in the ground. Then I'd be rotting and maggoty and gross. Much better to be cremated.

“You’re not dead.”

“Way to sound overjoyed.” I couldn’t help my sarcasm at his dry statement.

“It’s sheer dumb luck that you’re alive.”

“Hardly luck. I prevailed because I took the magic away from those ants.” More than I’d recommend. Still, it must have been enough. I’d survived and still had all my body parts.

“You did remove the source of their grandeur. Took it in and didn’t funnel any of the residue. Had I not stopped you from guzzling even more, Nexus would probably be a wasteland.”

“You’re going to have to slow down and explain because I don’t understand.”

The professor leaned against the wall, arms crossed, not looking professor-ish in his jeans and plaid button-up. “You do know there’s a limit to how much magic you can take within your body, right?”

“No, because I don’t take magic. I make it go away.”

He snorted. “You can’t seriously think that. Nothing truly disappears. Like a fire burning wood to ash, the magic is transformed.”

“Into what?”

“Magic.”

“Not funny,” I grumbled. For a moment I had expected him to impart something of great import, but instead he fucked with me.

“Call it unmagic then, but only because you’ve been taught to think of magic in one direction only. The kind most common out there is based off the elements.”

He spoke of earth, wind, fire, water, and spirit. “What I do isn’t any of those.”

“Because we are all of them and none. Those who can wield it are rare.”

“So what does our supposed unmagic do?”

“Stuff.” A single syllable and I stared at him, waiting for more.

When it didn’t come, I snorted. “Stuff? That’s your reply?”

“If you choose to learn, then I’ll tell you.”

“You tell me I need to learn and then don’t answer basic questions. So let’s ask another. What happened to me?”

“I told you. You ingested too much magic too quickly without doing something with the result. I recommend pushing it into a focus object, or if really stuck, stick your toes in the ground and treat it like lightning. Anything to relieve the amount you tried to hold.”

“I’ve never had to do that before.”

“Have you ever done anything this big?”

Had I ever come that close to dying? No. The things I’d dealt with before were small. “That was way more than I usually try to handle,” I admitted. My fingers went to my temples. “I remember feeling too tight in my skin. I thought I was going to blow up.”

“You did,” he stated flatly. “Just not into meaty chunks. You blew out all the excess unmagic at once, flattened everything. Almost killed your coworkers.”

“No.” I shook my head, my mouth suddenly dry.

The professor held up his phone. “I have the drone footage if you’d like to see.”

I didn’t.

He showed me anyhow, the video ready to go as if he’d predicted I’d need proof.

The image didn’t bounce much, and the action started when Baptiste and I emerged from the pit. He was the one to unhook me from the rope. I saw myself argue about getting in the truck. How we stood waiting in front of the sinkhole, determined to face the ants.

We looked badass.

I looked fucking badass.

Until I got tossed by the very first one. *Cringe*. Then the gross factor when I squished it. But I prevailed, vanquishing ant after ant... Less than my coworkers, who had more effective methods. Baptiste literally tore off their heads. Jump, wrench, twist, drop down, yank. Then onto the next. Clive sweated as he fired lightning at the horde. Shook his hand, looking to the sky, even retreating a few feet, looking for more power.

Nelly was a sharpshooter. I think she took as many out as all of us combined.

I did the least.

Still, as a team, we were a killing machine, and yet the bugs kept coming.

After me.

It became obvious as the ants surrounded me and paid the rest of my team no mind. Baptiste, Nelly, and Clive attacked, but for each one they killed, another took its place. And the bodies piled up, the magic in them begging for release. Pressed in a ring of bugs, dead and alive, all touching me. Not pinching or chomping me to bits.

At one point, Baptiste roared his way through, ripping through a carapace as if it were tissue paper. He dropped by my convulsing body, and the image zoomed in, forcing me to see him getting zapped when he tried to put a hand on me.

A second attempt to lay hands on me flung him away, ignored by the ants, who simply swayed around my prone body, their sizes varying and shrinking as they touched me.

Baptiste would have grabbed me again, but Clive snatched his arm and shook his head. Baptiste strained. Clive held on, and Nelly clutched his other bicep. Together they turned him away from my body. Left me writhing on the ground.

Why are they leaving me?

I must have whispered it out loud, because the professor offered a dry, “Because they didn’t want to die when you went supernova.”

The video hadn’t finished yet. The quivering mass of my body went rigid, and I saw nothing come out of me. Nothing at all. But things flattened. The bushes, the truck, the ants, everything wiped clean. The ground stripped, along with the paint on the hood of the truck.

“My friends...” I’d killed them. The grief and guilt hit me hard.

“They are alive but only because they retreated when told. I was in communication with Kyana, who patched me through to their earpieces. It was still very close, though.”

“I heard nothing.” I didn’t remember hearing Kyana at all once the battle started.

“Your transmitter was long blown.”

“Everyone is okay? No one died?” I barely choked out the words.

“Yes, no thanks to you. What were you thinking?”

“That I was saving the town from giant ants. And I did.” I pointed to the screen and the devastated landscape. “No more bugs.” At least I’d done some good.

I spoke too soon.

A head appeared from the hole in the ground, then another, and me out cold on the ground.

Baptiste reached me first, his wolfman legs eating up the barren ground. He reached for me, only to get flung.

“What happened?” I cried out.

“Your shield is keeping him out.”

“I don’t have a shield,” I exclaimed.

“You had so much excess magic, it created a force field around your body as protection.”

A shield only for me as the ants spilled out of the hole in great number. My efforts for naught. Worse, by staying behind for me, I'd put my friends in danger. They acquitted themselves valiantly, forming a triangle, with Clive throwing vile green blobs that ate through limbs like acid. Nelly had her sword out since she'd run out of bullets. As for Baptiste, I could see why he didn't like to eat meat.

"How did they survive?" It seemed impossible.

Rather than reply, he kept the video from the drone playing. It rose to take in the vehicles that arrived, spilling dark-clad soldiers with CHS badges. They formed a box around one person.

The professor.

He held a staff in one hand and his other outstretched. His head tilted back, and while I couldn't see him doing anything, ants shrank, and more quickly than I'd managed. He took the magic without touching them or collapsing. He didn't drool or almost blow himself to chunks. He won. He saved the day.

He, not I, was the hero. Because he could control his ability. Surely, I could do the same. "How did you do that?"

"By not being an idiot for starters and biting off more than I can chew."

"I didn't realize that would happen."

"Because you refused to even listen." He didn't relent.

I winced. "I was trying to do good."

"And yet your good keeps turning to shit. So why not cease doing the same thing expecting different outcomes and take time to rethink and relearn a new way of doing shit?"

"What if I can't change?" Probably my biggest fear. What if he couldn't teach me? I knew for a fact witches and wizards started their learning young.

"Then you'll die. Or spend your life locked up somewhere you can't hurt anyone."

"Not great choices."

“Only if you have a problem with learning.”

“No, it’s the threat of knowing I can’t fail. That’s a lot of pressure to put on someone.”

“Cry me a river. I swear today’s youth are always whining. In my day—”

“Don’t really care about your day. My therapist says I need to stop putting so much stock in what others achieve and make manageable goals for myself,” I parroted. I really did like my current virtual therapist. She had advice that I could actually use that made me feel empowered.

“It’s like you want me to add another option. Execution.”

“You’d kill me for being just like you?”

He snorted. “You are nothing like me.”

“Are you sure we’re not related? I mean, red hair, right age...I don’t suppose you ever used a fertility clinic? Maybe donated some sperm.” I was blunt.

His face? Priceless.

“What?” he sputtered.

“Are you my daddy?”

CHAPTER 21

“ME, YOUR FATHER? NEVER.” PROFESSOR SHOOK HIS HEAD AS if the very idea appalled. “I was sterilized at a young age to ensure I couldn’t pass on my genes.”

“Wait, someone neutered you?”

“The last time we met you envied me having a teacher and yet have no idea of the sadist who controlled me and my power.” His lips flattened. “One hopes you never have to endure the same depravity.”

“Who hurt you?”

“Not someone you need to worry about. Now that you’re awake, you should eat.”

“I’d rather check on my friends first.” I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, wondering if I were steady enough to stand.

“I told you they’re fine.”

As if I’d take him at his word. “I’d rather check for myself.” I stood and only wobbled a little.

“He’s telling the truth, Mistress.”

Hearing Aziza’s voice filled me with relief and joy. I whirled to see her sitting on the bed I’d just vacated. “Zizi, you found me!” The nickname slipped out.

She cocked her head in thought.

The professor barked, “How did you get inside? I’ve got wards against shapeshifters.”

“Shapeshifter, pfft. I am a sphinx, and you don’t have the magic to stop one such as me,” Aziza taunted, lifting her nose in the air.

His gaze narrowed. “You are too small to be the sphinx.”

That caused Aziza’s tail to swish. “Because you’ve met so many.”

“No, because they’ve been thought extinct. I did read a report though that you”—he eyed me—“found one in the ruins under the town.”

“I did. Say hi.” I swept my hands at Aziza.

Professor snorted. “That report had the feline you took home as jungle-cat sized. Not domestic. Making you either a shifter or doppelganger, the latter being more likely, given your ability to speak.”

“Hate to break it to you, but Aziza is the sphinx I found.”

“That’s not a sphinx.”

Aziza took offense. “Are you always this ignorant? You know nothing of my kind. Big as a tiger or much larger still. I can be whatever size I choose, for dimension is malleable.”

“Prove it.” He reached, and Aziza easily evaded his grasp by turning mouse-sized. She hit the floor and scampered a few paces then turned into a feline taller than the professor.

He snatched his hand back and stared.

By the time my wily feline jumped to my shoulder, she’d returned to petite size. She perched prettily before saying, “You are holding my mistress prisoner, *alsahyr*.”

She called him wizard killer as well. I didn’t know if I was complimented or insulted.

The professor appeared angry. “You made the creature your slave?”

The accusation stung.

“Of course not,” I huffed. “She’s the one who keeps calling me that. I tried telling her she was free, but she won’t

leave. I assumed it was a sphinx thing.”

He stared at Aziza, who had the haughty airs of a cat with her stare. “No one knew they could do that, given they’re supposed to be extinct.”

That caused Aziza to utter a noise before stating, “My kind is very much alive. You’re just not very good at seeing us. But I remember seeing you.” She smirked. “Young and cocky, you walked right by me and my friends in the Cairo marketplace. Seven of us sitting on a wall. You looked right at and through us.”

He blinked. “Seven?” He shook his head. “I didn’t know I was looking for a cat.”

“Because you are not as smart as you think, *alsahyr*.”

“You two have fun arguing. I’m going back to bed.” I rubbed my temples.

“Apologies, Mistress. This miscreant is being deliberately obtuse.” Aziza insulted while apologizing. So awesome.

“I agree, the professor is an ass, but he apparently saved me.”

“Apparently?” he huffed. “You saw the video.”

“How do I know it’s not doctored?” It happened all the time on social media.

“Why would I lie?” he exclaimed.

“I don’t know.”

“He’s not lying. You did explode,” Aziza offered. “I did not realize you were unschooled with your magic.”

“I don’t have magic.” I said it automatically.

“Because you won’t learn,” he countered.

I rolled my eyes. “You are annoying as fuck.”

“Only because you hate the fact I know more about our ability than you do.”

“He is correct about that, Mistress.” Aziza treacherously took his side.

I hissed, “You’re supposed to be agreeing with me.”

“Not if you’re being stupid. It is my duty to serve you, and that includes pointing out your flaws that you might improve them. By the way, you might want to take smaller bites, so you don’t chew so vigorously.”

Professor stared at Aziza. “Thank goodness my flight was delayed, or I’d be the one stuck with you.”

I took offense. “I’m not stuck. Aziza and I are friends.”

“She calls you mistress,” he pointed out.

“Because I bound myself to her when she saved me,” Aziza stated.

“Which I never asked her to do,” I quickly clarified.

“And yet, she did, which leads me to wonder why. Why did you bind yourself to Ruby Garcia?”

Aziza laughed. “You are perceptive, *alsahyr*. When Mistress saved me, a geas on my kind ensures I bind myself to my rescuer.”

“Until death do you part. Correct?” he asked.

“Are you sure you’re not versed in our lore?” she asked in reply.

“I think that I’ve seen enough bargains to know death is the cure.”

I pursed my lips at Aziza. “A curse is forcing you to stick with me until I die?”

“Yes, Mistress. But it is not a chore. You’re interesting to live with.”

“Glad to hear it and, in better news, given my propensity for chaos, I doubt I’ll live to a ripe old age.”

“Mistress underestimates herself.” Aziza had more faith in me than I did.

Professor hopped in. “Does the curse prevent you from killing the one you bond with?”

“She wouldn’t,” I immediately exclaimed.

He uttered a disdainful sound. “If you believe that, then you really won’t live to be old. If the sphinx kills you or arranges an accident, she’s free.”

I eyed Aziza. “You going to murder me?”

She shook her head. “Living with you is better than back home. More entertaining.”

“See, all good,” I tossed back at the professor.

He didn’t look impressed. “Stupid. So very, very stupid. I am glad we’re not related.”

“You should be so lucky,” I boasted.

“I need a break. I’m going for a walk,” Professor complained.

He exited the cabin, and I sighed. “About time he left. Now tell me what’s really going on.” Aziza must be the scout for my rescue.

“What’s happening is I am here. I would have come earlier, but I couldn’t detect your location until you woke.”

“I passed out because I overdid it with the giant ants. I’m okay now.” At least I felt good. I couldn’t help but remember my dream where I kept coming to the edge of the afterlife. Had I come close to death that many times? “When’s the team rescuing us?”

“Rescuing you from what?” Aziza sounded genuinely confused.

“When are they getting me out of here, away from the professor?”

“You can’t leave. Your lessons haven’t even begun.”

Ah yes, his ultimatum. Learn or be killed essentially. “I might have agreed to be his student, but I can’t live with him.”

“Why not?” Aziza asked with a cock of her head.

“Because I have an apartment with a bed that I like.”

“It will be there when you’re done.”

“Wally needs—”

“To stop relying so much on you and you on him. But because I imagine you’ll keep whining, someone called Nelly has undertaken his care.”

The knowledge didn’t improve my scowl. “Why do you want me to stay here so badly?”

“Because while the *alsahyr* is arrogant, he is also skilled in the arts. You’d do well to heed his instruction.”

“You know a lot. Can’t you teach me?”

Her laughter mocked. “Dear mistress, what you can do and what I am capable of are vast distances apart. You need the professor.”

I thinned my lips. “Fine. I do. But I don’t see how I’m supposed to learn if I’m kept a prisoner.”

“More so than now?” She glanced at my hands and the gloves I always wore, clean ones that had come from my apartment. The T-shirt and track pants I wore, also mine.

Rather than focus on her observation that my life was a cage, I huffed, “Who went into my place? Who dressed me?”

“Does it matter?”

Given I felt a touch violated, yes. My body was mine alone. My things... I didn’t have much. I appreciated every bit I did.

Aziza sighed. “I packed a bag for you. But the *alsahyr* was the one to cast the spells that took care of you while you slept.”

“A spell? But I’m immune to magic.”

“There is more than one kind, mistress.”

“More than one ...” I trailed off. What else did I not know? What could I learn? I became a tad impatient to find out. “How long was I sleeping?”

“Three days.”

My mouth rounded. It explained my hunger, the real belly ache kind this time.

“I’d begun to think my belief in your continued existence erroneous when you finally woke and I could find my way to you.”

“That’s a pretty intense link.”

“It’s normal. You’re my mistress.”

“Sorry about that.” It bothered me when she spoke as if I owned her.

“You would have preferred I kill you? Because that is the only way to escape the geas on my kind.”

“That’s bullshit,” I huffed.

“It is part of being a sphinx. A binding put on us by a jealous god. It is the only reason we don’t yet rule the world.”

“Maybe you should. We haven’t done a great job.”

“I agree. Humanity hasn’t, and yet the human god would have his ruff rule over the rest of us. As if we are the problem,” Aziza said quite vehemently, only to turn around and purr, “But now there are laws to protect the non-human. People like your Cryptid Authority and your SMU.”

I couldn’t tell if she was being sarcastic. “You sound like you hate humans.””

“That would require more effort than they’re worth,” she said with a sniff. “I’m hungry. Let us see what the *alsahyr* has in his larder.”

Not much as it turned out. Protein bars and water. I eyed Aziza and waved at the former. “We cannot stand for this cruel and unusual punishment.” My food anxiety ratcheted as I stared at the few bottles of water in the fridge.

Her nose wrinkled. “A good thing the hunting is plentiful around here.”

“I am going to pretend you didn’t say that.” Too late. I could see her in my mind, sitting there with a tail dangling from her mouth, looking smug. “What I need is a grocery store.”

“What are you complaining about now?” Professor grumbled as he walked through the door bearing a large paper bag from which wafted delicious scents.

“Ooh. What’s that?” I practically mauled him in my excitement, my annoyance with him forgotten for the moment.

“I bring sustenance.”

I almost forgave him as I dug into the curry rice and chicken with grilled vegetables.

Aziza enjoyed her plate and purred happily. Which led to me wondering where she’d been during the battle with the ants. I’d left her in the SUV when we got out. Had she been locked inside for the entire fight? Shouldn’t she have been able to get out, given she could use appliances?

Did it matter?

After dinner, we relaxed outside the cabin, enjoying a beautiful setting sun. While I understood we remained within the quarantine zone, we felt a world away from Nexus and the monsters. Amazing what a few miles of driving could do.

“This is nice.” I sighed with content.

“Don’t relax too much. We should start the lessons.”

“Now?” I grimaced. “I’m not even sure I want you as a teacher.”

“It’s a short list of people who can actually teach you about this power. Let me see, there’s me. And you.”

I waited.

“And?”

“Told you it was a short list.”

“Two? How can there be only two of us in the world?” Never mind before him I’d thought myself unique.

“Because those with our power are usually killed the moment it’s discovered. Sometimes within moments of being born.”

“That’s barbaric,” I sputtered then quickly added, “Why? And who is killing them?”

“The gods.”

“Gods don’t exist.”

He snorted. “They do, and they’re very vicious when it comes to maintaining their power.”

“The incubator used serving her god as her excuse too. But here’s the thing. I don’t see gods committing the atrocities, but people.”

“Because they are the scions of the gods on earth. Disciples. Avatars to their will.”

I rolled my eyes. “Giving it cool names doesn’t erase the fact that atrocities are committed in a god’s name.”

“Atrocities only to those who don’t believe,” he corrected.

“Murder is never okay. I don’t care the religion,” I huffed, thinking of the Pure Church and how it had been responsible for the death of so many cryptids, and horribly too.

“What if the sacrifice of one truly did save the many, though?”

“Why would a god care about one life?”

“What if that life was fated to do something momentous?”

“Then why would you sacrifice them?”

“Not all momentous things are good.”

A sobering reminder of me and my ability. “I’m not throwing myself into a volcano or getting staked out for Kong.” I made myself clear. Unlike some, I didn’t harbor a martyr complex even if I did believe I’d die young. It surprised me that I’d even made it past thirty.

“The choice isn’t always that simple.”

I waved my hand at him. “We got off track from the baby-killing thing. Gods are murdering them by sending its minions to do the dirty deed, but how do they know which ones to

eradicate? I didn't get my powers until my teens." No need to mention the bleeding part.

His brows raised. "I had them from birth. What saved me was that my mother had a human husband and they lived in a small town that wasn't popular with cryptids. So no magic. Nothing to raise any alarm bells."

"Then how did you find out?"

"Because of a toy. It was a miniature action figure that came with an animation hex. My parents set it up the night before for my birthday. I put my hands on it, and it didn't work. They got an exchange, but it didn't work either. They brought me to the store, and it didn't matter what they did. I couldn't get any of the magically animated toys to work. My mom demanded her money back, and we left. They never spoke to me about it, but I heard them whispering. That weekend, we joined the church."

"Your ability made them religious?" I asked with a wrinkle of my nose.

"It made them believers."

"Of?" I lost a bit of patience as he suddenly gave me a short answer.

"I believe your surrogate belonged to the same one. The Church of Pure."

CHAPTER 22

WHEN THE PROFESSOR ANNOUNCED HIS PARENTS BELONGED TO the Church of Pure, just like the incubator, I couldn't help but exclaim, "Your parents were religious nuts too?"

He winced. "No. They were good people who believed my ability meant I'd been born for a purpose."

It wasn't hard to extrapolate. "They used you to remove magic to advance their cause."

His lips twisted. "Yes, and they became noticed because of it. It led to me being taken from them. I was locked away while being taught how to hone my power. The plan was to use me to mount a coup."

"A coup against who?"

"Cryptids."

"But most don't have magic."

"You don't say," his dry reply.

"What happened?"

"I escaped. Turns out once someone like us learns enough, no one can hold us prisoner."

It surprised me to hear him being so frank. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because there are only two of us in the world. Perhaps by sharing our stories we can find more."

"I'm still stuck on the fact we supposedly don't exist in the history books and yet there's a standing kill order. Surely

there's something written somewhere.”

“You'd think so, and yet there is a distinct lack of information. On purpose I'd guess, given how thorough it is.”

I jabbed my finger in his direction. “If it's so hush-hush, how is it I'm alive? No one tried to kill me, and the CA has known about me since my late teens.”

“I think by then, given your age, they chose to watch you and see what happened. Which turned out to be a whole lot of nothing.”

“Ouch.”

“I've read your file. You used your ability wildly. It's a wonder more people didn't die.”

“It wasn't that bad,” I defended. “I was just trying to help. If I'd not acted, it would have been worse.”

“If you'd wielded your ability more carefully, most of those situations would have had better outcomes.”

“Well, excuse me for not being perfect with my power like you.” I couldn't help but sound bitter. Getting reamed for doing my best would do that.

“You'll learn.” Ominous since I heard the unspoken, *or else*.

“Why didn't the CA teach me when I was younger?”

He arched a brow. “Who do you think would agree? A wizard who would be powerless in your presence? A witch with the same problem?”

“Given there's only two of us, does that make us mutants?” After all, I'd been shaken and stirred in a test tube.

Aziza stretched and said, “The *alsahyr* have been around for a long time. However it's been some time since one has been seen, let alone two.”

“Why are we so rare?” I asked, only slightly surprised by Aziza's statement. After all, she'd been the first to call me *alsahyr*, wizard killer. Or more accurately magic killer.

“For one, you’re not easy to make. And second, the standing order to purge your kind remains to this day.”

“Still? Why do the gods want to murder us so badly?”

If a sphinx could shrug, Aziza did. “Those who can steal magic can render defenses and even attacks impotent. The gods, and even kings, do not like those who can oppose them. It is why when even the rumor of an *alsahyr* surfaces, hunters are sent to find and kill.”

“Luckily a few of the hunted survived, or we wouldn’t be here,” I pointed out.

“There is only one way to sire *alsahyr*,” Aziza stated.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I huffed.

“You won’t like the answer.”

“I still want to know,” I insisted.

“Not today.” Aziza settled into a curled ball, head tucked, with her tail over her eyes.

“Is she napping?” The professor goggled the sphinx, who looked very much like a sweet kitty sleeping there.

“Yes.”

“What does she mean there’s only one way to sire *alsahyrs*?” he asked.

“You don’t know?” I’d kind of assumed he’d have basic answers.

“No.” His scowl warmed me through and through. “Wake her and ask.”

“You wake her. I’d like to keep my arm, thank you.” Aziza didn’t like to be disturbed. I did also add, “I wonder if Aziza was talking about artificial insemination. It’s how I was created. What about you?”

“Artificial insemination is a recent procedure, so it wouldn’t explain our ancestors. And for your information, I had parents.”

“Maybe your mom cheated.”

“She didn’t, although my father thought she had because of my hair color. He did several DNA tests to see if I was his son.”

“And?”

“I came back as his each time, but on his deathbed, he told me someone had tampered with the results because he knew in his heart we weren’t related.”

“Harsh.”

“It was no great loss. We were never close.”

“You’re sure your parents weren’t cryptid?”

He shook his head. “They were one hundred percent human.”

“Maybe your mom was inseminated.”

His lips pursed. “They didn’t use any kind of outside help to have me.”

Given he looked so bothered, I felt it important to say, “That you know of.”

His jaw shifted. “How is it you’d rather argue with me than wake the cat?”

“Because she might just bite off my head if I disturb her. You, on the other hand, will yap me to death.” I quacked a hand in his direction.

His crossed eyes had me worried about his health. “You are purposely antagonizing me.”

“Yup. Can’t seem to help myself. The incubator used to call me the Devil’s child.”

“Misbehaved a lot, did you?”

“According to the incubator, yes. She claimed I started in the womb. She spent the first fifteen years of my life telling me how worthless I was and how hated. Lamented the fact she’d not killed me as a baby.”

The professor didn’t speak for a moment. When he did, he didn’t offer me an apology like most. “Pity she’s dead. There

are better ways of punishing.”

I blinked. Then smiled. “Finally, something we can agree on.”

“They don’t have the expression ‘hell on earth’ for nothing.” He then paused before saying, “You don’t know the identity of your parents, only the surrogate?”

I nodded. “A friend of mine was trying to locate the doctor who did the work but ran into a dead end.”

“Have you tried loading your sequence to one of those DNA websites to see if you can find relatives?”

“No.” Which, in retrospect, might have been shortsighted.

He stared at me, long enough I squirmed and added, “Kind of figured I had no one, given what my moth—the incubator said.”

“And now?”

“Now, it might be a good idea to put myself out there.” Who knew? Maybe I had siblings.

“Not publicly. Given your ability, it’s important to be careful, else you can get trapped doing something you’d rather not.”

“How long were you a prisoner?”

“Long enough to lose hope.”

“Yet you escaped and came out stronger because you knew how to control your power.”

“The cost was high.”

“Is that why you’re helping me?”

“I’m hoping to avoid you causing a mass casualty event.”

My lips twisted. “Way to have faith.”

“Would you rather I bullshit you?”

“Does it matter what I want?” I mumbled.

“You whining again?”

“Since the moment we met, you haven’t liked me or shown me any kind of respect.”

“You think I want to be here babysitting you?”

“Nobody’s asking you to.”

“Actually, a lot of folks were because the alternative is sending you to a cryptid lockup.”

“Put me in jail? I’ve done nothing wrong,” I exclaimed hotly. Recently, at least.

“You exploded and caused a concussion wave.”

“No one was hurt.”

“This time.” An ominous declaration.

“I need lessons. I get it.”

“And a reality check. Your ability is dangerous, and you need to rein it in. Stop treating it like a joke.”

“Yes, Professor.” I tried not to sulk.

“Think of it as using that head of yours for something other than a hat rack.”

“I hate hats.”

“Only because you have lots of hair,” he retorted. “And on that note, bedtime.”

I stood and glanced at the cabin. A key point jumped out. “If I’m supposed to be staying here, where are you sleeping?” Because there was one bedroom. One bed. And we wouldn’t be sharing it.

“I’ll be outside.”

“Gonna lie across the door and prevent me from escaping?” My sarcastic retort.

“Fuck no. The bunk over the garage has an antenna hooked up. Going to watch the game. And, no, I won’t be checking on you. If you want to leave, leave. But keep in mind the next time you lose control will be your last.”

I could leave? I latched onto that first part. I could walk out that door if I wanted. Go back to my apartment. Unschooled. And dangerous. Before it wouldn't have bothered me, but now I had friends and the threat of jail for life hanging over my head.

"I'm not stupid. I know I need to learn, but I'm going to need more than takeout as fuel." My food anxiousness wouldn't let me rest until I had some supplies.

"Go do a grocery run then. Keys are on the hook by the door."

"You'll just let me leave in your car?"

"I already told you, stay if you want. Go if you don't. You've been given the choice. Make up your mind."

"How long am I stuck here with you?"

"As long as it takes to ensure you're not a menace to society."

Not exactly a timeline. "What if that's impossible?"

"Do you have this negative attitude for everything? Because the bitching is getting annoying."

"He's right. You are rather negative." Aziza jumped on.

I clamped my mouth shut. "Fuck off, both of you." Said without heat or rancor because they were right. I was being ridiculous. I'd always wished I could control my ability so I could have a semblance of a normal life. Then I could get back to my friends.

CHAPTER 23

THE LESSONS STARTED THE NEXT MORNING OVER A BREAKFAST that could have used more than coffee and instant porridge.

“What is magic?” the professor asked.

Given my annoyance he didn’t even have brown sugar for the mush, I mumbled a sarcastic, “Invisible oogie-boogie stuff that can be shaped to do shit usually via a hex or a spell.” Actual spellcasting without a focus object took skill. Someone like Clive, who could fight with it, was rare. Most ran out of juice after a few throws. Much easier to infuse an item.

“You did not seriously just vomit that word salad,” the professor said with a disgusted tone and shake of his head. “Magic is an element and not a joke.”

“Elements are real.”

“So is magic. It is simply tangible on a different level than metals and gases.”

“And the anti-magic version you claim I have? Is it also an element?”

“Yes and no. It’s the reverse of it and the most powerful one of them all.”

“Which still doesn’t make much sense to me.” I sighed. I pushed my bowl of congealed sadness away before thinking to ask, “Do you get hungry when close to magic?”

“I wouldn’t have called it hunger, but there is an internal flutter. A knowing that there is some nearby. And that is going to be today’s lesson. You will find the hexed tree.”

“You want me to go traipsing in the woods?” I wrinkled my nose.

“I’m not telling you where to go look. Find the hexed tree. But do not touch it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

“Fine. But I need groceries first.”

A knock at the door had him smiling. “Already taken care of. I took the liberty of ordering through a grocery app.”

“Didn’t want me leaving? What happened to there’s the keys, go if you like?”

“We both know you won’t return. You’ll find an excuse.”

My lips pursed. “I said I wanted to learn.”

“Do you?”

“Let’s see what you bought.” If he’d simply ordered a bunch of healthy stuff, we’d have a problem because if I was going on a hike, I wanted more than nuts and fruit. Lucky for him, when we opened the door to the cabin, there was a pile of bags and a case of liquid electrolytes in multiple flavors. Chips. Chocolate. Actual nuts, with salt!

By the time I’d helped him put it all away, I couldn’t think of anything he’d really forgotten, which meant time to go find a tree, only first I asked again, “Can I call Nelly? I want to check on Wally.”

“No outside distractions. You need to focus.”

“I need to tell my friends I’m okay.”

“Already done,” Aziza announced as she arrived and jumped to the tabletop.

“Down.” Professor pointed.

Aziza laughed. “You can’t order me around.”

“No animals on the table.”

“I am a sphinx, *alsahyr*.”

“Why are you here?” he growled. “I asked for privacy to teach.”

“As if I’d leave my mistress unchaperoned.”

Professor snorted. “Her virtue is not in any danger. My sanity, though...”

“Hey!” I wasn’t really offended, more pleased that I’d dented his composure.

“I have better things to do than argue with you both. Find the tree.” Professor left us abruptly, exiting the cabin, but I didn’t hear an engine. He’d not gone far.

I located my clothes in a duffel and dressed for a hike in the woods. Further poking netted me a worn knapsack, which I dumped. Paperback of some recent thriller. Chapstick. A folded paper map. Ball cap that I couldn’t picture Professor wearing.

I shoved supplies in it: drinks, snacks, a belt since I couldn’t find a rope. But a belt could tie a tourniquet. I added scissors and a steak knife, just in case. Look at me, learning to be better prepared.

Exiting the cabin, I saw nothing of interest. The car parked nearby was a boring four-door rental sedan. The shed had its roll-down door shut. The professor might have been inside.

Look for a tree. Pretty vague given the number surrounding the cabin.

A closing of my eyes and clenching of my fists just made my jaw hurt. My tummy gave a little gurgle but that might be because of the hot sauce I’d used for dipping.

As I headed for the densest section, my tummy ache eased and Aziza joined me. She sauntered along to my left, tail high, dainty as could be. I tromped. Let nature know I came. I still didn’t feel comfortable with a weapon, meaning I hoped any threat ran away before we came face to face and I screamed.

We left the scrubby ground for the shadows under the boughs of the trees. I’d yet to figure out how I’d find this special tree. I wasn’t a shifter to sniff the scent. Or a wind

mage to read the air currents. Babbling brooks didn't speak to me. I trailed my fingers over the bark of a few trunks, catching my callouses on the surfaces. Feeling nothing. Not a single pang of hunger.

I wandered like that for an hour before stopping. Lost, I would admit at this point. I had no idea where the cabin was. A glance to the sky showed it gray and heavy with possible rain. And me in the forest without a coat.

Ugh. I tried to remember all the safety tips I'd ever heard. Moss on the north side? Or was it west?

Find a stream and follow it. I heard no water at all to use that tip.

Climb a tree and look for landmarks. I eyed them and chose to not fall and break anything vital in my body.

Besides, I couldn't go back to the cabin yet. I'd not found that stupid magical tree. Aziza said nothing.

I eyed her. "You know how to get back, don't you?"

"Yes."

Reassuring. "Do you know where that magic tree is?"

"I do."

She didn't offer to tell. I didn't ask. This task belonged to me. I wouldn't cheat. But at least I knew we wouldn't stay lost if things got dire.

"How am I supposed to find it?" I muttered aloud. "There must be some kind of trick."

"Stop looking with your eyes," Aziza recommended.

I shut them. "Doesn't seem to be helping. Maybe I should use my butt." I waggled it.

"How about stop being deliberately obtuse. Relax and let yourself feel."

Relax, she said, as if I could in the middle of a forest, standing stupidly with my eyes closed, looking for a tree that

possibly didn't exist. And with only a few snacks in my bag. No blanket, although I did have a belt to hang—

The faint tug had me tilting my head and halting that train of thought. What was that I felt?

My body turned, and it came again, a low pulse that tightened my belly.

“Do you sense something?” Aziza hissed.

“Yes.” A syllable said slowly. I moved like molasses as my inner eye turned to look. I sensed more than saw other thuds. A loud one at my rear from where we'd just come. A quiet one to my left, muffled, as if buried.

The quietest one, with its slow and steady thud, drew me hardest.

I kept my eyes shut as I followed its cadence, my steps sure, weaving a path that left me untouched. Until the thud rumbled so deeply I wondered how I kept my feet, even as my body didn't shake. My psyche did.

I opened my eyes and beheld an old tree. Gnarly of limb. Thick in the bole. Mostly dead. So many of its branches bare and rattling in the slight breeze. The area around was full of new saplings and encroaching bushes that they choked the massive giant. But that wasn't the reason for its slow death.

The rot tried to eat it from the inside. What began as a hole dug by a bird for bugs became a nest for rodents that took on water and decayed. The only thing keeping it alive? A spell left behind by a long-dead witch to try and save it. More like tortured it.

I blinked as I learned all this. “This poor tree.”

“You're talking to it?” Aziza asked, her glance bouncing from me to the towering behemoth.

“More like it showed me its life. I think it wants to die.”

“You didn't bring an axe.”

“Not by chopping. It's magic keeping it alive. I just have to touch it.”

As I went to reach, I heard the professor saying, *Once you find it, don't do anything.*

Surely, I misunderstood.

"I don't know if you should," Aziza warned.

"It's in pain."

"It's a tree."

"It's still a living thing."

Aziza sighed. "Your first lesson and already you are balking. And you wonder why I refused to teach you."

"I thought you couldn't."

"Because you're stubborn, Mistress."

I grimaced. "I'd like to argue, but I can't. Any idea why I can't touch the tree?"

"Actually, this isn't the tree I was talking about." The professor suddenly stepped into view, dressed as a lumberjack that would have made the moms in suburbia cream their panties. "How did you find this?"

"Closed my eyes and followed its thud."

"You sensed it?" His sharp question.

I nodded.

He eyed Aziza. "Did you lead her?"

"As if I would help her cheat." Affront in every word.

I took offense as well. "I found it on my own."

"Was it the only thing you felt?"

"No, just the most interesting."

"You weren't supposed to find this so quickly. I expected you to go for the bright beacon I left you in sight of the cabin." His pinched expression scowled at the tree.

"Sorry, I missed that one."

"It took me years before I could detect anything this subtle." He knelt and ran a gloved hand over the knotted soil

bumped with roots and covered in moss.

I'd have sworn the tree shuddered.

"There's magic keeping it alive," I pointed out.

"Indeed, there is. But why?" he mused aloud.

"It explained it as some witch thinking she did it a favor."

"The tree explained?" He snorted. "Trees aren't sentient. Besides, why would a witch try to save a single dying tree? Weak ones are routinely culled to make way for the strong."

"Does it matter why? The spell is hurting it."

"Trees don't feel pain."

I disagreed.

"Let's head back to the cabin." The professor turned away.

"Aren't you curious at all?" I asked.

"It's called practicing self-control. Is it you that wants to touch it? Or your power craving the magic?"

My nose crinkled. "I don't crave it. Not like I do a nice pasta or chocolate cake."

"Then walk away." He did so without a problem.

I took a few steps and paused. "It feels wrong to not help it."

He glanced at me over his shoulder. "Addicts will commonly find excuses to feed their hunger."

My mouth rounded, and I stomped after him. "I am not addicted to magic. I don't even feel it when I'm sucking it dry."

"Wrong. You do. You just haven't been paying it attention out of fear people will really notice how different you are."

"As if you'd know."

"I would, and worse than you can imagine."

"You claimed you and I are the only ones. There's nothing written about us, and yet someone taught you."

“If by taught you mean he gave me impossible tasks with dire punishment if I didn’t succeed. I got beaten quite a bit.”

The admission jolted, and I blurted out, “Sorry.”

“I didn’t mention it for pity. Merely wanted to point out the way I learned isn’t something I plan to repeat.”

“Thank you for not beating me,” I stated. I wouldn’t have allowed him to hurt me. I wasn’t a kid. I would fight back, but I’d rather not have to in the first place.

“Don’t make me regret it and pay attention.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And stop it with the sassy replies. This isn’t a joke. If you want to learn, you need to pay attention because I’m your only shot.”

“You keep telling me you can do stuff. Like what? In the video, you just waved around your staff and poofed the ants back to regular sized.”

“The staff is set with a moonstone. A special rock, part of an old asteroid. It can contain vast amounts of the unmagic. Think of it as a battery that can be charged and used later.”

“To do what?”

“Ah, now that’s something I’m very careful not to broadcast. Very few know the full extent of my abilities. It’s always best to be subtle because being too bold draws attention.”

Even with all his supposed control, the professor had to hide his true self.

“You think I can learn how to be less bull in a China shop.”

“I hope so because you’re a walking cloud of unmagic right now. No wonder you have a hard time fitting in with society.”

“You don’t have a bubble?”

“No, because I control the power; it doesn’t control me.”

“If you can do it, so can I.” I had to if I was going to show Mr. I’m-So-Great I was better than him.

Petty? As fuck.

We spent the following days doing lessons.

“Find the closest magic. But don’t touch.” This time I’d quickly gone to the tree with the magic acorn in the hole keeping a squirrel nest warm for winter.

Then I’d gone digging in the woods to find the ring someone had lost. The engraving was too worn to read.

Each had given me a quiver of hunger. Just a tiny one. The professor demanded I rein it in. I had no idea what he meant but assumed it meant not eating the magic.

It proved harder than expected, but as a reward, that evening the professor offered me a laptop to message my friends.

I started by sending Nelly a message: *Hey Nelly.*

I got a suspicious, *Who is this?*

Ruby.

Prove it. What’s Wally call you?

Sugar tits. I grimaced typing it.

Shit it is you. Sorry we ditched you, Nelly typed with an emoji looking sad.

It’s okay. I’m sorry I almost turned you into hamburger meat. My emoji had wide eyes.

She sent a laughing crying face, and we kept chatting. We talked about dumb stuff. Like the fact yet three more centaurs had recently shown up in town despite the quarantine and, no surprise, were already causing trouble and showing off their dicks.

At least these ones aren’t as badly endowed as Edward, Nelly messaged. Edward being the first centaur I met who blew up.

I sent back an eggplant. Yeah, my maturity level on some things didn't rank too high.

After that conversation, I fell more easily into my role as student. Nelly remained my friend despite everything. Once I mastered my ability, I'd return and show everyone I could be an asset.

On the fourth day of my lessons, I asked the professor, "How can you be here with me? Aren't you needed in the ruins?"

"If they come across something that requires my expertise, then I'll go."

I didn't know if it was good or bad that he hadn't been called. If the centaurs were appearing, then that meant the problems in Nexus hadn't yet been resolved. Meaning we had to find it. And here I wasted my time doing dumb shit like sitting by the water-filled quarry, meditating. To what purpose? My teacher replied, "You'll either see or be eaten."

"This is stupid," I muttered, dangling my fingers in the water. "I can't feel anything." My lower lip jutted.

Aziza didn't look impressed and continued to bask in the patch of sunlight she'd chosen. I chose to splay myself under a rocky overhang so my skin didn't burn. Hard to get any respect when your skin turns the shade of a tomato.

"There's nothing here," I grumbled.

"Because you're not listening," Aziza said.

I'd been trying. Eyes closed. Thinking of nothing. Picturing a flame. Then a fish. Farther out, I sensed the tree by the cabin with its tiny acorn. Farther still, the big gnarly oak that I'd been told to leave alone.

Where I didn't feel a thing? The lake now filling the old stone quarry.

"How am I supposed to practice using my unmagic if I can't fill up with some?" I grumbled.

"Each thing in its own time," my wise sphinx advised.

“What if we don’t have time?” What if I was tired of being cooped up with a grumpy old man?

“Rather than whine, why not go for a swim? After all, if the magic won’t come to you...”

“Bring it to me by offering myself as bait.”

Better than doing nothing. I stripped my shoes, socks, pants, and shirt but kept the bra and panties. The day was warm but not scorching, meaning the water would bite the flesh. It proved not as cold as expected. I slipped into it and did a breaststroke with my head above water. The water remained clear even with my motions. I could look down and see a fair distance, just not all the way to the bottom.

I still didn’t sense anything. I dove, wriggling deeper into the quarry lake, conscious I took a chance but trusted the professor and Aziza wouldn’t do me wrong.

When nothing happened, I flipped to my back and floated with my eyes closed, relaxed and uncaring. I star-fished and made myself lightweight. When young, I used to take baths and pretend I was a mermaid. A certain famous one with red hair. I loved the songs in that movie. Used to sing them when I was alone. They rose from me and lilted into the air. I belted out the words in a way I’d never done so freely. Because I finally didn’t care if someone heard me. I didn’t have to be silent anymore.

Not everyone appreciated my singing. The horn that speared between my legs lifted me from the water!

CHAPTER 24

I SCREAMED AND HELD ON TO THE HORN OF YELLOWED PEARL in spite of the fact it appeared attached to the rubbery head lifting from the water.

“What the fuck?” I didn’t even have time to finish saying it before I was flung like a beachball, not to shore but farther into the lake, where a second horned head rose from the water to catch me. Oh shit. A pair of fucking narwhals, the unicorns of the sea, playing ball—with me.

Narwhal two caught me, and I screamed as I swung wildly around the horn like a pole dancer with too much grease. I boomeranged back to narwhal one. As it angled its horn, I wrapped my arms around its spear-like protrusion, and my bare legs and feet touched its head.

No time to see if they had any magic. I got thrown again.

Caught.

My fingers scrabbled for purchase. If I could only hold on long enough to—

It jerked its head, but I held on to its horn, arms and legs wrapped in a pretzel-like vise. It kept shaking violently enough I lost my grip. I flew, but in good news, I’d screwed up its toss. I landed close to the edge of the lake. I quickly hauled myself onto solid ground and scrabbled on hands and knees until I didn’t worry about them retrieving their “ball.”

The narwhal pair trumpeted in disappointment and dove beneath the surface, most likely to wait for their next victim. I’d almost drowned. This kind of threat would have to be

called in. Even my friends at the SMU might need help. Despite the quarry being technically a restricted area, everyone knew that wouldn't stop people from trying to swim in a lake. And would the threat of narwhals stop them? Nope. Most likely the visitors would increase. Damn social media and its obsession with likes.

With the threat gone, along with the sun, leaving me in shivering damp skin, I stomped to my clothes, a glower on my face as I noted the sphinx lying atop them like a queen.

"Thanks for your help," I grumbled

"Don't look at me. You're the one who went into the water."

"On your advice."

"Never said it was good advice."

"I could have been killed!" I exclaimed, flapping my hands.

"Bah, now you're exaggerating. The narwhals are harmless."

"Did you not see what they were doing?"

"Having fun until you ruined it. Really, would it have killed you to give them a few more tosses? Most likely they would have dropped you close to shore when done."

"And if one of them missed and I got speared?"

"That would have been unfortunate, but it's rare that happens."

I stared at Aziza. "You speak as if you've seen this before."

"Narwhals are very playful creatures. I thought everyone knew that."

"I don't know much about anything that lives in the ocean, given there's not one for hundreds of miles around."

"That's no excuse. But you raise an interesting point. Given narwhals are not indigenous to this area, no one would

know if it ended up on a dinner plate.” Aziza licked her chops.

That got her a finger wag. “No hunting or eating the narwhals.”

“I hear they’re delicious.”

“Still a no.” I tugged my shirt out from under her reluctant body.

“Spoilsport,” a truly disgruntled Aziza said.

“I’m heading to town for a food run. You need anything?” I asked as we walked back to the cabin to admit my failure. Professor would most likely give me another lesson on observing and taking magic from afar. A lesson I couldn’t quite grasp. Not yet. Then again, not long ago I also couldn’t hear it. Still, as much as I tried, I’d yet to take magic without touching. My ability wanted that contact. I tried telling Professor that, and he told me to try harder.

Because that totally provided the revelation needed on how to do it.

Only once did the professor give me a glimpse of his own power.

It was after I grumbled when he told me to suck in the nimbus surrounding me, the one I couldn’t see, but he supposedly could.

“Watch. I am only going to turn it on for a second,” Professor warned. He held out his hands, and I studied him intently, expecting I’d need to strain.

I gasped when he let go of whatever shroud hid his power. He glowed so bright I put a hand over my eyes. It extinguished, and I gasped.

“How are you hiding all that?” He’d shone like a sun.

“How do you hold in a fart? Or a burp?”

“I just do,” I replied.

“Because it’s instinctive. And something you practice.”

“Unless I ate something I really shouldn’t have, then...”
My nose wrinkled.

“Magic is similar. You’ve ingested it, but instead of digesting it, your body is oozing it out. You need to hold it in.”

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to hold magic.”

“You can hold some. Just not more than you can handle. In your case, since you don’t handle any of it, you’re constantly oozing an anti-magic field. Depending on how strong of a residue you’re emitting, you will take out magic without touching it.”

I gaped at him. “Meaning I’m technically already using my power.”

“You’re more like a radioactive pool of goo infecting people who get near instead of being focused in a battery that could fuel so much more.”

“You should work on your analogies.”

“Do you get the point?”

I’d sighed. “Yes.”

After that, if I concentrated, I could see the mushy glow surrounding me. The cloud causing so many mishaps in my life. The foggy mess taunted. It had taken me a few days’ practice before I could suck it in to only ooze a few inches from my body. Professor offered me my first bit of praise and said, “Better.”

I hated the fact that made me glow.

What would he say when I told him I’d failed at the quarry? I hadn’t detected any magic at all. He’d probably say I didn’t try hard enough.

It had been days since I talked to anyone. Every time I messaged, Nelly was busy, and the conversation was short.

Guess I’d been out of sight long enough. Two weeks. That was apparently what it took to lose a friend.

As I neared the cabin, I noticed the professor’s car was gone. Odd.

“The *alsahyr* did not mention he’d be leaving.” An annoyed Aziza bounded ahead. I followed at a rapid clip, sensing nothing amiss. I entered to find a simple handwritten note.

Dealing with something. Back later. Don’t wait to eat.

As if I’d delay a meal for him. I began pulling out covered containers filled with leftovers to see what we had. I reached for a plate in the cupboard by the sink and glanced out the window to see a raven sitting on the branch of a tree across the clearing. A second raven arrived with a flap of wings.

As I watched, three more joined them. I forgot about grabbing a dish as I kept an eye on the growing flock. Seven, eight... It stopped at nineteen.

I’d have sworn each perched raven stared right at me.

Aziza suddenly jumped to the counter and blocked part of my view, hissing, “You’ve been found, Mistress.”

“By whom?” I replied as the birds spooked and rose into the sky, before dipping down low to the ground and blocking my view, a fluttering curtain of feathers that somehow masked his arrival.

When the ravens disperse, a shirtless Huego strode up the graveled drive, grim of countenance, totally unexpected. What did he want?

“Do not speak with him,” Aziza suddenly insisted.

“It’s Huego. I wonder why he’s here.”

“He’s not supposed to be,” was Aziza’s cryptic reply.

“It must be important then.” Maybe he had another relic for me to unmagic. I emerged and said, “Hey, Huego. Surprised to see you here. Is everything okay?”

“You’re a hard woman to find,” he announced.

I frowned. “What do you mean? The office knows where I am.”

“Actually, they don’t. They’ve been worried sick about you.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve been messaging with Nelly.”

“Which is the only reason she hasn’t completely lost her mind. No one’s seen you since the night of the ant attack.”

“Because the professor took me somewhere safe to practice my skill.”

“Without asking anyone’s permission, or advising them of your location,” he countered.

“He saved my life.”

“Did he?”

“Don’t listen to him, Mistress.” Aziza slunk around me, going from house-sized cat to jungle.

Her appearance drew a narrowed gaze from Huego. “I wondered if you were involved when I heard Ruby went missing. Guess the legends of your being tricky are true.”

“My kind aren’t the ones who tried to kill all the *alsahyr*, Odin’s pet,” Aziza hissed, growing in size as she left my side to place herself between me and Huego.

“Odin doesn’t want her dead.”

“Since when? Have you told her how many *alsahyr* you’ve killed in your god’s name?”

“Not anymore.” He didn’t refute the nasty truth.

“Since when?” sneered Aziza.

“Since I met Ruby and realized not all *alsahyr* are the danger I’ve been led to believe.”

“And Odin suddenly agreed? I find that hard to believe,” mocked Aziza.

Huego scowled in her direction. “How is it you’re here? How did you know where to find Ruby?”

“As if I’ll reveal my secrets,” Aziza boasted.

“Speaking of secrets, how many are you keeping from Ruby?”

“You’re one to speak, Odin’s pet. A slave to his whim.”

“And who do you obey?”

The slyest of smiles curved Aziza’s mouth. “No one, for there is no god in this time worthy of my attention.”

“Gods are a waste of time,” I opined.

Aziza canted her head. “There you are again with that silly belief that gods don’t exist.”

“I’m sure they do, but I doubt they’re more than just a fancy cryptid or some kind of magical construct created by belief.”

That caused Huego to snort. “Don’t let them hear you say that. You’ll force them to make an example of you.”

“I’d love to meet one and be proven wrong. Anyone?” I eyed them both. Neither offered to facilitate a rendezvous. “Exactly.”

“It’s not that simple,” Huego tried to argue.

“So I keep hearing,” I muttered.

“You’ll believe soon enough,” Aziza declared. “After all, I imagine Odin made his pet swear something ridiculous to keep you alive.”

“Did he?” I asked, turning my head to eye him.

Huego’s lips pressed tight. “I have the autonomy to make my own decisions.”

That led to Aziza snorting. “How amusing you think that. Odin, like many gods, keeps his pets on short leashes.”

For some reason, I blurted out, “Have you ever thought of just serving yourself and not some kind of overlord who thinks he’s so special?”

Aziza just about fell over laughing, which proved disconcerting, given her massive size versus my not-so-big toes.

The sphinx finally managed to chortle, “Gods are for life, Mistress.”

“What if you don’t like being some kind of religious fanatic? Or you chose the wrong god, or worse your parents chose for you?” I waved my hands to express my point.

“Doesn’t matter,” Aziza claimed. “Everyone has to choose, and once they do, only death can sever that bond.”

“Sounds like bullshit to me. What if their so-called god turns into a raving lunatic who wants to destroy the world?”

“The other gods would stop them.”

I glanced at Huego. “Is she serious?”

“Yes, but keep in mind those unhappy with their choice are rarer than you think. Most gods aren’t interested in world domination or destruction.”

“Implying there are some who are.”

“Not anymore.”

A cryptic thing to say. “Well, I, for one, am super happy to be an atheist.”

“Oh, are you in for a surprise.” Aziza chortled some more.

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, now I’m gonna have to agree with Huego, which hurts, but you’re obviously hiding stuff from me.”

“There are things you aren’t ready to hear.”

“Such as?” I snapped.

“Such as the fact you need to stop denying reality.”

That brought a disparaging noise. “I will when I see actual proof of a god. Until then, I am not drinking the cult juice.”

Somehow Aziza managed to tsk. “Stubborn mistress. You’ll soon see the error of your beliefs. Although it is ironic that an *alsahyr*, of all people, would deny the existence of gods.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She offered an enigmatic smile. “That you have much to learn still, Mistress.”

Huego finally jumped in to say, “See how she hides the truth from you?”

“Only because she is not ready,” Aziza declared.

“You’re afraid if you tell her what you know that she won’t cooperate.”

“Cooperate with what?” I interjected.

“With changing the world.” Aziza said it quite seriously.

Given my skill set, she could only mean swapping it into one without magic. I shook my head. “That sounds a little too evil villain for me.”

“Because you don’t see the grander design. But you will.” Aziza sounded so sure.

But Huego? “You mean the design of whoever you serve.”

“As if your god doesn’t have a plan for her,” scoffed the sphinx.

“Odin’s only concern is with ensuring the viability of this world and the beings inhabiting it.”

“And if Odin deems her too dangerous?” Aziza slyly added.

Huego pursed his lips. “That won’t happen.”

It hit me that they discussed my death. “You would kill me if your god told you to?” I exclaimed.

“Only if you caused grave peril. You’d do the same to me if the roles were reversed.”

Would I? I stared at Huego, a big hunk of half-naked man. Grim of countenance. Handsome too. Arrogant. Could I end his life if he turned out to be bad?

Aziza had no such qualms. “I’d tear out your throat right now if I didn’t think Mistress would be upset.”

“I’d get over it,” I offered.

“There is no need to dirty my fur since I am above riffraff such as the bird.” She lifted her nose.

“I should have tried harder to smash you when you were under that curse,” he muttered in reply.

As they argued, I thought of the leftovers inside. I’d not eaten for hours. I half turned, wondering if they’d notice if I left.

I tuned back in as Aziza asked, “How did you find her? Her location was masked.”

“Given the quarantine zone, it was simply a process of elimination.”

His reply led to Aziza shaking her head. “You should have minded your business.”

“Given I don’t know this professor’s motive, or yours for that matter, I can’t.”

“Unfortunate, because now you force me to act.” Aziza took a step toward him, baring her teeth.

Whoa. I put myself between her and Huego. “You can’t kill him.”

“He’s a danger,” Aziza hissed. “Move aside, Mistress. I will handle this.”

The sudden grab by Huego took me by surprise. His arms gripped me tight as he launched himself into the air with a push of his powerful legs. His wings emerged without a sound but immediately flapped, catching a current that pushed us high, quickly.

Below us, Aziza—despite having expanded in size—roared in disappointment as he flew us off.

CHAPTER 25

HUEGO SNATCHED MY ASS AND FLEW US AWAY, HIGH, HIGH into the sky. Above the clouds to those curious. I didn't think arguing his decision was a good idea given if he dropped me, I'd turn into pink pâté once I hit the pavement. I clung tight, face buried against his bare skin, my head cradled between his chin, neck, and shoulder. A nice spot for a nibble, not that I took a bite.

This was Huego. A man I barely knew who had just kidnapped me. I had to wonder why, and where did we go?

He seemed to think Aziza had some nefarious purpose for me, whereas my sphinx implied the same of him. Sounded like they both wanted to use me.

Guess what, though? I could make my own decision. Huego would be getting an earful when we landed. Talking didn't prove conducive given the firm push of air generated by Raven's speed not only stole sound but breath. We were moving and grooving, the sun not hot enough, despite its brilliance, to counter the chill in the sky.

When the pressure against me eased, his speed slowing, I finally lifted my head for a peek and saw a strange tower in the distance. Shaped like a cylinder, it stretched from the clouds below us and kept going, aiming higher into the sky, and I couldn't see its end.

Apertures dotted it, the shapes varying and no two openings in a row. Mostly smooth on the outside, the rocky surface showed no signs of seams. It appeared as if this impossible tower were made of one solid piece.

Huego aimed for a ledge with a large opening, the wooden porch a tenuous proposition. I could only hope someone had been maintaining it. My anxiety also reminded me I couldn't fly, meaning I couldn't escape.

He placed me on my feet, and yet I clung to him. While I had him to blame for my current position, he was also my best chance at survival. It helped that he'd not actually hurt me. Kidnapped, yes, and yet I remained unafraid. Not sure what it said about me that Huego's brusque methods were not entirely a turn-off. I always did like alpha male types. Ask me how I felt later if it turned out I was a prisoner in a tower in the sky.

"If you don't like heights, don't look down," he murmured.

I glanced immediately and saw the bank of clouds hundreds of feet below us. Unlike Rapunzel, I didn't have long enough hair to make it back to solid ground.

Logically I knew this place couldn't exist. Not naturally made, no way. This tower defied all the laws of science, but even more astonishing, I sensed no magic. No sudden hunger, just a solid structure that gave me the most insane view. Below, the clouds shifted every so often to give me glimpses of Earth and its greens and blues and browns. Above, a bright sun in a dark expanse dotted with stars. And the tower stretched into that galaxy.

Impossible.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"A bridge between worlds."

A glance overhead and squinting didn't show where it ended. "Long bridge. Who built it?"

"Beings long gone. I've heard say they were the parents of the gods left behind."

He led me inside to a room larger than I would have expected. In a glance, I spotted sleeping and dining areas, workshop, even a closed-off privy corner. The area was illuminated by slots in the stone which brought in light.

The space followed a strange curve that sloped upwards and down, not that the furniture showed it, having been designed with the slant in mind.

“This space is very customized. Did you build it?” I trailed my fingers over a table made of metal and wood, polished smooth and sturdy.

“I can’t take the credit. The previous guardians did most of the work. I mostly modernized some of the items.”

The remark led to me noticing strings of LED lights, the tail of one going outside. Mostly likely solar charged. Brilliant.

“Do you live here alone?”

“Sometimes.”

“Why did you bring me here?” I went to the crux of the matter.

His lips pursed. “Because you needed rescuing.”

“From Aziza?” I arched a brow.

“The sphinx has a motive for attaching itself. Just like the professor.”

“You think they want to use me.” My lips turned down. “Kind of seems like you do too.”

“My god isn’t the one trying to wreak havoc upon the world.”

“But he has killed people like me.”

His lips flattened.

I pressed. “He commanded you to murder me, didn’t he?”

“You’re still alive.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“Actually, I did.”

That was his rebuttal. In other words, yes, he had killed before. I was the only exception. I almost applauded him for having the balls to admit it. “That’s hardly a ringing

endorsement. Maybe I'm only alive because you haven't had a good chance to off me."

"I could have dropped you at any time if that were true. Why would I bring you here if I wanted you dead?"

"I don't know. You still haven't said," I pointed out.

"How about because I wanted you alive."

"Why?"

"I am still asking myself that question," he muttered.

"I don't understand why you'd even care. I got the impression you didn't like me."

"I don't."

I'd circle back to that. "Why do you think Aziza has an ulterior motive?"

"I don't think, I know."

"She's my friend."

"Sphinxes aren't friends with humans."

"Some would say I'm not human."

"And they would be right."

I blinked. Not the expected answer but I turned it on him. "Meaning she could be my friend."

"If you believe that, then you're not as smart as I thought."

That led to me snorting. "You've made it clear you think I'm dumb."

"Well, you do keep making bad choices."

"According to you."

"Did you ever wonder why this professor kidnapped you?"

"Hardly kidnapped. He wants to teach me to use my power."

"Professor Xannon is not the benevolent type."

“What kind of ulterior motive could he possibly have in teaching me?” I shook my head.

“Someone who can annul magic would make a powerful weapon.”

“They would but guess what. I’d never allow that to happen.”

“As if you’d have a choice.”

“What do expect me to do? Keep fumbling through life, not understanding the limits of my power? At least the professor is attempting to teach me how to not be a danger to myself and others. For the first time, I’m hopeful I can control what I do. Live a more normal life.”

“Why would you want to be normal when you could be great?”

My mouth opened, but I had no reply. However, I could now see how dictators became tempted. Imagine having the kind of power that demanded respect. No more being shunned. No more worries about being tossed out on my ass.

“Let me guess, you can help me achieve greatness.”

“Actually, it’s not in my best interest at all to help you. Which is why I’m still baffled by my decision to bring you here.” He raked fingers through his hair, leaving it ruffled. He’d tucked away his wings but forgotten to bring back his shirt. I enjoyed the view even as I listened to him rambling aloud.

“And yet you intentionally sought me out and kidnapped me, making you no better than the professor.”

That led to a mighty scowl. “That wasn’t part of the plan.”

The statement drew my attention. “What plan?”

“None of your concern.”

“Gonna say it probably is given you snatched me without my permission.”

“Saved you,” Huego corrected. “You’ll thank me later.”

“Doubtful.”

“Whatever,” he muttered. “Stay away from the door until my return.”

“Excuse me? You can’t go.”

His lips pressed tight. “I have to.”

“But what if you don’t come back?” I huffed. Panic set in at the thought. I’d be stuck in this tower, alone.

He took a few strides to close the gap between us and grabbed my clenched fists, stroking a thumb over them. I’d not even realized I dug my nails inside. The thought of being abandoned here...

“Don’t go,” I whispered, choking on the syllables.

“I’ll be back soon.”

I opened my mouth—

His lips brushed mine. A tentative stroke of skin.

I paused. So did he.

Waiting.

This wasn’t the time. The place. I didn’t like him. Didn’t trust him. Tell that to the tingles infusing me. What was one more bad decision in a steady stream of them?

I pressed my mouth to his in a real kiss, hot and hard, our lips slanting and sliding, breath meshing hotly.

We broke away at the same instant.

Reality bitch-slapped me. I was kissing the man who kidnapped me.

A man who backed away, looking like I’d stabbed him. He turned and ran for the door to the outside.

“Don’t you dare,” I huffed. I dashed to grab him. It was too late by the time I peeked out. He soared straight down to the clouds and out of sight.

That fucker. With a growl of annoyance, I stomped back into the suite, wondering how the hell I was supposed to get

my ass out of this mess. For a brief second, I thought of plastering myself naked to the stone to see if perhaps there was any magic I could break.

Then I thought of a tower of blocks. Take out one piece and—

Boom. The whole thing collapses.

I'd rather not end up as rubble. Not to mention I shouldn't have a knee-jerk reaction. Yes, the situation appeared dire, but that didn't mean I should go drastic right away. First off, the way he'd kissed me? Hell yeah, he was coming back.

The way I'd kissed him?

I might just let him do more than that. What could I say? I had a thing for bad boys.

In the meantime, until he did return, might as well further explore my current situation. I wandered the leaning and curving space, finding nothing of true interest—metal gears hung on the wall like art, a giant key, a massive basin that might be a tub. The only other door was at the very bottom of the space, mostly hidden by a tapestry. A chair stood in front as well, and I only happened to catch the seams by accident. A shove of the furniture and a tug displayed a door in the stone wall. Locked, not by magic, I should add.

I slammed my fists in annoyance. For a brief second, I'd thought I'd found a possible escape in case Huego didn't return.

Even if he did, I couldn't stay here forever. Heck, I wasn't sure I'd last a day. For one, I'd starve. No fridge. A search found only a box of stale cookies, some dry seasoning, and a half-eaten bag of chips well past their best-before date.

The only thing I did have? A crank of a handle poured some water into a basin. I shut it off quickly so as to not waste it in case it ran dry. A person could live on water for days.

It better not be days.

The books displayed on shelves didn't have enough pictures and were written in an unknown language. Bored, I

sat cross-legged in the doorway to eye the sky. I only bolted inside when I saw a massive shape coasting over the cloud cover. Not Huego. I didn't recognize the bugling cry.

I darted to safety, only to spy through a window slit as the creature spun in a wide, lazy arc around the tower holding me prisoner. It was a dark red in color that shimmered in the sun, altering the hue to an almost black, and the scales rippled as it coasted past.

With its vast wingspan and serpentine body, it wasn't much of a leap to figure out I looked upon the dragon folks had been talking about in town. Very freaking cool. Wish I had a camera. Also wished I could be sure it hadn't seen me. While this was the first live dragon in centuries, the historical accounts had them as exclusive carnivores who had been known to eat people

It was as the sun set and darkness crept in that I wondered if Huego had forgotten about me. Or worse, wasn't returning. While candles sat in sconces on the wall, I had no way of lighting them. Luckily those solar lights I'd spotted blinked on, tiny little pinpricks against the gloom. I hugged myself as I sat on a chair, the wicker of it cradling my body, the blanket draped over it coarse but comfortable. For some reason I didn't want to be in the bed.

I kept watch. At least I meant to. In reality, I fell asleep and dreamed.

CHAPTER 26

I'D BEEN BAD, EATING THAT LAST APPLE, THE ONE MOTHER HAD warned me from. But I was so hungry. My moldy sandwich at lunch had turned my belly, and I couldn't take a bite. There was nothing for supper, nothing but that apple. I'd crunched into it slowly at first, savoring each bite, only to end up devouring it, trying to quell that gnawing ache.

Mother lost her mind when she saw I'd eaten it, chasing me from the shed we'd been using to sleep in. To escape her wrath, I'd run for the overgrown forest, leaping for a branch and nimbly climbing higher and higher.

She harangued from the bottom. "Get down here."

"No."

"Right now."

"You'll punish me," I said almost accusingly.

"You deserve it." She stated that often, and yet I knew from school not everyone's mother was as strict and mean as mine.

"I was hungry."

"So am I because of you. Blame your wickedness if you have pangs."

"I'm not bad." I used to say that so often to myself when I went to sleep at night. Hugging and rocking in whatever tiny space I found.

"Devil's seed. Get down." She grabbed the tree as if she would shake it.

And then, even though impossible, it did rattle me loose, and I fell—

My eyes opened to see the floor an inch from smashing into my face, and the only reason I wasn't screaming in pain? The hands that caught me.

I struggled free to see Huego had returned.

Forget happy. With the dream still on me, I yelled, "You bastard!" I went at him with my fingers curved to act as claws.

He caught my wrists, ensuring I struggled uselessly. I ended up glaring.

"Done with your tantrum?" he drawled in amusement.

"No."

"Hangry?" he asked, releasing me. I might have attacked, only he unlayered three knapsacks from his body.

"I might be a little hungry." Having been abandoned without sustenance, I could see how people became cannibals. Heck, I almost pulled a beaver and chewed on some wood.

"Sorry about the bare cupboard. It's why I had to leave. I brought food."

"Why didn't you say that when you left?" I huffed.

He shrugged.

Not really an answer and yet I forgave him almost everything as I dove for the bag that he unzipped, which still steamed deliciously. Cardboard containers filled with warm stuff emerged to make my mouth water. Noodles, veggies, chunks of meat in a sauce, even some eggrolls. Added to that a cold cooler bag with drinks and even two types of dessert. He also dropped a knapsack on the table with yet more things that he poured out.

"Is this enough to tide you over for a bit?"

"Maybe a day, but what of after? How long are you going to keep me here?" I asked, even as I dug into the sustenance.

“Hadn’t really thought of it since this wasn’t supposed to happen.” Once more, he implied he’d changed his plan.

I slurped some noodles before saying, “You were going to kill me.”

“It would have been easiest,” he offered almost apologetically.

“Easier why? It’s not like I’m some super threat. Ask the professor. I can’t even use my powers.”

“Yet. And your professor isn’t telling you everything.”

“Oh, and exactly what has he kept hidden?”

“I can’t tell you.”

I blinked. “You can’t just raise the specter of him being a liar then not follow through.”

“Not liar so much as not revealing everything he knows.”

“I could say the same of you.”

“I have my reasons.” His fingers dragged through his dark locks. Then, completely off topic, he asked, “Do you really think gods are just constructs of magic?”

I shrugged. “No idea, as I’ve never met one.”

“And if you could?”

I couldn’t help an impish grin as I said, “I’d ask to shake their hand.”

“Because you think you’ll reveal them to be frauds.”

“Aren’t you the least bit curious?” I asked.

“I know gods aren’t using magic. What they do is beyond that.”

“So you’re not worried about me touching your god?”

He shook his head. “You can’t hurt Odin.”

“Then let me meet him.”

“I can’t—”

“But you just said I couldn’t hurt him.”

“No, but piss him off and he will end you.”

Huego declared Odin would kill me and my reply? “He can try, but as others have discovered, I’m not that easy to get rid of.”

His lips curved. “Only because you’ve never met an angry god.”

“I’m not scared,” I boasted.

“You should be. The *alsahyr* are not well liked.”

“Then maybe stop calling me that. I think null witch sounds cooler.” Not really. I mean who wouldn’t want to be known as a wizard killer?

“Just so you know, I informed Nelly that you were guesting with me in order to ensure she didn’t worry, given your abrupt departure.”

I snorted. “Let me guess. she probably threatened to blow off your balls if you didn’t bring me back.”

His lips tilted. “Something to that effect. And then your bird got in on the conversation. He’s got quite the vocabulary.”

I could only imagine what Wally said. “He’s worried about me.”

“I’m not the one he should be worried about.”

“Yet you’re the one who kidnapped me and are now holding me prisoner in a tower.”

“For your own protection.”

“I don’t need protecting. I can take care of myself.”

“Not from what I’ve seen. Look at who you chose as a teacher. Did you know the professor is currently on a forced leave of absence?”

“What?” I blinked in his direction.

“The details have been redacted, but the gist I’ve gotten from talking to people is there’ve been personality conflicts. Your professor is a bit of an arrogant ass.”

“I noticed. What I don’t get is why he didn’t let my friends know where I was.” I side-eyed Huego. “Unless he suspected one of my coworkers of wanting to kill me.”

“We’ve never met.”

“And yet he probably knows of you. After all, it’s not secret you are Odin’s emissary, and your god has been known to kill null witches and wizards.”

“I didn’t kill you.”

“Do you want a cookie?” I sassed in reply.

“What I want is for you to not question every damned thing I say.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“A man can wish.”

“You shouldn’t wish for the impossible.” With my belly full for the moment, I could relax enough to ask, “What’s the long game, Raven?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“Can’t you ask Odin?”

“I am fairly sure he doesn’t know either. There are things afoot in Nexus, and some of it ties to you.”

“Because of my power.”

“That’s part of it.”

“Meaning you’re going to Rapunzel me for, what? A week, month, year, decades, until I die or throw myself off the edge?”

“I need time to figure out the end game in Nexus and why you’re important.”

“Me?” I couldn’t help the incredulous exclamation.

“Yes, you, or haven’t you noticed how you’re always in the thick of trouble?”

“Because it’s my job.” I rose from my seat.

He stood as well to glare down at me. “It’s more than that, and you know it. It’s a wonder you’re not dead given your ability to ignore the obvious.”

“If there’s someone after me, then shouldn’t I be the one to confront them?”

“It’s like you want to be a target.”

“Because your plan of sticking me in a tower is so much better,” I sassed back.

“At least it keeps you out of trouble.” He huffed.

Somehow during the exchange, we’d gotten closer and faced off. Not nose to nose, he was too tall for that, but he’d leaned in to bring his face close enough I could have kissed him.

If I wanted to.

“Don’t,” he murmured.

“Don’t what?” I replied, watching the movement of his lips.

“I swore it wouldn’t happen again.”

“Afraid of a kiss, Raven?”

“Afraid of you.” A raw and honest answer.

That, for some reason, brought a girlish giggle. “I won’t hurt you.” My voice dropped to a husky whisper. “Unless you want me to.”

He was the one to grab me first, his hand palming my lower back to drag me close, even as my arms circled around his neck, grabbing him tight. Our mouths mashed, a hard press of lips, clash of teeth, and hot sweep of tongue.

He dragged my leg up around his hip and pulled me against him. My ass pressed against the seam of the table. It took only a hop to get seated that I might wrap both legs around his waist.

We kept kissing as my hands kneaded the hot flesh of his shoulders and upper chest. His skin was smooth. His pecs

hard. His nipples were tight buds that drew a groan from him when I played with them.

Grinding myself against him had me moaning and aching in that sweet spot. I wanted nothing more than to remove the clothes between us.

Only a bugling cry from outside froze him.

I saw the moment his desire died, his expression turning cold. He stepped from me as he stated, "I have to leave."

"Running away again?" I asked, hurt and angry that he could simply shut it off at will.

"I'll be back in a few hours."

"Where are you going?"

He didn't reply as he dove off the ledge. I couldn't even see him, not in the dark. I stared as long as I dared. The distant cries of creatures sent me back inside. I fled to the bed, wrapping myself in blankets, miserable and angry at myself.

I knew better than to put myself out there.

It always failed.

CHAPTER 27

AFTER A SUMMER OF HOLDING OFF, THE END RESULT PROVED less than exciting. My first time left me sore, sticky, and wondering why it sucked compared to everything else we'd done. I liked the kissing and the petting. Could it be the fact I was a virgin that made the sex part not particularly good?

I couldn't exactly ask, and my boyfriend, Leroy, didn't seem bothered. He zipped up his pants with a satisfied grin. It was when he put on his shoes, too, that I sat up with a frown from the blanket he'd brought for us to lie on in the woods.

I patted the spot beside me. "Do we have to leave right now? Can't we snuggle?" I really like that part of dating best.

"I promised the guys I'd swing by."

"Oh. Can I come?" A casual query as I dressed, not really in the mood for people but, this being the night I'd lost my cherry, not ready to go home.

"It's boys only."

At the time, I'd been stupid and believed him.

"Okay," I'd said.

It was an awkward ride with him cranking the music loud. When he stopped a block from my current foster home so I wouldn't get in trouble, I'd leaned in for a kiss. He'd given me a quick peck.

"See you at school?" I asked. Summer break ended this weekend.

"Sure."

He'd peeled off, but I still smiled. This final year would be different. I had a boyfriend. One who actually liked me. He'd spent all summer hanging with me before I finally trusted him with my cherry.

Apparently, I should have waited longer. School arrived with its mass of students, and me eager to see Leroy. I'd half expected him to offer me a ride, but I didn't live far. When I spotted him in the hall, I smiled and headed for him. He turned his back.

Maybe he'd not seen me? The bell rang, and I had no time to say hello until lunch. The cafeteria was busy. I bought a plate of fries and saw him lounging with his friends. He smiled at me, and I took that as an invitation. As I neared, I could hear him talking.

"...the rug matches the drapes, boys. And best of all, I broke her in for you. Although, be warned, she's a bit of a bore in the sack."

I whipped around fast before anyone could see my brimming tears. To think I'd trusted him. Might explain my intimacy issues when it came to relationships. Why I remained alone.

Alone.

The word rang inside my head as I woke, the spot beside me in bed untouched. Sitting upright, a view of the main space didn't show a brooding and annoying man who blew hot one second, cold the next. If Huego didn't have wings, I'd be tempted to push him off a ledge. In Leroy's case, it was unfortunate how he lost his footing on the stairs at school. Even better, I'd been hoping it would happen and then been lucky enough to see it when it did. Karma.

I ate leftovers for breakfast since they'd go bad if I didn't, having already been out for hours.

Dawn had recently crested and still bathed the plateau of clouds in shades of red, pink, orange, and yellow. Gorgeous. The sunset was equally beautiful, not that I noticed. Huego had yet to return. But do you know what I did see?

The dragon.

It swooped a few times around the tower, bugling in that strange fluting way. Dangerous or not? It didn't seem interested in me, and I wasn't so ignorant as to assume it didn't spot me here.

The solar lights illuminated and reminded me that Huego hadn't returned the previous day until nightfall.

Not today.

Or the next. A day spent trying to escape. I'd tried every which way I could to pick the lock on that door. To no avail.

I ate out of depression and then panicked as my stash of food diminished.

What if Huego didn't return?

I grimaced and frowned at one of the books, which had images that I hoped would help me decipher the text, when I heard a thud at the opening to the living space.

Huego!

I took two steps for the doorway when I paused.

What the fuck?

I blinked as a pony's head poked inside, but one like I'd never seen. It was scaled like a serpent, the surface shimmering between black and a deep green. A single stubby horn jutted from its head, pearlescent in color, a contrast to the wings tucked tight to its back as it carefully stepped inside. I noticed a smaller creature on its back, which leaped to the floor, startling me. I held out my hands as if to defend myself when it hit me. I knew the little green goblin standing there, the scar above their eye distinctive.

"Mungo?" I couldn't help a surprised lilt.

"Hi." The goblin I'd met before waved.

"What are you doing here?"

"Baby say lady stuck."

"Baby? What baby?"

Mungo patted the leg of the pony and grinned, baring lots of teeth. “My baby.”

I didn’t want to imagine how that came about. But in better news, I might have found my way out. “Can you tell my friends, the people at SMU, where I am? Maybe they can rescue me.”

“Pshaw.” Mungo blew out a noise. “I save.”

“How?”

“Fly.”

I eyed the pony. “I think your baby is a little too small for me to ride.”

“Not fly my baby. Jungy too small.” Mungo laughed. “Fly Kaida.”

“What is a kay-da?” I didn’t recognize the word. “Is it another of your children?” Perhaps a bigger version of the pony Mungo called Jungy?

“Kaida big.” Mungo held out skinny goblin arms. “Fly you.”

“For that to work, this kay-da would have to be sized like a dra—”

I never did finish the word, as the doorway suddenly had a large head poking in via a long sinuous neck. Slightly larger than that of a horse, the skin of it scaled, the forehead presented two short horns, nostrils that steamed, and slitted eyes.

The fucking dragon had found me!

And what did the goblin do? Walked over and rubbed its snout, cooing, “Pretty Kaida.”

Well, that answered one question. As to whether I’d get eaten or roasted? I began to feel hopeful, given Jungy, the goblin-mixed pony, neighed and also scooted over to nudge the bigger dragon with its nose. Kaida uttered a brr-ing sound that reminded me of a happy kitten, if giant sized.

So much for dragons being savage meat-eating killers. If it didn't swallow Mungo or chomp the hybrid baby. then maybe, just maybe, it wouldn't devour me and I could get out of here.

"Will Kaida let me ride?" I asked, coming close enough that those eyes, with their vertical slits, perused me.

"I don't know if I should." The voice, distinctly young and feminine, spoke in my head.

I gaped.

"You really shouldn't let your jaw drop like that. It's rather unattractive."

"You can talk."

"So can you."

"How is this possible? Dragons are extinct."

"Apparently not, since we're talking."

"I have so many questions."

"Ugh, do we have to do this now? I'm kind of in a rush. My parents are having a pig roast tonight."

"Who are your parents?"

The dragon eyed Mungo, who shook its head. "No tell. No arrest."

"I wouldn't..." I started to say, only to stop. That wasn't entirely true. The SMU would most definitely apprehend anyone aiding a dragon because dragons were supposed to be bad.

But I had to wonder, especially given no one in hundreds of years had ever met one.

"You know what, I'd rather not know." Although having read the files, I could guess. "And even if I did, I wouldn't tell." I did the sign of the cross and then added zippered lips.

"No hurt babies." Mungo sounded quite fierce saying it.

"I won't." Because I couldn't help thinking of how people like me had been killed for just existing. This dragon, while

spotted, hadn't caused any harm, and its friend, Jungy, hadn't either.

"Can we go? I'm hungry?" The plaintive demand of a child wanting its next meal.

"Are you sure I won't be too heavy?" I asked as I neared Kaida, the heat she exuded pleasant after the chill of the tower.

Kaida trilled.

I'd take that as a no.

"How do we do this?"

Mungo, who'd vaulted atop its baby, had a simple reply. "Hold tight."

Sounded easy until I edged out the door to see the dragon clinging to the ledge, its back scaled without any ridges and lacking a harness. I made the mistake of looking down. The clouds were thin, meaning I could see the pinpricks of light far below. If I fell, splat.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea. But what other choice did I have? Huego had been gone for two days. What if he didn't come back?

What if this was my one shot?

"Ready?" Kaida asked.

I swallowed hard but nodded. I climbed onto the back of the dragon, the scales grippable, I discovered. I leaned forward and hugged myself to her torso as much as I could.

I still screamed when we plunged from the ledge.

CHAPTER 28

THE DRAGON DIDN'T DO ANY CRAZY NOSE DIVES OR LOOP-DA-loops in the sky. She did a slow spiral around the tower, easy enough I lifted my head from her back to see.

I didn't see much other than a spot of light in the tower just above the band of clouds. We plunged through that thin mist, dampening my skin, giving me a shiver that Kaida's body heat couldn't entirely dispel.

Once we popped below that band of cumulus, the tower was gone! And yet Kaida continued her lazy spiral down for a while longer, as if it existed, before she banked and flapped.

I should have probably questioned earlier where exactly we were headed, yet I oddly trusted Mungo. After all, I knew Mindy, the goblin's friend.

As we dipped lower, the lights of a town beckoned. I couldn't tell the time other than it was late.

So late that no one was on the rooftop of the building I lived in. Kaida landed gently, dropping down straight, whereas Jungy arrived on a trot.

I slid from Kaida's back and moved to her front so I could see her face. "Thank you," I said, and on impulse hugged the dragon, who shivered. Too late, I wondered if I'd done something to her magic, only to realize I'd not once gotten hungry. Meaning, despite legends, dragons themselves weren't made of magic. Although I had to wonder if, as Kaida matured, she'd develop an ability to use it.

Next, I held out my fist to Mungo, who bumped it, as did the nose of her baby. “Thank you. I owe you.”

Mungo snorted. “No hurt babies.”

I nodded. “I will do my best to ensure no one touches them.” A promise I had no idea how to implement other than by trying my damndest.

I watched as the unlikely trio lifted from the roof. Nexus truly was a place of strange things, but at the same time, it felt like home. Especially when I walked into my apartment and Wally startled awake on his perch and exclaimed, “About fucking time you returned, sugar tits. My itchy ass needs you to rub on that special cream.”

My reply? “I’m happy to see you too. Mind if I hug you first, though?”

“If you must,” he grumbled, fluttering his way to the floor, only so he could throw himself at me.

We spent several minutes cuddling, and it might have lasted longer if my door didn’t slam open as Nelly barged in, gun in hand. “Hands up, thief!”

“Don’t shoot,” I yelled, knowing Nelly didn’t miss.

“Rubes, is that really you?” The barrel didn’t immediately drop.

“You know a lot of chicks with red hair and a dirty-minded bird?”

“I wouldn’t have to think it if I could get some action,” grumbled Wally.

“Prove it’s you and not a doppelganger,” Nelly demanded, not dropping her threatening stance. “Unmagic something.”

I frowned as I stood. “Who else would I be?”

“Do it.” She crouched and slid a dagger across the floor. Ornate and beautiful, I could almost taste its magic. Yum.

Unfortunately, the ingesting of it, while leaving me with a nice inner glow, caused the blade to suddenly rust.

“Sorry,” I apologized as I handed it back.

Nelly ignored it to throw her arms around me for a hug. “Thank fuck you’re all right. We were so worried when you disappeared. How did you escape?”

“Not easily,” I admitted with a laugh. I wondered how to explain my escape from the tower in the sky without revealing I’d met the dragon we’d been seeking.

“Thank goodness you found a way. When Aziza told us Huego had kidnapped you, we were so worried. The professor blamed himself for not having better protections in place.”

“Huego didn’t hurt me, other than leaving me somewhere I couldn’t easily escape.”

“Why did he abduct you? No one’s been able to question him since it happened.”

“Huego has some strange idea in his head that I’m important and people want to use me for nefarious reasons.”

She snorted. “Kind of priceless coming from him. Isn’t he like Odin’s sycophant?”

I didn’t wince, but it came close. “Odin wanted me dead, but Huego refused.”

“Sure he did.” She rolled her eyes.

“Is it true no one knew where the professor took me?” Huego had claimed it, and yet now I had to wonder.

“Yeah. We weren’t crazy about the fact the prof took you off somewhere secret to recover, but he claimed it was necessary in order to teach you without distraction. The only reason we didn’t hunt you down was because Renarde insisted this was best for you and you didn’t send us any coded messages asking for rescue.”

“The professor is a bit of an ass, but I wasn’t mistreated.”

“I know. Aziza was the one to first let us know what happened. And then Huego had the nerve to drop a message saying you were somewhere safe.”

“Where is Aziza?” Last I’d seen her, she’d been staying at the cabin by the quarry.

“Looking for you. We’ve all been searching since Huego snatched your ass.”

“Guess we should message the gang that I’m all right.”

And I was. I’d made it back home no worse for wear, if a little more jaded because of Huego. Was I so desperate for acceptance I’d believe any old lie? Renarde must have been so pissed given she was the one who headhunted him for the team.

Thinking of him had me asking, “Where is Huego?”

Her lips pressed into a tight line. “No idea. He disappeared after he took you, and other than that one message, we haven’t seen or heard from him in days.”

In other words, since he’d left me. Had he run into trouble?

Did I care? I had kissed him. Even been crushing on him a little bit if I were honest. Time to chalk it up to one more bad decision.

Nelly refused to leave me alone and, while I showered, must have been busy because I emerged with wet hair, wearing the comfiest shit I owned, to find my living room full.

Aziza spotted me first and wound her cat-sized body between my ankles, and dammit if she wasn’t purring when I scooped her for a snuggle.

“Mistress,” she cooed. “Forgive my failure.”

“Not your fault, Aziza. And I’m fine.”

A message repeated to Clive, who hugged me tight and sighed with relief as I eased some of his magical reservoir. I just about lost a few ribs in the crushing hug Baptiste gave me, but it was his whispered, “Maybe I can find a way,” that had my heart stammering.

A way to what?

Last, but not least, Kyana, who offered me a shy smile and a murmured, “Glad to see you’re back.”

It was past midnight, but that didn't stop us from ordering in, the food plentiful, as was the laughter. We only lightly dipped into what happened, with me offering a brief explanation—Huego claimed to be saving me from some dire fate and put me in an aerie I couldn't escape. Which led to the inevitable question, how did I?

This was where I lied to my friends, with good reason, but it still left me feeling icky as I said, "I'm not sure who my savior was. One minute I was a prisoner with no way to climb down, and the next, I found myself on the roof."

I almost winced as Kyana quickly jumped in to say, "I'll check the security cam footage."

My lie would unravel in seconds I realized as she played on her tablet, which went with her everywhere.

Before I could stammer out another fib, she frowned. "Well, this is weird. The cameras on the roof are dead."

I held in a sigh as I exclaimed, "Guess whoever saved me wanted to remain anonymous."

The conversation thankfully tracked onto other subjects, with me listening mostly as my friends regaled me with their search for me. Well, most of them. Baptiste remained silent and staring until he abruptly stood and muttered a gruff, "Gotta go to bed."

It led to my friends dispersing, except for Nelly. "We're bunking together until I know Huego isn't coming back to finish whatever he planned."

I almost cried. For more than a few reasons. One, she cared. Two, I couldn't hunt down Baptiste and ask what he meant. Three, there would be no Huego swooping in to finish that kiss.

What I didn't mind? Hearing Wally's warbling breath as he slept on his perch by my bed or the snuggles by Aziza, who kneaded the blanket on me before curling up by my side.

All was right in my world. At least until I went to work and a certain professor showed up determined to piss me off.

CHAPTER 29

THE NEXT MORNING, NELLY AND I BOTH WENT TO FETCH breakfast. Aziza chose to snooze in late, while Wally munched on a bowl of mealworms while watching Animal Planet. More like cursing them out for being idiots who chose to live in the wild instead of in luxury like him.

We entered SMU headquarters to find Renarde already there.

She stared at me and said, “Glad you made it back.”

“Guess you heard about Huego.”

“There is little I don’t know,” she agreed. “Take the day off to recover.”

“I’d rather work.”

“Understandable. Talk to the team. They’ll catch you up.” Renarde then popped into her office.

The boys wandered in, as did Kyana, and I went through the reports of the last week or so, catching up on the Nexus weirdness. The ants were only the tip of the monster iceberg. They’d dealt with a giant-sized centipede—which I’d gladly missed—another bogeyman, even some mutant rats who were lured into a cage by a giant animatronic nutcracker. Weird shit.

Around ten, a call came in about a disturbance at the movie theater. It was around the same time the professor walked in.

He gave me one look, and I suddenly wondered why I felt as if I were in trouble. Could it be no one told him I’d returned?

I headed for him. “Hey, Professor.”

“I’m surprised to see you here,” he remarked.

“I work here,” I reminded.

“But shouldn’t be. You left before completing your lessons.”

“I was kidnapped,” I corrected. “And now that I’m back, we can continue. I’m available after dinner today.”

“No.” The brusqueness of it had me recoiling.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because this isn’t something you can do in your free time.”

“Guess you’d know all about free time. I hear you were suspended from your job.” I repeated what Huego told me.

“I took a leave of absence. To teach you,” he snapped. “You’re a danger, Garcia. And until you commit yourself to changing that, I cannot allow you to pose a danger to your coworkers or this town.”

“I would never hurt anyone,” I huffed indignantly.

“Not intentionally, and yet, given the rise in magical situations, the potential is there.”

“A good thing it’s not up to you, then. You’re not my boss.”

He arched a brow. “So that’s how you’re going to play it?” He didn’t say another word to me, just marched into Renarde’s office as if he had every right.

Let him. Renarde had handpicked me. She’d have my back.

As I readied with the crew to go after whatever plagued the movie theater, I kept glancing at the closed door. Baptiste had already exited, Clive close to his heels, when it opened. I was only three strides from exiting when Renarde’s voice stopped me.

“Garcia, you’re staying here.”

“What?” I whirled and gaped at my boss. “Why?”

“I think you know.”

Standing by her side, Professor Xannon didn't smirk triumphantly, but he might as well have given this was his fault.

“I don't see why my lack of training is a problem now.”

“Because before I didn't realize what you could do.”

“So what, you're firing me?” I managed to say it despite the lump in my throat.

“More like reassigning you to office work until the professor thinks you're in control of your ability.”

“That's not fair. I'm part of the team,” I insisted. I knew I whined. Even understood I needed to learn, but seeing my friends... I'd missed being around them. Surely there was a way to have both my lessons and my life?

“I'm sorry, Garcia, but I have more than your pride to think of.” With that, Renarde returned to her office.

Nelly patted my arm and murmured, “It'll be okay.”

No, it wouldn't because some asshole had ruined everything.

Through a gritted jaw, I snapped, “Are you happy?”

“This brings me no pleasure.” Professor didn't look the least bit chagrined.

“You're acting like I intentionally ditched my lessons with you.”

“You certainly went willingly with the traitor.”

“Well, excuse me for not realizing someone I worked with, someone the CHS trusted, was the villain.”

“No one blames you for that.”

“Says the guy trying to get me fired.”

“Says the guy trying to ensure you don't kill anyone. If you can't see the difference, then maybe there is no hope for

you.” With that parting shot, he left.

Left me fuming. Yes, on the one hand, he had a point. I had much to learn. But at the same time, how dare he threaten and manipulate? This was my life.

The team left without me. I sulked behind a computer when Renarde departed as well, meaning I was alone when the call for help came.

Monster in a swimming pool.

The report further stated the human homeowner had managed to save their toddler from it but lost their Shih Tzu. If a single human could prevail to rescue their child, then I, a trained professional, should have no issue at all. Especially with a taser that could be easily dropped into the water. Problem solved.

Only I hesitated. Renarde had effectively suspended me from active duty. The professor was convinced I was dangerous. At the same time, there was no one left in the office to answer the call. Surely it wouldn't hurt for me to assess the situation for the team? At the very least, I could stand guard until the cavalry could join me.

The keys to the SMU cars hung on a board by the door, and I simply had to grab a set to be on my way. I'd not gone empty-handed. Along with my taser—which I'd been taught to use in Defense against Aquatic Cryptids—I had my handy-dandy knapsack, the knife gifted to me by Nelly, and with which I'd been practicing, snacks—because you never knew—and salt because more than one cryptid creature hated the stuff.

The house that made the call proved easy to find, given the police cars out front. Three of them were parked behind caution tape that spanned the house on each side of the one causing problems. I rolled out of my wheels and strutted with all the cockiness I could muster, given I could see the muttering and nudging among the cops waiting.

“No comment,” said the woman with short hair streaked with silver.

“I’m not a reporter. Agent Garcia, SMU.” I flashed my badge.

A relieved expression crossed her face. “Thank god. There’s a monster in that pool out back.”

“The call we received said something about it attacking a child?”

She nodded. “Good thing the mother was right there hanging laundry. She heard the kid scream and turned to see some swampy monster trying to drag her kid to the pool.”

“Pool as in chlorinated water?” An odd choice for a water creature, given they usually preferred anything but.

“Not exactly. She’s got some kind of natural pool thing going on. Instead of chlorine or salt water, it’s got plants and uses sand filtration. Sounds like a complicated version of a pond if you ask me.”

“There was mention of a missing dog?”

She nodded. “They put it out last night, and it didn’t come back, but she didn’t think anything of it. Apparently Boopsy likes to wander.”

“Where is the family now?”

“They and the neighbors around were evacuated.”

“And have you seen or engaged with the creature?”

“Nope. We ain’t paid enough to fuck with monsters,” drawled a different officer.

Human cops didn’t deal with cryptids unless they had to.

“Okay. I’m going to see what we’re dealing with.”

“Where’s the rest of your team? I thought you guys always worked in pairs?” asked the female officer.

“On another call. Don’t worry. I’m qualified to handle anything tossed my way.”

I boldly lied. In reality, if there was no magic, I’d most likely document and wait for backup. Or pull a Hail-Mary and toss the taser in the pool. But unlike the last agent who did this

—who had the misfortune of being splashed when the electrified weapon hit and getting electrocuted—I’d ensure I stood well out of the danger zone. Good thing I knew how to throw.

The side gate creaked as I pushed on the lever and opened it. The yard had that familiar suburban look: green grass cut short, stone tile patio, a gazebo with furniture under it. I saw the umbrella-style clothesline partially hung with garments. But the centerpiece around which everything else revolved was the currently very green pool.

I pursed my lips as the stench of it wafted. If this was natural, give me chemicals. I couldn’t imagine anyone swimming in it. A grumble in my tummy had me turning my head side to side.

I sensed magic.

It took me a moment to realize it came from an adjoining yard. A glance over the fence showed a fountain, which seemed too simple to explain the massive stone basin with the many moving stone statues splashing and spraying water. The magic animated it.

What people would waste money and talent on...

I turned back to the pool and froze as I saw an ugly green creature standing by its edge. Humanoid in shape, maybe three feet in height, with long arms and fingers tipped in claws. Despite its closed mouth, I already knew it had razor-sharp teeth. I’d learned about the grindyflow in my international monster class. Grindyflow usually resided in scummy ponds and marshes in the UK. While dangerous to small children and animals, they were non-magical and more of a nuisance than anything. The cops could have shot it and saved me a trip.

But I was here, and I had to prove, even if only to myself, that I had value. Not all battles were about magic, and this was a good example.

“Let’s get this over with.” I pulled out the taser, the easiest weapon for me to use. One zap and I’d be heading back to the office. Ooh, maybe I’d stop for some tacos on the way.

The monster didn't move as I neared, its behavior odd. Usually the sight of me, a grown-ass adult, should have sent it fleeing. Instead, it hissed.

“You think you can take me?” I taunted.

I got within reach, and it still didn't budge. It was as if it wanted me to kill it. Very well, then. I lunged with the taser and damned if the grindylow didn't grab it and hold it tight to its own flesh.

Startled, I took a step back, watching as it jiggled, using up the charge and smelling something awful in the process. It collapsed atop the device, covering it in goo.

Dead.

Yay me.

The waters of the pool rippled.

Uh-oh.

Seeing the agitation in the pool made it clear I'd celebrated too soon. A green hand grabbed the edge of the pool. While usually loners, it seemed this grindylow had a friend.

Wait, make that two. Another set of fingers clawed for traction.

Then a third.

I backed away from the burbling pool. Just how many were under its surface?

Only instinct had me whirling while dancing to the side. More monsters shuffled at my back, exiting from the house. The fuckers had been hiding? More like lying in wait I realized, as they had me surrounded.

I pulled my knife. One puny little blade against at least a dozen with the waters still churning.

They converged on me, which didn't bode well. Where was a wolfman when you needed one? A sharpshooter? A wizard with fireballs? I'd even settle for Huego and his great big sword.

Alas, in my arrogance, I'd come alone, and now I'd die that way, unless—

The magic next door tugged at me. Too far to touch, and even if I could, what would I do with it?

Use it. A great plan, only I didn't know how. Maybe instinct would kick in though, just like with the ants, and provide a shield for my fleshy bits. If I could grab enough power in time. I swung wildly with my knife as I reached for the magic next door.

I'd almost grasped it when I got shoved off balance. I'd run out of time. Slimy bodies slammed into me and grabbed. Not to tear me to shreds but to drag. I couldn't stop them, and the edge of the pool neared.

No. I wasn't ready to die.

I wouldn't!

The scream I uttered wasn't vocal so much as psychic. It froze the monsters holding me. Stilled them long enough for me to reach again for the magic next door. I grabbed it and drew it to me, filling a gnawing hole in my belly.

But it needed to do more than that. I took the warm glow and imagined it as a shield around me, a shield of fire!

Yeah.

Hot and melting.

The shrieks let me know it worked, as did the stench. The monsters holding me let go. I'd started to smile in victory when the magic ran out.

Claws pricked my flesh as new grindy low grasped me. My fear ramped up anew, and as I stared at the creeping edge of the green muck, I cast out desperately for magic. Any kind.

I found nothing.

Dreading what came next, I closed my mouth and eyes. Please let it be quick.

My body got dumped, but not in water. I hit the paving stones hard enough I bit my tongue.

Something had agitated the grindy low. A hum filled the air. I rolled over in time to see the monster standing next to me exploding into chunks.

Fun. Good thing my mouth remained closed, or I'd have tasted if they were as putrid as they smelled.

More of the creatures combusted, and it took a second for me to see the reason why.

Professor Xannon stood with his staff, expression fierce, his hair standing as if by static, and yet I knew it was actually the unmagic. An unmagic that demolished the army of monsters, splitting them apart into wet chunks until only I remained.

I shoved myself to my feet. Alive. Embarrassed. And contrite.

He gave me a look.

Just one disappointed look.

I met his gaze, unflinching, knowing I'd earned his disapproval. Also understanding, in that moment, just how fucking stupid I'd been.

There was no I in team. There were no do-overs when you died either.

Which was why I said, "Will you still teach me?"

He muttered, "Against my better judgment."

EPILOGUE

LUCKY FOR ME, I WAS ALLOWED TO SHOWER BEFORE I returned to the cabin with the professor—a shower that took a while, given I had to plunge the drain of goo a couple of times. Even got to pack a bag, box up some food, and say goodbye to my friends. It was hard. I'd never cared about people before, and now I had several that meant so much to me. Their hugs helped, along with their reminders, "You'll be back in no time."

I hoped so, seeing as how this time I wouldn't even have Aziza along. Too distracting the professor claimed.

His words, not mine. I expected Wally to have an issue with it the most, only my longest friend plucked a feather from his now lush plumage and offered it to me saying, "If you need me, burn it and I will come."

Given the struggle he'd had to regrow them, I was touched.

Aziza proved blunter, saying simply, "Try and listen better this time. I'd hate to have to find a new mistress."

Baptiste proved the strangest goodbye because he simply gathered me close and sniffed me. I'm talking full-on, belly-full snort.

As for Clive, he slid me a little present. A sketch of the two of us, wearing capes, one with a sparkly lightning bolt, the other with a line through the same image. When I eyed him in puzzlement, he grinned.

“Just imagine what we could do once you master your gift.” Clive with his ability to take in magic, mine to turn it into something else. We could be a dynamic duo.

Once I mastered my skill. There would be no if about it. I would become a true *alsahyr* or die trying.

That night, I returned to the cabin by the quarry no wiser than when I’d left but definitely ready to learn what I could do.

And once I did...watch out, world.



THE UNDERCOVER MINION slunk onto the estate, sticking to the deepest pockets of shadows, taking their secrecy seriously because if anyone ever guessed their subterfuge, they’d die. And not necessarily by those they’d betrayed.

“So?” Asked in an impatient tone.

“As requested, Ruby has returned to train with the professor.”

“Long past due. About time she took an interest in her powers.” Said with drummed fingers. “What of the males sniffing around her?”

“The wolfman will be shortly married, and part of his mating contract forbids cheating on pain of death.”

“Savage.” A word said with a chuckle.

“Odin’s emissary appears to have disappeared, though.”

“Worry not about the annoying bird. He has been handled.” The raven currently guested in the dungeon, chained and drugged. For now. He might have some use yet.

“I won’t be able to visit her while she’s receiving instruction without drawing notice,” announced the spy.

“Understandable. Does anyone suspect you’re working for me?”

“No.”

“What of Ruby?”

“She’s clueless and easy to fool. Are you sure she’s the one?”

“She is exactly what we need.”

The spy left, and a visit to the dungeon brought a smile to the lips, especially when the raven lifted his head to stare and gasp, “You’re the traitor?”

Renarde grinned wide at his surprise. “I’m much more than that.” And soon the world would know her name—and fear it.

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