



KISS
OF
DEATH

SECRETS & SIN: BOOK THREE

LINSEY HALL

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Thank You!

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Copyright

Cora

ALL AROUND, the street was vibrant with life. On either side of the road, the crowd cheered and shouted. Parade floats drifted down the road, resplendent with colorful banners and sparkles. People stood on the decks of the floats, throwing beads and candy to the joyous crowd. New Orleans was famous for its parades, but this was the first one I had attended.

I'd planned to stay behind and keep working on my mother's bookstore—*my* bookstore—but Rei, Mia, and Fiona had dragged me out of the house, insisting that I accompany them. Quite aggressively.

Now that I was here, surrounded by the energy of the crowd, I was glad I'd agreed.

"Isn't this phenomenal?" Fiona shouted over the noise of the people surrounding us. Balthazar, our shadow cat, was draped over her shoulders. His dark fur wafted smoke, and his red eyes were trained on the parade floats. Once Fiona had started to leave the house regularly, Balthazar had decided he wanted to accompany her.

"It's amazing!" I shouted back.

And it really was. I'd been so focused on my work and my fear that Marek, my old boss, would find me that I hadn't been enjoying the best of what New Orleans had to offer. My new home was incredible, even though it was hard for me to really think of it as a home. I'd never belonged anywhere, and it just felt...weird.

A parade float drifted by, decked with blue sparkles and enough glitter to sink a warship. Mermaids waved from the deck, hurling beads at the crowd. Fiona leapt up to grab some, then handed them to me with a grin. "You don't even have to show your boobs!"

"That's really a thing?"

"On Bourbon Street at one a.m.? Definitely."

"Yeah, then this is better." I draped them around my neck.

My friend Mia appeared at my side and handed Fiona and me a plastic tumbler full of sparkling liquid. "One of my newest concoctions. Champagne and passionfruit juice, with a little shot of magic for extra buzz."

I accepted the drink from her with grin. "Thanks."

The first sip was divine, sparkling on my tongue with a bright sweetness that made me want to swoon.

"This is delicious!" Fiona said.

"Seconded." I took another sip, watching the parade floats glide by.

A court jester wearing purple and green silk danced a jig on the front of a float as he hurled candy bars into the crowd. One flew right at me, and I reached up to grab it.

Candy was way better than beads.

I tore the package open with my teeth but caught Balthazar giving me an interested look.

“You like chocolate?” I asked him.

He meowed, his red eyes keen on the chocolate. I ripped the wrapper off and held the bar out for him for him to have a little nibble. Instead, he opened his jaws wide, white fangs flashing, and devoured the whole thing in one bite.

I yanked my hand back. “Hey! I almost lost a finger there. *And* we were supposed to share.”

“He’s terrible at that.” Fiona grinned at me. “Don’t even try to eat a chocolate sundae around him.”

Balthazar licked his lips, and I shook my head at him. “I’ll know better next time.”

He just grinned.

I turned back to the parade and kept my eyes peeled for another float that threw chocolate to the crowd. Balthazar looked between me and the parade, clearly wondering if I would be sharing more of my loot.

Not a chance in hell. If I had to eat it in secret, hunched over like a squirrel with an acorn, that’s what I would do. I had dignity, of course, but not when it came to chocolate.

My gaze was drawn to the clouds overhead. Dusk was falling, and the sunset glowed golden on the horizon, so the clouds should be a beautiful array of colors. Instead, they were a gun metal gray that didn’t reflect the pretty light.

I looked at Rei. “Have you heard anything about a weather advisory?”

She looked up, frowning at the dark clouds growing thicker and thicker with every second. “That doesn’t look like

normal weather.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. The clouds are forming too quickly.”

“And they’re too dark.”

Lightning cracked amongst them, and I flinched at the accompanying thunder.

All around me, people began to murmur, shooting anxious glances overhead. Unease skittered across my skin.

“Do you think we should go?” Mia asked.

I couldn’t respond. The clouds had begun to glow with an eerie green light, and magic vibrated in the air. The scent of it reminded me of burning tires mingled with despair.

Black magic.

“Yeah, I think we had better head out,” Rei said, tilting her head toward home.

“We’ve only been here a little while!” Fiona protested. She’d been a ghost when we’d met, and she’d only returned to the living a few days ago. Consequently, there wasn’t a party she wanted to miss or an event she wanted to leave early.

The thunder crashed again, so loud that it vibrated my bones.

“On second thought, we can go,” Fiona said.

Overhead, the clouds began to vibrate. Intense magic filled the air, sending a shudder through me.

The crowd felt it, too. Their anxiety was palpable. The floats sped up, and the occupants no longer threw beads or candy. In a matter of moments, the entire atmosphere of the event had changed.

What the hell was going on?

Suddenly, leaving felt like the wrong thing to do. I hesitated. Maybe I should stick around.

Before I had time to decide, a massive bolt of lightning struck me from above in a blaze of light and pain. The shock of it tore through me like a beast shaking me in its jaws and there was darkness, nothing but darkness.

Sometime later—I had no idea how long—I pried my eyes open. Every inch of me ached, and my vision was blurry.

How long had I been out?

And where the hell was I?

The ground was cold and hard beneath me. My vision slowly returned, and I stared up at the night sky above me. Towering walls of earth extended upright on either side.

Holy fates, I was in a massive pit, more of a crevasse, really, blasted by lightning. People stared down at me from the edge of the crater, their expressions unreadable from this distance. I must be forty feet down.

What the hell had just happened?

My friends peered down at me, only recognizable because of Balthazar's red eyes and the familiar blue and pink glow of Rei and Mia's hair illuminated in the streetlights above.

“Are you all right?” Fiona called down.

Before I could answer, Talan appeared at my side. “Don't move, you could have broken something.”

“Where the hell did you come from?” I looked up at his too-beautiful face, noting the concern in his dark eyes. It made

something shift inside of me, and I wanted to lean closer to him.

No.

That was a terrible idea. I'd sworn to avoid him. I couldn't afford to feel anything for anybody else. I'd already reached my limit with Fiona, Rei, and Mia.

"Up there," he said, a wry smile on his face. He pointed toward a rope that hung limply against one of the earthen walls. He must have climbed down.

I drew in a shuddering breath. The pain had faded, but my equilibrium was slow to return. Though the initial blast had hurt like hell, nothing appeared to be damaged.

I hadn't seen Talan since I'd told him there could be nothing between us. Nevertheless, his mere presence was enough to make my breath come faster.

How was I supposed to act around him now? I wanted him to hug me.

Hug me? No way. My pride wouldn't allow that. Besides, I needed to get my act together on my own. I could barely handle the fact that I was starting to rely on my friends. I definitely couldn't rely on him as well.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his hand hovering over my shoulder as if he wanted to touch me but was unsure how I would react.

Bad idea. If he so much as brushed my skin, I had a feeling I'd throw myself into his arms, pride be damned.

"I'm fine." I pushed myself upright, weaker than I expected to be.

"I'm not sure you are."

“Just a little beat up. I’ve had worse.” Why the hell had I been struck by lightning? And why was I fine? I should be dead.

“You’re...glowing,” he said.

“Glowing?”

I looked down at my body and gasped. A faint white light was coming from my skin. Instinct made me scramble backwards as if I could escape myself. I had never glowed before.

“That’s weird.” I raised my hands to inspect them. Other than the strange glow, they looked normal.

The murmurs of the crowd above turned into shouts, and I looked up. Most of the people who had been staring down into the hole had disappeared. Fiona’s gaze darted between me and something happening on the surface.

“We need to get up there.” I staggered to my feet, my body aching. I reached for the rope, dreading the climb out of the hole.

Talan joined me, and I could feel his concern burning through my skin. “Are you sure you can do that?”

I nodded. “I have to.”

“You don’t. If you’ll wait, I’ll find a way to get you out of here.”

“I’m not waiting for anything.” I gripped the rope with my other hand and planted my feet on the wall. Step by step, I began to climb, finding footholds amongst the packed dirt and rocks.

As I neared the top of the crevasse, the sounds of screams echoed through the city.

Fiona and Balthazar appeared at the top of the chasm. Fiona's face was white, her eyes wide. "Hurry!"

I pushed past my aches and climbed faster, finally scrambling out of the hole. I staggered upright. Much of the street had been cleared. The floats were gone, and people had pressed themselves back against the buildings.

A giant beast thundered toward us on four legs, its body made of wispy smoke. The thing's eyes blazed with blue fire, and its mouth was opened wide, revealing dozens of fangs.

If I'd been alone, I might have run for it. But there were so many of us that my fear was a dull thud instead of a raging storm.

"What the hell is it?" Fiona asked. "And should we get the hell out of here?"

"I think we're out of time," I said.

Talan appeared at my side. He drew his sword from the ether and moved to stand in front of me. His damned shoulders were so broad that he killed my view, so I stepped to the side so I could see the creature. Could I kill it with my power, or was it even alive? Beasts like this were often created from dark magic and weren't technically living things.

The monster stopped abruptly and rose on two legs. Magic swirled, and the beast transformed into a man, a being far scarier than any ravenous beast.

Fear iced the blood in my veins as I looked into the eyes of my former master. My old boss, as I liked to think of him. But when I stood face-to-face with him, the fear and smallness that I felt forced me to acknowledge what he'd really been—my master. My owner.

The man I'd hoped to never see again.

Marek's slight frame, combined with his pale skin and hair, made him look almost insubstantial. One could mistake him for weak if they were stupid.

I wasn't stupid.

I glared at him, but before I could speak, a wide grin split his features. Satisfaction seemed to emanate from him as he looked me up and down like he was inspecting something he owned.

In his mind, he did. He'd paid the orphanage good money for me.

I clenched my fists, wanting to do more than punch him. I'd tear his damned throat out if he got close to me.

"It worked," he murmured, so low that I almost couldn't hear him. The words seemed almost unconscious as they escaped him, a product of the awe in his eyes.

"What worked?" I demanded, hoping that my bravado didn't betray my fear.

"Who are you?" Talan demanded.

The bastard gave me a terrifying smile full of knowledge. "Ask Cora why I'm here. She knows."

"He's no one," I spat. "And if he doesn't get the hell out of here, I'm going to kill him."

"You are quite good at that." He smiled, and I wanted to attack him. "But I'm afraid you're going to have to come with me willingly."

My friends moved closer to me. I could feel them at my back, standing so near that their warmth seeped through my shirt.

I laughed in his face. “No way in hell.”

“I was afraid you might say that.” Marek shrugged. “I tried to get you back in the normal way, sending your colleague after you, but you’ve proven yourself to be even more resilient than I expected.”

“Of course I am.” I’d taken care of every one of the kidnappers he’d sent my way, and I’d take care of any others. No way in hell would I go back to him. My days of being forced to kill for him were over.

He smiled. “It only makes me want you more.”

Beside me, Talan growled. He vibrated with barely leashed rage, clearly wanting to attack.

I put a hand on his arm, and he stilled.

“Please don’t,” I whispered.

He said nothing, but I caught the almost imperceptible nod of his head. He wouldn’t hold himself back for long, though.

“Why the lightning and the storm?” I asked. “I wasn’t aware you were capable of that kind of thing. Seems like overkill.”

“Just testing a theory.” He grinned, his gaze moving up and down my body once more. “I’m pleased to see it panned out.”

I looked down. I was still glowing faintly. Had he expected that to happen? Did he know what was going on with me?

I wanted to ask but couldn’t bring myself to do it. I didn’t want him to know he had anything I wanted, even something as insubstantial as information.

“Come with me now, Cora. Return home with me.” The confidence in his voice made rage vibrate through me. He sounded like he expected me to do it—to just walk away from my new life and return to servitude with him.

Next to me, Talan growled once more. It was taking every ounce of his control not to attack, and I didn’t have long before he snapped.

“There’s no way in hell I’m returning with you.”

Marek shrugged, then pointed behind me. “Come with me now, or more of this will happen. People will die, and it will be on your shoulders.”

I turned, realizing in horror that the street was missing. Actually *missing*.

The crevasse I’d been in had been the street itself. I’d woken at one end, then climbed out without looking behind me. I’d been so distracted by Marek’s arrival that I’d had no idea what lay behind me.

He’d destroyed one of the main streets through New Orleans. The buildings still stood, thick fates, but the road itself was a deep valley running all the way to the next intersection. One wrong step and a person would break their neck.

I turned back to him, my heart pounding. “There are innocent people who live here.”

He shrugged. “And?”

“You’re a monster.”

“It’s one of my finest qualities, I know.” His expression turned even colder. “Come home with me, Cora, or people will die. You’re mine, and you always have been.”

Hot rage and shame washed through me, a vile mix. There was no time for me to respond, though.

Talan exploded forward, so fast that I almost couldn't see it. He was on the monster in a second, slashing his sword through the air. As it collided with Marek, the bastard disappeared.

Damn it.

Talan growled as he turned, and I saw that his blade was red with blood.

Shock lanced me. "You got him."

"Not badly enough." Talan glowered. "It wasn't a death blow. I could see right before he disappeared that I only hit his midsection. If he has any kind of healer on hand, he'll survive."

Damn it. It had been too much to hope for.

"So, what now?" Fiona asked.

What now?

He was going to force me to come to him, using thousands of lives as leverage. And I couldn't see any way around it.

T *alan*

I STARED AT CORA, hating the fear that I saw in her eyes. She'd never told me what her old master looked like, but there was no question that had been him.

The people around us murmured. I'd been so focused on the arrival of the shadowy beast that I hadn't noticed the crowd lingering in the alleys, watching the show. With the danger gone, they'd crept out onto the main road. Their whispers grew in volume, and I caught the distinct sound of someone saying, "It happened because of her."

Anger flooded me. Would the crowd blame Cora for this?

I couldn't have that.

I turned to them and raised my hands. "Be calm. Everything will be fine."

"How can we be calm?" someone shouted from the back. "Look at the street!"

I didn't need to look to recall the intensity of the damage. "No one was hurt, and I'll handle the street. This is my town, and I'll take care of it just as I always have."

There were a few murmurs of agreement, but there were still doubtful glances and whispers. These people trusted and respected me, but fear was a powerful drug. The attack had come from nowhere and had blasted apart the entire street. We'd never seen anything like that before.

As long as the crowd blamed Cora, she was at risk. I strode toward her, the crowd rumbling around us. I needed to get her out of there, then I could deal with them without worrying about her.

I reached Cora and gripped her hand.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

I said nothing as I pulled a transport charm from my pocket and hurled it to the ground. I dragged her inside, taking her back to my estate. The ether spat us out on the front lawn.

She yanked her hand away from mine and glared. “You can't just drag me off! What about my friends?”

“They're fine, but you wouldn't have been. That crowd was about to get violent. They needed a chance to calm down, and your presence was only inciting their anger.”

“You can't keep interfering like this. I don't need you to protect me.”

“You might not need me to protect you, but I will. I always will.”

“You have no right.”

“Right?” I felt anger rise inside me. “I have every right. I'm your mate. You may deny it, but I don't. Fate doesn't.”

“Ugh, freaking fate. I hate the damned thing.” She turned away. “I can't talk about this right now. What's going on is too dangerous, and it's my fault he came.” She looked toward the

gate at the edge of my property, as if she would leave immediately. “I don’t know what else he’s capable of, but I know he has no conscience. He’ll kill anyone to get what he wants. I need to go to him.”

The fear in her voice made a protective rage rise inside me. “The hell you will. We’ll find another way.”

She huffed a laugh, clearly disbelieving, then looked down at her hands and frowned. “I’m still glowing.”

The pale white light had faded slightly, but she was right. It only made her more beautiful, and I wanted to sweep her into my arms and protect her from the world. It was the last thing she would tolerate, though.

I turned at a shot behind me. Rei, Mia, and Fiona were running down the path toward us. One of the gate guards followed behind them, a worried frown on his face. No doubt the three women had overpowered him and run past, but I’d told the guards not to hurt Cora or her friends.

The three women stopped in front of us, panting and wearing worried expressions.

The guard stopped behind them and gasped out, “I tried to stop them.”

“I know.” I nodded back toward the gate. “Return to your post.”

Rei hurried to Cora and gripped her hands. “Are you okay? What happened back there?”

Cora blew out a breath and looked at me. I understood what she was asking without her even having to speak the words.

“Come,” I said. “I’ll find a place for the four of you to speak.”

The cat draped around Fiona’s shoulder hissed, its bright red glare boring into me.

“Balthazar wants to be included,” Fiona said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Fine, the five of you,” I amended, unable to believe what I was saying.

The cat gave me an approving look, but I turned, ignoring him. I took the stairs two at a time to the main door, then headed down the hall to one of the libraries. The room was one of my favorites, with towering bookshelves and a deep fireplace surrounded by large, comfortable chairs.

It was also one of the most private places in the house, which made it perfect for Cora if she were going to share anything about her past. I knew how hard it was to confess to such a terrible life, and any little thing that would make it easier was worth the effort.

The four women followed me into the room and went immediately to the fire, which lay cold and dead.

Fiona pointed to the hearth, her brows raised. “Do you think you could...?”

I flicked a hand, igniting the logs with a bolt of my magic. The fire crackled merrily as the women sat in the chairs.

Cora looked at me. “Could you give us a moment?”

I nodded. I already knew Cora’s tale—at least, as much as she’d been willing to tell me while we’d been trapped in the fae prison—and I understood the desire for privacy. We were on shaky ground, anyway. In this, I could do as she asked.

“Of course. I’ll see about getting the staff to make you some food,” I said, then left the room.



Cora

I WATCHED TALON DEPART, oddly touched by his sensitivity. I really didn’t want him here while I relived my horrible past, and he already knew what I was going to say.

“Well?” Mia asked, her tone curious but firm. “You’re going to have to fill us in.”

Did I have to, though?

I cared for them. They were my friends—hell, the closest thing I had to family. But my instinct was to hold the information tight to my chest and pretend everything was fine.

But no.

That wasn’t what my new life was about. I was trying to build something here. A community. A home. No matter how weird it felt to be vulnerable, trusting your friends was part of what made a full life.

I drew in a shuddery breath and looked at Balthazar. The cat was no longer staring at us. He’d turned his attention toward the flames. Somehow, his lack of interest was almost soothing.

“So, my time in New York was pretty bad,” I said. “I was a mercenary. An assassin, sometimes. But not by choice.”

My friends stared at me, riveted, but without an ounce of judgement on their faces. Their neutrality convinced me to

continue. “I didn’t choose that life. My mother sold me into it when she realized what my power was.”

My mother sold me... Just saying the words made me want to sink into the floor. I hated thinking about it, even though I’d come to terms with it long ago. Speaking the words aloud, though, felt terrible.

Mia and Rei shared a glance. Obviously, they’d talked about my weird and unknown magic. Fiona, too, probably. She kept stroking Balthazar, her gaze on mine. They waited patiently for me to finish, and I forced myself to find the courage.

“I’m a manslaga, a type of supernatural that can kill with a touch,” I said, guilt flooding me. I hated having to admit this horrible part of myself.

Rei laughed. “Is that all?”

I felt my jaw slacken. “Wait, what do you mean?”

“Well, the way you hid your power, I assumed it was something terrible.”

“That is terrible.”

“Nah, it’s just efficient.”

“But...” I gaped at her. “If I wanted to kill you—or anyone—I could just walk up and give you a zap of my magic. Boom, dead.”

“Sure, and if I wanted to kill you, I could stab you in the heart when your back is turned. Everyone is deadly, Cora. You’re just quicker at it.”

I blew out a breath.

I supposed she had a point. It wasn't the power that mattered; it was the intention. A maniacal human with a gun could take out dozens of people in a minute.

“So your...what do I call him?” Mia asked.

“I like to think of him as my old boss. Master was too demoralizing. But we can just call him Merak.”

Mia nodded. “So Merak wants you back. Did you escape or something?”

“Pretty much. Saved up enough money and planned it, then made my move. Ended up here because of my mother.”

“And we're glad you did.” Fiona grinned at me. “Now we just have to deal with that bastard.”

“You saw what he did,” I said. “I need to go to him.”

Rei laughed like a lunatic, then realized I wasn't joking. She straightened. “Wait, you're serious?”

“He's completely amoral. He tried to capture me by sending his goons here, but I'm too good for them. I sent every one of them packing. But now that he's decided to hold the city hostage, you can count on him to live up to his threats. He'll kill everyone here to force me to come to him.”

“Eventually, maybe,” Rei said. “But his first salvo wasn't so bad. And what if it's worse for you to go to him? You're essentially a weapon.”

She had a point.

Mia pointed to me, her finger moving up and down. “Not to mention, you're glowing. It's faded, but it's still there. I've never seen that before. Have you?”

“Um, no.” I hated to admit it, but I had no idea what my magic was doing, and that was the truth. “I have no clue what’s going on with me.”

From the doorway, Talan spoke. “From what he said, it sounded like he had something to do with it.”

He’d appeared at the right time—after the hardest part was over and right when we needed to discuss strategy.

He was right, though. That was exactly what it had sounded like. The bastard had appeared in New Orleans to see if I would glow when struck by lightning. Since I had, he was determined to get me back.

But why? And what did the glow mean?

“He must have an end goal,” Fiona said. “Something bigger than just getting you back and making you kill individual people. That’s small potatoes, especially now that you’re glowing with some kind of unknown magic.”

She had a point. He’d forced me to do terrible things in the past. His plans could be even worse now. They would be, in fact. I was sure of it.

“What about the people in the town, though?” I asked. “They were nervous. If they don’t blame me now, they will eventually.”

“I’ll deal with them,” Talan said, his voice firm.

His confident manner made something glow warm inside me. He’d stop at nothing to protect me—I could read it on him like a neon sign.

Was this what it was to have a home?

It had to be.

All of these people—even Talan, *particularly* Talan—cared enough about me to try to protect me.

How was this my life?

How had everything changed in such a short time?

And how did I keep myself from losing it?

A staff member hurried into the house, pale-faced and panting. “There are people at the gates. A lot of them, and they’re angry.”

Shit.

Angry about me?

They had to be.

Talan strode to the door. “I’ll handle it.”

He was gone before I could say anything. And what would I say, anyway?

My three friends turned to me.

“Don’t worry,” Fiona said. “He’s got this. And while he handles it, we’re going to make a plan.”

“What do you know about your kind?” Mia asked. “What is this glow?”

I searched my mind but came up with nothing. I shouldn’t be surprised. The one time I’d met another like me, we’d almost immediately parted ways. “Honestly, I have no idea. We need to find Varen.” In my head, I still called him the tattooed man, but his proper name was Varen. I’d only learned it right before he’d left town weeks ago. “He’s the man who helped Elisa and Loralie after they were abducted.”

“They’re like you?” Fiona asked.

I nodded, confident that my friends would keep their secret. “We need to find them.”

“Where are they?”

“Last I heard, Turkey.”

Fiona’s eyes widened. “Like, the country?”

“No, the bird.” I grinned at her. “Of course the country.”

She blew out an impressed breath. “Well, I want to come. I’d want to go with you no matter what, but this sounds like a seriously excellent opportunity for travel.”

“When do we leave?” Rei asked.

I looked between her and Mia. They were both leaning forward in their seats, their intentions clear.

They were coming with me.

Cora

“LEAVE FOR WHERE?” Talan asked, walking back into the room. He’d clearly heard the last bit as he’d approached from the hall.

“Is everything okay outside?” I asked, worry tugging at me.

He nodded curtly, but there were shadows in his gaze. “Fine. People are concerned about the damage, but I’ve already asked Liora to see about hiring people to repair it.”

“*Just* the damage?” I asked.

He hesitated briefly, and I had to guess that he didn’t want to say they were concerned about me too. “Primarily the damage. They’re also worried about future attacks, but we’re going to take care of that. Which begs the questions—where are we going?”

“Turkey,” Rei said.

I glared at her. I hadn’t yet decided if I wanted to tell him or not.

She shrugged. “This is important. We’re going to need all the help we can get.”

She had a point, and Talan was resourceful and powerful. I could put my personal issues aside to have his help.

“We’re going to Turkey,” I said.

“To find Varen?” he asked.

I nodded. “How did you know?”

“I’ve kept track of him since he left.” His brows rose, understanding crossing his face. “He’s like you, isn’t he?”

“Yep, although you can tell no one. And I’m hoping he’ll have my answers.”

“We should leave immediately,” he said.

I looked at the clock over the door. It was early afternoon, which meant it would be night in Turkey. Not that it mattered. We needed answers ASAP, whether the sun was up or not.

“Does anyone have a transport charm?” I asked.

“I do,” Talan said. “Let me get them. Does anyone need to stop by their home before we leave?”

My three friends shook their heads, and I looked at Balthazar. He lay draped around Fiona’s neck, his red gaze on me.

“Do you want to go home?” I asked. “I don’t know what kind of toasters they have in Turkey.”

He gave me a disgusted look, as if to say, *I don’t need to sleep on a toaster in Turkey.*

“So, you’re coming then?” I asked.

He glared, and I took that to be a yes.

Talan left the room, and I turned to my friends. “Are you guys sure about this?”

“Of course we are,” Fiona said. “And I’m offended you’d even ask.”

“Same,” Rei said.

“Ditto.” Mia, who sat closest to me, reached over and grabbed my hand. “I know you had a shitty past, but you’re just going to have to get used to having friends.”

I winced. “I’m that easy to read?”

“Nah. I just know you by now.”

Warmth surged through me. How had I gotten so lucky?

Talan returned a moment later. “I have three charms. Enough to get us there and back, plus an extra one for an emergency.”

“Perfect.” I stood, and my friends joined me. I couldn’t believe we were going to Turkey. I’d woken up thinking I’d go to a parade and eat dinner in front of the TV with Fiona and our demon cat.

The day had taken a decided turn for the more interesting. And dangerous.

We approached Talan, stopping beside him. He handed me the charm. “Do you know how to get us there?”

“Yeah, I do.” Varen had sent me the name of a bar and a person when he’d relocated to Turkey, and I’d looked it up online. I had a good enough idea of our intended destination so that I could get us there.

“Good,” Talan said. “We’ll need to hold hands to end up in the same place.”

I nodded. Many portals went to specific places or could be controlled by one party. Most transportation charms were a little different—the destination was controlled by the person who threw the charm to the ground.

I held out my left hand and Fiona gripped it. Talan stayed by my other side, clearly intending to take my right hand when it was free. Rei and Mia linked hands with Fiona, and I hurled the transportation charm to the ground.

It exploded in a cloud of silvery smoke, and I reached for Talan's hand. He gripped my palm, his own warm and firm. A shiver ran up my arm, and it took all my effort to focus on our intended destination instead of him.

I imagined the coastal town of Kalkan and the street I'd seen on Google Earth, then stepped into the silver cloud. The ether sucked us in and spun us through space, spitting us out in the balmy night air of the Mediterranean.

The air smelled of sea salt and flowers, and I let go of Fiona and Talan's hands and stepped out of the darkened nook that we'd arrived in to inspect the beautiful little street. Fortunately, we'd arrived in an area where no one could see us, because the town was largely occupied by humans.

The street was narrow—pedestrian only—with restaurants on both sides. Small tables sat on either side of the street, cluttered with candles and wine glasses and plates of delicious-looking food.

Overhead, massive bougainvillea boughs hung heavy with pink blooms. Cats lounged everywhere, looking sleepy and happy. A few dogs sat in beds positioned in quiet areas on the street.

Fiona looked at me, her brows raised. “Turkish people really take care of their animals, don’t they?”

I grinned, nodding. “I like them already.”

“Where to, next?” Talan asked.

“There’s supposed to be a bar called The Treetops where I can find out about Varen’s home,” I said. “There’s a guy there named Emir.”

“I think it’s right over there.” Mia pointed down the street. The town was built on a steep hill that led down to the sea, and we were at the level of the upper tree branches. “There’s a lot of tree tops, at least.”

We headed toward it, passing tables full of people enjoying a night out. No one spared Balthazar a second glance. Apparently, a cat riding on someone’s shoulders wasn’t unusual here. He’d managed to tone down his red eyes and smoky fur, or he’d have gotten a lot more attention.

I spotted a sign that said THE TREETOPS hanging from a branch over a set of stairs. The stairs led down to a bar. We’d reached our destination.

We descended the wooden steps into a wonderland. Tables were scattered amongst the large tree trunks, and the branches stretched overhead. Colorful lanterns hung from the branches, along with the glass Turkish Eyes that I’d seen as jewelry and good luck charms. The blue glass disks with white and black interiors glinted under the light of the lanterns.

Across the space, I spotted a wooden bar. I caught the attention of the bartender, a pretty woman with blue hair and dark eyes. She smiled at us as she approached.

“What can I help you with?”

“I’m looking for Emir. Is he here?”

She nodded, then pointed behind me. “You can find him up there.”

I turned to see some wooden stairs leading up into the tree branches.

“Thank you.”

She nodded and returned to her work. As much as I might like the idea of getting a drink and curling up at one of the comfy-looking tables, we were here for far more important matters. But maybe one day I could come back.

My friends and I climbed the stairs to a platform that had been built amongst the branches. Halfway up, the air seemed to freeze around me, hard as a rock. I couldn’t move an inch.

Panic iced the blood in my veins, and I tried to see my friends. I couldn’t though—they were standing behind me, and it was impossible to even twitch my head.

They had to be frozen, too. Otherwise, they would have ascended the stairs to see why I had stopped moving.

Shit, shit, shit. What the hell was happening?

It was impossible to breathe, and I was becoming lightheaded, my lungs burning.

It was some kind of test, obviously. Emir was meant to protect Varen’s location, and Varen belonged to a species that was hunted, something I knew all too well. It wouldn’t be easy to reach him *or* Emir.

But how was I supposed to pass this test?

Prove that I was magical? No—this was a human town, and the bar owner wouldn’t want to kill any wayward human

that happened to walk up the wrong stairs. I probably had to prove that I didn't have *dark* magic, because Varen wouldn't want to be around anyone who would want to control him.

Since I was frozen solid and losing air by the second, there was only one way to prove myself. I had to reveal my magic and hope that the spell binding me could sense good magic from bad.

I called upon the power deep in my soul, the part of me I kept hidden away. I didn't want people to sense my signature or know how powerful I was.

The magic flowed, and I released it, filling the air around me. If this spell was trying to sense my magic, I'd let it get the full brunt of it.

Panic made my heart race. My vision started to go dark as my air ran out. When the spell broke at last, and I was finally able to move, I sucked air into my lungs and turned around.

Talan was beginning to move, as were the others. They'd figured it out, too, thank fates.

Fiona shook out her arms and gasped. "Ugh, that was awful."

"A clever spell," Talan said.

Rei scowled. "A jerky spell. I'd have liked a little warning, honestly. For a minute there, I thought I wasn't going to make it."

"At least we all figured it out." Mia looked up the stairs toward the platform above. "Let's go see this Emir guy. After a stunt like that, I bet he's a barrel of laughs."

I turned and continued up the stairs, my heart still racing from the experience. At the top, I stepped onto a wooden

platform surrounded by branches. Colorful rugs and cushions sat on the floor, surrounding a low wooden table.

A dark-haired man lounged on one of the cushions, a book held up in front of his face as he sipped from a glass filled with clear liquid. He lowered the book and looked at the four of us, his brows raised.

“And who might you be?” he asked in English. His accent was Turkish, I assumed, but it was light.

“I’m looking for Varen.”

“Ah.” He smiled and gestured for us to move closer. “He told me he might have visitors. I’m glad you passed the test to get up here. It’s inconvenient when people fail. I don’t enjoy clearing up the bodies.”

I winced. He said it so casually. As we approached the man, I caught the scent of his magic. Figs and honey. It was a lovely signature, indicating that he was fundamentally good despite his callous remark about cleaning up bodies.

We sat around the table, finding spots on the cushions that were surprisingly more comfortable than I’d expected. Emir turned his attention to Talan, as if sizing up the only other man in the room. Talan nodded, seemingly unbothered by the inspection.

Emir turned back to me. “Why do you seek him?”

“That’s my business. He told me to find you, and you’d help me reach his house.”

“Indeed, I can.” He smiled. “And right you are. It’s none of my business why you seek him. Since you’ve proven yourself by having his name and getting past my test, I’ll give you the charm that will allow you to access his house.”

“We need a charm?” Talan asked.

Emir nodded. “This is primarily a human village. Emir’s house is hidden from them so as not to arouse suspicion. But I have the charms that will reveal it, and I’m tasked with distributing them to visitors.”

Emir was his guard dog, essentially. I needed to get one of those.

“Wait here. I’ll fetch the charm. Tea will be delivered.” He left, descending the stairs with an otherworldly grace.

“Well, that part wasn’t so hard,” Mia said. She gestured around her. “Very relaxing. If only we hadn’t almost died, this might be like a vacation.”

I felt a smile crack my face. I hadn’t expected the protection spell, but I should have. Emir took his duty to protect my kind seriously. He’d given me a way to find him, but it wouldn’t be as easy as showing up on his doorstep.

The bartender arrived a moment later, balancing a tray of tiny glasses filled with dark amber liquid. She set it carefully down on the table and smiled. “Tea. A tradition.”

“Thank you.” I picked up a glass, noting that it had the tiny emblem of the blue glass evil eye on the side.

She noticed me looking at it and said, “It’s to draw the negative energy sent at you.”

I nodded my thanks. Considering my old boss’s interest in me, I should probably buy a few of these.

We sipped the tea, and Emir returned a few moments later. He held a small golden compass in his hands, which he held out to me. “It’s a charm as well as a compass.” He sat on a cushion. “It will help you find the place.”

I took the charm. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Give him my best.”

“You don’t see him often?”

He shook his head. “He rarely comes into the town anymore.”

“I’ll give him your regards, then.”

“I’ll have a driver waiting for you at the end of the street. He’ll get you as close as he can, then you’ll use the compass.”

We thanked him again and departed, making our way back onto the main street. It didn’t take long to find the dark purple cab that idled by a huge bougainvillea bush, and my friends and I squeezed into the back seat, leaving Talan to take the front. Balthazar pressed his face against the window, clearly enjoying the adventure.

We were squished in like sardines as the car zipped through town, the driver moving through small streets and over bumps at a terrifying rate. Finally, we reached a darkened area high above the town, and the driver pulled over.

“This is as far as I can go,” he said.

“Thank you.” I climbed out of the cab, and my friends followed.

“Whoa.” Fiona whistled at the sight spread out before us.

“Whoa is right,” I said, taking in the vista.

Varen lived high on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean. It was more of a mountain, actually, a steep and dramatic incline to the ocean below. There were no houses around, but hundreds of homes dotted the slope below, their lights glittering like a blanket of stars. Moonlight gleamed on the

sea, and islands dotted the water, dark spots among the surging waves.

I took the compass out of my pocket as the cab pulled away, trundling back down the mountain. The compass vibrated with magic against my palm, and I watched the little needle spin. It stopped, pointing to an area behind me.

“This way.” I started up the hill. The ground was rocky and dry, with scraggly bushes here and there.

We’d only gone about fifty meters when magic sparked against my skin. The charm burned with power, glowing bright gold as a house began to appear in front of us.

My jaw dropped. The house was an enormous, a huge white structure with windows along the front. A massive patio spread out in front of the house, and an infinity pool dropped off into the darkness, the gleaming turquoise water illuminated by pool lights. Lounge chairs were scattered around, along with a fire pit and a bar.

“You never told me your friend was loaded,” Fiona said.

“I didn’t realize.”

Many of the windows were dark, and the house felt quiet. Too quiet. It wasn’t that late here, and I’d expect some of the residents to be awake.

“Damn it,” I said. “I don’t think they’re here.”

C *ora*

I STARED at the house in dismay. It felt empty.

“Who are you?” a female voice demanded from the shadows above us.

Okay, not so empty. Had she been lurking in the dark?

An older woman stood on the balcony of one of the upper rooms. There wasn't enough moonlight to make out the details of her features, but she had the slightly stooped posture of someone later on in years.

“How did you find this place?” The accusation in her tone was clear. She thought we'd hurt Emir to get the charm that had led us here.

“I'm looking for Varen,” I called up. “He told me to seek Emir in the town of Kalkan in order to find him. Emir's driver just dropped us off.”

“Humph.” She turned and disappeared into the house.

I shot my friends a sidelong look. “Do you think she's coming down?”

“Probably,” Mia said.

A few moments later, one of the sliding glass doors on the bottom floor opened, and the woman walked out. She wore a flowing white dress and layered necklaces that gave her a bohemian vibe. There was nothing bohemian about the suspicion in her eyes, however. “Why do you seek Varen?”

“He’s a friend,” I said.

“You’re going to have to do better than that.” The distrust in her eyes deepened, and I appreciated it. The delay was annoying and slowing us down, but Varen was in hiding, and she was an excellent guard dog. Tiny, but that didn’t mean she was helpless. Powerful magic vibrated around her, and I didn’t want to get on her bad side.

“I’m like him,” I said. “And I’m seeking answers about myself.”

“Prove it.”

I felt my jaw drop slightly. “You know what I can do, right? I’m not about to kill one of my friends to prove it to you, and I’m going to demonstrate on you, either.”

She laughed. “As if you’d get the chance.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

She walked over to one of the bougainvillea bushes that hung heavy over the patio, the blooms so dark pink in the moonlight that they were almost black. She snapped off a small branch and returned to me, then held it out.

I took it, understanding dawning. “I’ve never tried my power on plants before.”

“Well, at least you’re not a psychopath.”

I gave a small, choked laugh. She had a point, though. I didn’t go around killing everything within reach, and that was

good.

“Do I have to?” I asked, not liking the idea of demonstrating my power in front of my friends. I didn’t use my magic unless I was forced to, but I was still one of the most despised species in the world. My friends had been understanding, but I was reluctant to flash my power around.

The older woman just glared at me.

“Fine.” I gripped the branch and called upon my magic, letting it rise up inside me. The power pulsed, flowing easily through my fingertips. The branch wilted before my eyes, shriveling until it was little more than dust.

“Well, that was easy,” I said, not liking what I was seeing.

“At least you’ve proven what you are.” Her gaze softened. “I’m Sabiha. I’m the groundskeeper here, and I’m afraid to say that you’ve missed Varen by only a day.”

“Missed him?” Talan asked. “He’s left?”

She nodded. “A group of suspicious people were spotted on the hillside near here, searching for the house. They couldn’t find it without the charm, but they were clearly looking for Varen and the two women he’s sheltering. He decided that this place was no longer safe for the time being and headed farther inland to The Sanctuary.”

“What’s The Sanctuary?” Talan asked.

“A place for people like her.” She nodded to me. “But it’s remote and rarely used. Life is beautiful there, but too quiet.”

“Can you tell us where it is?” I asked, disappointment blooming inside me.

“I can, but you can’t go tonight. It’s too dangerous.”

“We’re in a hurry,” I said. “Surely, it’s fine.”

“It’s really not. You wouldn’t survive the trip. You’ll need all the light you can get to see the threats coming.”

Next to me, Fiona winced. “You can’t just tell us how to get past those?”

“No, they’re ever changing. That’s the point of The Sanctuary. Nearly inaccessible, and only one such as yourself can make the trek.” She gave me a pointed look.

“Can my friends come?” I asked.

She nodded. “With you as their guide, yes.”

Relief filled me, and the sensation made me vaguely uncomfortable. I’d spent so much of my life alone. Nearly all of it, in fact. I’d survived countless threats with just my wits and skill.

After less than a month in New Orleans with my new friends, I didn’t want to go anywhere without them.

Embarrassing.

“We’ll leave before first light, then,” Talan said. “Is that the safest time?”

“As long as you enter the canyon at dawn, yes.” She looked between us, frowning. “In the meantime, you can stay here. There are plenty of empty bedrooms.”

Mia whistled low, clearly impressed. “Can we use the pool?”

Sabiha shrugged. “Sure. And there’s wine in the refrigerator, along with some snacks.”

“Mini vacay!” Fiona said.

“Shh,” Rei said. “We’re on a deadly mission to save our city. We can’t just party.”

Fiona shot her a look that said *you can't be serious*. “I’ve been dead for the last year. I can definitely multitask on saving the city and enjoying my mini vacay.”

Rei’s expression softened. “Fair enough. I suppose there’s nothing we can do for the next few hours, anyway.”

“Exactly.”

“You’ll be safe here,” Sabiha said. “At least, for a bit. I haven’t seen the people who were poking around yesterday, and if they reappear, we should have some warning.”

I nodded, hoping she was right. We had too many problems to deal with—I didn’t want to deal with this one, too. Hopefully, Varen had shaken off whoever was looking for him. And if not, I could help him out once I’d saved my new town from my old life.

“Follow me.” Sabiha led us into the house, which was an all white, very modern affair.

She showed us to some empty bedrooms that we could sleep in, then led us back down to the kitchen to lay out a quick meal of meats, cheese, bread, and salad. There were at least four different types of olives, which I liked more than I expected.

When we were done eating, Fiona looked at the clock, then at the rest of us. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I want a swim in that glorious pool. It’s not late.”

The idea made guilt tug at me. New Orleans was under threat...could I really go swimming in an infinity pool overlooking the Mediterranean?

Fiona arched a brow at me. “I know what you’re thinking. Stop it.”

“No, you don’t.” I scowled at her.

“You’re feeling guilty. It’s all over your face.”

“Well, I am to blame for what’s happening to New Orleans. Feels a bit wrong to be partying.”

“Not partying, swimming,” she corrected. “And more importantly, you’re *not* to blame. You’re as much a victim as everyone else. More so even, since Marek was the one who made your life hell and continues to do so.”

On the one hand, I didn’t like hearing myself described as a victim. And did I even deserve her sympathy? I’d done terrible things. True, my old boss had made me do them, but still...*I’d* done them.

“Anyway,” Fiona said, distracting me from my thoughts. “It’s not like we’re swimming because we don’t want to find Varen. We’re filling time until we can leave in the morning. You remember what Sabiha said? It’s too dangerous to go in the dark.”

She had a point. And Fiona had been trapped in my mother’s house for over a year. She was understandably desperate to do fun things. I didn’t want to be the one to stop her.

And I wanted to swim. The pool looked amazing, and I could use a break from worry.

“All right.” I grinned and stood, trying to shake away the dark memories. “Let’s get in.”

“Yay!” Fiona jumped to her feet and hurried outside. Rei and Mia followed.

I looked at the dishes on the table. They still needed to be done. I couldn't leave them for the housekeeper who was being so kind to us.

Talan seemed to read my mind, because he caught my eye and said, "I'm not one for swimming. I'll take care of these."

A demon lord who did the dishes? That was unexpected.

"Go." His voice was firm, but kind. "Really. Your friends want you there."

As if to confirm his words, Fiona's voice carried inside. "Cora!"

"Thank you." I gave him one last look, wishing I could let my gaze linger on him. Wishing I could stay and talk to him.

No.

It was a bad idea.

I hurried out of the house to the pool patio.

The night air was balmy, and I sucked in a deep breath as I approached my friends. The view was divine—a glittering turquoise pool lit from within, set against the pitch-black expanse of a landscape that swept down the mountainside to the waiting sea.

My friends were already in the pool, stripped down to their underwear. It looked inviting. Yanking off my clothes, I dived into the cool, lovely water.

We spent an hour swimming and looking at the view while discussing the challenges ahead of us tomorrow. Talking about it might not prepare us for what was to come, but it made me feel less guilty to keep our purpose in mind.

When it was finally time to head up to our beds, I left the pool and went upstairs. I didn't see Talan, unfortunately, but it was for the best.

Despite my best efforts, it was impossible to fall asleep. Worry dogged me, chewing at my mind until I rose and went out onto the patio to get some fresh air.

But I wasn't alone.

Talan stood at the railing overlooking the sea, the moonlight casting shadows over his face.

"How did you get out here?" I'd thought the patio was private. I looked toward the glass doors that I'd come from and realized that there was another set right next to them. "Ah. Your room is next to mine."

He nodded, his gaze sweeping over my face.

At least I was wearing a long T-shirt that I'd found in the closet and wasn't entirely nude. He, however, was shirtless. The moonlight gleamed on his smooth skin, highlighting the muscles that made him a work of art.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

I moved my gaze from his chest to his eyes, my cheeks growing hot because I'd been caught gawking. "No, you?"

He shook his head.

"You're worried about your city."

He nodded once.

"I'm sorry." Guilt flooded me once again.

"Don't be." His voice was firm. "Fiona was right. It's not your fault."

"Don't you call me a victim, too."

“Why not? There’s nothing weak about it. Something terrible was done to you, and you’ve risen above it. The title is a mark of a survivor.”

“Then call me a survivor.”

His gaze turned even more serious, and he nodded. “A survivor then. That’s more appropriate, I agree.”

“Marek’s threatening the city because of me.”

“Still not your fault.” He gestured to the railing next to him, indicating that there was a spot for me.

I joined him, my heartbeat picking up the pace as I stood next to him. Resting my hands on the railing, I stared out into the night.

There was silence for only the briefest moment before he said, “I’ve never met anyone like you, Cora.”

“Full of trouble and problems?”

“No.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “Strong, determined, clever. You’re a fighter, in the best sense of the word. You don’t let problems pass you by—you fix them instead. The people we’re going to see tomorrow? You saved them with your wit and determination.”

Heat flushed my cheeks. No one had ever said such nice things about me before, and to hear them from him...?

It was almost more than I could bear.

“Why are you saying things like this?” I asked, unable to help myself.

“Because they’re true, and I feel compelled.”

“You’re not exactly one to wax lyrical about something, and yet you’re really going to town with the compliments. Is it

because I'm you're mate?"

"No. It's because you're amazing. I want to ignore you, to continue my life of solitude and duty to my city—it's what I imagined for myself. The life plan that I thought was going so well. And yet..." He sighed, clearly searching for the right words. "I can't."

"Why not?" I asked, my heart racing.

"Because I want you. Forever. By my side, at my table, in my bed. I want to make you a queen. If I had a crown, it would be yours."

The air rushed out of me.

I'd never imagined anyone would say such things to me. That they would *want* to.

"I—" It was downright terrifying. Maybe it shouldn't be, but it was. I'd nearly lost Fiona last week, and the stress of it had almost killed me. "I've never been good at emotions. Or caring for people."

"I don't believe that."

"Well, you should." Anger flared inside me, but I didn't know who it was directed at. Him? Myself? Marek? "I've never had anyone to care about, or anyone who cares about me. I barely know how to do it, and it scares the hell out of me. I don't know how people survive when they love other people. It's like taking your heart out of your body and letting it walk around without you. It's too much."

He was silent for a moment, and I realized how intense my little speech had been. But I couldn't help it. I felt strongly about this.

"Life is short," he said. "And I care—"

I held up my hand. “No. Don’t say it.”

“Cora, I—“

“No.” I turned and walked back into the room, my heart pounding so loudly that it nearly deafened me. Tears pricked my eyes as I shut the door behind me, and I felt like a lunatic walking away from him.

I cared about him—I couldn’t help it. If I delved even slightly into my feelings, I might even find that I loved him. I didn’t actually know what love felt like, but it was probably this combination of insane longing and deep terror.

I just couldn’t stand it.

T *alan*

I AWOKE after a restless night's sleep. After Cora had left me on the patio the previous night, I'd realized that I'd handled the situation poorly. I'd known she was skittish, but I hadn't realized how much. Her past life had left scars that ran deep, and it made me hate Marek even more.

I wanted to kill him with my bare hands and watch the life fade from his eyes as I told him that he was dying because of her.

I shook away my dark thoughts. It was morning now, and we had a dangerous journey ahead. I needed to focus on that.

Sabiha had been kind enough to give us a ride to the canyon entrance to cut off part of the journey, and I sat beside her in the front of the vehicle as she drove. The atmosphere was silent as she navigated through the mountains. Sabiha had said she couldn't get us all the way there, but she could get us close. It was still dark outside, but we should arrive shortly before first light.

The vehicle pulled to a stop at the side of the road.

“This is it,” Sabiha said. “You’ll follow that path there.” She pointed to a path that cut through the mountain at our right. “When you reach the river, be wary. It becomes dangerous there. Continue up the river and through the canyon until you reach your destination.”

“How will we know we’ve arrived?” Fiona asked.

“Oh, you’ll know,” Sabiha said. “And be careful. Cora can guide you through because of what she is, but it will still be dangerous.”

“Thank you.” I climbed out of the car, and the others joined me. Balthazar was still draped around Fiona’s shoulders, and Mia and Rei appeared alert and ready for anything. I didn’t look at Cora, though I wanted to. Better to avoid the distraction of her beauty and keep my mind on the task ahead.

We set off on foot down the path. The sky grew brighter as we walked, until it was light enough to see our surroundings well.

We’d arrived.

The canyon walls were a smooth, pale beige that towered hundreds of feet above us. It was narrow, which only heightened the drama of the surroundings, and a milky blue river ran through the center of it.

Fiona whistled low. “It’s beautiful.”

“If it weren’t so deadly, I would want to ride an inner tube down the river while drinking a fruity cocktail,” Mia said.

Cora laughed, and I loved the sound. Humor wasn’t my gift. I’d like to be the one to amuse her, but if I couldn’t, I’d happily settle for hearing someone else make her laugh.

“We’re going to have to walk through the water to get deeper into the canyon,” Cora said.

She was right. The river that snaked through the canyon flooded the entire thing. Though it was impossible to see the river bottom due to the milky white sediment that floated in the water, rocks and tiny sand islands popped up here and there, making it clear that it wasn’t too deep. We stepped toward it, and Cora hurried to move in front of me.

“Let me go first,” she said.

“The hell I will.”

“I’m the guide, remember? And none of that caveman shit.”

Caveman shit?

I supposed she had a point. The protective beast that she roused inside me was primal. Ancient.

“Fine,” I said, hating to relent. “I’m staying by your side, though.”

She nodded and turned to the river, setting her foot into the water. A shudder ran over her. “It’s cold. We’d better cross quickly.”

She waded in, the water rising to her knees. I kept close to her, the icy liquid sending a chill through my veins. It was so cold that it almost burned. The others followed, and we forged ahead.

In places, the current was powerful, forcing us to hold onto one another for support. We’d gone about a hundred yards when it became more difficult to move our feet through the river.

“Is the current getting stronger?” Fiona teeth were chattering.

“No, it’s completely still,” Cora said.

My feet were entirely numb, so it was difficult to feel what the problem was. I looked down. Ice crystals had formed on the surface of the water, and magic sparked around them. The damned river had been enchanted to freeze when people entered it.

“The river is freezing over,” I said. “Quickly.”

“Shit.” Cora squinted into the distance, a frown on her face. “I see dry land over there. If we can make it that far, we should be okay.”

“I don’t see dry land,” Rei said.

“Neither do I,” Mia added.

I had to agree with them. All I saw was a flooded riverbed.

“She’s the guide, remember?” Fiona said. “That’s what Sabiha told us. We need to stick with her. She can see the safest way through.”

Of course. “We’ll follow you.”

Cora dragged her feet through the water. The river was turning to icy slush. The slush hardened until she couldn’t move at all. “Talan, I’m stuck.”

“Me, too.”

“Same,” Fiona said, her voice slightly shaky.

Shit. We needed a way to thaw the water.

I pressed my fingertips to the frozen surface, feeding my demon fire into the ice. I hoped it would melt without burning us. Slowly, the ice began to turn back to slush.

“It’s working!” Cora cried. “Keep going!”

I did as she asked, and we were soon able to move. We charged across the water, going as quickly as we could. The dry riverbed came into view, the pale mud and pebbles revealed through the spell that had hidden them.

Thank fates Cora was here to lead us.

She pointed ahead. “As long as we stick near the canyon wall, we’ll be on dry land. There are parts that are flooded, but hopefully they’re not enchanted to freeze.”

We set off down the river, following her directions. My senses were on high alert. I couldn’t see the truth of this canyon like Cora could, and the knowledge made me feel vulnerable. Putting my faith and safety in the hands of someone else was foreign to me, and I didn’t like it.



Cora

I PLOWED AHEAD, staying close to the towering wall as we made our way deeper into the canyon. My shoes squelched with water, but at least I didn’t have frostbite.

The sun had risen higher, gleaming brightly on the pale blue water that traveled lazily through the canyon. My friends stuck close behind me, and I glanced back every few minutes to make sure they were okay. There was danger in the air, like a cloud of gnats constantly pricking at me. The icy water had been unexpected, and I didn’t want any more surprises. I had too many lives on my hands.

I was used to taking care of myself. Being responsible for others like this *sucked*. I'd have shrugged off the responsibility if I could, but that wasn't an option. I was going to make sure I didn't screw this up.

The sound of rock scraping against rock caught my attention, and I looked up. Enormous boulders were tumbling down the canyon wall.

“Run!” I shouted, sprinting ahead.

We charged through the canyon, feet splashing in the shallow water near the rocky walls. A huge boulder slammed into the river in front of me, splashing me with a wave of cold water.

My heart leapt into my throat.

The rocks fell all around us, dozens of them in all shapes and sizes. A scream behind me sent an icy chill through my veins. I looked back to see Fiona squeeze out of a narrow space between a boulder and the canyon wall.

Holy fates, that had been close. She'd nearly been crushed.

“I'm fine!” she shouted. “Keep going!”

“The rocks aren't stopping,” Talan said, pointing.

An endless avalanche of rock was raining down upon us, splashing ceaselessly into the river.

Sooner or later, one of us would be hit.

We needed a place to hide.

I quickened my pace, scanning the canyon for shelter. I spotted a cave in the side wall up ahead and did a double take. One moment, there was a welcoming entry, the next, nothing but smooth rock.

Magic.

I felt it now, sparking in the air. The cave was concealed from view.

I pointed to it. “There! A cave.”

“I don’t see it,” Talan shouted at my back.

“It’s there, I promise.” I sprinted toward it.

I was nearly there when an enormous force slammed into me from behind. It was warm and strong, and comfortingly familiar.

Talan.

He pressed me against the canyon wall, a massive boulder slamming into the exact spot I’d been heading for.

Panting, I looked up at him. “Thank you.”

He nodded, his eyes flashing, then stepped back. “Lead the way.”

I darted for the cave once more, lunging inside. The air thickened, like I was pushing my way through Jell-O. I kept going, gasping when I popped out on the other side. Spinning around, I saw my friends enter the cave behind me.

Fiona leaned over, propping her hands on her knees as she gasped for breath. Balthazar climbed onto her back and sat, his eerie red gaze glued on the river where rocks continued to fall, piling up on one another until our exit was blocked.

Narrow streams of light filtered through the gaps in the rock, disappearing as more boulders fell.

“Thank fates you could see this place,” Mia said, her voice raspy from exertion. “I thought I was going to slam face-first into a stone wall when I followed you in here.”

“No kidding,” Fiona said. “Balthazar dug his claws so hard into my shoulders that I’m pretty sure I’ll have scars.”

A flash of pale blue light illuminated the darkened space. Rei held a glowing orb that emitted enough light to reveal our surroundings. We stood inside a narrow tunnel that seemed to terminate about twenty feet in.

“Does it go anywhere?” Talan asked.

“I sure hope so.” I headed deeper into the cave. We could try to dig our way out, but I didn’t fancy our odds against the sheer volume of stone that trapped us inside.

The cave was partially submerged, about two inches of water splashing around my feet as I investigated the tunnel. Fortunately, it didn’t dead-end. Instead, it turned a hard left and headed deeper into the canyon.

“Let’s go this way,” I said. “Hopefully there will be another exit.”

“Lead on, boss,” Mia said.

The air grew stale as we traveled deeper into the earth. Talan kept close by my side, and I could feel the intensity of his focus. He moved with deadly grace, his gaze scanning the space in front of us.

“You hate this, don’t you?” I asked. He had to rely on me to lead us safely through the canyon, and he was not the sort to rely on anyone for anything.

“I do.”

We continued in silence, moving two by two. The tunnel branched at one point, and I stopped to consider our options. Something ephemeral tugged me to the left, so I pointed toward it. “That one.”

My friends followed in silence, and I led us through several more junctures, choosing our path on instinct.

“How are you deciding which way to go?” Mia asked.

“I feel it, I guess.” The sensation was strong and growing stronger with every step forward. “It’s like I’m being pulled toward somewhere that I’m welcome.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Mia said.

Her faith in me made a small smile tug at my lips. Eventually, the quality of the air changed.

“Does it smell fresher to you?” Fiona asked.

“I think so.” I sniffed deeply. “We might be near an exit.”

About fifty yards later, a pale light filled the tunnel. Soon, I could see the brightly lit exit—a narrow crevasse that was going to be a squeeze to get through.

Rei whistled low at the sight. “At least it’s not covered with thousands of pounds of rock.”

That was all it had to recommend it, though. I looked Talan up and down, a bit worried about his odds of getting through.

He must have felt my gaze on him, because he said, “I’ll manage.”

I nodded and headed toward the opening. Talan gripped my arm, stopping me from trying to squeeze through. “Let me go first.”

“I appreciate that, but I’m the only one who will be able to see what’s really out there.”

He scowled at me, indecision and determination to protect me at war on his face.

“That also makes me the boss of this operation,” I said.
“Now step back.”

His jaw tightened, but he complied.

Warmth filled me. Talan was a man who didn't take orders from anybody, and yet, he respected my authority here, though it was obviously difficult for him.

“Thank you.” I turned and edged through the narrow exit. I made it with a bit of room to spare, which gave me hope for Talan.

The light outside was nearly blinding, but my eyes adjusted quickly. The canyon looked similar to the part we'd been in earlier, but without the boulders.

Talan squeezed through behind me, cursing low under his breath. His shirt was torn, revealing the smooth skin and muscle beneath. The others joined us, and we headed up the river.

A pile of boulders formed a small waterfall, and we clambered up it. The cold water soaked through most of my clothes, and I shivered.

At the top, the river widened, flooding the entire canyon.
“Ugh. More water.”

We slogged through, submerged up to our knees. As least we didn't have to swim. We'd only gone a few dozen yards when the canyon walls began to shimmer.

“Do you guys see that?” I said. “The canyon walls look weird.”

“They look normal to me,” Talan said, concern in his voice.

Danger prickled the air, magic that made me uneasy.
“Something is coming. Draw your weapons.”

Cora

TALON DREW his long sword from the ether. I called upon my karambit, gripping the blade as I looked at the others. Rei clutched a bag of potion bombs, while Mia held a short sword. It was Fiona who caught me by surprise, though. She gripped a bow in her hands, a quiver of arrows at her back.

She raised a brow at me. “What? I had a whole life before I died. That included a very sweet bow that I stored in the ether.”

“Nice.” I grinned, my smile fading as the canyon walls bulged and contorted. Magic sparked as figures stepped from the stone. They were over a dozen of them—warriors who were somehow ephemeral yet solid. At least, their weapons looked solid.

“I see that,” Talan said grimly.

They wore armor from a time long ago, and their swords and spears were tipped with gold. Helmets concealed most of their faces.

I braced myself as they charged, moving swiftly through the water toward us. From behind me, an arrow flew with

deadly precision, piercing a warrior's heart.

He kept going.

"That's bad," Mia said.

Rei hurled a potion bomb. It exploded against the chest of another man, acid green liquid splashing all over him.

He didn't even flinch.

"And that's worse," Fiona said.

Shit, shit, shit.

They were nearly to us, and so far, they seemed unkillable. There was no way we could take over a dozen hostages. We needed to use brute force to survive this.

How the hell do we kill you?

Frantic, I raked my gaze over them, looking for anything that might be a clue.

"You see anything we don't?" Talan asked, his sword raised in front of himself.

They were only twenty feet away now, and I could see the glow of their eyes. It was a pale, eerie blue that sent a shiver down my spine.

Then I noticed their necks. Beneath their golden helmets, there was a pale white light glowing in their necks.

Their life force.

Or at least, the magic that animated them. It was concentrated in their necks.

"Aim for the neck!" I shouted.

Then they were on us, swords and spears raised. Talan met the nearest one with a violent slash of his blade that cut

through the attacker's neck. The figure disappeared in a flash of white magic.

Fiona gave a whoop of delight, and one of her arrows followed. It sailed through the air and landed directly in the neck of one of the attackers. He poofed out of existence, the white light blasting outward.

I sprinted through the water, dodging the slicing sword of an attacker, and stabbed my karambit into his throat. A pulse of magic washed over me as he exploded.

Heart racing, I turned to find another. He had to be six and a half feet tall, slender and quick. The armor he wore was decorated with scrolling designs that were ancient and beautiful. With a low roar, he stabbed his spear at me. I dodged, but too slowly, and it sliced into my side.

Pain flared, and I gasped.

He drew the spear back, aiming for another blow. I feinted left, then moved to the right before he could land his attack. I lunged for him, reaching high to stab him in the neck.

He was gone before I could withdraw the blade.

All around me, water splashed as my friends battled the ancient warriors. Talan moved like a vengeful god, his speed and grace something to behold. He beheaded two warriors in a single whirling sword maneuver.

Rei's potion bombs found their mark in the necks of the warriors closest to the canyon wall, and three of them were gone within seconds.

Damn, she was good.

I spun to look for another attacker, finding one nearly upon me. I ducked beneath his sword blow and charged him,

tripping on an underwater rock. Cold water closed around me as I landed face first in the river. Panic flashed, and I tried to right myself.

Fighting in knee-deep water was the worst.

Pain sliced through my leg as his blade made contact, but it also gave me fuel. Danger always did that.

I found my footing and surged upright, grateful to find myself in front of him. His pale blue eyes widened with surprise. I plunged my blade into his throat, and to my satisfaction, he exploded in a burst of magic and disappeared.

A scream sounded from behind me, and I whirled to see Mia taking a nasty sword hit to her arm. Blood poured freely. She stumbled back to avoid her attacker.

He raised his sword once more and advanced on her. Before he could reach her, one of Fiona's arrows soared through the air and plunged into his neck.

Gone.

He was the last one, thank fates.

Panting, I pressed my hand to the cut at my side. It still wept blood, as did the wound on my thigh. Both were ugly cuts, deep and painful.

My friends didn't look much better. Mia had a wound on her arm, and Fiona sported a slice across her chest that turned her entire shirt red.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just a flesh wound."

Rei clutched her shoulder, putting pressure on what was likely a puncture wound from a spear.

“Cora, are you all right?” Talan asked. I turned to see him staring at me with concern in his eyes.

“Fine, as long as we get there soon.” I looked him up and down, spotting a telltale dark stain at his hip. “You?”

He nodded. “The same.”

“I’ve got some healing potions,” Rei said. “They won’t fix us up entirely, but they should take care of the worst of the damage so we can keep going.”

I staggered toward her, accepting Talan’s offer of help, and leaning into him. He wrapped a strong arm around my waist, and I tried to focus on that instead of the pain that shot through me with every step.

“Here.” Rei uncorked a vial and handed it to me.

“Are there enough for everyone?” I asked, accepting it.

She nodded, pulling more out of her bag, and passing them around.

I swigged mine, grimacing at the foul taste. The pain in my side and leg faded to a dull throb, and the wound closed a little. It didn’t heal entirely, but at least the blood stopped flowing.

“We’ll need to find a real healer soon,” Rei said. “But the potion stops the bleeding and dulls the pain.”

It was good enough for me. “Thank you.”

Once everyone had taken their potions, the grimaces on their faces eased. Balthazar was the only one who hadn’t been injured, though I wasn’t sure it was even possible to harm a shadow cat. I hoped not.

“Ready to keep going?” I asked.

“Yep.” Fiona nodded. “Though I hope we’re almost there.”

“No kidding,” Mia said.

We continued on, and I almost immediately got the sense that safety was nearby. It washed over me like a warm shower, and I picked up the pace. The water grew shallower, eventually turning to solid ground. The river flowed by on our left, moving deeper and faster.

“I think we’re almost there,” I said, suddenly wanting to run to get there faster. It was the weirdest feeling. I resisted it, though, since it was never a good idea to approach a heavily protected place at top speed.

Ahead, the air shimmered with a pale, opalescent light. Instead of feeling repellent, like most protective charms, it felt welcoming. I passed through it easily, gasping at the sight in front of me.

We’d arrived in an ancient city, one that had been carved out of the canyon walls around us.

“Wow,” I breathed. Buildings were stacked on top of one another, houses carved into the stone with false fronts hewn from rock. The facades of the buildings had decorative peaked roofs and open doorways framed with carved stone. Glassless windows would provide a clear view of the canyon beyond.

Figures appeared in the doorways above us, staring down at us with curiosity. I felt no sense that they might attack and raised my hand to wave.

My friends did the same, but no one responded.

When my gaze landed on the familiar tattoos of Varen, I smiled. He stood in the entry of one of the buildings on the third level, and his brows raised with surprise at the sight of me. He gave me a quick wave, then disappeared.

“Do you think he’s coming down?” Fiona asked.

“I’m pretty sure he is.”

A moment later, he exited a hidden doorway at the base of the cliff wall. His stride was strong and sure as he approached us, but concern creased his brow.

“Cora,” he said, stopping in front of me. “Something must be wrong if you braved the journey here.”

I nodded. “Very wrong. Can we talk?”

“Of course.” His gaze moved over me and the rest of my contingent. We had to be a sight, soaking wet and covered in blood. “Let’s get you cleaned up, then we’ll speak.”

“Thanks.”

He led us toward the hidden door, which looked like plain stone. He stepped through with ease, and we followed. The stairs within had been carved right out of the rock, wide and smoothly finished. Glowing golden sconces lit the dark space, and the fresh scent of flowers filled the air. It was entirely unexpected, but so was the rest of this place.

“How many people live here?” I asked.

“Thirty to sixty, depending on the day.” He led us up three flights of stairs, passing doorways on the left, then into a room with pale white walls. On the opposite wall, a doorway and windows overlooked the canyon. The view was incredible.

Balthazar leapt off Fiona’s shoulders and strolled over to a window, hopping onto the sill to get a better look.

“The stairs go behind the houses,” he said. “They were built thousands of years ago, along with all the rest of this.”

Thousands of years.

Holy fate, that was amazing.

“This is the infirmary.” He indicated four beds against one wall and a table full of potion bottles. “I’ll leave you here while I arrange food for you. When you’re done, the healer will bring you to us.”

“Thank you.” I inclined my head in gratitude.

My friends stood against the wall, silently inspecting our surroundings. I’d never expected to see a place like this, and they seemed just as awed as I was.

Varen left the room, and a few moments later, a small, dark-haired woman entered. A tall man followed her, slender and pale.

She looked us up and down with a click of her tongue. “It looks like you were in a good fight.”

“That’s an understatement,” Fiona said. “The protections on this place are impressive.”

“Aren’t they?” The woman smiled. “I’m Calliope. This is Marit. We’re the healers.”

I stepped back and gestured to my friends to go first.

Rei arched a brow at me. “You look worse for wear. You should go first.”

“I look great,” I said. “And anyway, I’m used to it. Now hop up and get fixed.”

She rolled her eyes. “Thanks.”

Mia did the same, and the two healers got to tending to their wounds. It didn’t take long to mend the puncture wound in Rei’s shoulder, so Fiona went next. When the three were

finished, Calliope pointed to one of the doors. “Go that way, and you’ll find a change of clothes.”

Rei, Mia, and Fiona disappeared into the room. Balthazar still sat on one of the windows overlooking the canyon, and Fiona left him to it.

Talan and I approached the healers, who worked quietly and efficiently. Marit finished with Talan first, and the demon left to get changed.

“You’re the one who is like us,” Calliope said as she mended the wound on my thigh with the magic that glowed from her palm.

The pain faded with every second, and I relaxed. “I am.”

“Welcome home,” she said.

“Home?” It was a nice thing to say, but I wanted New Orleans to be my home, not this place.

“This is a safe haven for those like us. Some choose to stay forever, some for only a short time.”

I would be in the latter group, but I was glad to know this place existed.

When she was finished, she stepped back and dusted off her hands. The gesture appeared more ceremonial than anything, since she’d used her magic to heal me, and her hands were clean.

“You can get changed, now,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I left her, heading into the large room next door. It was an open, airy space with cubbies for clothing that had been hung

on racks.

Talan stood in the middle, shirtless.

I stopped dead in my tracks, staring at the expanse of his chest. The breath caught in my throat as I absorbed the sight of him. He was sheer perfection.

“Uh, sorry.” I stepped backward, as if to leave.

“It’s fine.” A smile tugged at his mouth. “I’m almost done.”

I nodded, unable to tear my gaze away from him. Why the hell wasn’t I able to look away?

He realized that I was staring like an idiot, and his gaze heated.

“Cora,” he said, his voice low. “If you want there to be nothing between us, you can’t look at me like that.”

“Right.” I croaked, still unable to look away. Our gazes met, and I saw the heat in his. It ignited an inferno inside me, and I wanted to throw my arms around his neck and kiss him. He was the world’s biggest magnet, and I was incapable of resisting him, and not just because he was hot as hell and looked like a fallen god.

It was the connection between us. The sheer magic of what it felt like to be around him.

How the hell was I supposed to withstand this attraction? Was I an idiot to even try?

“Hey, you almost done?” Fiona’s voice broke the spell as she reentered the room. Her gaze moved between Talan and me, her eyes widening. “Uh, I’ll leave you.”

She backed out, but her interruption had broken the spell. I whirled around and selected the first thing I saw off the rack. The rustle of Talan putting on his shirt behind me made me squeeze my eyes shut.

He had to be done soon, right?

I felt his heat at my back and his breath near my ear, and I shuddered. He was standing close to me, so close that if I leaned back, I'd feel every inch of him.

“You can't ignore this forever,” he murmured.

Desire lanced through me, hot and fierce.

Then he was gone.

I sagged, leaning my head against the wall.

He was right. I wouldn't be able to resist this forever.

T *alan*

I LEFT Cora and went into the hall, blood pumping and my heart racing. The look in her eyes had nearly brought me to my knees.

How was I supposed to stay away from her when she looked at me like that, her eyes hot and her lips parted? She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen—every aspect of her. I wanted her like I wanted my next breath, and she wanted me back.

Yet she resisted. Pointlessly.

“You, okay?” Fiona asked.

Shit.

I hadn't even realized she was in the hallway. Cora was making me lose my mind.

Fiona, Rei, and Mia were there as well. The cat was gone, but I was sure he'd be back. Creatures like him did as they pleased.

A moment later, Cora appeared wearing a simple white dress that floated around her legs. Her hair was loose around

her shoulders, curling slightly in the golden light. She was so lovely it made me ache to look at her.

“I see you’re all ready to go,” Veran said from the end of the hall. He gestured at us. “Follow me.”

We did as he requested, climbing flights of stairs that led up to a huge space with the ceiling open to the sky. Trees and plants grew within, and a glittering blue pond sat at the center.

“We’re deep in the mountain,” Veran said.

“This whole place is beautiful.” There was reverence in Cora’s voice, and it was obvious she loved it there.

“I think so,” Veran said. “I only come here when it’s too dangerous to be anywhere else, but I like it. Too remote to live in forever, but beautiful all the same.”

He led us to a cluster of benches around a small fountain. A table sat nearby, host to an array of delicious-looking food. Olives, sliced cucumbers and tomatoes, cheese, hummus, eggs, and delicate breads were arranged in an artistic design around small cups of tea.

Veran gestured to it. “Help yourself. Turkish breakfast.”

I filled a plate because I’d need the fuel but kept my attention on our surroundings. As beautiful and peaceful as this place was, I’d learned never to let my guard down.

“Why is it too dangerous to be anywhere else?” Cora asked as she sat on the bench, her plate in hand.

“People are more interested in our kind these days. There were unwelcome guests snooping around my home in Kalkan. And you must have experienced something similar if you’re here.”

Cora nodded. “The man I used to work for—was forced to work for—found me. He did something to me that makes me glow, and it seems he’ll stop at nothing to get me back. But I have no idea what’s going on.”

Veran nodded, carefully looking Cora up and down. The glow that had surrounded her after Marek’s attack had faded to an almost imperceptible level, but if one knew to look for it, they could see it. “I thought you seemed different.”

“So, you know what’s going on with me?” she asked.

“I have some theories, but it’s above my pay grade to guess.”

“Come on,” Cora said, desperation in her voice. “You have to give me something. I have nowhere else to go for information.”

“I know, I know.” He raised his hands in a placating gesture. “And we can help you. Just not me.”

“Then who?”

“Hapheta. I’ll take you to her.”

“She’s here? And who is she?”

“The oldest and wisest one at The Sanctuary. And don’t worry, you don’t have to go anywhere else.”

Thank fates. After the journey we’d just had, I didn’t want to turn around and fight my way through more challenges.

“Let’s go, then.” Cora turned to us. “You guys good with that? I know you probably want to rest.”

“We came here for you,” Rei said. “We’re not resting until we have answers.”

I liked her friends and was glad she had them.

“You’ll have to see Hapheta alone,” Veran said. “Your friends can wait here.”

Alone? I didn’t want to leave her alone here.

Cora’s gaze cut to mine, as if she knew what I was thinking. She raised a brow, and I nodded.

I’d wait here, as much as it pained me. She was in safe hands, at least.



Cora

VERAN and I left my friends in the courtyard, and he took me back into the hallways that led to the rooms that fronted the canyon.

“Are Elisa and Loralie adjusting here?” I asked, wondering how the women from New Orleans were doing in such a strange place.

He nodded. “They are. I’ve sent word that they can visit your friends while you see Hapheta.”

“What is Hapheta, exactly?” I asked as he led me down several flights of stairs.

“She’s an ancient spirit who resides in the temple here.”

“Temple to what?”

“An ancient Lycian death goddess named Lelwani was once worshipped in this part of Turkey. The Sanctuary was built by her people, a settlement where they lived and worshipped her.”

“A death goddess?”

He nodded. “Makes sense, doesn’t it? Given what we can do.”

It did. I’d just never considered where we’d come from before. I’d thought of my gift as a curse and hadn’t wanted to dwell on it.

“We’re here.” He gestured toward a grand entryway barred by a huge wooden door. Intricate geometric designs had been carved onto the surface, and it called to me. The tug was visceral and deep. Uncomfortable, even.

I looked at the door and back to Veran.

“This is where I leave you,” he said. “From here, the journey is your own.”

I nodded. Sucking in a deep breath, I reached for the large bronze handle on the door. The door swung easily beneath my grip, and I stepped into a huge room built of stone. Large windows on one side provided a gorgeous view of the canyon beyond, but it was the carving on the ground that caught and held my attention.

A large, intricate star had been inscribed into the stone, cut deep to make the design easily visible. This was a temple, but not any kind that I was familiar with. I’d seen altars before, but this one was simpler, and somehow, more powerful, because of it.

I walked toward the star, pulled by something I couldn’t explain. There was no question that I was meant to stand on it, so I did. Magic vibrated up through my feet and into my body. A shaky breath escaped my lungs.

A warm breeze rushed through the open windows, and a pale glow began to shine from the lines of the star beneath my

feet. Soon, it became so bright that I had to squeeze my eyes shut.

When I opened them, a woman stood before me. She was partially transparent, as spirits often were, but she wasn't pale white or blue as I was used to. Instead, her coloring was fairly normal. Tanned skin and dark hair, with a sweeping golden dress and bangles climbing up her arms. She was beautiful in a timeless way.

Her power rushed over me in a wave, nearly making me stagger. When a small smile creased her lips, I couldn't help but feel relieved. This was not a woman I would want to fight with.

"You must be Hapheta," I said.

Her smile broadened. "Indeed I am. And who are you?"

"Cora. I've come here for help."

"I suspected as much." She walked around me in a slow circle, looking me up and down. Normally that kind of behavior would be weird and a bit rude, but these were extenuating circumstances. "There's something special about you, Cora."

"I'm not sure about that."

"Modesty doesn't become you." She stopped in front of me once more. "It could also be viewed as ignorance."

She had a point. I could kill with a touch, and now I glowed like a weird nightlight. I needed to own it and figure out what I was. "You're right. I'm a manslaga, but I'm also something else, I think. That's why I'm here. I want to know why I'm different."

She nodded. “You’re not the first to come here with questions, and you won’t be the last. Something is hunting you though, isn’t it?”

“How can you tell?”

“I’ve seen that look in my own eyes in the mirror. I know it well.”

Anger bubbled inside me. For some reason, it was easier to feel anger on her behalf than for myself. “I hate that we’re hunted. People need to mind their own damned business and leave us alone.”

She smiled and shrugged. “It would be nice, but that’s not the way of things.”

“So you’re like me?” I asked.

She nodded. “I died long ago, though. I was one of the founders of this place, along with the goddess Lelwani.”

“So you knew her?”

“I did. She has been gone a long time now, but a spell keeps my spirit here in case others need my help.”

“Were you a goddess?”

She laughed. “Hardly. Those are few and far between. I was a high priestess here for many years.”

“Can you help me figure out why I’m different?”

“Likely.” She raised a hand and hovered it at my shoulder. “May I touch you?”

I nodded.

She touched me, the contact so light that I almost couldn’t feel it. A frown creased her brow. “Have you experienced a traumatizing event recently?”

“My life?” I laughed slightly.

“More specific.”

“I was struck by lightning.” That had been pretty traumatizing.

“As I thought. You’ve experienced a catalyst. That lightning was meant to unlock the power deep inside you. Someone knows something about you that you don’t.”

“What is it?”

“We’ll find out.” She studied me. “Would you let me join my spirit with yours? I believe you were someone in a past life, and with my help, you can see that.”

“I’m reincarnated?”

“I think so. May I?”

“Sure.” I didn’t care for the notion of joining my spirit with hers, but I was fresh out of options.

She stepped close to me, so close that I could see the tiny pores of her skin. Then she was inside me, her spirit drifting into my body like a ghost taking possession. A chill rushed through me, then intense heat. Brilliant white light exploded behind my eyes, blinding me.

My vision cleared. I was still in the temple, but it was different. A woman was perched on a massive throne, her hands resting on two golden skulls carved on the arms of the chair. The back of the throne was adorned with foliage and pomegranates.

She wore a simple, pale silken dress. Gold and gems decorated her arms and neck. The darkness in her eyes was both frightening and familiar.

She wasn't alone. People laid tributes at her feet—food and jewels and art work. They were dressed in simple garb that looked like something from the far distant past—tunics and sandals and rough leather belts.

The vision faded as quickly as it had come, and suddenly, Hapheta was standing in front of me. She looked at me with wide eyes, her jaw slightly slack. “Lelwani.”

“What?” I asked. “The goddess?”

She nodded. “You are Lelwani, reincarnated.”

“Uh, no way. I'm not a goddess.”

“Not yet, but with the right catalyst, you will be.”

“I thought I'd already experienced a catalyst.”

“The first, yes. The trauma of the lightning was meant to unlock your power, but you haven't embraced it yet.”

“Whoa, whoa. Slow down.” My head was spinning with this new information. I couldn't be a goddess. No way. It was crazy.

“Don't reject what you've seen with your own two eyes.” Hapheta shook her head in wonder. “I can't believe you are my old friend.”

“Neither can I. I don't think I'm exactly qualified.”

“You will be.”

“What do I need to do? What does this even mean?”

“Lelwani was—*is*—the patron saint of our kind. Some say that we were created from droplets of her blood.”

Okay, that was weird.

“Ever since her destruction by other gods who were jealous of her power, she has been reincarnated over and over into the body of a manslaga. But just because she was reincarnated doesn’t mean that the individual manslaga knew they had the soul of a goddess. A catalyst was required to unlock her.”

“And that’s what Marek did to me.”

“Is Marek the one who found the Lightning Staff?”

“Lightning Staff?”

She nodded. “An artifact imbued with some of your power. It could be used to create the lightning that would strike and unlock Lelwani.”

“Yeah, he’s the guy. But how did he know about the staff if I didn’t?”

“It was created long ago, but that doesn’t mean it was forgotten. This Marek clearly found the information and the staff itself.”

“So he used it to unlock my goddess power.”

“Essentially.”

“But why? He used to force me to be an assassin for him. What could this goddess power allow me to do that he’s so keen about? Murder even more people at once? Because if that’s the case, I want to give that power back.”

Understanding darkened her eyes. “If you wanted to kill a large group all at once, I’m sure you could now find a way. But that’s not all Lelwani was capable of. She’s two sides of a coin—life and death. Not only do you cause death, but you can also create life. Just not in the traditional sense.”

“Like, a healing power?”

“Yes, if you put your mind to it. And you can give immortality, though it would take all your life force to do.”

“Am *I* immortal?” I asked, a cold shiver running over me. The last thing I wanted was to be immortal and watch all my friends die before me.

“You are. Unless you’re stabbed through the heart with the Lightning Staff.”

My legs became weak.

No.

I couldn’t... I shook my head. There was no way I could deal with that right now. I shoved the thought away and focused on the problem at hand. “If I can grant immortality, then that must be what Marek wants from me.”

“In part, surely,” she said. “But when he gets that immortality, he will also get your powers.”

“So, I would be dead, and he would be able to murder massive numbers of people at once?” That was the worst news I could imagine. Even worse than being immortal.

“Yes. So you can see why it’s important that you find the staff and use it to embrace your powers before he kills you with it.”

Oh, that was some creepy ritual stuff all right, and I didn’t want to get anywhere near it.

“Why did Lelwani want to be reincarnated? It seems like it would just be easier if she’d died a normal death and let this all rest.” Frankly, I was annoyed with her for it.

“It wasn’t her choice. Her manslaga disciples crafted the staff and the spell so that they wouldn’t have to live without their goddess and protector. But it didn’t go as they planned.”

“It never does, does it?”

Cora

WITHOUT ANOTHER WORD, Hapheta departed, leaving me standing in the middle of the glowing star. I needed to find my friends and tell them what I'd learned, but how did I tell someone something like this?

Hey, guys. Turns out I'm an ancient, reincarnated goddess who could give a psychopath the unlimited ability to murder as many people as he wants! And I'm immortal, so I'll die alone.

Fabulous. And it sounded terrible. But I didn't know how to sugarcoat it any better.

I blew out a breath, and gave the temple one last look. It was surreal to think that my former self had once been worshipped here. I shivered. It gave me the heebie jeebies, actually. All I'd wanted was a nice, quiet normal life running my mother's old bookstore. Instead, I got this craziness.

Might as well lean into it long enough to solve my problems, then commit myself to an insane asylum to deal with the fallout.

I turned and left, weaving my way through the halls that I must have trod thousands of years before. I found my friends

in the same open-air courtyard that I'd left them in. They sat on the benches around the pond, chatting with Elisa and Loralie, the two manslaga from New Orleans that Varen had saved.

Talan saw me first, and relief flashed across his face. He strode toward me. "Are you all right?"

"I'm good. Learned some things."

"Like?" Fiona asked, approaching me with purring Balthazar once more draped over her shoulders. The others had joined us, including Elisa, Loralie, and Varen.

"Um, I'm reincarnated, apparently. I'm Lelwani, Lycian goddess of death."

Fiona's eyes popped wide. "That's an upgrade."

A surprised laugh escaped me. "I'm not so sure. It comes with the power to murder a whole lot of people at once—although I have no idea how—and also to gift immortality. The only catch being that I die when I do it, and that person gets my magic." I didn't mention that I would otherwise be immortal, which was a terrible fate when everyone you loved was mortal. That was something I didn't even want to think about right now.

"So that answers why Marek is so determined to get you," Talan said, anger in his voice.

"I guess so. I just don't get how he figured all this out when I had no idea."

"We'll find out," Talan said. "And we'll kill him." The viciousness in his voice was oddly comforting.

I nodded, my gaze moving to Elisa and Loralie. It was high time we left, but I wanted to know how they were doing. "Are

you happy here?”

“It’s pretty sweet,” Elisa said. “Feels more like home than New Orleans ever did.”

I could understand that—I felt it too—but I *wanted* New Orleans to be my home. As much as this place felt like a warm embrace, I was meant to live in the vibrant, sultry streets of the Big Easy.

“I’m glad,” I said.

“We should go,” Talan said.

He was right. We’d gotten what we’d come for, and there was still much to do.

I looked at the tattooed man. “Thank you, Varen.”

He nodded. “We’re always here if you need safe harbor.”

“Thank you.”

Talan drew a transport charm from his pocket and looked at each of us. “Ready? I’ll take us back to my compound. It’s safest.”

“Ready,” I said, and my friends echoed the sentiment.

Talan threw the charm to the ground. The silver smoke poofed upward, and we all joined hands before stepping into the portal. The ether sucked us in and spun us through space, carrying us away from the strange paradise of Turkey.

When it spat us back out in New Orleans, the welcoming sound of the frogs in Talan’s garden was the first thing I noticed.

Home.

I felt a sense of belonging, here, too, even more strongly than I had at The Sanctuary.

Exhaustion pulled at me, reminding me that we'd just been through hell.

"I don't know about you guys, but I could use a nap," Fiona said. Balthazar appeared to have already fallen asleep around her neck.

"Let's head home," I said. As much as I wanted to forge ahead, never sleeping, it wasn't really an option if I wanted to be functional and stay alive. "We'll have a quick recovery snooze, then get to planning what's next."

"Stay here at my place," Talan said. "It's safer."

I looked at him, instinct telling me to say no. Every minute I was around him made it harder to remember why I wanted to stay away. But he was right. His compound was far safer than my own house, and I couldn't let Marek get ahold of me.

"All right." I looked at my friends. "If you guys stay too."

They all nodded, and Talan led us through the main door. His housekeeper took us to guest bedrooms on the same hall, and we separated, disappearing into our individual rooms.

Of course mine was gorgeous. There was nothing about this house that wasn't phenomenal. The room the housekeeper led me to was large and decorated in shades of ivory and beige, classic and comforting. Exhausted, I staggered to the private en suite bathroom, finding a glorious oasis of cream marble and sparkling glass. Until I'd met Talan, I'd never been in such nice places. His life was fabulous, and it made it ever more clear how different we were.

I really shouldn't get used to this kind of thing.

I hopped in the shower and tried to rush through it, determined not to enjoy the phenomenal water pressure pounding from the three shower heads. Of course, I didn't

manage it, and lingered a few minutes extra, enjoying the bath products that smelled like a forest of flowers.

As I leaned back against the shower wall and let the spray beat against me in a comforting massage, my thoughts drifted to Talan. He was getting to me—I couldn't help it.

I shook the thought away and climbed out of the shower, wrapping myself in the warm, fluffy robe that hung against the wall.

In the bedroom, I found a tray of delicious food sitting on the table near the window. I took a seat and devoured the pasta and salad, reveling in the cheese and tomato that tasted Michelin-level quality. Not that I knew what that tasted like, but I had to assume it was the best thing in the world, and that's what this tasted like.

By the time I was finished, I was so tired that I tumbled into bed and barely made it under the covers. I slept a deep, dreamless sleep—until I didn't. The comforting blackness of slumber was replaced by an icy feeling that snaked up my limbs and into my heart.

I'm not alone.

And this time, it wasn't Talan who was visiting me.

“Who's there?” I asked. The dream had started to feel far too real. I was no longer in the plush bed where I'd fallen asleep. Instead, I stood in an empty field, dark grass blowing in the wind at my feet. Fear tightened my throat.

“You know who's here.” The eerily familiar voice sounded from behind me.

Marek.

A chill raced down my spine.

Somehow, he'd found a way into my dreams.

I faced him. His form was shadowy and impossible to fully make out. I stepped closer to get a better look at him. Could I kill him in the dream world? I tried calling upon my karambit, grateful when I felt the cold, solid weight in my hand.

Maybe I could just finish it now if he was willing to get close enough to me. He normally never did—too afraid of my power—but maybe I could catch him unaware.

As I stepped toward him, the field in which I stood changed, fading to reveal the interior of an almost painfully modern home. Everything was sharp white and black, hard angles, and minimalist furniture.

Marek stood in front of a huge bank of windows with a view of a gloomy river. He was no longer in Manhattan, or so I surmised.

“You’ve moved,” I said. This was nothing like the more traditional compound he’d owned when I’d been with him.

He smiled and gestured around him. “I thought we needed an upgrade. Better security here.”

It was as cold and hard as he was. I looked around the room, searching for the Lightning Staff. I doubted it would be here, but maybe I’d get lucky.

“Come to me, Cora. This is your last warning.”

I wanted to spit on him. “No way in hell.”

“Then be prepared to see your city fall.”

“You don’t have the power.”

His face turned thunderous, and he raised a hand. Lightning struck from the ceiling, piercing me with an almost

blinding pain. I hit the ground hard, groaning, and stared at the ceiling.

This was not going well. And where the hell had he gotten this extra power?

His face appeared over mine, his hand hovering at my cheek. He couldn't make contact, but I swore I could feel a prickle of something where he touched me, something that made my stomach turn.

"If I could steal you from the dream world, I would," he said. "Alas, we cannot make contact. And you're always surrounded by your friends."

"Not to mention, you're too afraid to get close to me."

"I'm not stupid. I know what you can do."

"And you want that power for yourself?"

"Immortality and the ability to control death? Of course."

"How did you find out about me?" I demanded.

"After I bought you, I realized how special you are." He smiled, and the sight made me ill. "I looked into it and discovered an entire lore around manslaga that I had never known. It made me ravenous for more."

I got the point. The bastard was power hungry and soulless, and I couldn't stand another minute in his presence. If my karambit couldn't pierce his flesh in the dream world, then I had no interest in being here.

"You'll regret this," I said. "But not for long. I'll enjoy killing you."

He laughed, but I didn't stick around. It took everything I had to tear myself out of the dream and wake up, but I

managed it. Panting, I lay in bed and stared into the darkness. I needed to get that damned Lightning Staff before he destroyed New Orleans, or he killed me with it.

A quick look at the clock showed it was just before dawn. I rose from the bed and dressed. I'd arrived here in the dress that I'd gotten at The Sanctuary, but Varen had made sure my clothes were freshly laundered. There were a few slices in the fabric from my sword wounds, but that was fine. It felt good to wear my own things again.

When I left my room, the first thing I noticed was the scent of bacon. My stomach growled, and I followed my nose to a kitchen located on an adjacent hall. My friends already sat around a long table. Behind them, a large kitchen bustled with two cooks manning the stove.

Fiona looked up from her plate of eggs and bacon. "They'll make you whatever you want."

"Thanks."

I walked past her to talk to the cooks, running my hand over Balthazar's back. He sat at her side, working his way through a Western Omelet.

Within ten minutes, I had a breakfast fit for a queen—fruit, eggs, bacon, and pancakes. I had no idea when I'd eat again, and I would need all the energy I could get.

Rei and Mia polished off their massive stacks of pancakes at the same time and leaned toward me.

"How did you sleep?" Mia asked.

"Like shit. You?"

"Same."

I was about to tell them about Marek's midnight visit to my nightmares when Talan walked in, freshly showered and shaved. He was dressed in dark, sturdy clothing, the kind CIA operatives wear on TV on a dangerous mission. He was clearly prepared for what was to come.

His gaze moved immediately to mine. I tried to look away, but I couldn't. His eyes snared me, and I felt my breath go short. Before he could say anything, Liora ran into the room. She was red-faced and panting, her eyes wild.

My stomach dropped.

"There's been another attack," she said. "It's still happening."

I surged to my feet, and my friends joined me.

"What's happening?" Talan demanded.

"More cracks in the city streets, but I have reports of monsters crawling out of them."

Shit.

"Take us there," he said.

She nodded and turned. We raced through the house and city streets, past people running in the opposite direction. There was panic in the air, along with a thick haze of fear. The damage was only a few blocks away.

I stumbled to a halt, staring at the deep crevasse in the middle of the road. Horrified, I gripped Fiona's hand. "Does it extend from the point where it started during the parade?"

Liora nodded. "That's what I've heard."

Something shadowy moved in the crevasse, and a four-legged beast climbed from the depths. It was slightly larger

than a wolf, with scaly skin and enormous fangs. Acid yellow eyes searched the street, landing on woman in a pink cloak who stood on the other side of the crevasse from us.

“That’s Violet,” Rei said. “A witch.”

The creature scuttled toward her. Violet reached into the pocket of her cloak and hurled a potion bomb at the beast. The bomb exploded in a splash of neon orange liquid. The creature hissed, fell on its side, and turned to ash.

It would have been a comforting victory, except for the fact that four more creatures followed it. Scuttling out of the chasm, they ran toward Violet.

“Backup!” she yelled into a comms charm on her wrist. “Corner of Ferron and LaVue!” She hurled more potion bombs, and another witch appeared at her side, having transported through the ether. The new arrival wore a skin tight suit of black leather and carried a sword that flamed with brilliant orange fire. She charged the two remaining monsters, slicing through them with deadly skill.

“We have reports of more of this throughout the city,” Liora said. “Our guards are responding, and so are the witches who live nearest to us.”

Farther down the street, I saw a group of demons fighting off six of the monsters.

“What if a creature escapes to the human part of New Orleans?” I asked, dread unfurling within me. This was the start of a much bigger problem.

“We’re screwed.” The voice of a new arrival sounded from behind us. I turned to see Loretta, head of the witch’s coven. She glared at Talan. “Why is your part of town going crazy

and causing serious problems for the rest of us? Two of these creatures appeared in the witches' quarter."

More would come, I was sure of that.

"We have it under control," Talan said.

Disbelief flashed on her face. "You don't."

"We will." Talan's voice was firm. "We have a lead on the one responsible, and we're going to stop him."

"But what does he want?" Loretta said. "Why cause all this damage?"

"His problem is with me," Talan said.

I gasped.

He was lying to protect me. But it was a lie that could so easily unravel. A huge crowd in his neighborhood had overheard Marek's demand that I come to him. Loretta would know the truth soon enough, and I couldn't let him take the fall for me.

"He's trying to protect me." I stepped forward. "A man called Marek is doing this, and he wants me."

She frowned. "Well, that's stupid. He can't have you."

Shock flashed through me. I'd expected her to tell me to go to him and end all of this the easy way. She didn't know the consequences of that, after all.

"Wait," I said, dumbfounded. "Why?"

"Because you're one of us, and we protect our own. We certainly don't offer them up as sacrifices to bullies."

"But I've only lived here a short while." I couldn't wrap my head around it.

“Doesn’t matter.” Loretta watched as more monsters crawled out of the hole in the street. Talan’s demons had joined her witches, and they held the creatures back from getting to the buildings on the other side of the street. “You’re one of us. We’ll hold them off, but you’re going to have to be fast. I don’t know how long we can last.”

“Thank you,” Talan said.

She nodded. “I know we don’t always see eye to eye, but this is obvious.”

T *alan*

I HATED TO LEAVE, especially when my demons were under attack by dark magic monsters, but there was no choice. We needed to get to Marek.

“I hope you have a plan,” I said to Cora.

“There’s some kind of ancient artifact that was the start of all this,” she said. “Hapheta called it the Lightning Staff, and it’s what Marek used against me. He awakened my new powers, and I need that staff if I’m going to learn how to use them. I also need to get it so he can’t kill me with it.”

“And we need to kill him,” I said.

She nodded. “He has a new compound. I don’t know where it is, but I think I can find out.”

“How?” I asked.

“Ophelia, my contact in New York. But I don’t want to appear on her doorstep—Marek will definitely be watching her.”

That was certain. Last time we’d visited Ophelia, we’d ended up in a fight for our lives with Marek’s goons.

“Can you call her?” Mia asked.

“I wish. She doesn’t answer.”

“You can visit her through the fire,” I said. “I’ll help you. It will allow you to appear in her house and speak to her.”

Cora huffed a small laugh. “She’s going to love that.”

“Come. We need a hearth.”

Rei nodded toward the crevasse. “We’ll stay here and help these guys.”

Mia and Fiona nodded their agreement, and Cora hugged them goodbye.

I led Cora back through town to my home, heading straight for the library.

The room was quiet and cool as we entered. I flicked on the lights and waved a hand toward the hearth, feeding it a jet of magic. A fire burst to life.

“Come.” I held out my hand for Cora. “You’ll have to go with me for this to work.”

She laid her hand in mine, and heat raced up my arm. I swallowed hard. We walked up to the fire and stopped. I reached out with my power, feeling the heat of the flames. I could travel through dreams and flames, but this was the easiest and most preferred method of travel. People really hated it when you invaded their dreams. They hated it slightly less when you appeared through their fireplace.

“I’m going to need you to envision her home and hearth,” I said. “Hopefully, she’ll be there.”

Cora nodded. “Done.”

I directed my magic toward Cora, hoping that it could pick up on the location that she imagined. As it twisted around her, I stared deep into the flames, letting my consciousness become one with them.

A few moments later, the flames disappeared, revealing a cozy sitting room with a large couch and bookshelves on the walls. Ophelia sat curled up on the couch with a book and glass of wine. It was only seven in the morning, but to each their own.

At my side, Cora gasped.

The sound alerted the woman, and she looked up.

Irritation flashed on her face, and she scowled. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I need help,” Cora said. “But we didn’t want to come to your door and draw Marek’s gaze.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “Thank you, I can appreciate that. What’s wrong?”

“A lot. But mostly, I need to know where Marek’s new place is and anything you can tell me about security.”

She grimaced. “It’s a monstrosity outside of the city, right on the water in the Hudson River Valley. I can get you the specific address.”

It was exactly what I’d feared, but also what I’d expected.

“How many guards?” I asked.

“At least two dozen, along with advanced protective spells.” Concern flashed on her face. “Something has changed with him recently. He’s more powerful than ever, and there are whispers that he’s captured more people.”

“For what?” Cora asked.

“Probably the same reason he got you.”

Cora scowled. “He’s yanking them off the street?”

“In some cases.”

“We need to get into the compound, and we can’t wait for dark.”

“If you want to survive getting in, you’re going to have to.”

Cora nodded. “We’ll go as soon as dusk falls. Any tips?”

“You’re in luck,” Ophelia said. “I’ve heard of this house before. It’s a bit famous amongst New York’s criminals. It was once owned by a robber baron who smuggled contraband in and out of a secret room below the house.”

“Of course, Marek would choose a place like that,” Cora said.

“I’d suggest you approach by boat. The house is built on a cliff, and the basement of the building is accessible from the water.”

“How so?” I asked. It couldn’t be easy access.

“That’s the tricky part. There’s an underwater tunnel that you have to swim through. The water is low visibility, but according to my sources, there is a chain bolted to the rock that will lead you through the tunnel and into the basement.”

“Can this be done without specialized equipment?” Cora asked.

“Yes, but it won’t be easy,” Ophelia said. “I believe the former owner used the tunnel to transport contraband out of

the house and to a waiting boat.” She arched a brow. “If we’re done here, I’ll look up that address and send it to you.”

“We are,” Cora said, “and thank you. Truly.”

“If you need anything else, just let me know.”

“Answer my calls, and maybe I will.”

Ophelia grimaced. “You know how I hate the phone.”

“The alternative is to have us pop into your living room.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll answer my phone. Be careful, though. He’s more dangerous than he’s ever been.”



Cora

WAITING UNTIL NIGHTTIME WAS TORTURE, but I believed Ophelia when she’d said it was the only way we would get in. As much as we didn’t have time to spare, we also couldn’t afford to fail.

We’d decided that a smaller group would have a better shot of infiltrating the compound, so Talan and I would go alone. I hadn’t even hesitated to say yes when he’d offered to come. His help was too powerful to resist taking, and he’d been insistent.

Rei and Mia had gone home to rest up, even though they hadn’t liked the idea of staying behind. Fiona had stayed at Talan’s place because we’d decided it was too dangerous for her to be in my house. I didn’t want Marek to show up and take her hostage. He didn’t know she was important to me, but

since she was living in my place until she got her life back on track, he could safely make that assumption.

Near nightfall, I waited in the yard in front of Talan's house, doing laps in front of the door in my impatience. I was anxious to leave.

"Ready?" I asked when he appeared at last.

He nodded and pulled something out of his pocket. It was a small obsidian charm on a silver chain.

I looked at him in confusion when he handed it to me. "A necklace?"

"A guardian charm."

I felt the breath rush from my lungs and shoved it back at him. "I can't take this."

He made no move to take the necklace. "I insist."

I looked down at it, unable to believe my eyes. A guardian charm was both rare and expensive. It protected the recipient, but at the cost of the giver. Any time I was hit by dangerous magic, Talan would take some of the blow. It wouldn't keep me safe from everything, but it would do a hell of a lot.

"Seriously, Talan, I can't take this." I tried to push it into his hand, but he stepped back.

"Take it, or I'm locking you up in the cellar and going without you." His voice was so implacable that I blinked. I'd never heard that tone before, but I was damned sure he meant it.

"You're crazy," I said.

"I care for you."

I glanced down at the charm in my hand. "I can see that."

“Do you want to stand here and talk about it, or do you want to put on the necklace and go?”

He had me there. Frankly, I’d rather face a hungry T-Rex than talk about my feelings. The same went for talking about how *he* felt.

“Let’s go.” I draped the necklace over my head and tucked it under my shirt. It glowed warmly against my skin, buzzing with the gift of Talan’s magic.

“We’re going to transport to a spot downriver from Marek’s house. I’ve arranged for a boat to take us the rest of the way.” Talan pulled a transport charm from his pocket and held out his hand. I placed my hand in his, shivering at the warmth of his skin. He threw the charm to the ground and a silver cloud burst upward. We stepped inside, and I couldn’t help the nerves that prickled just under my skin.

The ether spun us through space, making my stomach turn, then spat us out in the dimly lit woods of New York State. I let go of Talan’s hand. The sun was setting, a pale orange glow on the horizon. Insects rustled and shrieked in the trees, and I turned to inspect our surroundings. We stood on a well-trodden path through a forest.

“This is used frequently by hikers,” Talan said. “I couldn’t find anything more remote.”

“It’s fine. Where’s the boat?”

“This way.” He led me down the path that sloped toward the water.

Near a sign that gave directions through the park, we turned left and headed off the path. I navigated over roots and rocks as I followed him, spotting movement through the trees ahead.

I drew my dagger from the ether, wary and alert.

“It’s okay,” Talan said. “It’s Talia, the captain who will pilot the boat.”

She stepped out of the woods, a cap pulled down over her golden hair. Bright green eyes assessed us as she asked, “You ready?”

Talan nodded. “Lead the way.”

She turned and headed for the shore. A boat had been beached on the muddy bank, the outboard engine tilted up so that the prop didn’t get stuck. The river was wide and calm, so dark that I could barely see the trees on the other side.

Talia pulled on a pair of waders, a rubber-pants-and-boots combination that made her look like she ready to go fly fishing. She gestured for us to get on the boat. “I’ll push us off.”

We climbed into the small skiff that had benches along either side of the bow. Talia pushed the boat out into the deeper water, her waders protecting her clothes and shoes. Once we were free-floating, she joined us in the skiff and hurried to the wheel. The engine hummed to life, far quieter than I expected.

“Talia has run covert operations for me before,” Talan explained. “She’s used to stealth being a requirement.”

I liked her already. She was efficient and no-nonsense, her gaze pinned on the water as she navigated us upriver.

“Talan, check the box at your feet,” Talia said. “You’ll find the emergency air you requested.”

He bent over and pulled out two small metal cylinders. Each was the size of a small coke bottle and had a mouthpiece

on it. A yellow caution sticker was plastered to the side of each.

“What are those?” I asked.

Talan handed me one, along with a strappy thing that looked like a holster. “We’re swimming in without scuba gear, but this will provide a few extra breaths if you need it. But you have to be careful. Whatever breath you take in, you must release. Don’t hold your breath and ascend, or the air will expand in your lungs and cause decompression sickness.”

“Decompression sickness?” I asked.

“Long story short, you’re dead,” Talia said. “And it’s not a pretty death.”

“Okay, so only use the air if I need to, and don’t hold my breath under any circumstances.”

“Exactly,” Talan said.

I nodded, making a note to go over the science later. Now wasn’t the time for that kind of curiosity, though. I needed to keep my head in the game. Talan strapped the holster to his thigh, then snapped the small cylinder into place. I did the same, making sure it was tight enough not to come loose while swimming.

“Have you seen the house before?” I asked Talia.

“I passed it on the way here. Looks occupied, but I can’t tell by how many.”

“Protections?” Talan asked.

“I could feel them, yes. Repelling charms and the like. Possibly surveillance.”

“Good thing we waited until dark,” I said.

“Exactly. Wouldn’t stand a chance otherwise.” Talia pointed to the bank on the left. “The house is just up there. I’ll slow down a bit, but I won’t stop the vessel. I’ll also have to keep going. Lingering out front will just draw their attention.”

“You brought more transport charms for our escape?” I asked Talan.

He nodded.

“Almost there,” Talia said. “You should go over the port—left—side of the boat. I’ll get you as close as I can, then you’re on your own.”

“Thank you,” Talan said.

“Don’t thank me, just come out alive.”

“We’ll do our best.” Talan joined me and we got into position as the boat slowed.

I inspected the huge house on the cliff. It was a strange combination of old and new—there were historic parts made of wood and decorated with ornate trim, along with more modern parts that had been added on, like a massive concrete tower in the back. I was pretty sure the large, flat roof at the back had a helicopter on it, for fate’s sake.

“It looks like a Frankenhause,” I said.

Talan huffed a short, surprised laugh, then pointed toward one of the windows. “There’s the largest window. Tunnel should be just under there.”

I nodded, looking at the water beneath. When Ophelia had sent us the specific address, she’d included the information that the tunnel entrance was supposed to be underneath the largest window.

“Time to go,” Talia said.

We slipped overboard, and I gasped at the coldness of the water. A shudder ran over me, and I tried not to think of what might be lurking in the darkness below.

Talia motored away, and we began swimming. I tried to keep my strokes as silent as possible, avoiding too much splashing as we made for the largest window in the house. Thankfully, it was a moonless night, and it was unlikely anyone could see us in the water. The cliff towered above us as we swam nearer, and I had to crane my neck to make sure I was still in line with the right window.

When we reached the cliff wall, I grabbed a protrusion of rock and caught my breath. Talan stayed nearby, treading water silently.

“Ready?” he asked.

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Remember, if you use the air, don’t hold your breath.”

“I know, I know. Trust me, Talia really sold me on it.”

Through the darkness, I thought I could see a grin on his face.

“Here.” Talan handed me the end of the rope we’d brought. A small clip had been attached to it.

While planning the operation, we’d realized that we wouldn’t be able to see one another underwater, and we’d devised a fifteen-foot rope with two clips to attach to our belt loops. If one of us found the chain before the other, we would tug on the rope. If we needed to disconnect for some reason, there was a button on the clip that would quickly release.

I didn’t want to think of the reason we might have to do an emergency disconnect, though. It could only be bad—like, a

monster-lurking-in-the-depths kind of bad.

As we'd planned, I clipped the rope to my belt, then nodded at him. "Ready when you are."

"Let's go." He drew in a deep breath, and I did the same.

Together, we submerged.

The cold, dark water closed around me. Almost immediately, I felt claustrophobic, the darkness suffocating.

I swam deeper, keeping one hand against the cliff face to feel for the chain. I really wished we hadn't decided that lights would be too dangerous and give us away.

The deeper we got, the more my lungs burned. We had to be almost to the chain, right? How deep had we gone?

It was impossible to say.

A flash of cold white light illuminated the cliff wall in front of me. To my left, I spotted an old chain bolted into the rocks. Algae grew on it, concealing most of the metal, but it was definitely shaped like a chain. The light was gone as quickly as it had come, and I swam to the left, reaching for the chain.

When my fingertips collided with the slimy metal, satisfaction surged through me. I tugged on the rope to let Talan know I'd found it. A few moments later, he tugged back.

He'd found it, too. Now we just needed to follow it to the tunnel.

First, though, I needed air.

I was reaching for the small bottle holstered to my thigh when the brilliant flash of light returned. The blaring light illuminated an eel swimming toward me.

Shit.

Electric eel.

Were they even supposed to live in the Hudson River? No way.

Which meant it had been enchanted and put here to protect the tunnel.

My lungs burned as I vacillated, uncertain whether to go for my air or wait to see if the eel attacked. I couldn't afford to drop the bottle.

Of course, it was going to attack, idiot.

The light flashed again, right before the eel wrapped itself around my arm. The shock hurt like hell, and it took everything I had not to open my mouth on a scream. I reached for the beast, gripping it around the thick body and calling upon my death magic. The creature went limp, uncoiling from my arm.

I shook it loose, pain searing, and reached for the chain once more. My lungs were so desperate for air that I felt myself going woozy as unconsciousness called. I grabbed the small air tank from the holster and sucked in a deep breath.

Relief rushed through me, and I shoved the air tank back onto the holster. Carefully, I released a slow stream of bubbles as I followed the chain toward the tunnel—or at least, what I hoped was the tunnel.

Was Talan okay? I hadn't felt him pull on the chain, and the eel that had attacked me had hurt like hell, but not as bad as it could have. Probably because of the protective necklace Talan had given me. He'd taken some of the blow.

Worry seethed inside me, but I couldn't afford to let it distract me. Too dangerous.

A faint tug on the rope made hope flare. Talan was okay, and he must have found the entrance to the tunnel. I pulled myself along as fast as I could. When the chain turned sharp right, I knew I'd found it.

Here goes nothing.

I swam into the tunnel, my heart thundering like a rampage of elephants. This was the craziest thing I'd ever done, so stupid that I probably deserved the terrible end that might be coming my way.

Please be right, Ophelia.

If any part of our info was wrong, I could be dead within minutes.

I shoved the fear away and kept going, pulling myself along as quickly as I could. My lungs burned so fiercely that I took another breath of air before re-holstering the canister. We had to be close, right? It was supposed to be possible to swim this route without assistance if you knew where you were going. But maybe that was only possible for an Olympic-level swimmer.

In front of me, the water lit up with a brilliant white light.

Eel!

Shit.

Talan was ahead of me, and I saw the eel wrap around his leg before the water went dark once more. Panic raced through me as I tried to reach him. He'd been a good eight feet in front of me, which was a long way underwater.

No matter how fast I went, I didn't reach him. But the line that connected us hadn't gone slack, either.

Finally, the tunnel ended. There was nothing but water above me. Lungs burning, I swam for the surface, following the pull of the rope around my waist.

When I burst through to the surface and sucked in air, the first thing I saw was Talan. His wet hair was slicked back on his head, and he looked fine.

Oh, thank fates.

Relief flashed in his gaze as he looked at me, but only for a moment. He turned at the sound of voices, and I followed his gaze. Two guards stood with their backs to us. We'd surfaced in an underground cavern. The pool of water was small—only about ten feet by ten feet—and a platform of rock bordered it on one side.

The two men sat at a table arguing over cards, a lucky circumstance that had probably saved our butts. If they hadn't been so busy fighting, they might have heard us surface in the pool.

In tandem, we swam silently toward the edge of the stone platform. There was about three feet of difference between the top off the water and the platform, so we were hidden from the men by the ledge once we reached it.

Next to me, a rusty ladder extended into the pool. I unclipped the rope that connected me to Talan, then grabbed the ladder. He glared at me, clearly wanting to go up first, but I grinned and silently mouthed, "They're mine."

Rei had given me an assortment of potion bombs to help with long range fighting. I climbed to the edge of the platform, careful to keep myself low and hidden. Clinging to the ladder,

I unzipped my jacket pocket and withdrew one of the small potion bombs, a new type Rei was experimenting with—small enough to be easily portable, but magically weighted so they could be thrown farther and with more precision.

Through the dim light, I could see that I'd chosen a pale blue one. It was a stunner, not a deadly one, which was perfect. I couldn't guarantee that these guys were fundamentally evil, and even if they were, I didn't want to be the one to kill them. Especially if they were just idiots who'd taken a job for the wrong guy.

“Do you hear something?” a rough voice asked from above.

Uh oh, they'd stopped fighting and had figured out they weren't alone.

Show time.

I lunged onto the platform, my gaze on the guards. They'd turned in their chairs to look at the water, their eyes widening when they spotted me.

Too late, fellas.

I hurled the potion bomb, grinning as it burst in a cloud of pale blue dust that quickly enveloped them. They coughed and slumped to the stone, unconscious.

I hurried over, Talan close behind me. Kneeling beside the men, we made quick work of removing their belt buckles. I shoved my guy onto his belly and bound his hands behind his back, then tied his shoes together with the laces. For my final trick, I removed his radio and key cards.

Talan finished with his guard at the same time, and we stood to inspect our surroundings. About ten feet away, there

was a modern metal door with a key card scanner set into the front.

“It’s probably linked to a security system in the house,” Talan said. “If we use the cards to get through the door, someone will be alerted that something unusual is happening.”

“I don’t suppose they get smoke breaks, do they?” I asked.

“Unlikely.”

He turned to look at an old, abandoned elevator, an ancient contraption made of rusted iron bars. It was essentially a cage that could be raised and lowered via a hand crank set into the stone wall.

“You can’t be serious,” I said, looking at the death trap from the past.

“I think it might be our only option.”

Just my luck.

Cora

“A RELIC FROM THE FIRST HOUSE,” I said, recalling the crazy mishmash of architecture we’d seen as we’d driven up to the house.

Talan strode toward it. I followed, dreading what we might have to do. The metal accordion door had been torn off, and he stepped into the metal cage and looked up. “Bars are rusted.”

“How rusted?” I peered inside the tiny space and realized that he was right. They were rusted nearly through in parts. “Do you think you can break them?”

“I think I’d better try, because there’s no way I want to try cranking us up in that thing.”

“Not to mention, only one of us could go, if the other has to stay back and crank.” I wasn’t keen on going by myself or letting him leave me behind.

“Let me try.” He reached up and gripped two of the bars in his big hands. The muscles in his shoulders and forearms bulged as he slowly pried the iron bars apart. A low grunt escaped him as he worked. Finally, the space was big enough for us to squeeze through.

“Whew,” I said, exhaling in relief. “That was impressive.”

He lowered his hands, breathing heavily. “All in a day’s work.”

He formed a cradle with his hands, and I stepped into it with one foot, reaching for the bars as he gave me a lift. I squirmed through, then moved aside so he could pull himself into the cage. His sheer strength was enough to take my breath away.

I peered into the elevator shaft. It was dark as hell, and I quickly lost sight of the elevator cables that extended up into the gloom.

“How deep do you think we are?” I asked.

“Fifty, sixty feet maybe?” he said. “It will be a long climb.”

I reached for a dangling metal cable. It was close enough to the shaft wall that I could brace my feet against the stone. Thank fates for small mercies, because there was no way I could climb up using just my hands.

“Ready?” Talan gripped another cable.

I nodded, and he planted his feet on the stone wall and began to climb. I did the same on my side, the rusty cable biting into my hands as I ascended.

Hand over hand, step over step, I dragged myself up. Soon, we’d left the faint light of the chamber below and were ascending in darkness. A chill raced over my skin.

“Hang on, I’ve got a light,” Talan said, his voice low.

A moment later, a pale golden glow filled the elevator shaft. I glanced at him. The light came from a cuff on his wrist. A magical nightlight—handy.

I looked up at the shaft, searching for an exit. Praying for an exit. My hands and muscles burned, and with every foot upward I traveled, the more it would hurt if I fell.

A skittering noise made ice race through my veins. “Do you hear that?”

“I do.” Talan’s voice was way too calm, which meant that whatever it was, it had to be bad.

“You know what it is?” I asked.

“No, but I don’t think we’re going to like it.”

I squinted up into the dark, searching for whatever was up there. “Should we climb up or down?”

“Up. We can handle whatever is coming.”

As if to prove him wrong, dozens of large spider-like creatures scurried from the gloom, heading toward us.

“Shit!” I squeaked. I hated spiders.

These weren’t exactly spiders, though. They were more like crabs. Or eight-legged monsters the size of dogs. Their pincers made sharp snapping noises, and I could just imagine them crawling all over me.

“Tell me you have a plan,” I said. Nothing in Rei’s arsenal or my own had prepared me for this number of little monsters.

“I do but brace yourself.”

I gripped the rope tightly, planting my feet against the wall of the shaft.

Talan’s magic flared, and green fire bloomed above us, racing toward the monsters. It enveloped them, and the clicking and scrabbling sounds died. As the flame extinguished, ashes from the crispy critters rained down on us.

I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my head.

Ew.

Cinders were still falling, so I breathed shallowly through my nose. When I judged the worst was over, I finally asked, “Are they gone?”

“I think so.”

I opened my eyes. No more monsters, so we continued our climb. We’d only gone about a dozen feet when I spotted movement on the elevator cables overhead. Two of the crab-like monsters clung to the elevator cables roughly thirty feet away from us, one on Talan’s cable, and one on mine. They snapped at the chains with their claws, trying to sever them.

My heart leapt into my throat. “Talan.”

“I see them.” Worry sounded in his voice. “But my flame is too hot. If I aim it at the cable, it could weaken and cause it to break.”

I looked down.

Way too far to survive a fall.

I could try to throw my knife at one, but I only had one knife, and there were two of them. Nor was a potion bomb an option. Too violent. An explosion could damage the elevator cable as easily as the monster, and it wasn’t likely my aim would be great, hanging off a rope with one arm.

“Hurry,” I said. Speed was our only option. We just had to make it to the first door.

The clicking of the monster’s claws was a horrific soundtrack to our frantic upward climb. Hand over hand I climbed, muscles screaming with fatigue. Soon, I was close enough to see the individual cable wires snapping off. The

monsters were more than halfway through with their job. Tiny cuts lacerated my hands as I climbed, but I ignored the pain and kept going.

“We’re almost there,” Talan said. “Eight more feet.”

I spotted the exit above us, a large rectangular indentation in the stone wall framed by iron supports. Two metal elevator doors barred the way out, but there was about a foot of ledge we could stand on.

I pushed myself the rest of the way, moving with a speed that surprised me. Above us, the monsters had nearly finished with their work. The cable that I climbed squeaked with the effort of bearing my weight.

“Hurry!” Talan said, leaping for the ledge.

He slipped, grabbed it with his fingertips, and pulled himself up. Cold fear iced my spine as I watched him. There was no way I’d be capable of that.

“Just push off the wall and the cable,” Talan said. “Don’t think, just do. I’ll catch you.”

He was right. If I stopped to think about the impossibility of this for even a second, I’d be dead. The monster was nearly finished with my cable, and there was no other way out.

I went for it, pushing myself off as hard as I could. The world dropped out from under me. Arms flailing, I reached for the ledge like Talan had and missed.

He grabbed me by the wrist as I dropped, his hand tightening around me like a vise. He yanked me up, and I slammed into him, hugging him tight as my shoulder screamed in pain. It was so sickening that I felt my stomach lurch.

“It’s probably dislocated,” he said, his voice low. “I’ll fix it, but you can’t scream.”

“Right.” The word was barely audible.

Without warning, he gripped my shoulder and shoved. There was the briefest flare of pain, then the worst faded.

I slumped against him, gasping. “That sucked but thank you.”

He held me close, his heart thundering beneath my ear. I couldn’t believe how loud it sounded, or how fast it was going.

“I thought I’d almost lost you,” he murmured.

“I thought I’d almost lost me, too.” I pulled back to look at him. “Thank you.”

The intensity of his gaze stripped me bare and made my brain scramble as I tried to figure out what to say.

Of course, there was nothing I could say, and now wasn’t the time for a conversation.

“We’ll talk about this later,” he said.

“Sure.” I didn’t mean it. There was no way in hell I’d be talking about this with him, but he didn’t need to know that. I looked away from him and pulled out of his arms to inspect the metal elevator door that separated us from the rest of the house.

“I’ve got it,” he said.

I stepped aside so that he could grip the edges of the doors to pull them apart. I drew my karambit from the ether, ready for whatever might be on the other side.

The doors creaked open to reveal a slab of drywall and house framing.

“The bastard put up a wall?” I almost laughed. Just our freaking luck.

“I can get through this, too,” Talan said, drawing a large knife from the ether. “We just have to hope there’s no one on the other side.”

“Fingers crossed.” I stashed my karambit and drew a stunner bomb from my pocket. If Talan was going to be punching our way out of here, we might have to hurl a weapon through a hole in the drywall.

Talan used the knife to cut through the drywall, creating a hole big enough to fit his hands through. He pressed his face to the hole and peered out. “We’re good for now.”

Whew.

Talan pulled back and gripped the drywall in two hands, pulling off great chunks that he threw down the elevator shaft behind him. Within less than a minute, he’d created a space between the framing that we could slip through.

I followed him through the narrow opening, the wooden boards squeaking beneath my feet. The walls were coated in maroon silk wallpaper, and a faded rug ran down the center of the hallway. “We must be in the old part of the house.”

Which only made sense, considering we’d just exited an elevator shaft that predated electricity.

“Do you have any idea where to go from here?” Talan asked.

“Give me a moment.” I closed my eyes and drew in a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. Now that I was here and not under immediate threat of death, I was hoping that I could sense something. The Lightning Staff was part of me,

right? It had been imbued with my magic, which meant I should be able to sense it.

I hoped.

It took everything I had to slow my heartbeat and call upon my magic. I felt the faintest pull in my chest, like a string dragging me forward, as if there were magic out in the world that was mine, and I needed to get it back. I was being drawn toward something I had lost.

“This way.” I started down the hall, the potion bomb still gripped in my hand.

We moved quickly from hallway to hallway, soon lost in the maze of the house. It was beyond enormous, a collection of old and new that was jarring. The sensation in my chest grew stronger as I followed it, focusing on the death magic that I’d tried so hard to ignore since I’d left my old life behind.

Talan gripped my arm, stopping me. “Someone is coming.”

I’d been so obsessed with my goal that I hadn’t heard them. Now, I could make out the sound of voices.

“This way.” He pulled me toward a partially open door.

We slipped into a darkened room set with a large table and chairs. I pressed myself against the wall and listened closely, Talan at my side.

As the people approached, their footsteps grew louder, and so did the sound of their voices.

“Marek will be back later tonight,” said a deep voice. “But he sent the Lighting Staff ahead with a contingent of armed guards. It’s just arrived, and they’re taking it to the vault.”

“Thank fates,” said a second voice. “I’ll be glad when it’s finally in there. Marek would lose his shit if anything happened to it, and it would be our heads on the chopping block.”

The vault.

If I knew Marek, it would be downright impenetrable. But the staff wasn’t in the vault yet.

The men kept talking as they passed. Once they were far enough away, I peeked out to get a look at them. Two guards, if I had to guess, large and wearing identical dark outfits. They turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

“If they’re carrying the Lightning Staff, I can’t risk using too much of my demon fire or it could destroy the staff,” he said. “You still need it to embrace your magic.”

“Good point.” I didn’t know if it was metal or wood, but we couldn’t take the risk. Demon fire was so intense that it could easily melt gold or silver. “Stick to using a little of your magic, and be sure not to scare all of them away. They need to think they can take us if we want to get close to the staff.”

He nodded.

“Let’s go.” I darted from our hiding space and hurried down the hall, Talan at my side. He’d heard the same thing I had, and the message was clear—we were running out of time.

The sensation of being pulled toward something familiar increased as I ran, narrowly avoiding a pair of housekeepers that Talan heard before I did. Once again, he dragged me into a room to wait them out. We got lucky, and they passed us by.

“We’re almost there,” I whispered, hurrying from the room. I could feel it pounding in my chest, an insanely strong

desire to be reunited with the Lightning Staff. Now that it was nearby, it was all I could think about.

I had to get it.

As we neared another hallway, I heard the sound of footsteps ahead. Talan and I slowed, pressing ourselves against the wall as we crept toward the intersection. I listened carefully, trying to figure out what we were walking into. There had to be at least half a dozen people, if not more. They didn't speak as they walked, but their footsteps were distinct.

I reached the corner and paused. As soon as we peeked out, we could be spotted. We needed to be prepared to fight.

I looked back at Talan. "Ready?"

He drew his sword from the ether with a nod. I gripped my karambit in one hand and clutched the potion bomb in the other. As soon as we were prepared, I leaned around the corner. Ten guards were marching toward us, nine of them surrounding the guy in the middle holding the Lightning Staff.

It gleamed with a golden sheen; power incarnate.

As soon as I saw it, a burning desire filled me. More than desire—it was need, visceral and deep, like part of my soul was contained in that staff, and I needed to get to it. I needed to be reunited with the part of me that had been severed.

The guards spotted me and shouted. My brief moment of obsession had lost us the element of surprise.

"Go!" I lunged out into the hall, Talan following me.

The guards charged us, and I hurled a potion bomb at them. It exploded at the feet of the three guards in the front, slamming them backward with the force of its blast.

At my side, Talan raised his hands, and his magic flared. Green flames burst to life in front of the rest of the men, driving them back.

We used the cover to approach. As the flames died down, I lunged for the nearest guard and slashed out with my karambit. The blade cut deeply into his chest, and he staggered back with a roar of anguish. Another guard lunged for me, sword outstretched. I dodged, narrowly avoiding a blow.

Unfortunately, I lunged straight toward another attacker. He thrust his sword forward. I jerked to the side, but not before he sliced a gash into my left arm. I cried out, darting away.

Across the hall from me, Talan fought three guards with his sword. Four more stood between me and the staff, and I felt the most intense compulsion to throw myself between them to reach it, come hell or high water.

I charged. Drawing another potion bomb from my pocket, I hurled it at the men, taking out two of them in a blast of red smoke. They dropped like stones. I darted around the cloud and attacked two more guards.

I ducked below their blades, feeling the whoosh of air over my head as a sword sliced close enough to sever a few hairs. I slashed their shins with my karambit. The blade cut deeply, and they cried out in pain, dropping to the ground.

Panting, I straightened, leaping over them to pursue the man running down the hall, the staff clutched in his hand.

“He’s getting away!” I shouted to Talan. “Can you stop him?”

He nodded and flung out his hands, forming a barrier of fire between the man and his escape. He skidded to a halt, still

gripping the staff tightly. I sprinted after him, lungs burning. I was nearly on him when I realized there was another hallway adjoining ours.

It separated me from my prey, and I heard the sound of pounding footsteps. More guards, and they were almost upon us. Reaching the intersection of the two hallways, I saw that nearly a dozen fresh guards were approaching us.

Shit.

I might be able to reach the staff, but they'd be only seconds behind me.

Didn't matter.

I had to get to it.

Something otherworldly pushed me forward, an insane need to be reunited with the long piece of gold that called my name.

The guard holding the staff whirled to face me and raised his hand. He clutched a potion bomb in his fist, and he hurled it at me.

I darted out of the way, driven by a burst of speed I'd never felt before, as if the staff were giving me power.

The bomb exploded behind me. I heard the guards scream but didn't turn. I threw myself at the man with the staff and gripped it hard in my right hand.

Magic surged through me, so powerful that I nearly blacked out. It took everything I had to stay on my feet as the power lit me up like a lightning bolt. Darkness and light exploded within me, more magic than I'd ever felt in my life. So much, too much to contain. The power fought to escape, and terror filled me.

What would happen if I released it? There was death and life in the new magic that I felt, but I couldn't tell which was stronger. I tried to control it, to keep it bottled up inside me, but I felt like a soda bottle that had been shaken.

The pressure finally burst, the magic exploding out of me in a brilliant flash of dark and white light. Dark light shouldn't be possible, but somehow, it was.

I tumbled backward, hitting the ground with a hard thud that sent pain shooting through my head. In my hand, I felt the comforting pressure of the staff.

Gasping, I clutched the staff and dragged myself upright. My vision cleared, revealing the chaos around me. Bodies sprawled everywhere, still and unmoving.

Terror lanced me, cold and fierce.

“Talan!” I spun in a circle, searching for him.

I spotted him about twenty feet away. He was on his back, his eyes closed, and his limbs splayed.

No.

Horror deadened my soul as I stared at him, my breath coming fast. I jolted out of my shock and raced over to him, falling to my knees at his side. I still gripped the staff, but I threw it aside and pressed my hands to his chest, feeling for a heartbeat.

“Talan! Wake up, please, please wake up.” Tears pricked my eyes as I searched his pale face for signs of life.

Did his eyelids flicker?

Yes?

I couldn't tell. But I could feel a faint heartbeat. Too faint.

I fumbled in my pocket, searching for one of the healing potions that Rei had given me. When I found it, I uncorked it with shaking hands and poured it between his lips.

Nothing happened.

“Swallow it!” I cried, desperate for him to wake up.

Still, nothing happened. I was pretty sure he’d swallowed at least some of it, but maybe his wounds were too dire.

Tears poured from my eyes as I pressed my hands to his chest. I could feel the life inside him, faint and fluttery. Was this what I’d done to all of them, nearly killed them with one blast of my magic?

I couldn’t bear the thought. Was this my power, then, this horrific ability to kill by the dozen without even meaning to?

I hated it. It made me hate myself.

I couldn’t tolerate it.

Hadn’t Hapheta said that I was two halves of a coin—light and dark, life and death? I had to use that to help Talan, but I had no idea how.

But I’d also had no idea how to use my death magic until the women at the orphanage had forced me to master it. I could do that again.

I would have to—and fast.

I couldn’t lose him, even though I knew that fate was inevitable. I couldn’t lose him *now*.

“I’m going to save you,” I said, as much for my own benefit as for his. *More* for my own benefit. I needed to believe I could do this.

I reached for the new magic glowing inside me, seeking out the life magic. I could feel it, so different from the death magic I'd had for so long. I hated that power, but I could get behind this new healing magic.

It rose up inside me, bubbling to the surface. I fed it into Talan, praying that it would revive him. As I worked, his color returned, and his eyes fluttered open. A ragged breath escaped me, relief and joy in equal parts.

A moment later, he opened his eyes and stared at me.

Holy fates.

It had worked.

T *alan*

I LOOKED UP AT CORA, my mind blank for the briefest moment. She looked like a goddess, beautiful and powerful above me. She'd pressed her hands to my chest, and the magic that flowed from her palms felt like a breath of air into my starving lungs.

"Cora." My voice was raspy and low. "What happened?"

"I killed you." Tears slicked her cheeks. "Almost."

I sat up. Bodies lay scattered around me. "Why aren't I dead like the rest?"

"Maybe it's our mate connection." She gripped the stone around her neck. "Or this protection charm you gave me."

"Or maybe it's your magic." She'd saved me—I could feel it.

I rose. My body ached, but I could move it at least. At her side, a golden staff lay discarded on the floor. It was four feet long, with a large opal on the top and a sharpened tip at the bottom.

The sight of it made the memories rush back, and I remembered why we were here. We'd broken into Marek's compound to steal the staff back. She'd reached it, grabbing it with her right hand, and that was the last thing I remembered.

But her magic was different. More powerful—so much so that it made it difficult to breathe in her presence. I'd get used to it, but the first adjustment was intense.

"You've transformed," I said, awe in my voice.

She looked around at the bodies, dismay on her face. "But into what? This is horrible."

I followed her gaze. Frankly, I appreciated her newfound powers. She'd killed them all—or at least, wounded them grievously so they couldn't attack us. It was a useful skill.

But she was a better person than I. Of course, she wouldn't want this gift.

"You'll learn to control it." I offered her my hand. "But we need to get out of here before they send reinforcements."

She took my hand and stood, then bent down to retrieve the staff. As soon as she touched it, she stiffened.

"What is it?" I asked.

She rose, staring at the staff with wide eyes. "We can't leave yet."

"What do you mean? We need to get out of here if we want to survive."

"There's something else in this place that we need to find."

"Really?" I looked around the hall, waiting for another troop of guards to show up.

She nodded, desperation on her face. “Come on. Follow me.”

“Where are we going?”

She headed down the hall, glancing back at me. “Upstairs. Toward what, I don’t know. But we have to go.”

“All right.” Her behavior was intense and strange. Whatever she was after, she needed to find it. Desperately, and I would help her.

We made it to a stairwell without running into any more guards, and she raced up the steps. Pushing open the door on the landing, she ran through, and I followed her into an industrial style hallway with linoleum floors and thick steel doors.

“Cells,” she said in a disgusted voice.

A guard standing at the end of the hall stared at us in shock. He recovered quickly and reached for a potion bomb snapped into his belt. I hit him with a blast of demon fire before he could throw it. He flew into the cell door behind him and slumped to the ground, unconscious, his shirt smoldering.

We sprinted up to him. I grabbed his feet and dragged him away from the door while Cora searched his belt for the key. She worked with a silent intensity that puzzled me. What the hell was behind that cell door?

“Got it.” She stood, shoving the key into the lock.

I moved to stand behind her, ready to take on whatever was in the cell.

The lock clicked, and she turned the door handle, saying, “I’m here to help. I’m like you.”

Like you?

When I saw the woman inside the cell, I understood.

Cora had found another of her kind.

The dark-haired woman stood on the far side of the cell, her eyes flashing with wariness. Her clothes were dirty and torn, her hair a mess. Old bruises blossomed in a sickening array of green and yellow on her cheekbones, and there was a hint of feral animal about her.

Cora raised her hands and stepped inside. She still clutched the staff, which made her look more dangerous. She seemed unwilling to let it go now that she had it. I said nothing, staying outside the cell to make sure my presence didn't scare the woman more.

"I'm Cora." She tucked the staff behind her back. "I'm a manslaga too, and I'm going to get you out of here."

The woman blinked, studying Cora through suspicious eyes. "You're not like me. Not quite."

"No." Cora stopped trying to hide the staff. It was obviously part of what made her different, and she couldn't conceal it, anyway. "But that's a long story, and I promise to tell you later. In the meantime, we need to get out of here. Quickly."

"How did you make it all the way to me? There are dozens of guards."

"We incapacitated them." Cora winced. "Killed a few. Are you coming or not? Because there's no way in hell that I'll let Marek catch me here. He won't take me again."

She started forward. "I'm coming."

Cora stepped into the hall, and the woman followed, her gaze moving up and down my body. Checking for weapons,

no doubt. “How do you plan to get out?” she asked.

I reached into my pocket and found a hole in the bottom. The fabric had been slashed during the battle and the contents had fallen out. “Shit, the transport charm is gone.”

“According to Ophelia’s intelligence, there is an unguarded service entrance at the west side of the house,” Cora said. “That’s our best backup for an escape.”

The woman shook her head. “It won’t be unguarded anymore, not now when they know you’re here. And we’d have to steal a car, and that raises the question of the gate.” She gestured for us to follow her. “This way.”

I looked at Cora. “You trust her?”

“She’s also our best bet,” she said with a shrug. “Let’s go.”

We followed the woman to a door at the end of the hall. She shoved it open and hurried up the stairs, saying, “We’re headed to the roof.”

At the top of the stairs, a guard stood by the metal door. His jaw dropped when he saw the woman.

“Hi, Tom.” Her voice echoed with delighted menace, and she lunged for him. Before he could so much as flinch, she’d gripped his throat and fed him a blast of her death magic.

He dropped like a stone.

She stepped back and dusted off her hands. “Bastard deserved it.”

She looked back at us, her gaze challenging, as if she expected us to censure her.

Cora’s gaze flicked to the man at her feet. “Good riddance.”

So, Cora knew him, too. I didn't like to think about what had made her hate him, but I was tempted to kick his corpse.

"Come on, hurry," the woman said. "Be alert for guards." She opened the door and stepped onto the darkened roof. The wind whipped her hair as she looked this way and that, searching for threats. "We're clear."

She strode toward a helicopter parked on the helipad. The aircraft was chained and bolted to the roof.

Cora and I joined her, studying the thick fastenings.

"We need a key to unlock these," Cora said.

"One of the guards has the keys." Frustration echoed in the woman's voice, along with fear. "I should have thought of this."

"I've got it." I gripped the chain in both hands and fed my demon fire into the metal. It softened, and I pulled it apart like putty.

"Whoa," the woman breathed.

"Hurry, do the rest." Cora turned to the woman. "I sure hope you know how to fly this thing, because I don't."

"You're in luck." The woman grinned and climbed into the cockpit as I worked my way around the aircraft, breaking the remaining chains.

The engine cranked on, and the rotors began to spin, faster and faster until my hair whipped violently in the gale. I was working on the last chain when a group of guards spilled out of the stairwell and onto the roof.

"Get in!" I shouted to Cora. "Guards coming."

She withdrew a potion bomb and hurled it at the guards, not waiting to see if it hit. “That was my last one. Hurry, Talan!”

The potion bomb exploded, driving the guards back with a percussive blast of force. Two guards fell, but the other four kept coming.

I yanked the last chain apart and jumped into the helicopter.

“Hold on!” shouted the woman at the controls.

The helicopter rose from the helipad, wind whipping around us in the roar of noise. I leaned out of the helicopter door and hurled a blast of fire at the guards. The green flame collided with them, lighting them up like emerald torches.

As the helicopter veered away from the building, I watched the guards burn with grim satisfaction. Vicious, perhaps, but I couldn’t help it. Some of those bastards had been Cora’s captors, and I’d kill each and every one I could get my hands on.

“Where to?” the woman asked.

We needed a way back to New Orleans, but we couldn’t ask Ophelia for another transport charm. She’d done enough for us already, and we couldn’t repay her by bringing Marek to her door.

There were other portals to New Orleans, however, and one was located in the perfect place to land a helicopter.

“Central Park,” I shouted. “By the portal at the north side.”

“I know where that is.” The woman nodded, adjusting her headset as she fiddled with the controls.

I leaned back against the seat as we flew south. Cora sat next to me, her head against the seat. Fear for her tightened a cold hand around my chest.

She'd almost died back there. Hell, I'd almost died. My death was far less terrifying than hers, though.

As if she could feel me looking at her, she popped one eye open and looked at me. "You, okay?"

"Yeah. I will be." As soon as she was safe back in my home, that is.

Cora

THE OTHER MANSLAGA piloted us to Central Park without issue. I rode with the wind blasting through the open doors, my hand gripped tight around the staff. We probably could have shut the doors, but I liked the breeze. Anything to distract me from what had just happened and the new power I wielded.

The woman lowered the helicopter to the ground. Leaning back, she shouted, “We’re going to have to be fast. Central Park is full of humans, and their police are not going to be happy with us for parking this thing here.”

“You’ll come with us, then?” I asked.

She nodded. “You set me free. I want to know more about you, and I don’t have a lot of options. Marek blew up my life when he captured me.”

I hated the thought of whatever he’d done to her. There was no doubt it was bad—it was the only way Marek knew to operate.

The helicopter touched down, and the woman turned it off. We climbed out and raced across the park to a cluster of trees. The trees contained portals to other major cities in the US.

They were monitored by magic, which was why I hadn't used them to escape from Marek the first time. Since he knew where we were going anyway, it didn't matter.

As we neared, Talan reached for my hand. I gripped his, sprinting toward the gleaming silver portal that only supernaturals could see. There were others nearby—Los Angeles, Miami, Dallas—but the New Orleans one was our goal. My new friend stuck close by our side, and we threw ourselves into the portal. The ether sucked us in and spun us through space.

It spat us back out in the middle of Jackson Square. I stumbled when I landed, gripping the Lighting Staff. Talan clung to my hand, not letting me go as he raised his comms charm to his mouth and ordered a car from Liora.

Iron streetlamps shed a golden glow on the grass and benches, casting shadows from the trees. There was almost no one in the park at this hour, and the buildings bordering the square were darkened for the night.

The woman who had come with us spun in a circle to inspect our surroundings. "This sure is open. I hope you've got a better place to hide."

"We do," Talan said. "Our ride will be here any minute."

"Great." She shoved her hair off her face. The ride in the helicopter had made it even more tangled. "I'm Madeline."

I'd already introduced myself when I'd walked into her cell, so I let Talan take the lead.

"Talan." He nodded at her. "Good to meet you."

She looked at his hand. "Don't want to shake?"

"I apologize." He stuck out his hand.

She laughed. “Just fooling with you. I don’t blame you, considering what I can do with just a touch.”

A large SUV pulled up, and Liora hopped out, relief clearly written on her face. “Thank fates, you’re back. And in one piece.” Her gaze landed on our new friend, and interest lit her eyes. “Hello.”

“Hi.” Madeline smiled with more warmth than I’d seen from her before. “I’ll ride up front with you.”

Hmm. There was some definite chemistry there.

Madeline climbed into the front of the car with Liora, and Talan looked at me, brows raised. “You trust her?”

“Worried she’ll attack Liora?” I asked. “Because I’m pretty sure Liora can handle it. Also, I think Liora would be pretty annoyed if you took her new friend away. I think they like each other.”

“You’re right.” He looked toward the SUV where the two women waited.

“And I do trust her,” I said. “Maybe I shouldn’t, but I do.”

“We’ll get our answers soon enough.”

“Let’s get her cleaned up first.” I knew what it was like to be one of Marek’s caged animals. I’d had more freedom when I’d been with him, but it hadn’t always been that way. I’d had to earn it. Until then, I’d spent plenty of time like Madeline.

I shoved away the awful memories, grateful that we’d arrived at Talan’s house. I needed the distraction.

Liora pulled the car to a stop, and we all climbed out. Madeline whistled low under her breath when she saw the house. “You live here?”

Talan nodded.

She arched a brow at him. “You sure you aren’t like Marek?”

Offense flashed in Talan’s eyes, then faded. He just shook his head, the slightest curve at the corner of his mouth.

Madeline shrugged. “Can you blame me? In my experience, rich men suck.”

“Oh, he sucks sometimes,” Liora said. “But he’s mostly all right.”

“Thank you for tolerating me, Liora,” he said. “Will you show Madeline to a bedroom so she can get settled in?”

“Don’t you want to interrogate me?” Madeline asked.

“Eventually, we’d like to ask you some questions, but Cora made a valid point when she suggested that you’d probably prefer a shower, first.”

Madeline looked down at herself and blew out a breath. “That’s the truth.”

“Come on,” Liora said. “I’ll show you to a room.”

“Thanks.” Madeline followed her up the stairs and into the house.

As Talan and I stepped into the foyer, everything that we’d been through hit me like a ton of bricks.

“I almost killed you,” I said on a shudder of breath.

He turned to me, his gaze soft. “But you didn’t. In fact, you healed me.”

I nodded, still shaky inside.

He stepped close to me, so close that his chest nearly brushed mine. He reached up to touch my cheek, his hand stilling in hesitation.

“I thought I lost you,” I said, gazing at him.

“Would that have been a bad thing?”

“Oh, yeah.”

His jaw tightened. “And yet, you still deny what’s between us?”

“I have my reasons.” *Like, I’m immortal.* Hapheta’s words rushed back to me. I’d been afraid of falling for him and possibly losing him. Being immortal made that a foregone conclusion. There was no way I could charge headfirst into love knowing that he would die centuries before I did.

The mere idea made me want to throw up.

He clearly didn’t like what he read in my face because his features tightened. He nodded at my legs. “You should get that wound seen to. It looks bad.”

Blood seeped through the cut in my jeans. He was right. I’d forgotten about my injury until he’d mentioned it. Now that I was safe, the adrenaline had worn off, and I could feel the pain.

Damn, that hurt. “Where’s the healer?”

“I’ll take you.” He turned and headed toward the hall. I followed, walking in silence beside him. There was nothing to say at this point.

Fortunately, the healer was in residence. Catriona, a woman with wild gray curls and a long flowing dress of pale silver, smiled and let me into the apartment she kept at the back of the house. Talan waited at the door.

“You can sit there.” She pointed to a bench, and I did as she instructed. She gathered a few medicinal things. Combining them in a mortar, she ground the ingredients with a pestle, shooting me the occasional glance as she worked.

“What is it?” I asked, still gripping my staff tight. She was probably looking at the strange weapon, and I had no idea how to explain it. I couldn’t tell her that I was a reincarnated god. I didn’t feel like one, and I hadn’t adjusted to the idea yet myself. It was the worst news I’d received in a while.

“I’ve never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you,” she said finally. “And I’ve been with him since the fighting pits.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “I was the healer there, but I as much a prisoner as he was. I hated it. When he escaped, he took me with him. Along with the others who didn’t want to be there.”

Of course he had. That was so like Talan, to look out for others.

“He looks at me different?” I asked, unable to stop myself. What was between us could go *nowhere*. Yet I couldn’t seem to stop myself from asking.

She nodded, kneeling in front of me to apply the paste to my wound. It soothed the burn, which improved even more when she hovered her hand over it and fed some of her magic into the gash.

“He’s always kept to himself. In fact, I’ve never seen him with anyone he might care for. Until you. And the way he looks at you...” She sighed. “It’s different, that’s all. He cares.”

I believed her, but it was crazy to think others might notice it.

“You should give him a chance,” she said.

Ha. “Do you have a cure for immortality?”

Her gaze darted up to mine, dark with despair. “Oh, no. Really?”

I nodded. “Just got the news.”

Her brow crumpled and her gaze softened. “I’m so sorry.”

I nodded, my throat tightening as I looked away. Living forever wasn’t a gift—it was a curse. There were so few immortal supernaturals that it was inevitable I would spend my life alone. Not that it mattered that there weren’t more of us—what mattered was that my friends and Talan weren’t immortal too.

“Maybe you should take what you can,” she said.

“And risk the pain later?” I asked.

“Life is pain.”

“That’s the truth.” I’d only recently found a life that wasn’t all pain, and then this had happened. “Are you a mind reader as well as a healer?”

“It’s not so hard to figure out people like you and Talan. You’ve had hard lives. It makes you wary. And you’ve got the added burden of immortality.”

That was an understatement. I could always kill myself with the Lightning Staff, but that was so dark. I’d hoped for a normal life, aging alongside my friends.

“Still,” she said. “It’s worth it to try to find something better. Living this life alone is pointless.” She stood and dusted

off her hands. “You’re all better.”

“Thank you.” I stood, happy to find that the pain was gone. I might have bigger problems on the horizon, but I could focus on the good things right now. “And thank you for the free therapy.”

“Any time.” She reached for my hand and gripped it tightly. “Good luck.”

“Thanks, I’m going to need it.” I left, finding Talan waiting a few feet down the hall. Liora stood near him, and they conferred in low voices. As I approached, they stopped talking and turned to me.

“Madeline wants to talk,” Liora said.

“Great.” That had happened more quickly than I’d expected.

“She’s in her room. The green one,” Liora added. “Doesn’t seem inclined to leave.”

“Let’s meet her there, then,” Talan said. “Has someone brought her food?”

“I’ll make sure they do.” Liora headed toward the kitchens, and Talan led the way to the woman’s room.

He knocked gently on the door, and her voice filtered through, “Come in.”

I followed him into a pretty bed chamber done up in different shades of green. The large wooden bed had a canopy overhead, and the massive windows provided a beautiful view of the garden. A sofa and two chairs were positioned to take advantage of the view, and Madeline sat in one of the chairs, freshly clean and wearing what I suspected were some of Liora’s clothes.

“You’ve got a pretty sweet place,” she told Talan. “Do all your guests get such nice rooms?”

“The ones I like.”

She grinned. “Like me, do you?”

“After the way you piloted us out of there, how can I not?” His voice was relaxed and charming, as if he were trying to put her at ease. It seemed to be working.

I sat on the sofa near her, the staff still gripped in my hand. I seemed unable to let go of the thing, and Madeline looked at it like it was a snake.

“That’s the reason you’re different than me, right?” she asked.

I nodded. “It’s the reason I broke into Marek’s place.” I held it out so that she could touch it, but she shrank back. “Sorry, thought you might want a closer look.”

“He tried to use it on me,” she said. “Didn’t work, but it made me real disinterested in ever seeing it again. Must have worked on you, though, huh?”

I nodded. “All I had to do was touch it.”

“What happened when you did?”

“I killed a lot of people without meaning to.”

Madeline winced. “I don’t envy you.”

An ugly feeling welled inside me—a mixture of guilt, shame, self-hatred, and even a little gratitude that I’d been able to use the power to save us from Marek’s guards.

“I wouldn’t have this power if I had a choice,” I said.

“Me, neither,” Madeline agreed. “But no one gave us a choice, did they?”

I shook my head, hating the lot of the manslaga. Of all the great magic out there, we got the ability to kill with a touch. How miserable.

“He tried it on other manslaga, too,” Madeline said. “It never worked. I guess he was looking for you.”

“So, he didn’t know who it would work on when he got it?” I asked.

“I guess not. According to Carolina—the girl he ‘tested’ it on before me—he’d gotten the staff right before I was kidnapped. He tried it on her. When that didn’t work, he tried it on me.”

“What happened?”

“I got struck by lightning.” She shuddered. “That sucked. But no new magic, thank fates.”

I nodded, understanding her desire not to have any more of this miserable power. She was a reminder of everything I’d been through in my life and everything that was to come.

I didn’t like it.

Talan sat quietly by my side. He seemed to be instinctively trying not to startle her, and I appreciated it.

“What happened to Carolina?” I asked. I hadn’t felt her presence in Marek’s compound, only Madeline’s.

“She escaped. Tried to take me with her, but she couldn’t get me out of my cell. I told her to go before they came, but she said she’d come back for me.”

“When was this?”

“Two days before you arrived.”

“So there was still time for her to come back.”

Offense flashed on Madeline's face. "Of course. She wouldn't have just left me there. She was my friend."

"I can help you find her," Talan said. "We have the resources to get you back to your old life or set you up in a new one."

His offer floored me. I looked over at him, surprised by his sensitivity and generosity. Or maybe I shouldn't have been. I was trying to ignore how wonderful he was, but it wasn't working. It was as though seeing him almost die had unlocked something inside me that I could not ignore.

I noticed everything he did. I couldn't help it.

"What happens now?" Madeline said.

"I'm pretty sure Marek will come for me." The thought made ice chill my spine. "He wants my magic, and he'll stop at nothing to get it."

"Can't you hide?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I don't want to."

"Good. I'll help you stop him." Grim determination glinted in her eyes. "But first, I'd like a nap."

I nodded and stood. Talan and I left her, shutting the door quietly behind us.

"So, Marek had no idea that I was the one who was reincarnated," I said. "He kept trying the staff on other manslaga."

"We'll stop him. I promise you that." The low determination in his voice rocked me.

We'd been making our way through the house to his chambers, and we'd reached the door. "How are you so

good?”

“Good?”

“Good to me, good to Madeline,” I said. “I thought you were essentially a demon mob boss, but I was so wrong.”

“You weren’t wrong. I have plenty of darkness in me.”

“We all do.” He’d almost died at my hand. The memory made my heart thud inside.

I’d nearly lost him. I could still feel the fear. The horror.

Catriona’s words echoed in my mind.

Was she right? Should I take what I could?

He was here now. He cared for me. He wanted a life with me.

He would die far sooner than I would, but so what? Did that mean I shouldn’t try for something better? At least for a little while?

The mere idea of losing him made fear grip me, but it also made me want to grab on to what I could.

“Cora?” Talan’s voice rumbled low. “Are you all right?”

“No.” My own voice came out a harsh rasp. “But you can fix it. For now.”

Understanding flashed in his eyes, then heat, a heat that made me decide this was worth it. Life was full of misery—I knew that more than most. Pain would always come, and I couldn’t save myself from it.

But at least I could have this one night.

I reached for him, wrapping my arms around his neck, and pressing my body to his. I gripped the staff behind his back,

but could no longer think about it, not with him next to me. The warmth and hardness of his muscles made a liquid heat rise inside me, and I hovered my mouth a scant inch from his.

The tension of it nearly killed me, but I wanted to give him an opportunity to back away.

He didn't.

Instead, he swooped down to kiss me with a passion that made my head spin. His lips were soft and warm, skillful as they parted my own and plundered like a starving man.

His large hands slid down my waist, leaving shivers in their wake as he gripped my rear and lifted me up so that I could wrap my legs around him.

As soon as his hardness pressed against the heat of my core, my entire body melted. An inferno rose inside me, and I kissed him as though my life depended on it. I couldn't get enough of his spicy, sweet taste or the skill with which his lips moved on mine.

"Take me to bed," I murmured, dragging my mouth down the side of his neck. His scent was heady, and I breathed in deeply.

A low groan escaped him as he turned and walked into his bedroom, striding to the tall bed in the corner. I dropped my staff on the ground, finally glad to be rid of the thing. The draping fabric of the canopy created a haven for us as he laid me down on the bed.

"This is all I've ever wanted," he said. "You, to myself."

"You can have me." *For now.*

I didn't know what the future would bring, or how I would feel tomorrow. But right now, I had the courage to face the

unknown and take what I so desperately wanted. Whatever came next, I would deal with it.

I'd have to.

His mouth drove the dire thoughts from my mind as he pressed kisses along my lips, jaw, and neck. Moving south, he pushed my shirt up over my belly.

When his hot mouth ran a searing line across my stomach, I arched my back, wanting to feel more of him.

"You're so damned beautiful," he murmured against my skin. "Impossibly beautiful."

I wanted to compliment him back, but his mouth closed over my nipple, biting gently through the fabric of my bra. A whimper was all I could manage, and then my bra and top were off, gone so quickly I barely noticed how it happened.

The rough noise that escaped his throat sent a shot of heat straight through me. His large hands cupped my breasts, and I pressed myself into him as he dragged his mouth to my stomach once more.

As he worked at the buttons of my jeans, his hands shook slightly. The sight of it made my heart swell, but there was little time for emotion when he dragged the fabric down my legs, taking my underwear and shoes with it.

As he looked at me, a low groan escaped him. He moved his head to my core, stroking his tongue over me in deep lash of heat that made me cry out.

"Now, Talan." I didn't want to wait. Couldn't wait. The need was a pulsing, feral drive. "I want to feel you inside me."

But he was still dressed, for fate's sake. I pulled at his shirt, yanking it over his head as he tore open the fly of his

jeans.

He was naked in seconds, and I reached for him with a desperation that shocked me. I felt like I would die if I didn't feel him inside me. *Now.*

He rose up over me like a fallen god, and I wrapped my legs around him. He sank into me with the most glorious searing heat.

Pleasure exploded inside me as he began to move, and I couldn't look away from him. His eyes burned into me, the expression in them enough to melt my soul and fuse it to his.

Being with him like this was everything I'd hoped it would be, and everything I'd feared.

I loved him, and there was no going back.



WHEN IT WAS OVER, after we'd lost ourselves in each other, I lay with my head on his shoulder.

"I don't want to talk about the future," I said, before he could say anything of his own.

"All right. But we'll talk about it later."

"Sure." *Lie.*

I might love him, but I still didn't know how to cope with the knowledge that I would outlive him by centuries. I also had no idea how to tell him that. The pity in Catriona's eyes had been tough enough to bear.

I didn't want it from him.

"Let's order food," I said. "Then sleep."

“All right.” He pulled me closer to him, hugging me tightly.

I let him, knowing that it was just for now.

After all, something this good couldn't last forever. Especially when one party was immortal.

Cora

THE ECHO of an unholy roar woke me from my slumber. I shot upright and flung myself out of bed, instinct driving me.

Talan did the same, rising with a swift grace that made me envy his reflexes. He moved toward the window, looking out into the darkness. “It’s not out here, whatever it is.”

The roar sounded again, shaking the windows.

“It has to be Marek,” I said, pulling on my clothing as fast as I could. “Or whatever beast he’s sent to torment us.”

Talan dressed in his discarded clothes, his movements efficient. I finished dressing and looked at the staff that I’d dropped by the bed. I hadn’t been able to let go of it before, but should I take it with me?

As if he could read my mind, Talan asked, “Taking that with you?”

“I don’t think I should. It’s too valuable, and it’s not like I can fight with it. Not easily, at least.”

“I can get someone to lock it up.”

A pounding noise sounded at the door, and Talan called, “Come in!”

Liora appeared, breathless and dressed for battle in her usual dark combat clothing. “There’s an enormous monster on the lawn. He’s already destroyed part of the east wing of the house.”

“Shit.” Talan finished tying his boots and pointed to the staff. “Will you see to it that gets delivered to the safe, then come join us?”

She nodded, striding to the staff and picking it up.

“Thank you,” I said, before following Talan from the room.

We raced down the hall and to the main foyer, sprinting out onto the lawn in time to see a beast swipe one huge paw at the far side of the house. He tore out a window, sending splinters of wood and glass flying. The creature had to be at least twenty-five feet tall, a cross between an alligator and a dog, with scaly skin and the rough shape of a canine.

His eyes glowed with a dead, pale light.

“He’s made of magic,” I said. “I don’t think my death power will work against him.” Not to mention, the thing was enormous. I’d never tried my gift on a creature so large.

“I don’t want you getting close to him anyway.” Talan moved toward a contingent of a dozen of his guards that hurled spears and potion bombs at the monster.

The spears bounced off, but the potion bombs seemed to slow the beast. Several of the guards threw blasts of fire and sonic booms, but it wasn’t enough to take the creature out.

A man was handing out bags of potion bombs to the guards, who discarded their projectile weapons. I ran over to him and grabbed one for myself, joining the guards in their attack. We hurled our potion bombs, keeping the monster away from the house as best we could.

Talan threw a blast of green demon fire at the beast. The flame exploded against the creature's leg. With a roar of rage, the beast rose on its hind legs, and Talan blasted him again, this time in the underbelly. The impact drove the creature back, but the monster planted its feet and didn't move.

Talan threw larger and larger gouts of green flame, eventually pushing the monster into the narrow, decorative river that flowed through the property. The beast's back limb sizzled as it hit the water, smoke rising as the creature bellowed and lumbered out of the river.

Understanding dawned.

He was basically the Wicked Witch of the West.

"Water will destroy him!" I shouted. We could call the fire brigade, but it would take them too long to arrive.

"We'll drive him toward the pond," Talan shouted.

It was the only way. The pond was large enough to envelop the entire monster and destroy him—we just had to get him there.

The guards and I joined Talan, attacking the beast from an angle designed to drive him toward the pond. A frontal attack wasn't efficient, given the strength of the beast's back legs.

Talan's green flame lit up the night with a brilliant glow. Some of his demon guards had a similar gift, but nowhere near as powerful as Talan's.

We needed every bit of it, though. The creature was massively powerful, making it difficult to herd it toward the lake. I kept throwing potion bombs, but they weren't much help.

We were halfway there when Talan said, "I'm running out of power."

Shit.

Magic was finite. If he used it all up, he'd need to rest before recouping it again. The monster would use that time to overwhelm us.

We were still about forty yards from the pond and Talan and the guards were weakening. Time for a change of tactics. Marek had sent the monster to capture me, not kill me. I needed to die at Marek's hand if he wanted to steal my power.

"I'll be the bait," I said. "I'll lead the monster to the pond so you can get a hit from the side. That should do the trick."

"No, it's too—"

I knew he was going to say dangerous, but I didn't wait around to confirm my suspicions. I sprinted toward the beast, darting to the side. The monster whirled and gave chase.

His sulfurous breath made my lungs burn as I ran. I could feel the heat of it as he pursued me toward the pond, and my heart thundered. His huge footsteps pounded behind me, stoking the fear that gave me speed.

I glanced over my shoulder. The monster was nearly upon me, his massive claws digging into the earth as he charged. One swipe of those claws, and I'd be dead.

But he wouldn't kill me. Marek wanted that honor for himself. The monster would trap me, and then wait for his

master to claim his prize.

It would probably hurt, though.

I put on a final burst of speed as I reached the lake and turned left, forcing him to veer after me. The beast's flank and left side were exposed, and Talan hurled green fire at the monster.

The surge slammed into the creature, driving the thing into the pond. The beast crashed into the water with an enormous splash, the pond sizzling and smoking.

Within seconds, the beast was gone.

Panting, I fell to my knees and tried to catch my breath. Talan ran up to me, his face pale and angry.

"I told you not to do that." He knelt, tilting my chin to examine my red face.

I was still struggling to catch my breath. "Good thing I don't listen to you."

A low laugh escaped him, short and surprised. "Good thing. Because that worked."

I nodded. "I figured Marek sent him to get me."

"He should have sent a bigger monster."

I looked toward the pond, which still fizzed faintly. "I'm happy to call it good with this one."

Talan nodded and straightened. I did the same, turning toward the house.

I winced at the sight of the damage. The creature had torn through the wall on the east wing, leaving gaping holes that revealed the furniture and decorations within.

"That will take some time to repair," I said.

“We’ll manage.” He lifted his chin at the guards who cleaned up the debris from the potion bombs and discarded spears. “Let’s see if any of them saw anything besides that monster.”

I nodded. “Good plan. There’s no way this is over yet.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

We strode over to the guards. As we neared them, a group walked out of the house.

For the briefest moment, I thought they were our friends.

Then I saw him—Marek.

I stopped dead in my tracks. He was flanked by ten guards, all hulking demons with ashy gray skin and brilliant white eyes.

But the worst was the sight of the Lightning Staff in Marek’s hand.

And there was no sign of Liora. Fear sliced me, and I prayed she wasn’t dead or terribly wounded.

“Cora, you’re mine,” Marek shouted, his voice thundering through the gardens. “It’s over. Come to me.”

At my side, Talan growled, then roared, “The hell she will.”

He raised his hands, his magic flaring in the air. It was so powerful that it nearly bowled me over, and he threw the biggest blast of green fire that I’d ever seen. It hit Marek like a steam train, and the man disappeared.

“Holy fates.” I staggered, looking at Talan.

He appeared pale, his face set in grim lines. “That was the last of my magic for the day.”

“Is he dead?” I knew it was too much to hope for, but I had to ask.

“No, but he is gone.”

Marek’s demon guards used transport charms to bail out as quickly as they could, leaving us in silence.

“We need to check on Liora,” I said. I could deal with Marek and the stolen staff later. For now, I needed to make sure she was okay.

Talan and I hurried toward the main door. The entire thing was gone, courtesy of Talan’s blast of demon fire, and the interior of the foyer smelled of smoke. Nothing was alight, though, and relief rushed through me when Liora staggered into the foyer.

She had a gruesome cut across her chest, along with one on her right shoulder and left thigh.

“They knocked me unconscious,” she said. “Is he still here?”

Talan shook his head. “Go see the healer.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I failed.”

“We all did.” He jerked his chin in the direction of the healer’s quarters. “See to those wounds at once.”

She nodded, her eyes dark with disappointment.

I knew the feeling. We’d once again lost Marek.

“He’ll be back,” I said. “Just as soon as he recovers from your fire.”

Talan nodded. “We’ll be ready.”

Would we?

“There’s an angry mob at your gate.” Calex’s familiar voice sounded from behind me, and I turned around to see him standing in the doorway.

“Your timing is impeccable,” Talan said. “Here, right after the danger.”

The enforcer’s mouth twitched, and it was obvious he wasn’t offended. Talan and he were on good terms, but it was strange to see Talan joking. The wry expression suited him, though.

“Angry mob of who?” I asked, but the dread in my stomach suggested I already knew.

“Townspople,” Calex said, confirming my suspicions.

I should go to Marek—it was the only way.

“I’m coming.” Talan looked at me. “Why don’t you get cleaned up, and I’ll see you soon?”

“No way I’m leaving you to do it alone.”

“It might be better if you stay here.”

“So they can’t demand that I leave?” I ask. “Or that I go to Marek?”

“I won’t allow it.”

“Not your choice.” I strode past him and out onto the lawn, heading for the path that led to the main gate.

“Guards!” Talan called.

He said nothing else, but they clearly knew what he wanted. They flanked me on all sides, but I ignored them as I marched to the gate.

I really didn’t want to find out that the residents of New Orleans, my new home, wanted to feed me to Marek so he’d

leave them alone, but it was what I expected.

I reached the guardhouse, spotting six of Talan's guards blocking the way into his compound. At least eighty people crowded at the gate, all shouting and gesturing.

My friends were squeezed into the crowd, right at the front. Mia, Rei, and Fiona spotted me almost immediately, and the worry on their faces faded.

"We want to know what's going on!" shouted an older woman in the front. She had curly golden hair and a wise face, along with a wicked-looking sword. Her posture suggested that she knew how to use it. "Why did that beast come here?"

I looked back at Talan, knowing that he was about to speak.

But there was nothing he could say.

This was my fault.

I raised my hands to get their attention. "Listen up!"

The crowd went silent, staring at me. I could feel Talan's gaze burning into my back as I faced the group of scared, angry people. "We all know that Marek has come here for me, so I'm going to go to him," I said, grateful that my voice was steady. "If I do that, he won't bother the town anymore."

"You can't do that!" Fiona yelled. From his perch around her shoulders, Balthazar hissed.

"You know she's right," Rei added, more softly. "He could do more damage if he got ahold of you."

"I'll figure a way around that," I said. But even as I said the words, I knew it was unlikely. What the hell was I going to do? Fight my way free?

As if.

But I was out of options. I couldn't be responsible for the destruction of New Orleans, but if I went to Marek, something worse could happen.

There were murmurs throughout the crowd as the people talked among themselves. I couldn't make out the words, but the buzz in the air made my heart thud.

The woman with the sword stepped forward. "We won't tolerate that."

"What?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"You can't just hand yourself over to him. You're one of us. We're not the kind of city to give up one of our own."

Tears pricked my eyes as I looked at her, then at the rest of the crowd.

Was this for real?

"We just need more information from the demon lord," she said. "Keep us apprised of the risks. We need to work together."

Talan stepped up beside me. "I can do that. Together, we can defeat the one who threatens our town."

I looked up at him, my throat tight. How had I gotten so lucky?

T *alan*

THE TOWNSPEOPLE DISPERSED, but I couldn't look away from Cora's face. She stared after them with an unreadable expression. I couldn't tell if it was confusion or surprise—or a mixture of both. There was almost a bit of grief there as well.

Her friends stalked up to the guards, faces set and posture determined. Balthazar's eyes flamed red. The four of them looked like they would push their way through if the guards didn't move aside.

“Let them in,” I said.

The guards parted to let the women through, and Fiona raised a brow at one of them as she passed. “That's how it is, and don't forget it.”

The guard gaped at her, and a small laugh escaped Cora.

Her friends approached her, worry on their faces.

“We've decided we're staying the night here,” Rei said.

Cora frowned. “It's too dangerous.”

“Psh.” Fiona waved a hand. “We don't care. The point is to be wherever you are.”

“You can’t do that.” Cora’s voice was tight with emotion. “It’s too risky.”

“Nah, we’re pros,” Mia said. “He doesn’t stand a chance against us.”

“Your day job is in a bakery, and your hobby is collecting fabulous dresses,” Cora said.

“I’d be offended if I knew you weren’t trying to drive me away for my own safety.” Mia shrugged. “Anyway, you’ve seen me in a fight. I can handle myself.”

“And then some,” Rei said.

Mia bumped shoulders with her friend. “Thanks, pal.”

Fiona looked at me. “We’ll show ourselves to our old rooms, eh?”

I looked back at the house, wincing at the damage to the east wing. “Maybe new bedrooms. I’m afraid your old rooms are no longer there.”

“Damn, that’s a shame,” said Fiona. “No one was hurt though, right?”

“Not permanently. Not that I know of,” I said. I had a feeling that Catriona was working overtime, though.

“Let’s get some rest,” Mia said. “He’ll be back, and we need to be ready.”

She was right. I’d drained my magic to drive Malek away, and I was exhausted. I probably shouldn’t have done it at all—we could have tried to take him out. But I’d been so angry when he’d said Cora was his, that I’d reacted without thinking.

Now, I’d need to rest and recoup my power as quickly as possible. The last thing we needed was to be unprepared when

Marek came back. With any luck, we'd find a way to ambush him before he could return.

Regardless where and when we met him, taking some time to regenerate our powers before the next battle made sense.

Cora still stood at my side, silent and intense.

"You look like you've been hit by a truck," Rei said.

"I feel like it." A heavy sigh escaped her, and she turned. "Let's go get cleaned up and rest. He'll be back sooner than we expect, I'm sure."

The women surrounded Cora and walked her back toward the house. I followed, keeping my distance so that they could talk if they needed to. As much as I wanted to hear what Cora had to say, I didn't want to be in the way if she needed her friends right now.

When we reached the house, Fiona whistled low under her breath when she saw the destroyed front door.

Liora and Madeline appeared in the entrance, both cleaned up after the battle.

I nodded toward our guests. "Liora, can you show them to some rooms? We're going to rest and recoup our magic before Marek returns."

"We don't want to ambush him on his turf?" Liora asked.

"Ideally, yes. But we need to recover first." Most of my guards were nowhere to be seen, which was more evidence that I was right. We needed go into the next fight fully armed with all of our power, and that included my men.

Liora nodded. "Fair point. I could use some recovery time." She gestured for the women to follow her. "Come on,

I'll show you to some rooms in the untouched part of the house."

Rei, Mia, and Fiona trailed after Liora and Madeline, but Cora didn't move.

The faintest flutter of hope expanded in my chest.

"Let's go grab some sleep," she said, her eyes shadowed with weariness.

I'd been unsure she'd want to share my bed again, but apparently, she did. I was glad, and I certainly wasn't going to do anything to spook her or make her change her mind.

We made our way through the house to my chambers. Entering the room, Cora toed off her boots and stripped out of her jeans and shirt. She didn't remove her bra or underwear as she fell into bed, and I followed her lead, stripping down to my boxer briefs.

As I lay beside her, she curled up against me, her head on my shoulder.

The most intense feeling of calm and comfort rushed over me, and I pulled her close.

"This is perfection," I murmured.

"Huh. I thought what we did earlier was perfection."

"That too."

She was silent for a few moments. When she spoke, her voice was soft. "I can't believe the townspeople didn't want to turn me over to Marek."

"You should believe it. It's not the first time you've heard it."

“Loretta.” She nodded against my shoulder. “That surprised me, too.”

“You’re part of this town,” I said. “You have a home here.”

She heaved a sigh. “It’s everything that I wanted. Before.”

“Before?” I looked down at her, but she kept her face tilted down so that I couldn’t see it.

“I’m immortal, now,” she said, her tone the same as if she were delivering news of cancer. “It’s part of the reincarnation.”

I cursed under my breath, low and fierce.

Immortality wasn’t the gift some people thought it was. Far from it. The only way it could ever be considered a good thing was if your entire species were immortal—then you wouldn’t have to watch all of your loved ones die before you.

No wonder she was so hesitant to pursue something with me.

“How am I supposed to grow to care for the people in this town if I know I’m going to have to watch them die?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” Grief for her tightened something in my chest. “But I’ll do everything in my power to find a way out for you.”

She laughed softly, a sad sound. “Thank you, but I don’t think that’s how this works. You, and everyone I love, will eventually die and go to your afterworlds. And I’ll be left here on earth, alone. Forever.”

I squeezed her tighter, wishing I could drive away this pain for her. She deserved better than this.

“Try to sleep,” I said. “I swear to you—I’ll find a way. And things will look better in the morning.”

This time her laugh was more genuine. “You mean when Marek shows up to kill us all?”

“Fair point. Things will probably look like shit in the morning, but at least you’ll be well rested.”

“Good point.” She snuggled closer to me, and warmth blossomed within me. “I might as well enjoy this, anyway.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

It took longer than I’d expected to fall asleep, but since I was pressed up against Cora, I enjoyed every minute.



Cora

WHEN I WOKE, I was still curled against Talan. It had been divine to sleep next to him, using his broad chest for a pillow.

How was I supposed to give this up?

I couldn’t.

Even if it meant watching him die centuries before me, I knew that I couldn’t stay away from him. Or from my friends or the people of New Orleans.

I was still scared—even more so now that I was immortal—but something had also changed in me. Maybe it was Talan. Maybe it was seeing the way everyone in the town joined together to protect each other—even me.

I would be foolish to throw that away, no matter how scared I was. The distant future might be dark and lonely, but that didn't mean the present had to be.

“Are you awake?” Talan murmured.

“Yes.” I yawned, looking toward the window to see if it was light out.

A strange gray haze filled the sky outside, and I rose to inspect it. I didn't want to leave Talan or the warm sheets, but dread drew me forward. I stared out the window at the dark clouds. They were massive and heavy, ominous and otherworldly.

“Have you seen this?” I asked.

Talan joined me at the window. He reached out to wrap an arm around me, but dropped it in shock when he saw what was outside. “No. That's not normal weather—not even for a hurricane.”

“It's Marek. It has to be.” Lightning struck amongst the clouds, brilliant white. Thunder boomed, shaking the glass in the windows.

“It looks like it covers the whole city,” Talan said.

“We need to get dressed.” I whirled around and scrambled into my discarded clothes. They were dirty, but it didn't matter. They were about to get a hell of a lot dirtier.

Talan dressed quickly, and we ran from the room, nearly slamming into Liora as she raised a hand to knock on the door.

She wasted no time on pleasantries. “There are reports of fulgur demons on the outskirts of town. Hundreds of them. They're making their way into the city now. Marek is with them.”

Shit. Fulgur demons could throw lightning, and they were mercenaries for hire. The demons who lived in Marek's part of the city were decent individuals trying to make a living. There were a few rotten apples in the bunch, but they weren't like the fulgur demons. Fulgur demons only cared about serving their master and getting paid, and they'd kill anyone they were told to.

Thunder boomed once more. Lightning was clearly a theme of Marek's attack.

"Hundreds? You're sure?" Talan asked.

She nodded, her eyes stark with worry. I spotted Madeline standing at the end of the hall, her dark gaze on Liora's back. Her jaw had gone tight at the mention of Marek's name, and I didn't blame her.

"The city will have to fight," Talan said.

Dread filled me.

"No." I couldn't bear the thought. "He's here because of me."

"You're going to have to get over that," Liora said. "We're not giving you up, and we're not sitting this one out."

My mind raced. If there really were hundreds of fulgur demons, people would die. A lot of people.

We needed fighters who didn't have that weakness.

"I need to get to the cemetery," I said.

Talan turned to look at me, brows raised in shock. "Really? Why?"

"We need reinforcements, and I have an idea."

My friends careened into the hall behind Madeline, their faces pale. Balthazar stood at Fiona's side, back arched and smoke wafting wildly off him.

"You've seen outside?" Fiona asked.

I nodded. "We're headed to the cemetery now."

Her eyes widened, and she nodded. "Good idea."

"At least she knows what you're on about," Liora said.

Fiona knew that I could compel ghosts. And while I couldn't compel them to join the fight against Marek, I could at least ask.

"I'm going to rally the troops toward the edge of town," Liora said. "We have dozens of guards. They'll be the first line of defense."

Talan's phone vibrated in his pocket, and he pulled it out to read a message. "Calex is gathering all the enforcers. They'll join you."

"I'll go to the witches," Rei said. "They probably already know what's going on, but if not, I'll tell them."

Shit, shit, shit.

So many people would be fighting.

"I'm headed out," I said. Mad Maury would be my best bet. He was one of the most powerful ghosts in town, and his mausoleum wasn't far from here in one of the closer cemeteries.

"I'll come with you," Talan said.

"We'll go with Liora," Fiona said. At her side, Mia nodded.

Ice chilled my spine. Fiona had just come back to life, and now she was headed to the front of the battle. She arched a brow, as if challenging me to say something to stop her.

But there was only one thing to say. “Thank you.”

She nodded. “You’d do it for me.”

I blew out a breath and watched them turn to leave. We followed them out of the house and across the grounds. Above us, the clouds roiled violently. They stretched as far as I could see, hovering over the city like an ominous blanket. There was no rain, which made it even eerier, but the scent of ozone and sulfur was heavy in the air.

Lightning continued to strike, and the constant rumble of thunder was enough to make my lungs vibrate. Talan and I reached the main part of town and deviated from the rest of the group, heading toward Mad Maury’s cemetery.

We strode through the large white gate at the entrance of the graveyard and made our way down one of the long narrow avenues that separated the stone mausoleums.

As before, it was colder in the cemetery. Darker, too, though it wasn’t as noticeable with the heavy cloud cover. Everywhere in town was darker than normal.

All around, ghosts peeked out from behind the ancient mausoleums. They hadn’t shown themselves so obviously last time I’d been here, but it was impossible not to notice that something was wrong with New Orleans. Even the ghosts were interested.

We reached Mad Maury’s mausoleum, which was covered with mirrors. Each pane of glass rippled and shimmered like water, revealing a distorted view of myself as I approached.

We were nearly to the door when Mad Maury flung it open and stepped out into the cemetery. He was a wizened old man who glowed with a faint white light. Power radiated from him, and I was glad I'd chosen to come to him. He was the right one for the job.

"What's going on?" he demanded, his voice as crotchety as one would expect from such an old ghost. "The whole town is going crazy."

"We're under attack," I said. "A man named Marek has created this storm, and he's brought hundreds of fulgur demons to the edges of the city."

Maury narrowed his eyes. "Why did he come here?"

"Because of me."

The man harrumphed. "I knew you were trouble the minute I saw you."

"You were trouble in your day, old man," Talan said. "The stories of you are legendary."

Maury grinned. "True enough." He turned back to me. "I like you, girl. Knew that the first time I saw you, too."

"Will you help us?" I asked. "The town needs you."

"The town needs more than me."

I nodded. "I was hoping you'd summon the other ghosts so I can ask them to join us, too."

He nodded. "You're going to need them. Follow me."

He floated down the path away from his mausoleum, and we did as he commanded. About twenty yards away, he stopped in front of a tall post that had been topped with a bell. He reached up and rang the thing. It clanged far more loudly

than I would have expected, and I slapped my hands over my ears.

It didn't do much good, but at least my brain didn't feel like it was vibrating. When it faded, I lowered my hands. "That's how you call them?"

"What did you expect me to do, howl?" he scoffed. "I'm not a wolf."

"Fair enough."

Within seconds, a hundred ghosts appeared, if not more. The old woman from the grocery store materialized at my side, a cloud of cigarette smoke wafting around her.

"What trouble are you causing now?" she asked me.

"Bad trouble." I looked at Maury. "Is everyone here?"

"Is it not enough?" He glowered at me.

"No, it's perfect!" I raised my hands in a placating gesture. The last thing I needed was to offend him.

"Exactly." He gestured to a bench nearby. "Now get up there and say your piece."

I climbed onto the bench to address the crowd, my heart thundering. A hundred expectant, ghostly faces turned up to mine.

I drew in a deep breath and spoke. "A man named Marek has brought an army of fulgur demons to the city. Since you can't die, I was hoping you would help us hold them off while I find Marek and kill him. Once he's dead, the demons will have no reason to keep fighting."

Murmurs traveled through the crowd, and the woman at my side made a delighted sound.

“We’ll possess them,” she said, sounding as if that were something she would enjoy. From the looks on the other ghosts’ faces, they would enjoy it, too. “Not all of us have the gift of possession, though,” she added.

“That’s all right,” I said. “I’ll need help finding Marek. Maybe some of you can act as scouts. Marek will be the only human with a golden staff about four feet long.”

She nodded. “Yes, very good.” She stuck two fingers between her lips and gave the most piercing whistle I’d ever heard. “Those of you who can possess demons, get to it,” she said, once she had everyone’s attention. “Make them kill each other and themselves. Those of you without that gift, act as scouts and distractions. I’ll stay by this one’s side.” She hiked a thumb at me. “Be on the lookout for the bastard human who is in charge of this endeavor. Our girl says he’ll be carrying a golden staff. If you see him, report to me through the whisper network, and I’ll tell her.”

It was silly, but warmth filled me to hear her call me *our girl*. I just had to be worthy of it.

C *ora*

AS THE GHOSTS drifted out of the cemetery, the old woman turned to me. Her cloud of transparent, once-white hair was teased up as high as she could get it, and the shoulder pads on her jeweled jacket were something to behold. She'd been at least ninety when she'd died, and she reminded me of one of the Golden Girls.

"I'm Maude." She flicked her cigarette to the side. "What do I call you?"

"Cora."

"And who's this handsome man?" she asked, nodding at Talan.

"Talan, at your service," he said.

She smiled. "I like you. Now let's get a move on."

I shared a brief look with him as Maude floated through the cemetery. We followed, and I was glad to have the grumpy ghost on my side. She'd commanded the attention of the other ghosts with efficiency, and she clearly knew everyone in town.

In fact, there were far more ghosts here than I'd expected, despite the fact that Mad Maury had assumed I'd be disappointed by the numbers. As far as I'd known, ghosts were often trapped near the location of their death or burial. Fiona had been bound to stay near my house for much of her ghosthood.

I hurried up to Maude. "How can you travel so far from the grocery store that you usually haunt?"

"Age, honey. I've been dead long enough that I've become more powerful. That goes for the rest of the ghosts who showed up here. There are more in the city who can't leave their places of death, but we'll get word to them about the fight to come. They'll do their part."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me," she grouched. "This town is as much ours as it is the living's. More so."

"Can't argue with that."

Talan and I followed her out onto the street. The rest of the ghosts had already dispersed, headed for the edges of town where the demons had been seen.

"We should make for the center of the city," I said. "We don't know which direction Marek will choose and that seems like the best location until we know where he is."

"I'll lead." Maude moved swiftly through town, not bound by the limits of an earthly body.

I ran to keep up, my senses on high alert. Talan stuck close by my side as lightning began to strike the buildings around us. Until now, the blasts had stayed amongst the clouds. Marek must be growing frustrated.

I prayed that people would stay inside and leave the fight to the ghosts and professionals.

It was a pointless prayer, though. Word of the attack had clearly spread, because people poured out of apartments and homes, armed with potion bombs, weapons, and their magic.

New Orleans was going to defend itself—I just had to catch Marek quickly enough to ensure that we didn't lose too many people.

Too many people.

The idea of losing anyone made me ill, but I couldn't focus on that. I needed every bit of my attention on the fight ahead.

Thunder boomed around us as we moved deeper into the city. We ran into trouble within minutes. A swarm of demons charged down the street. Four ghosts intercepted them, disappearing inside of them. The demon bodies glowed with a faint white light as the ghosts forced them to turn on their brethren. Lightning struck as the fulgur demons shot their magic at each other, but there were still too many of them.

More than a dozen had avoided the ghosts' attack and surged toward us, several wielding blades that sparked with electricity. Creating lightning took a lot of magic, and I assumed the blades were a way to extend their power and keep them in the fight for longer.

Talan hurled a blast of green demon fire at four of the enemy, taking them out in an explosion of emerald flames.

"I'll be right back, honey." Maude charged the demon in the lead, her ghostly form disappearing inside him.

He glowed with the faintest blue light as he turned and struck his companion with his blade. I could hear Maude

cackling inside the possessed body, and I left her to it, turning my attention to the demons who were nearly upon me.

There were two of them, and they raised twin swords crackling with electricity. I eyed them warily, not liking my odds against such long blades that could possibly shoot lightning.

I had to try something new.

Instinct drove me to touch the ground, and I imagined my death magic streaking through the earth and hitting them where they stood. The power flowed out of me, cracking the asphalt as it streaked toward the demons attacking me.

My magic shot into them, and the demons dropped like stones.

I stood, shaking my hand.

Maude, who had finished with her demon, gave me an appraising look.

“I know,” I said. “A useful talent, but a miserable one.”

She shrugged. “We work with what we’ve got. You’ve got good intentions, and that’s what matters.”

I did have good intentions, but was it enough?

I might never know.

Ahead of us, Talan and the other ghosts finished off the demons they’d been fighting. The street was clear ahead of us, so we continued on. We were nearly to the cross section when I began to hear whispers in the air. I couldn’t quite make out what the whispers were saying, but Maude appeared to be listening intently.

“Your target is on the west side of town,” she said a moment later. “Let’s head that way.”

I turned toward the street that would take us there. Talan kept close by my side, his sword drawn and his left hand sparking with green magic, ready to be thrown.

When a group of giant alligator-like monsters careened into the street in front of us, my heart fell.

How the hell were we going to get past them? The other fighters had gone in a different direction, which meant it was just the three of us against six massive beasts.

“I’ve got this.” Talan pointed to a fire escape that led to the roof of a building on our left. “You go high so you can get around them and get to Marek.”

“I can’t leave you to fight them alone,” I protested.

The creatures barreled toward us, moving swiftly on stocky legs. Their fangs glinted in the harsh glow of the lightning, and their acid green gaze was pure evil.

A parade float pulled onto our street, a troop of witches riding on top of it. Rei was in the lead. They must have commandeered a float from the parade earlier that week, but it was perfect. It gave them a higher vantage point and a place for their fighters to stand as they drove through town.

“See? I’m not alone.” Talan nodded toward the float. “Now, go.”

“All right,” I said, my chest tight at the idea of leaving him. But he was right—I needed to go to Marek if we wanted this to end soon. A showdown was our only shot, and I had to win.

The parade float sped up as it approached, and the witches whooped as they threw magic at the oncoming monsters, sonic booms and spears of ice.

I gave Talan one quick, hard kiss, then turned and raced for the fire escape stairs.

“You’ve got a good man there,” Maude said, darting beside me.

I almost said that he wasn’t mine, but that would be a lie. Anyway, I needed to save my breath for the climb ahead. I sprinted up the three flights of metal stairs, leapt onto the roof, and ran along it. I could see the fight perfectly from here, spotting Talan as he took out two of the monsters in one massive green blast. The witches were right at his side, their attack just as vicious.

More whispers filled the air, the ghosts communicating through their network. It made energy fizz against my skin, almost as if faint dust motes were swirling around me.

“You can hear it, can’t you?” Maude asked.

“Not the words, but I know they’re talking to you. Where is he?”

“Getting closer to the center of town. Some reports say he’s headed to Jackson Square.”

“Of course he is.” I leapt onto a slightly higher roof and kept moving, my lungs burning. Marek would like the stage provided by New Orleans’s most famous square. “I bet you know the fastest way. You lead.”

Maude nodded and moved more swiftly, forcing me to run even faster.

We reached an intersection where a battle raged below. Townsfolk fought against demons, and as much as I wanted to join them in their fight, I needed to take out Marek so the fighting could end entirely.

I cursed as I neared the end of the roof. There was no way I could leap from this building to the next, nor was there a conveniently placed fire escape to shimmy down.

I was screwed.

“Don’t slow down!” Maude shouted.

“I’m almost out of roof!” But I listened to her, feeling like I was losing my mind as I sprinted toward the edge. “You’d better have a plan!”

“As long as you’ve got momentum, I’ve got a plan!”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Just close your eyes, it’ll be fine.”

There was no way in hell I was doing that. She slapped me hard on the butt, and a jolt of ghostly magic surged through me, launching me into the air. I flew, limbs pinwheeling, across the street, and landed with a crash on the other side, tumbling head over heels. Pain flared as I scrambled upright to see Maude grinning at me.

“Was that entirely necessary?” I asked, panting as I picked up the pace to keep going.

“You’re over, aren’t you?”

She was right about that. I’d made it, and there was another long expanse of buildings that I could run across without being slowed by the fighting in the streets. I just hoped I didn’t have to do that again.

The fighting intensified the closer we got to Jackson Square. There were more demons and monsters, but just as many ghosts and townspeople to fight them. It was the sight of the bodies that gave me the extra energy I needed to keep sprinting at full speed. I didn't know if there were any deaths on our side, but there were certainly grievous injuries. It would be too good to be true not to lose anyone to such a vicious fight.

I had to stop this.

More ghostly whispers filled the air, and Maude said. "He's reached the square and stopped. They think he's waiting for you."

"How close are we?"

"Two blocks."

I picked up the pace, lungs and muscles straining from exertion.

Down in the street, I caught sight of familiar faces battling a horde of demons.

Varen and Elisa, along with other manslaga that I'd seen at The Sanctuary.

My stomach pitched as hope flared. How had they gotten here? Someone must have told them what was happening, and they'd come to help. No doubt they'd taken transport charms to get here so quickly, and they were cutting through the demons with record speed.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. So many people fighting for our city because they loved it and each other.

Marek and his demons didn't stand a chance against us. I just had to reach him.



Talan

I FOUGHT my way toward Jackson Square, having gotten word from Calex that he'd spotted Marek there. The bastard was surrounded by demons and the enforcers couldn't break through. I knew the bastard was waiting for Cora.

I had to be there when she arrived.

Exhaustion pulled at me as I fought my way through the crowd of demons in the city streets. I'd parted ways with the witches and their parade float several blocks ago, but I'd come across roving gangs of ghosts and townspeople who were determined to defend their city.

I'd always known New Orleans was full of fighters, but this proved it beyond my wildest imaginings.

While some people fought in the streets, others pulled the injured off the sidewalks and into the houses. I had no idea how many we had lost, but it was going to be a great many. The demons and monsters were just too powerful and too large in numbers.

I couldn't bear to think what it would do to Cora to know that people had died at Marek's hand. Thinking about it didn't help, though.

The only thing I could do now was fight.

I called upon my demon fire, knowing that I was running low once more but unable to think of another way to plow through two dozen demons. With a roar, I fired a blast the size

of a semi-truck. It bowled through the horde, sending them flying like bowling pins and clearing the path in front of me.

I sprinted the rest of the way to Jackson Square, my heartbeat pounding as I searched for Cora.

I spotted her climbing down a building on the left side of the square. Fear lanced through me. There were at least forty demons between her and Marek, who stood in the center of the square like a damned king, the Lightning Staff at his side.

Cora's friends appeared beside her, weapons raised. Liora and Madeline were with them, along with some of the other manslaga. I'd told Varen what was happening, knowing that he'd want a piece of Marek if he could get it. All of the manslaga wanted their chance at the bastard. But there were more of them than I'd expected.

Cora and her friends collided with the demons, fighting with magic and blades as lightning struck all around. It slammed down from the sky, sending debris flying.

I sprinted for them, joining the fight with my sword instead of my demon fire. It was a melee, our side mingling with theirs, and I couldn't risk hurting our fighters.

Cora spotted me through the crowd, but there was no time for our gazes to linger. She whirled gracefully to slice at an oncoming demon, her karambit severing his jugular as he flailed backward.

“Clear a path!” Marek's roar carried over the fighting.

His demons did as he commanded, moving away so that Cora could approach Marek.

It was like something out of an old Western, the two of them facing off in the square at high noon.

“If you want me, you’re going to have to come and get me.” Marek’s voice echoed with delighted glee, and he raised the golden staff high.

Lightning struck the ground between him and Cora, bolt after bolt that created a minefield for her to cross. Thunder boomed, shaking the ground beneath our feet as the sky lit with cold white lightning.

Jaw tight with determination, Cora charged him.

C *ora*

LIGHTNING STRUCK all around me as I sprinted toward Marek. The bastard used the Lightning Staff to force dozens of bolts from the sky. Pure, white electricity plunged into the ground nearby, thunder booming loud enough to deafen.

When the first bolt struck me, I thought I was dead. Pain seared every inch of my body, but I kept going, somehow.

Was it because I was now a goddess?

The immortality had to help.

I caught sight of Talan, fighting demons at the side of the square, his blade whirling with a terrifying efficiency as he beheaded one after the other.

Another strike of lightning landed on me, a direct hit that nearly brought me to my knees. I forced myself upright and plunged on, but it was impossible not to notice Talan's jerk of pain when the lightning struck me.

He's taking some of the blow.

The necklace he'd given me allowed him to absorb some of the damage, and it was helping me cross the minefield

toward Marek. That monster wanted me incapacitated when I reached him, but he wasn't going to get so lucky.

"You don't stand a chance," Marek called, his voice filled with evil delight. "You're mine, Cora. And your magic will be the greatest weapon I'll ever wield."

I gritted my teeth, dodging the lightning as best I could, but Marek was fast. The grin on his face was sickening as he used my own Lightning Staff against me, sending bolts of electricity into me and Talan.

I was only halfway to Marek when I saw Talan go to his knees. There were no demons around him—it was purely the lightning that was wounding him.

He's taking more of the blast than I am.

Or his mortality was his weakness.

"Talan!" I screamed.

If I kept going, he could die. There were already too many bodies scattered around the square—too many lives lost. I couldn't lose Talan as well.

"Keep going." His voice was raspy and weak with pain, but I could hear it all the way across the square. "Don't quit."

He meant it. I could see it in every line of his face.

My heart clutched, agony piercing me as I closed the last of the distance between Marek and me. More lightning struck, enough that I was nearly blinded from the pain.

I wanted to charge him as fast as I could, but I didn't want him to realize I was stronger than he thought. The lightning would have incapacitated me already if I weren't wearing the charm Talan had given me. I needed the element of surprise

against Malek, so I slowed my pace, zig-zagging unevenly as the lightning struck again and again.

Marek's ravenous gaze was glued to me as I staggered toward him. He raised the staff as if to plunge it through my heart.

There was no way in hell he'd get the chance.

I called on the last of my energy, remembering every time he'd abused me. He was nothing but pure evil, and I was going to end him. The thought gave me strength—so much strength that *I* felt like a lightning bolt.

I put on a burst of speed. Shock flashed on his face. I leapt toward him, smacking the Lightning Staff aside as I plowed into him with my entire body weight. We slammed to the ground, me on top of him.

“You won't hurt anyone again,” I said, vicious in my intensity as I wrapped my hands around his bare neck and fed my death magic into him.

Shock turned to rage as he realized that I'd tricked him. He hadn't known that Talan had helped me endure his attacks. He never could have imagined helping someone else like that.

I watched the light fade from his eyes, making sure he was fully dead before I grabbed the lightning staff and stood.

My gaze went immediately to Talan, who was still on his knees.

Alive, thank fates.

But that was more than I could say for many of the others on our side. As the demons disappeared, sensing their master's death, and knowing there was no reason to stick around, I was able to see the extent of the casualties.

Bodies lay scattered around the square, limbs flung wide and awkward.

Tears filled my eyes, a tearing pain severing my soul in two. When I spotted the familiar curls spread out around a pretty face, a cry of agony escaped me.

Fiona.

She was twenty feet away. Balthazar was at her side, staring fixedly at her blank face. I ran to her and dropped to my knees.

“Fiona!” I gripped her shoulders and shook her, but nothing happened. She lay still and slack, her face frozen in death.

No, no, no.

This couldn't be happening.

“She's gone.” Gentle hands gripped my shoulders, trying to pull me away. “We need to take care of her body.”

“No!” I screamed the word so loudly that my ears rang. “No!”

Whoever had gripped my shoulders let go, and I stayed by Fiona's side, my mind racing.

I couldn't tolerate this. I wouldn't.

I don't have to.

Hapheta's words rang in my ears once more. Life and death, two sides of a coin.

I'd used plenty of my death power today. It was time for life.

I had no idea what I was doing, but I had the Lightning Staff by my side. And I was a goddess now, for fate's sake.

I wouldn't lose my friend.

Determination surged through me as I gripped the lightning staff in one hand and pressed my other to her chest. Tears poured from my eyes as I fed my magic into her, careful to pull only from the life magic, although it probably didn't matter. It wasn't like I could kill her more.

Power vibrated around me, and the Lightning Staff glowed with a pale white light. I could feel the death inside Fiona, a darkness that rushed over her, and I was going to drive it out with my light.

In fact, I could feel the death all around me. Dozens of citizens of New Orleans had died tonight, and they were all connected together. Just like the ghosts were connected, I could feel the recently deceased through Fiona. Their loss weighed like a million-pound stone, threatening to drag me into the earth.

And I would let it. Eventually.

But first, I was going to save Fiona.

I was going to save *all* of them.

I forced more of my magic into her, driving away the death that cloaked her. I could barely see through my tears, and my entire body had gone numb as I worked.

"Stop, you're killing yourself." Mia's familiar voice sounded at my side, her hand on my shoulder.

I shook her off. "I'm not stopping."

I kept working, feeling myself grow weaker with every ounce of magic that I poured into Fiona. My new magic was wildly powerful, and I was going to use every bit of it I could.

Instinct drove me, and I stoked the connection between Fiona and the others who had died.

The life that I fed into her flowed into the others, too, filling vessels recently emptied. She wouldn't wake until they all did, and there was no way I would stop now.

And yet, Mia was right. I was running out of power.

There were just too many of them.

How was I supposed to fill so many with my finite magic? I might be a goddess, but even I didn't have infinite power.

A ragged sob escaped me, but I refused to give up. I'd rather die than quit.

When several unfamiliar pairs of hands gripped my shoulders and arms, I blinked to clear my vision, looking up to see Varen and Elisa. Other manslaga that I didn't recognize were touching me as well.

There were dozens of them—every single person from The Sanctuary, as well as Madeline and others I didn't recognize. They formed a chain, gripping me and each other.

Their magic rushed into me.

Two sides of a coin.

I took the death magic from them, letting it fill me, letting my power convert it to life. I fed it into Fiona and all the rest, acting as a conduit for the magic the others shared.

I had no idea how it was happening—the mechanics of it were beyond me. But I was a goddess, and the manslaga had been created from my blood. Together, we used our power to revive those who had died tonight, feeding life into their still forms.

Two halves of a coin.

I could feel the last of the power seeping from the other manslaga, flowing through me and into Fiona. Soon, we were out. There was nothing left to draw upon.

Panting, I opened my eyes, not realizing that I'd shut them at some point. I was slumped over Fiona, so weak I could barely lift my head. I forced myself to sit up, staring at Fiona as hope and despair fought within me.

Please, wake up.

All around me, the other manslaga were staggering to their feet.

Fiona's lashes fluttered, and she blinked up at me. Her gaze cleared, and she sucked in a shocked breath. Balthazar jumped on her chest, and she sank a hand into his fur.

"Do you think I get a prize for dying twice?" she asked.

A shocked laugh escaped me, and I threw myself at her, hugging her. "I can't believe that worked."

"The others are waking up!" Elisa cried.

I let go of Fiona and swiveled my head around, frantically searching for the others. Slowly, people rose from the ground, hugging those around them. Wounds had closed and life had returned to their bodies.

"Holy fates," I breathed. Being a goddess had its perks after all.

"You did it." Fiona grinned, throwing her arms around me once more. "I don't know how you did it, since I was dead at the time, but you did it."

I nodded, joy surging through me.

Talan appeared at my side, kneeling down to wrap an arm around me. “Reports are coming in from all over the city. Those who were killed have revived.”

I blinked back tears, looking past him at the other manslaga. I couldn’t have done it without them. I couldn’t have done any of this without them.

Varen and Elise approached, along with Madeline and another woman with long golden hair. They flopped to the ground next to me, clearly exhausted.

“This is Carolina.” Madeline nodded to her companion. “The friend who was going to come back for me.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you for coming here.”

“I could feel you,” she said. “All of us could. We could feel that we were needed here, and we came.”

I blinked, looking around at the crowd that surrounded me. They were *all* like me. So many manslaga—even more than I’d realized.

I turned to Talan, a question on my lips.

“I called Varen and told him what was happening,” he said before I could ask it. “But I didn’t call the rest of these people.”

“Neither did I,” Varen said. “I brought everyone from The Sanctuary, but the rest must have been like Carolina. They felt it when you became Lelwani and knew when you needed help.”

Holy fates, it was more than I had ever imagined.

I opened my mouth, but it took a few tries to speak. When I did, it wasn’t very impressive. “I don’t know what to say—“

“Actually, I think we have something to say,” Madeline said. She held out her hand, pointing a trembling finger to a blade of grass that peeked through a crack in one of the paving stones. When she touched it, the blade slowly wilted. Then she moved her hand to a small daisy that had broken through the stone. It was bigger than the grass, but not by much. She touched it, but nothing happened.

Shocked, I looked up at her. “You’re trying to use your power?”

“Gone.” She smiled. “Mostly. And not in the way that will be regenerated with some rest—I can already tell. When we gave it to the people of New Orleans to revive them, that was it. Gone. I’ve got just enough that I can do a tiny bit of weed control, but that’s it.”

A delighted laugh escaped me, and I looked at everyone else. Joy spread across so many faces. No one with a decent heart wanted to be a manslaga. It was a curse more than anything—the worst kind of magic in the world. One that meant we were hunted and forced to do terrible things.

“And you feel okay?” I asked, searching my own soul for any feeling of loss. I felt almost none of the death magic that had lurked inside me for so long, but I also didn’t feel the horrible emptiness that came when a supernatural lost *all* their power. “Your soul feels intact?”

“Right as rain,” Madeline said.

“Me, too,” Elise added. “I couldn’t kill a fly, but there’s just enough left that I feel fine. My soul is totally intact.”

I felt it, too. More than that, I could feel that my immortality was gone. As I looked at the happiness of everyone around me, Talan wrapped an arm around my waist.

We were no longer bound by the horrible magic that had defined us for so long.

We were free, all of us were free.



Talan

I STARED DOWN AT CORA, awed by what she'd accomplished. It should have been impossible, but she'd revived every soul we'd lost in the battle. All around us, people rejoiced and tended to each other's wounds.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could make out a group of manslaga gathering around Marek's body. I didn't know what they would do with him, but I didn't care. His demon forces that had survived the attack were gone, thank fates, and the bodies of the deceased were disappearing back to their underworlds.

We'd lost demons from our side, though I didn't know how many. If their bodies had already disappeared back to their underworlds before Cora had started reviving everyone, I would get them and bring them home. It was one of the unique parts of being a demon. We would eventually die of old age and be returned to our underworlds, but until then, we could go back and forth—albeit with a bit of magical help. All the rest, Cora had saved.

I could hear her name whispered through the crowd and felt the attention of people arriving in the square to see the woman who had saved them all. Not only had she saved them, but she'd also saved herself and the rest of the manslaga from

the burden of their magic. They could have normal lives now, unafraid of being hunted.

All around, there was chaos in the square. But it was good chaos, a joyous one. Crying and laughing and shouting.

Still, I couldn't look away from Cora. Fiona and the manslaga had moved on, talking to each other and likely preparing to leave. It felt like Cora and I were in a bubble, just the two of us, and I couldn't imagine ever letting her go.

She turned to me, her eyes wide and her expression shocked. "I'm mortal. Giving so much of my life force to the people of New Orleans saved me."

"Cora, that's amazing." Joy exploded inside me. I pulled her toward me and kissed her, feeling her trembling beneath me. She kissed me back, her arms wrapped around her neck. There was a desperation to her and an unfettered joy that made me happier than I'd ever been in my life.

There was something different about her now that she was free. An aura of peace, or maybe...contentment that existed alongside the joy. I could feel it radiating from her.

She pulled back and looked up at me, her eyes shining with tears. "I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you."

The words tumbled from her lips, the best thing I'd heard in my entire life.

"I was too afraid to admit it before," she added. "To myself or to you. But after everything that's happened, I realize how silly that is. Life is short instead of endless, thank fates, and I want to spend it with you."

I pressed a kiss to her lips, murmuring, "I love you, too—with my entire heart and soul. I want to spend every day of

this life with you, and when we finally pass on, I want to spend it in my afterworld with you.”

She smiled and kissed me back. “That sounds perfect.”

EPILOGUE

Cora

IT HAD BEEN a month since we'd driven Marek and his demons from New Orleans, and every day of it had been better than the last. Living without my horrible murder magic was more amazing that I could have imagined.

Not to mention, living without the burden of Marek hunting me was *phenomenal*. I'd gotten a chance to talk to many of the other manslaga, and they'd all said the same. They were no longer hunted or afraid of being found out, and they'd gone on to start new lives, lives they couldn't have dreamed of.

Madeline had moved to New Orleans, and it was obvious to everyone why—Liora.

The two hadn't been seen out of each other's company all month, and Talan's stalwart second in command was grinning from ear to ear every time I saw her. The gossip network had reported sightings of the two of them on dates in the cutest restaurants in town, and I couldn't have been happier for them.

Nor could I have been happier for myself.

Life with Talan was amazing. I hadn't yet moved in with him, despite his frequent requests. I was delighted to be in my little apartment, living the quiet life I'd always wanted. Talan spent every night in my bed, anyway. There was no incentive for me to move to his giant place across town.

Fiona had moved out, along with Balthazar. Fortunately, they'd only gone next door to a recently vacated apartment, and I saw them every day in the bookstore that we ran together. Balthazar's toaster stayed plugged in at the desk, and he spent most of the day lounging there as Fiona and I helped customers find books and happily took their money.

I might be in love with the wealthiest guy in town, but I wanted to pay my own way with the money that I earned. Eventually, I might not worry about it so much, but my former life was still at the edge of my mind. Back then, I hadn't even had money—just the room and board provided by the man who'd kept me prisoner.

But now that bastard was dead, and the bad memories were farther away every day. And on a beautiful day like today, how could I dwell on them?

Fiona and I had just closed up the bookstore after a successful day, and she'd gone home to get changed for the parade later tonight. Balthazar still slept on the desk toaster, his little snores filling the air as I pattered around the shop and tended to the plants.

I might have lost my death magic, but I'd been left with a tiny gift from the goddess Lelwani. I didn't think of myself as her, since I had no memories and no epic, godly magic. But I did have the ability to make plants thrive. Unlike the other manslaga who'd lost most of their magic, I couldn't kill blades of grass or flowers or anything. That magic was entirely gone.

Instead, I'd been left with the other side of the coin—*life*.

Any time I saw a wilting flower, all I had to do was touch it and send it a jolt of my magic to bring it back to life. My magic wasn't powerful enough to save entire trees or forests, but I was content with my little indoor garden. I'd become obsessed, collecting plants from all over the world and growing them in pots that hung in the shop windows.

The result was a glorious haven of books and greenery, the most perfect place I could imagine. And with Balthazar the demon cat, we really had everything for the ideal bookstore.

I spun to inspect the shop, taking great joy in the sight of it, peaceful and quiet as the sun set outside, filling the room with golden light.

Perfection.

I turned at a knock on the door. Through the glass, I saw Mia, Fiona, and Rei waiting for me.

“Balthazar, wake up!” I called. “It's parade time.”

He grumbled and didn't move.

“Suit yourself,” I said as I walked to the door. “But I'm keeping all the parade chocolate for myself.”

Balthazar's head popped up, and he glared at me. If he could speak, I was sure I'd hear him say, *Fine, I'm coming. But I'm going to be grumpy.*

I grinned and picked him up, setting him on my shoulders so that he could drape around my neck. He'd gotten to like me as much as Fiona and would occasionally deign to ride on me like the little prince he was.

“I promise I'll share my chocolate with you,” I said, relenting.

He purred, wrapping himself around my neck as I pulled open the door to greet my friends.

“Ready for this?” Fiona smiled widely.

“Sure am. I just hope it ends better than the last parade we went to.” Though I was joking, it was still a terrifying memory. But the more jokes I told, the more I took the power out of it.

“It’ll be a blast. The theme is Willy Wonka.” Rei grinned widely. “Balthazar is going to love that.”

“He’ll be unstoppable, with all that sugar,” I said.

Fiona shuddered. “He’s spending the night at your place, then. He gets the midnight zoomies something fierce if he eats too much sugar before bed.”

“Is he your cat or your child?” Mia asked.

“Both.” Fiona scratched him under his chin, and he purred even louder. “Now let’s get out of here. I want a good spot for this parade, and the entire town will be there. It’s going to be competitive.”

“Talan and Calex are saving us a spot near Enforcement headquarters,” I said.

“Lucky us!” Rei turned and started down the street.

We followed, joining the crowds as they moved toward the parade site. The air was warm and scented with the flowers that hung off the balconies overhead, and it was the most perfect night.

At the corner of Villeneuve and Burgundy, I spotted Talan and Calex. They’d saved us a small spot right at the front, but I could see Maude the ghost giving Talan the evil eye. She

wasn't a fan of spot savers, I was sure, but when she saw me, she smiled.

I crossed the street, my friends at my side, and joined Calex and Talan. I reached up to wrap my arms around Talan's neck and press a kiss to his lips.

Balthazar growled from his spot around my neck, not enjoying the disruption of his nap, and I grinned as I pulled back and looked up at Talan. "Thanks for saving us a spot."

"Rude," Maude muttered.

I peeked around Talan to grin at the ghost. "Come stand by me. You saved the day at the Battle of New Orleans—you certainly deserve a front row seat."

She harrumphed her approval and joined me. I turned, staying within the circle of Talan's arms, and leaned back against his chest to wait for the show. Balthazar abandoned his perch on my shoulders and climbed onto Talan, no doubt wanting the higher vantage point for catching chocolate.

All around me, the streets were full of happy people waiting for the parade to start. My friends chatted away, swigging sips of wine out of the bottle that Mia had brought.

Talan leaned down to murmur against my ear. "A good life, isn't it?"

"The perfect life."

~~~

That's it for Talan and Cora, but there will be a new adventure coming later this year!



## **THANK YOU FOR READING!**

I hope you enjoyed reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. Reviews are *so* helpful to authors. I really appreciate all reviews, both positive and negative. If you want to leave one, you can do so at Amazon or GoodReads.

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## **ABOUT LINSEY**

Before becoming a writer, Linsey Hall was a nautical archaeologist who studied shipwrecks from Hawaii and the Yukon to the UK and the Mediterranean. She credits fantasy and historical romances with her love of history and her career as an archaeologist. After a decade of tromping around the globe in search of old bits of stuff that people left lying about, she settled down and started penning her own romance novels. Her Dragon's Gift series draws upon her love of history and the paranormal elements that she can't help but include.



This is a work of fiction. All reference to events, persons, and locale are used fictitiously, except where documented in historical record. Names, characters, and places are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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