

THE 14TH RIDER

A man with a serious expression is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark leather motorcycle jacket. He is sitting on a motorcycle, with the handlebars and a round headlight visible. The background is a dark city skyline at night, with lights from buildings reflecting on a body of water in the foreground. The overall color palette is dark with blue and white highlights.

A

NOVEL

OF THE MONSTERS MC PNR SERIES BY

HEATHER KILLOUGH-WALDEN

The Fourteenth Rider

A Monsters Spinoff Novel

by Heather Killough-Walden

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Heather Killough-Walden Reading List:

I, Android:

I, Android, Book One: A Different Model

I, Android, Book Two (TBA)

The Big Bad Wolf series:

The Heat

The Strip

The Spell

The Hunt

The Big Bad Wolf Romance Compilation (All four books together, in chronological order)

The Lost Angels series:

Always Angel (eBook-only introductory novella)

Avenger's Angel

Messenger's Angel

Death's Angel

Warrior's Angel

Samael

The Kings - A Big Bad Wolf spinoff series:

The Vampire King

The Phantom King

The Warlock King

The Goblin King

The Seelie King

The Unseelie King
The Shadow King
The Winter King
The Demon King
The Shifter King
The Nightmare King
The Dragon King
The Time King
Withered (Bridge novella linking *The Kings* to *Monsters*)

Monsters

Book One: The Good, The Bad, The Cursed
Book Two: Hour of the Dragon
The Fourteenth Rider, a Novel of the Monsters series
Book Three: Twice Notorious (coming soon!)
Book Four - Book Thirteen (TBA)

The October Trilogy:

Sam I Am
Secretly Sam
Suddenly Sam

Neverland Series:

Forever Neverland
Beyond Neverland

The Chosen Soul Trilogy:

The Chosen Soul

Drake of Tanith

Queen of Abaddon

Redeemer (stand-alone)

Hell Bent (stand-alone)

Thorn and Grace (stand-alone)

Relentless: The Patrick Sinclair Story (stand-alone)

A Sinister Game (stand-alone)

The Third Kiss: Dorian's Dream (stand-alone)

Note: The Lost Angels series (not including Always Angel, Warrior's Angel and Samael) and the Big Bad Wolf series are available in print and eBook format. All other HKW books are currently eBook-only or serial story.

Note from the author...

It's been a long road, hasn't it? We've traveled it together by motorcycle, classic car, and transport spell. We were never headed anywhere in particular; our journey together has always been all about the ride. And along the way, we've learned quite a bit.

We've learned so many things in fact, I'm betting you have as much trouble keeping it all straight as I do. And believe me, I do. Sometimes I just plain fail. lol The most interesting accidents happen when I do... I've been lucky that they usually manage to work themselves into the story. And then I can't help but wonder whether they were accidents to begin with. Like, maybe they were meant to happen?

Maybe I was supposed to forget?

Maybe my storytelling is actually written by someone else.... The way I tell the story about a Storyteller in another world.

Well, that's a thought for another day. Preferably a slightly buzzed one with lots of candy.

For now? I want to give my readers something they've been asking me to provide for years. My dear friends, my readers, my lifeline in heat waves, pandemics, and general crises: Here is the list of the beings in the HKW Multiverse – so far. Or as many as I can remember. (smile) It will probably be added to.

Enjoy! xoxo

From the old HKW Multiverse (Before the Dimensional Shift at the end of The Time King)

Figures of Power

StoryTeller

The Oldest Woman (Lilith)

Nomads, aka Travelers

Primes (vampires, werewolves, etc.): *The first of their kind, for example the first vampire or first werewolf or first dragon.*

Archangels (called *Nephili* in the new HKW multiverse) **aka The Lost Angels:** *The four archangels: Uriel, Gabriel, Michael, and Azrael, along with Samael who is thought of as the fifth archangel.*

Adarians: *A race of archangels. Their weakness is gold.*

Archangel Guardian: Max

Gregori: *The first archangels sent to Earth by the "Old Man." Beautiful. Decidedly powerful and dangerous.*

Phantoms: *Solitary creatures who rarely work together. Seven feet tall, with skin that looks like it's covered in fog, blue-white hair, inky-black eyes, and runes drawn around their abdomens in glowing ink. Considered the bane of the supernatural community, they can disappear at will, transport through a space of any size, and sap a victim's strength and chill them from the inside out, resulting in a painful frozen death.*

Wraiths: *Black cloaked figures with faces like wax, red bleeding slits for mouths, eyes of stone, and skeletal hands. One touch of their hands reopens every wound an individual has suffered in their life time.*

Icarans: *Black-skinned creatures that feed on magic, often to the point of overconsuming it and exploding.*

Vampires – Three Kinds.

Nephili: *normally have to kill to continue to exist, but strong magic can negate this, allowing a vampire to continue in existence without draining a victim to the point of death.*

Offspring: *Another form of vampires, those created by the breeding of an Akyri with a warlock. Roman D'Angelo is one of these.*

Cain's Children or Children of Cain:

Anime: *Ghosts of the Phantom Realm, the spirits of the dead.*

Warlocks: *Black magic or dark magic practitioners, not necessarily evil.*

Witches: *Magic users.*

Werewolves: *Don't have to kill to exist, but enjoy hunting.*

Shifters:

Some of these come with guardians of their own

Magishifter

Doppelshifter

Werecats (too dwindling to have a kingdom of their own in the last multiverse, but in this new universe they are a force to be reckoned with, and some are dire werecats. Some are also Withered werecats.)

All other animal shifters

Dragons

Note: All dragons have three hearts. One pumps knowledge, one pumps magic, and the final heart pumps dragon blood.

Legendaries

Special dragons only witnessed in passing such as the Storm Dragon

The Three Legendary Greats: The Great Gray, The Great Black, The Great White

The children of the Greats: *(Only one is known to exist at present, and that is the Dragon Queen Evangeline, who is also the daughter of Lalura/Katrielle the Nomad.)*

Black dragons

White dragons

Red dragons

Green dragons

Blue dragons

Akyri:

Demons:

Nightmares: *Incubi, essentially. They gain vitality from sleeping with other humanoids, so they're quite beautiful. They see people for who they are inside, instead of their outside appearances.*

Preceptors: *(guardians of the Nightmare King)*

The Challenger: *(Challenger to the Nightmare King's throne)*

Fae:

Tuathan: (both Seelie and Unseelie)

Goblins

Xenobe Goblins:

Seelie:

Legendary Great White Stag

Fairies

Sprites, etc.

Elementals

Unseelie:

Fuatharkan

Malek Taal: (Taal) Unseelie fae

Dark faeries:

Unicorns:

Spell Spiders: *Rainbow colored spiders who spin magic webs as traps.*

Bookas: *Tall, gangly white-skinned humanoid figures with ram's heads, giant ram's horns, and white eyes as if afflicted with cataracts.*

Shadows:

Pan Shadows: *Lost shadows. Seemingly permanently separated from their mortal mates and hence darkened by this separation in every way. The Pan are a dangerous breed.*

Regular Shadows: *Those that all of us possess. Or most of us.*

Dark Fire Phoenix: *A phoenix made of dark fire, which is so cold it burns and which only exists in the Shadow Realm.*

Valkyrie:

The shield maidens in charge of fallen warriors. “Frienemies” to the Winter King, Kristopher Scaul.

New HKW Multiverse

Figures of Power:

Vicium Mehimii (unique, “mayhem” embodied, goes by name Victor Maze)

StoryTeller

Nomads... but only Katrielle, who was formerly Lalura, has made an appearance since the shift. Are the others still in existence?

Prime Creatures: *The first of their kind, no matter the race.*

Dire Creatures:

Dire shifters,

Dire werewolves,

Dire Withered creatures

Vampires:

Nephili or “The Fallen”: *(The former archangel Azrael is their chosen and actual king): These vampires believe they are descended from angels or archangels, as their appearances and abilities tend to be different from those of the Offspring.*

Cain’s Children: *The ancient legend of Cain and Abel tells that Abel insisted he and his brother exist on the blood of death alone. In other words, he insisted that they drink from*

animals that were already dying, and never humans. The legend continues, explaining that existing in this manner displeased Cain. Cain therefore destroyed Abel, murdering him so that he could drink of healthy and human blood. His first victim was apparently Abel himself, and hence Cain carries Abel's blood in his veins in more ways than one. Cain's wickedness was so great, the legend tells that it spread throughout the world, touching the souls of the chosen, and those chosen became his children.

Offspring: *(same as in the old HKW universe)*

Goldblood vampires: *Very rare, and they can come from all three vampire lines.*

Dark World Creatures (those who came “over” as evil or troublesome supernaturals that wardens must continuously police):

Night Terrors (Terrors, Sometimes referred to as Doppelgangers): *Can live disguised as a human or possess another being by slipping into its bloodstream through an opening in the skin like a cut. In their true form they look like long dragons with many legs.*

Dwellers: *A creature impossible to fully describe, as it exists in constant movement underground but for the tentacles it sometimes shoves up through the ground to ensnare its victims. The rest of the Dweller remains hidden.*

Cantorips: *Clouds of purple gas that put their victims to sleep by infusing them with poison and absorbing their vitality until the victim is comatose.*

Dark World (DW) Griffons: *All black, and rather than half eagle, half lion, they're half vulture, half dire dog. They are enormous and terrifying, and give off an aura of fear that keeps would-be thieves away from their finds or kills*

Peyton: *Amber colored stag with shining fur, griffon-like wings, antlers with jagged edges like knives, and feathers cascading in more long, luxurious tails*

Alacans: *equines the size of draft horses, replete with the furry legs of Clydesdales. Their fur is either jet black, snow*

white, or slate gray. They have massive wings, composed of flower petals or leaves that come in a rainbow of colors. They all have a single horn, wound in a spiral of crystalline deep blood red, and composed of pure gemstone similar to garnet or ruby, sharp as razor blades..

Fearfells: *eight-foot-tall beasts with extremely soft rainbow-colored fur but mouths filled with rows of razor teeth and claws of chipped black stone that slice an opponent to ribbons without trying. They have eyes the same iridescent white as the walls of a transportation portal*

Wardens: For the most part humans or humanoids. They are fully integrated into the current universe as if they have always existed. Wardens are broken into clans in charge of guarding separate territories. These are the police of the supernatural world and they work directly for the rulers of the 13 sovereign kingdoms (the thirteen realms).

Sentinels (sometimes called guardian angels or watchers): *Sentinels protect the wardens. They have two weaknesses: They can only come when called, but that includes mentally. They can only heal one person each time they appear. Their strengths are that they are immune to damage by wardens and most, if not all supernatural creatures.*

The Withered – *Zombies, essentially, but without the decomposition. They were alive as humans, died, and returned to life in a slightly changed form. All have a type of birthmark somewhere upon their bodies, normally shaped like a crescent moon or “scythe.” This birthmark grows darker once they’ve made the life-death-life shift. They tend to also love alcohol (at least the males do) because as they say, it “helps to preserve them.” Any excuse, after all.*

Witherbrood: *Withered versions of whatever creature or race the being was before it experienced the Withered death and return to life. Hence, you can potentially have countless varieties of witherbrood, such as:*

Witherwolves

Withercats
Wither(whatever)

Gold blood humans/fae: *People carrying the only kind of blood that gold blood vampires can drink; highly desirable, priceless.*

Apex: (vampire werewolf hybrid): *Does not have to kill to continue to exist, but are incredibly powerful and usually very violent.*

Gemini: *Twin dragons purported to be evil or “twisted” in nature, and undeniably promiscuous.*

Clurican/Leprechauns: (seelie fae now a part of the seelie realm): *They can become invisible, and they can sink into people’s minds past wards in order to tell what they wish for. The good leprechauns are awesome. The bad ones are horrifying. They look human and “leprechaun” is a derogatory term. They go by the name Clurican.*

Fae spell spiders: *crawled over the edifice of the house, their rainbow colored bodies collectively spinning a web around it that would act as a magical trap for anyone attempting to flee. The front door and all five visible windows pulsed with purple warding magic, also blocking escape. The dark, depthless shadows around Diana’s home shifted, grew, shrank, and shifted again. They were not shadows. If they had been actual shadows, the Shadow King would have been there that night just as Roman was now.*

(Fae) The Prophet: *A woman bathed in darkness and time so much so that her form wavers between states of being, and her words echo with eerie delay. She takes the form of a twelve year-old child.*

Sometimes the will is so strong, it defies logic.

And reality.

And death.

Introduction

Early on the peaceful but drizzly morning of Saturday July 24th, 1915, approximately five-thousand people gathered on the banks of the Chicago River in order to board passenger ships for the now famous yearly Western Electric picnic excursion. For some Western employees, the picnic was a much-anticipated event. For others, it was simply mandatory. One might liken it to a modern-day company retreat, if a very big one.

The plan was to take picnic revelers from the bank of the river in Chicago to Michigan City, Indiana, where the lakefront Washington Park had been outfitted for the celebration and sported a roller coaster, merry-go-round, baseball diamond, dancing pavilion with a band stand, bowling alleys, an entire amusement park, and even a strip of bathing beach with waiting bath houses for privacy. People were to dress their best, especially the women and children, who were viewed as the “beautiful decor” of the picnic. There was to be a parade, people were to lay out on blankets and relax and converse, and the food promised to be delicious and plentiful.

Five steamer ships were designated to the task. However, one ship in particular possessed known design flaws that greatly limited its safe carrying capacity. Further aggravating an already prominent problem of a top-heavy ship was the fact that due to the tragedy of the steamship *Titanic* three years earlier, the *LaFollette's Seaman's Act* required that earlier that month, three lifeboats and six rafts had been added to the top deck of this ship, the SS Eastland, amounting to approximately fourteen extra tons of top-heavy and unstable weight.

Attendance at the yearly picnic had been nearly doubling over the last few years, and this year a whopping seven thousand people had purchased tickets. Of these, 2,500 boarded the SS Eastland, loading it well beyond its carrying capacity.

By 6:30 a.m., the boat began to list and roll, both of which were largely ignored by passengers, who filled the

lower decks, conversed, and danced. Between 7:28 and 7:30 a.m., the SS Eastland capsized completely onto its side, sank into the mud twenty feet down, and crushed, smothered, and drowned 844 passengers, the vast majority of which were young women and children. The average age of the victims would be tallied at a mere 23 years.

Volunteers of every kind descended on the disaster to help victims or to pull up bodies. Perhaps most impressive were the rescues performed by the brave men who had been on the Eastland that morning themselves and leapt into immediate action in the vital seconds and minutes after the ship's demise. These were the men who rescued the majority of the SS Eastland's survivors.

One young man in particular went on to save the lives of more than a dozen who had been deemed unreachable by some of the stronger swimmers there that morning. Against all odds, he dove long enough and deep enough to reach the victims in an air pocket of the ship's hull and pull them one after another to the safety of the water's surface. Unfortunately, the one he wanted to save most of all was not counted among those he freed.

It was beyond lucky for the survivors that this man, so determined, had happened to survive the disaster himself. At least, it was lucky that he *believed* he had survived.

For sometimes love is more determined, even, than death itself.

Chapter One

(Chicago, Illinois - Current Day)

Zeke smiled tightly when he felt the influx of magic he rarely allowed himself to indulge in. He tried not to enjoy it too much when the man in his grasp blanched, and Zeke caught the sharp scent of fear-expunged urine.

What Zeke was doing right now wasn't something he often engaged in. Almost never, in fact. Most of the time, his employees did as they were told, and punitive measures weren't normally called for. A few well-placed and unfortunately necessary examples had been made of the handful of employees who *didn't* do as they were told long ago. Those examples had sustained Zeke's infamy and reputation for more than a century.

But of course, nothing lasts forever. Empires rise and fall. Success is fickle, and failure waits only a fate's coin-toss away. No one knew this better than Ezekiel Stone. He'd once ignored the obvious signs of impending doom. Long ago. And he'd taken the subsequent fall as hard as a man possibly could.

This time when the signs began to show that something was hedging toward out of control, Zeke was ready.

With one inhumanly strong hand, he held his captive by the throat, dangling him over the dark water of the Chicago River below. The man's face became bulbous with pent-up blood and air, and his body wriggled like a fish on a wire. But Zeke made certain to allow just enough room in his windpipe for a response.

"Who was your target tonight?" Zeke asked. His deep voice rolled over the man and surrounding river with nearly diabolic brutality, scarcely more than a growling rumble that echoed with the hissing whispers of the literal ghosts of victims past. The man he held stopped wriggling, falling into petrified immobility at the sound of it, but not before Zeke caught sight of the shoulder holster under the man's jacket. More proof that he'd gone rogue.

It wasn't a normal holster meant for housing a normal gun. It was made for a special gun that used special bullets. That particular weapon was yet another violation; Zeke's men were strictly prohibited from carrying them, and for good reason. The gun was non-lethal to humans; a bullet would render a mortal unconscious for a good while, but as long as it wasn't a direct shot to the head, the mortal would survive. Hunters had developed it decades ago, and wardens had modified it to make it safer for humans.

It was the *non*-humans who had something to fear from the weapon, which was why it was forbidden in Zeke's territory.

Quentin Mulhill had been one of Zeke's trusted employees. But he was clearly already in league with Zeke's enemies, and probably considered himself protected by them as well. He was a fool on both counts.

Zeke allowed his magic to gather around his form and whispered a few potent words. Then he said, "I'll ask again, Quent. Who was your target tonight?"

The spell allowed Zeke access to his subject's surface thoughts, which Mulhill easily gave up in the terrified state he was in. But what Zeke read there surprised him. His gaze narrowed with confusion. Mulhill hadn't actually been after Zeke that night, nor any other supernatural creature. Instead, he'd chosen the gun because he was after a *human* and meant to take the human alive.

At that point, Mulhill's thoughts became clouded and dark, and Zeke's power bumped along the gathering mental fog in frustration. Mulhill's mind had been armored. Even if the man had wanted to answer the question, magic would prevent him from doing so. "I see," Zeke whispered to himself. It was a gag spell, so to speak, but one so deep it also deterred the speaking of the mind. Zeke's enemies were fond of these spells, one enemy in particular.

But time, contradicting power, and a few tricks could often get around such spells, and Zeke wasn't finished. He knew Mulhill would never tell him who his target had been.

So Zeke asked something else. “Where is your drop-off point?” he demanded. He was now growling his questions through his teeth. He couldn’t help it. The low, cruel grating of the monster inside him had only grown deeper, drawing the final syllables of his query out like some kind of gargoyle speech.

His eyes were heated, his vision enhanced. He could see them glowing yellow in the broad-shouldered, very much *not*-human image of his reflection on the water’s surface. It showed him a man who might have otherwise been handsome, starkly beautiful even, if not for the blue ghostly aura around him and the bright warning light in his eyes.

He hated the water when it was this calm. It always revealed to him things he didn’t want to know.

Zeke staunchly ignored the reflection and returned his attention to his prisoner, fixing him with the full throttle of his diligence. “*Well?*” he demanded coldly.

Finally, something old-brain and life preserving must have switched on inside Mulhill’s head. He jerked to reanimation, clutching at Zeke’s unmoving fingers where they held him so easily by the neck, then sputtered. “T-Turney!” he gasped out through clenched teeth and closing flesh. “M-meet... tomorrow noon at... R-rose...hill!”

By the time the man had finished speaking, his words were escaping as little more than scraping whispers, and Zeke knew he was squeezing too tight. But his last words only spiked Zeke’s fury.

Rosehill Cemetery... His enemies had not chosen the meeting spot at random. Rosehill was not only at the far edges of Ezekiel’s daily roaming boundaries, it was a graveyard. And having forsaken Death all those years ago, Death had in turn forsaken Ezekiel. He could not step foot inside the borders of any cemetery. Not for any reason. He as much as confirmed it when he tried to attend the funerals of those cared for over the decades. And failed every time.

Zeke’s enemy not only knew what he was, they knew how to avoid him. Zeke felt the spike of betrayal like acid

burning through the heart of his currently solid form, and before he fully realized what he was doing, he was squeezing too hard. His captive's neck snapped, the life instantly leaving Mulhill's eyes.

The body hung limp and lifeless from Zeke's fist for several stretched-out seconds. Zeke gazed steadily at the result of what he had done. He may have saved some unknown individual this night - but another life had been taken. Somehow the knowledge that Zeke had destroyed something bad or dangerous did little to comfort him. Ultimately Mulhill had possessed what Zeke could never again know, and Zeke had just taken it from him. It was the one thing he could never give back.

With numb fingers and a growing sense of deep disquiet, he released his hold on Mulhill's body, allowing it to hit and then slip beneath the river's surface. He stared grimly at the ripples he'd caused. The surface was no longer calm, and no longer reflected the monster that he was. It held those secrets inside now.

Mulhill's body would rise back to the surface at precisely 2 pm tomorrow. Zeke would see to that.

Once upon a time, the river had taken everything from him. Now the river *owed* him. Hence it obeyed his unholy command, rising and falling, turning and flowing as Ezekiel saw fit. This gave him incredible power over much of the city. It was remarkable how much control over society one possessed when they could control its ships of cargo, passenger boats, the flooding of nearby streets, homes and power boxes, and in this case, the hiding and revealing of a dead body.

The traitor's remains would rise to the surface at a time when most lunching workers had begrudgingly returned to their offices. Traveling teens would have sauntered unwillingly back to class, and no river tours were scheduled to pass by the location. Innocents would for the most part be spared the spectacle, especially since it would happen in a very non-innocent place. The body would bob to the surface within

the territory of one very dangerous crime lord and perpetual thorn in Zeke's side - Michael Clemens.

Either Clemens would take it as a warning not to encroach upon his territory again, or the authorities would find the body first and blame it on Clemens and his cartel. Either way, it was a win for Ezekiel.

Zeke closed his eyes and took a deep breath, feeling the night stretch out around him. These moments when he could achieve physical form were precious to him. At first, the length of time had been short - mere seconds. But over the years, that time had stretched. Now if he wanted, he could remain corporeal for a touch over seven hours and thirteen minutes twice a day. One seven-hour stint kicked in at 7:28 am, and the other at 7:28 pm.

7:28. The dreaded number sentence, the tick that never heard its tock, the space frozen in time that would haunt him - as he haunted the world - forever.

Right now, Zeke had only minutes remaining before he would relinquish his solid form to the incorporeal mists that were the majority of his existence. He wanted to make the most of them.

Each breath was a gift to him. There was little he loved more than filling his lungs with air, feeling them expand and contract with deep, healthy vigor. He took an especially deep breath and began to slowly release it - when he heard the subtle sound of something scrape behind him. He froze, concentrating on the sound until he could also hear frightened, uneven breathing. It was nearly quiet enough to evade his detection, but for the fact that he was in full monstrous form at the moment, and his powers were enhanced.

He slowly turned his head to peer over his broad shoulder, focusing on the sound behind him. He knew his eyes were still glowing, but now was not the time to dampen that particular fire, because with the glow came increased vision. The shifting-scraping sound came again, this time accompanied by a tiny, furtive gasp. It was coming from the deepest, darkest shadows of the alley behind him.

Now Zeke turned fully, focusing harder.

Suddenly, a small form burst forth from the darkness, leaping up from what must have been a crouched position behind a trash bin. A mass of wild, brunette hair broke free from a dark hoodie, knocked aside in the figure's chaotic haste, and Zeke's gaze fell on her face.

He froze on the dock, his temporarily corporeal form petrified in shock as he stared wide-eyed at a woman he wasn't entirely sure was real. She couldn't be real. She shouldn't have been there. What he was seeing was impossible.

Layer upon layer of chestnut curls cascaded over sharp shoulders tensed in fear. In the low light, skin like cream dotted with a smattering of cinnamon freckles seemed to almost glow. She had eyes like those of a frightened doe trapped in the light of a hunter's lantern. And lips like pillows of perpetual just-bitten pink-red.

Zeke had seen those lips, those eyes, that skin, and that beautiful hair before.

More than a hundred years ago, he'd *fallen in love* with them.

His mouth formed an almost voiceless name, a mere whisper that barely escaped his throat. "*Madeleine?*"

She was the spitting image of the only person he had ever cared about. She was momentarily still, held as motionless in obvious fear as he was in surprise, but she was clearly preparing to run. And then, with a blast of adrenaline-fed speed, she *did* run, her hair flying out behind her as if she were the wind itself.

Zeke spared absolutely no thought before giving chase.

Chapter Two

(Chicago, Illinois 1915)

Ezekiel Stone used a strong arm to brace himself briefly against the stairwell wall when the ship listed a little further than he was accustomed to. His stomach was beginning to feel sideways, and somewhere in the back of his mind, his late father's deep voice was telling him to pay attention.

He glanced over his shoulder at the building crowd behind him. The women were still laughing and the men were still holding drinks, despite the now slightly slip-sliding furniture. The fact that water had come through the nearby porthole on the lower deck wasn't helping stability matters; Zeke's leather-soled shoes could find little purchase as he squeezed between bodies on his way back topside.

He felt a sense of urgency. It was a sharp contrast to the nearly invasive peace of that Saturday morning. The weather was perfectly quiet. The temperature was perfectly unnoticeable. The water was so calm, its surface was like glass. But there was an indescribable excitement to being in a mass of ready people at a time of day when the world seemed to have not yet fully wakened. Beyond the docks, the streets of Chicago were still empty and the shops still closed. Businessmen and mothers were perhaps only now taking off their sleeping caps or steaming coffee or tea - but for the crowd of several thousand and counting that continued to gather and build excitedly there on that single block of Chicago, all of life was happening.

These were the Western Electric employees and their families, and they were there that morning to board steamer ships that would then take them to Michigan City, Indiana for the yearly picnic excursion. The picnic would feature everything from roller coasters to baseball and dancing, an entire amusement park, a beach to cool off in, and Zeke had it on good faith that a bowling alley had been added.

The food alone was enough to convince most of the employees and their families to attend. But Zeke wasn't interested in food. He was here for *her*.

She'd told him not to come. She'd warned him time and again that it was probably not safe. Safe was a relative term, he'd learned. There was the general safety he would have in his physical person, but Madeleine was more concerned with what he would have to endure mentally. This may have been the North, and emancipation had been "officially" proclaimed for more than forty years, but Zeke's skin was still a dark tan in the dead of winter, and a few shades darker in July.

Zeke reached the top deck and made his way to the railing to glance over. The water was drawing near again, the ship listing heavily to his side. He saw his reflection in the glassiness of the river's surface.

Maybe she was right, he thought as his reflection grew closer and his six-foot-three frame filled the field of water. He could admit there was a certain handsomeness to his appearance; Madeleine must have seen *something* in him that she favored. But his heritage *was* beginning to show. The darker skin tone made the color of his eyes that much more intense. Green eyes on any man were rare enough, but on a man half-black, they were attention-grabbing at best. At worst, they would see him in a fight. Or kicked off the boat in what was sure to be a spectacle.

He had as much right to be there as anyone. He was an employee just like Madeleine.

But Madeleine was wise for her years. In the time he'd known her, she'd never been wrong when it came to her instincts. She'd asked him not to come because she claimed to "have a bad feeling" about the ship. Of course, he'd automatically assumed she'd meant she was afraid he would get into some kind of scrape. And since she had to be here because her entire family would be here, he vowed to attend regardless of any preconceived danger.

But... now?

Zeke's brow furrowed. *That water is very close.*

He'd heard through the rumor mill that the ship was built for carrying cargo, and not passengers, and that she didn't sit well in the water. He'd expected a little to-and-fro, but that

“sinking” feeling Zeke had begun to experience below decks was growing stronger now.

Where is she? he thought as he turned away from the railing to the interior of the decks and attempted to peer through the thick mass of gathered passengers. *This is too many*, was his next thought. *Too many people.*

He watched a group of women stumble to regain their balance when the boat’s tilting became too severe. Men reached out for them to steady them, and conversations promptly ceased in favor of hastily muttered questions of status. “Are you steady?” “Careful now!” And then someone’s drink dropped, the glass shattering across the ship’s deck. And that was when Zeke *knew*. He knew the situation had become critical.

And Madeleine was right. *Again.*

Something below decks made a strange sound. It was hollow and foreboding, followed by a sickly *thunk*. When voices raised once more from the quiet, this time pitched in alarm, the bands on the top deck stopped playing. It had become too difficult for them to hold their instruments up anyway. When the keys of the piano clanged discordantly and it broke loose from its position to scrape loudly across the wooden planks, no one could stop it. Zeke watched the bodies in front of him attempt to part in order to get out of the way of the barreling wooden object. But they were packed in like sardines and they, themselves were beginning to slip and slide. There was no escape.

Zeke found himself facing off with the musical colossus and the handful of bodies remaining between it and him. He had just enough time to attempt to duck, dipping into a deep knee bend to crouch as low as possible. He instinctively covered his head with his hands as the piano became airborne, smacking grotesquely into the upper bodies of the half-dozen people between them before it was on him and Zeke’s body was thrown against the railing. The piano must have missed him by a hair, because he felt nothing. A split-second later, he heard its mass hit the water. Or was that tremendous splash something else? Several somethings?

He knew the answer deep down but couldn't admit it.

It didn't matter because the situation was now well past dire; it had transgressed into disaster. The ship was capsizing, nearing a horizontal state. Bodies were beginning to lose their foothold on the deck; a few sailed past him to either hit the railing like his or enter the water. There was no denying the splashes now.

His own body remained upon the ship only because of the railing - which he seemed stuck to as if it were a magnet and he were made of iron. Zeke attempted in vain to straighten back up when a second large object began barreling toward him, even more massive than the piano. It was a multitude of objects really, a make-shift pyramid of them tied together. They were trunks filled with the objects of revelry meant to be unpacked upon arriving at the company picnic's destination.

Zeke stared at it in that devastating, fractured moment of time when a person notices their very real doom and struggles to process it. Trunk after trunk, all heavy in their own right, but now all lassoed together as if solely to make matters worse were hurtling at Zeke like a great roped beast. The trunks' trajectory was tail-coated by a chorus of screams louder than anything Zeke had ever heard, and yet the sound was numbed-down by the sudden ringing in his ears.

He felt something like a distant bump, hard but detached and anesthetized, and then the water had him, surrounding him like an inescapable shroud. Moments passed, moments of chaos and uncertainty, fragments of time that were unplaceable and uncountable, filled with indistinct images, bubbles, and rainbow colors.

And then Zeke was breaking the surface of the river and gasping for air.

It took another moment or two for his vision to clear enough to see what was happening around him. The ship was on its side, most of its hull submerged in the river and the mud beneath it. All around him, people were screaming and struggling in the water. The river's surface had become as crowded as the boat and the docks seconds before; it was

impossible to see the water's surface through the throngs of struggling victims.

Someone or something bumped Zeke's legs from beneath, and he tried to get out of the way as more survivors rose away from the depths underneath him to break for air. Everywhere people called out names and generally cried for help. Sometimes their calls were met with echoes from no-longer-lost family members or friends. Other times, there was no response and the screaming continued, becoming more frantic.

On the docks on either side of the river, people were running and gathering, hauling equipment, ropes, blankets and towels. Zeke could hear distant bells or sirens - some sound of emergency, some city-wide alarm that the unthinkable was in the process of happening.

Zeke called Madeleine's name as his stark green gaze searched the sea of people for the one he'd originally come here to meet. But there were so many women, too many. All of them were being dragged down by the weight of their soaked-through clothing. Long hair had come loose from updos all around him, streaming colors of blonde, red, brown, and black that sometimes made the surface before its owner did. It had only been seconds, he knew, and yet the swath of space around Zeke had already become a slice of Abaddon, all calamity and ruin and indistinct horror.

He treaded water carefully - so as not to kick anyone beneath him struggling to make it to the surface - and continued to call out her name at the tops of his lungs. His deep voice rang slightly louder than those around him, but there was no response, not that he could tell in any case. Truly, he might not have known if she *had* answered. There were far too many screams.

In fact, a different woman screamed a few feet away from him, treading water rather than swimming toward the docks. She was attempting to peer down into the water as other survivors bumped into her, moved around her, and struggled to get to shore. "My children!" she screamed. "My sons! Please save my sons! They were right next to me!"

It was impressive how much lung power she had, as drowned as she looked. Zeke could tell right away that she was losing strength; her soaked petticoats and constrictive corset would be her undoing if she didn't get out of the water soon.

"You must get to shore!" he bellowed at her, shoving forward through several others in order to grasp her by her upper arms and swing her around. By the looks of her, she was no more than twenty, and not yet wizened enough by years and experience to know how to keep panic at bay. Her breathing was quick and shallow. He made her look at him, held her gaze hard, and firmly said, "I will look for your sons! Which deck were you on, and which side?"

She needed a moment to process his question, but something mechanical must have kicked in because she said, "Top deck, port side!"

He nodded. "Now get to the dock this instant or you will not live to greet them!"

A second passed, a beat in which she processed his advice, and then her expression washed with understanding. Her face was a mask of desperation mixed with relief and gut-wrenching fear, but she nodded and turned just as some other rescue swimmer came to her from behind. Zeke and the man exchanged a nod of understanding, and Zeke turned away to scan the swimming crowd one last time.

Then he breathed out, emptying his lungs completely. He took a breath and did it again, and again - and then he breathed in deeply, filling them to the point of what should have been pain. But he was numb to physical sensations, too lost in the sea of trauma.

With one last desperate look all around at the field of long hair and petticoats and faces he didn't recognize, Zeke held his breath and dove beneath the water.

Chapter Three

(Chicago, Illinois - Current Day)

Fathom Kate Everett rarely went by “Fathom.” She normally went by “Faye” or even “Faith.” The occasional close friend called her “Kate,” or “Katie,” but the name Fathom was reserved for the select few who had given her life, were disappointed in her, and probably had very good reason to be.

In other words, only her *mother* had ever called her “Fathom,” and only when Faye was in trouble. Hence, she hadn’t been called by her given name in nearly twenty years.

But if her mother knew what she was doing now... would she use her name again?

No, Faye thought. *She would know*. Despite how criminal Faye’s activities looked on paper, her mother would know better. She was out on the streets that night with money in her pockets for a drug dealer - not because she was an addict or a pusher or evil in any form. But because there were people who needed these particular drugs - and due to prohibitions or insurance, they didn’t have access to them.

This was against the law right now. But history proved that a lot of *proper* and *necessary* things had at one point been against the law. Women being allowed to read, for instance. Women being allowed to attend school. Women being allowed to work outside the home. Women being allowed to own land. Women being allowed to vote. Hell - women being allowed by law to do anything but pop out kids and then die in childbirth had at one point been illegal. In some places across the globe it still was. And that was only one field of examples.

Basically, law served two purposes to Faye’s way of thinking. One, it served - *barely* - as an occasional deterrent against such violent acts as rape and murder. But mostly, two, it served as a holding place for short-sighted ineptitude that progress would one day change.

To that end, Faye felt the law often had little to do with what was right and what was wrong. What mattered to her was

that a person followed the *Golden Rule*. Other than, “Thou shalt not kill,” it was the only tenet that Fathom followed to the letter, and the only “law” of any kind she felt was universal and timeless.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

If - no, *when* - Faye suffered, she wanted someone to help her and end her suffering. So of course, that was what she set out to do for others. People were suffering, and the government wasn't listening. But *she* was listening. And a few other people were. Fortunately, they were a few very *powerful* people. Together they had set out to make a difference and hopefully save a few lives.

Technically, this part wasn't normally Faye's job. Someone had to meet the contact, collect the goods, and make it safely back to the distributor. This was the tricky part, the part where everything could go wrong and fall apart. Normally, it was a well-trained agent - a warden - who pulled off this part of the stunt. But a number of things had happened to make that impossible.

One, the warden meant to meet the contact tonight was still recovering from a particularly nasty magical attack during their last warden job. And two, a second emergency warden job had literally just come up several minutes ago, requiring the attention of one Genevieve Rayne - leader of the Sirius warden clan, and also the one surreptitiously in charge of this little underground operation.

The clan leader had to go on this particular warden assignment, not only to keep up appearances, but because she was incredibly skilled, and her clan needed her, plain and simple.

Genevieve was in the process of packing her supplies to respond to the emergency when Faye had found her and Marcus, her second-in-command in the hidden room beneath Genevieve's apartment. She was one of a very select few who had access and means to the location.

Gen and Marcus were talking about who was going to meet the contact in the injured agent's place. This particular

meet up couldn't be missed; too many people were counting on the medication that would be obtained. At the spur of the moment, Faye stepped into the room and volunteered.

“Absolutely not,” the boss lady had firmly said as she stopped packing and fixed Faye with a hard look. Her very light green eyes were unique, and when they were trained on you in earnest, it could actually become uncomfortable.

Genevieve Rayne was the “boss lady” to Faye. She and the others also sometimes lovingly referred to her as the “Heroine of Heroin,” but only when she wasn't around, and only in very hushed tones. Plus, that wasn't quite fair. Rayne's underground angel operation never dealt with heroin. And contrary to ignorant and-or uninformed belief, not all opiates were created equal.

Rayne headed the Sirius warden clan. Other than whispers about her haunting beauty, impressive skill, and her ironically equally impressive bad luck, that was all anyone knew about Rayne. But in the shadows, she was in charge of creating and running the world's largest ongoing underground philanthropist drug operation.

She was a force for good. It was a shame she had to be such a force under the radar. It said a lot about the state of the world when doing something good was so illegal, it could mean life in prison.

Everyone involved knew the risks, though. Almost every person connected with Rayne's effort had undergone a selection process and training so rigorous, most people would have run, not walked, in the other direction. The few who made it through were Rayne's angels. In fact, that was what they called themselves - Rayne's Angels. Which never failed to make Genevieve cringe.

Despite the rigorous training most of them received, Rayne had been against Faye making the contact tonight. “Not you,” she said sternly, shaking her head for emphasis. “You know you're not trained for this.” And she was right. Faye was RA's newest member, and she'd been treated a little differently

because Faye possessed a talent in which Rayne saw inherent value. She hadn't been put through the ringer like the others.

But the only other person in the room, and consequently the only other person technically available to meet the contact on such short notice, was Marcus Troy. And Marcus couldn't go for two reasons. One, he was a warden as well, and again - there was an emergency. But two, Marcus couldn't stray very far from Genevieve, especially when she went up against dangerous foes. The fate of the world literally depended on his proximity to her.

Marcus was not only Rayne's second-in-command in the Sirius clan, he was the single most important member of Rayne's Angels. But not because he was essential to the cause - it was because he was the one keeping Genevieve hidden from her worst enemy.

Who and what that was wound up being complicated and involved a lot of chaos, order, and fate-of-life-as-we-know-it stuff. Sufficed to say, Marcus possessed the ability to mask magic in all its forms, whether a magical device or spell or artifact or warding or innate magical capacity. But there was an area of effect in which he could do this; he couldn't stray far from his target. If Marcus left Gen's side for too long, Genevieve's own inherent power began to take shape and make itself known. And that couldn't happen. Not if people wanted to go on existing.

Marcus turned to Genevieve in that secret room and shrugged. "Gen, she's... the only one left. Everyone else is either on another mission, dealing with warden jobs, or recuperating from injuries. Without healing magic to speed things along, I'm afraid we have to work as slowly as humans do in that regard."

The hurt in Genevieve's ice-green eyes was rapid and unmistakable, despite how she promptly turned her face away in an obvious attempt to hide it. And Marcus was instantly sorry he'd reminded her of their ordeal. That was obvious too.

But rather than give him the chance to apologize, Faye took the opportunity to remind them of the task at hand and

the fact that the clock was ticking. "I can do this, Gen. Trust me. I'll be able to know if the contact is being genuine or is dangerous."

"It won't matter when you're face to face with him. At that point, if he means you harm it'll be too late," Gen told her.

"I'll keep back then. And... I'll go armed."

Genevieve shook her head. "That's a given, but that won't always protect you. There are some very scary people in that part of Chicago."

"Scarier than Michael Clemens?" Faye asked disbelievingly.

But Genevieve just stared at her with green eyes like a storm-wrecked sea. "Yeah. Scarier than him."

Faye took a deep breath, stood up from the couch she'd been sitting on, and said, "We have no choice. I have to cut my teeth sometime; it might as well be now. Give me the details and let's get this done."

They'd caved.

Which was why Faye now found herself in a dark alley in downtown Chicago in the middle of the night running full-tilt from someone or *something* she couldn't quite wrap her head around. What she'd witnessed - what he'd *done*....

Worse - what he'd *become*....

He wasn't human. That tall, broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted figure was already too perfect to be normal. The clothing he wore was strange too. It was beautifully tailored, expensive brocade and suede and velvet... But it seemed out of place somehow.

Or out of date, she thought frantically as her feet skidded around a corner and she shot blindly down another alley in her mad-dash getaway. She just needed to get enough space between them. Then she could think. And call Genevieve.

As she ran, an image of the dangerous figure formed in her mind. Bright, luminous gold eyes in a diabolically

beautiful face, and a blue glowing aura. He was not even *vaguely* human.

It was enough that he'd murdered Faye's contact, and that he'd done it in such a ruthless, brutal manner. But the fact that he was clearly some sort of magical being meant that Faye was viciously outmatched. She had no idea what she was up against, and she had zero magic with which to defend herself. The absolutely normal bullets in her absolutely normal pea-shooter weren't going to do squat against him.

Genevieve had been right. Faye wasn't ready for field work like this. There really *were* people out here more frightening than Clemens.

He's going to kill me, she thought. *I saw him kill someone and now he's going to kill me to tie up loose ends and keep me from talking.*

She fumbled for the phone in her pocket as she rounded yet another corner. But just as she managed to pull it out and got ready to instruct the AI to call "Boss Lady," she found herself sliding on the tarmac once again. This time, she was skidding to a halt. Because at the end of the new alley was a familiar tall, broad figure draped in a phosphorescent aura of ghostly blue.

Even as she struggled to come to a stop, the figure started toward her, his stride long and sure, the wisps of blue fog around him wrapping and curling and following as if they really were a part of him.

The phone slipped from Faye's hand. She must have had sweaty palms in her fear. She was fairly sure she screamed. Or maybe she only managed a squeak. Either way, it wasn't enough to block out the figure's deep voice as he spoke to her and his bright gold eyes locked onto hers like physical shackles.

"*Please,*" he said, holding out his hand as she attempted to backpedal and retreat once more. His gaze hardened, his tone becoming a command. "Don't run from me."

The warning was palpable and only made Faye want to run all the more. But the man then shook his beautiful head. “Believe me when I say that you cannot hide from me here, and you’ve dozens of blocks to go before you escape my reach. But I mean you no harm,” he told her, pressing on but slowing his advance as if approaching a frightened animal.

Which in a manner of speaking, she was.

Faye couldn’t quite bring herself to turn and run. She meant to. Over and over. But she seemed petrified in fear - or fascination? *Something*. She could only watch wide-eyed as the tall, handsome, non-human killer stopped in his tracks several feet away and straightened to his full towering height. He lowered his hand. “I wish only to talk.”

“Faye, *run!*” came a familiar female voice from somewhere overhead. It was a voice Faye had definitely not expected to hear that night, but one she was exceedingly grateful to hear, nonetheless. Genevieve’s sudden sharp command seemed to jar her out of her hypnotized stupor. And it grabbed the stranger’s attention as well.

He looked up to the roof of the building beside them just as a barrage of offensive magic came crashing down into the alley, filling it with light, heat, and a harsh static much like electricity.

Faye cried out in near-pain and surprise. But she did as she was told, spun around - and ran.

Chapter Four

A wail went up through the dark streets behind Faye, one that sounded like both a low rumble that shook the foundations of nearby buildings and a high keening that mimicked the scream of a bansidhe. The sound pierced through Faye's skull, filling her with an instant doubt that had her stumbling in her otherwise fleet steps. She slowed, reaching out to shove against a nearby wall, but her teeth were bared and terror pressed on from behind her. It drove her, kept her moving like the shadow hunters that followed dreamers' heels in nightmares.

If I stop, I will die.

It was the basic, unconscious chant that drove every fleeing victim. But something about it sounded wrong in her head.

It sounded like a lie.

Since Fathom was little, she'd possessed a certain talent. It wasn't a magical ability; there was no bright light that shone in her hands or her eyes when she used it, there were no magic words, and it wasn't a spell. In fact, it wasn't a single act of any kind at all. It was simply that she had a way of seeing things - the smaller things, the details and nuances and sneaky things - that other people didn't seem to possess. They say the devil is in the details, and for Fathom, that had pretty much been true. Because by unconsciously analyzing those tiny details and coming to instantaneous conclusions, she had always - *always* - been able to tell when someone was lying.

This, she learned, was not a fun talent to have.

It was handy - to a degree. But only when it came to insurance policies, car salesman, and politics. The rest of the time? It was pretty much accepted world-wide that on a daily basis, people were just going to out-and-out lie. Society really couldn't exist, much less thrive, without doing so. Because when you asked someone how they were doing and they told you they were doing fine, nearly none of them really were. At

the same time, nearly none of them had either the time or the desire to pretend they cared otherwise.

All the “*wish you were here*” messages on post cards, every “*your haircut looks great!*” offered to co-workers, the thumbs-ups icons on social media posts about someone’s kids or diet accomplishments - lies, nearly every one. The world thrived on handshakes and emoji’s that conveyed support and caring. But the fact was, even the *world* knew it was lying. Even the world was aware - down deep, underneath the social masks and niceties - that handshakes had been invented to check for weapons because humanity was untrustworthy. And those emoji’s? Were just easy-peasy substitutes for empathy when the person clicking on them was in their PJ’s, hadn’t had coffee, and would have volunteered as target practice for a firing squad in exchange for a vacation.

The planet would stop turning if people stopped lying.

That was the basic conclusion Faye eventually came to. Unfortunately, it wasn’t until she’d lost a lot of friends, most of her dates, and too many jobs. Then she decided maybe it would be better if she let the planet keep turning and stopped saying anything about it when people lied.

She kept it to herself, whether they were lying to her or to others around her, for thirty years. And for thirty years she wondered why the hell she possessed such an ability in a world where it was utterly, completely, *useless*.

Until one day... it wasn’t.

Sitting in a doctor’s office waiting room, Faye couldn’t help but overhear a woman talking to her companion about how she was afraid to see the doc. She had no good expectations for the visit - only bad ones. She spoke of incessant, debilitating and throbbing aches throughout her joints, her muscles, and even her skin. And she admitted that no doctors would believe her when she told them about the pain, much less prescribe medication strong enough to dull it or kill it and allow her to return to work. She was in misery limbo, unable to cope with the constant agony, unable to work,

unable to sleep, and with no one believing her, she was also unable to gain unemployment or insurance.

Faye listened, glanced over at the woman, and her lie-detection ability kicked in as usual. There were nuanced desperations that curled the edges of the other woman's very being. Her words were laced with the shaking undertones of frustration and confusion. And all of it was layered deeply, nearly hidden entirely, by measures of self-doubt due to repetitive rejections.

Faye knew the woman was speaking the truth. In fact, as she continued to look over at the woman, she was hit with a wave of invisible but indescribable empathy-induced *hell*. It was brought on by her inability to block out the details, and it was worse than ever. Faye unexpectedly found it hard to breathe through the abrupt realizations pressing in on her, and when she lifted her head to look around at everyone else in the waiting room, she was hit with that same hellish wave over and over again.

The people of the world were *suffering*. *Truly suffering*. And no one believed them.

What was worse, no one cared.

Faye suddenly understood what she needed to do. She needed to somehow use her ability to suss out the people who really needed help - and get that help to them. One way or another, come hell or high water.

The strange thing was, as soon as she made this decision and started looking into rather frightening prospects such as the dark web and black markets in order to obtain medication for the people she wanted to help - *Genevieve Rayne* found *her*.

Now Faye understood that despite her own ability not being magical, magic did indeed exist. It had been used to find her, in fact, so that the leader of the Sirius warden clan could approach her and bring her into the RA fold.

Gen couldn't use magic of her own, not without dire consequences, and when she did slip up, Marcus was there to

help disguise whatever she'd accidentally released. But magic cast by others was allowed, in small quantities. Larger quantities would draw undue attention.

Which was why they had to obtain their medications the old-fashioned way. And consequently the illegal way.

Faye had been working with the RA for roughly a year. In that time, she'd helped Gen locate countless individuals in pain, both mental and physical and usually both. But Faye never took part in the more dangerous aspects of the operation. She never played a hand in the rescues from psych wards, or even things like this - the contact meet-ups where information or drugs were exchanged. Like Gen said, she wasn't trained for that. Instead, she stuck to the basics and used her skills to determine whether a person was lying or truly needed help.

Thus far? Not a single person had been lying. They had all been telling the truth. Faye was realizing that when a person was at the point of giving up all measure of pride and hope, then *yeah* - they were telling the truth. *No one* would choose to permanently debase themselves in such a manner unless they were desperate. There were easier ways to get high, and much, *much* easier ways to make money.

But tonight had been a break of RA's mold, and Faye had done what she didn't normally do. She'd gone where she didn't normally go. And she'd seen something she probably never should have seen. And now she was running for her life - and Genevieve had come out of hiding and used her own magic to save her!

What have I done? Faye thought recklessly. *Just keep running!* her mind commanded. But even as she continued to sprint and skid and run, the scene played over in her head. And the thing was, she'd not only seen what she normally didn't see, she'd also heard something she wouldn't have otherwise heard.

“... *I mean you no harm.*”

His deep voice echoed in her mind, filling up that hollow-mist cavern of thought that otherwise rattled with echoes of fear. She saw tall shadows and flashing, glowing eyes and

ghostly blue auras. Her heart pounded as she rounded another corner, her sturdy boots clinging surely to the wet cement underfoot.

I mean you no harm.

Fog was creeping in off the water in the early Chicago morning, mists curling around the corners of buildings and slipping like living tendrils into the alleys as she rushed blindly through them.

I mean you no harm.

That was the thing. Even as she ran away, she realized - *that was the thing!* She'd heard his words, seen his face, and read his body language. She'd done it unconsciously and in the wake of finding her dead contact in his clutched fist. He may have been terrifying. He may have killed someone.

But the thing was - he hadn't been lying.

Faye's steps slowed, almost of their own accord, as she realized this. She blinked and looked around, realizing something else. She had no idea where she was.

She'd run blindly, only wanting to get away and stay alive. And now? "Where... *crap*, where the hell am I?" she whispered furtively, actually stopping in place to do a full circle in the middle of the latest alley. There had been a *lot* of alleys, really.

"Too many," she thought out loud. The last few minutes, or perhaps just seconds, had been a messy, confusing blur. She was lost.

Downtown Chicago wasn't supposed to be alley after alley. And at this time of day, it shouldn't have been quiet either. There should have been glass-construction skyscrapers, tons of trash bins, and the smell of roasting coffee, exhaust, and a hint of old garbage. There should have been the sounds of early morning traffic, honking horns, people talking. There should have been managers unlocking back doors to prepare for the day, baristas and deli owners putting up signs detailing what the specials were, Type A workaholics driving in and out

of public parking garages while buses threatened smaller vehicles pulled over in their spots.

But there was none of that.

As Faye turned slowly in place, she was greeted by the absolute silence of *fog*, and the empty, clean line of an alley that ended at both ends in thick, white mist. She stopped turning and stared hard through that mist, trying to see something beyond it. But far from the wisps of swirling tendrils it had been moments earlier, this was pea soup, worthy of a seasoned captain's worst fears.

She drew her fingers into her palms, trying to think. On instinct and a boat load of training, her right hand slid to the small of her back, checking for the weapon she normally had holstered there. It would do her no good against something magical, but perhaps it would at least afford her a few extra sec-

It was gone. The gun, the holster, everything.

For some reason, Faye just wasn't all that surprised. She squared her shoulders, flexed and un-flexed her hands into fists some more, and looked from one end of the alley to the other. They were the same; both ended in unnaturally thick ground-bound clouds. After a moment, she licked her lips and picked a side, then turned to take a single step in that direction.

"It won't do any good to keep running, little one."

At the sound of the deep voice, Faye spun wildly around, her hair flying into her face and her breath freezing in her lungs. In her rush to slap the hair out of her eyes, her backpedaling misfired, and she lost her balance.

"Easy," came that deep voice again as she stumbled a few steps before righting herself, weak-kneed and leaning heavily against the closest wall. "Sorry about the wail," he told her, his tone gentle and oddly sincere. "It was only meant to slow you, and it did its job. But I know it's unnerving."

Faye tried not to pant too loudly, to show the weakness of her red-alert fear, but she possessed little control over the in-

and-out of her breathing at that point. Her heart was simply racing too hard.

With a shaking hand, she once more brushed the thick locks of dark hair from her face and stared out from behind equally dark eyes. The man from the river now stood where nothing but alley had been before. He was dressed the same, out of place and out of time, but he was no longer surrounded by a miasma of ghostly blue, and his eyes were no longer glowing like twin suns.

Instead, his eyes were green. They were beautiful, starkly vivid and exceptionally rare. Several shades different than Genevieve's, their color was more deep, luminescent jade than ice. His hands were at his sides. He stood perfectly still.

I mean you no harm.

His words played again in her head, and for some reason she held on to them like a lifeline.

What is this place? she wanted to ask. She knew it wasn't Chicago, not strictly, at least not any longer. *What are you doing? How are you doing this?* she wanted to know. And most of all, *What do you want from me?*

But what came out first was, "Who are you?"

His reaction was completely unexpected. He let out a short sigh, made a sound like a sad laugh, and shook his head. "I see," he said, looking away briefly. His gaze peered through the ground as if he were seeing something else. "Of course." It was as if he were speaking to himself and not her. His expression was lost, distant, inexorably forlorn.

But then he straightened and looked back up at her, his eyes skirting over her hair and wary, hunched form. He smiled.

Faye felt her own eyes widen at the sight of that smile. Gods, it was the most disarming smile she had ever seen.

"You can come out from under there now," he told her, nodding toward the arm that was still holding up her curtain of hair. She had a lot of hair. It was long and thick enough that hairdressers had suggested thinning it out. She never would, though. She was wise enough to recognize that thick hair

wasn't a given in this world, and one day she probably wouldn't have it any longer. She would make the most of it now.

"I did promise I wouldn't hurt you," he added, his smile broadening a little.

Not in so many words, she thought. *But... yeah*. And he still wasn't lying. So, very slowly she straightened up, coming away from the wall. She pushed her hair back over her shoulders and out of her face, but suddenly felt exposed without the blanket of it to hide behind.

"May I have your name?" he asked softly, his glittering green eyes studying her with keen interest. He tilted his head thoughtfully. "I assume you don't go by Madeleine."

Faye's brow furrowed. She blinked rapidly a few times, too many thoughts racing through her head to pluck any one of them out of line and shove it through her vocal cords. So she went with something that came from somewhere deeper and more instinctive.

"Why did you kill that man?"

As soon as she asked it, she knew she shouldn't have. Her mouth snapped shut, her teeth cracking together. She could feel her eyes go wide, the sudden rush and roar of blood through her ears making her partially deaf.

The man went very still. His smile slowly faded, but he made no move to approach her. It was a while before he did anything at all, and the passing time grew terrifyingly tense. Finally, he said, "*You* are the one he was meant to meet, aren't you?"

Faye was struck with the way he'd turned the tables on her; all at once she was the one on the defensive instead of him. He was the one asking the questions instead of her.

But no... he killed someone. You don't have to tell him anything!

Faye tried not to let any tremors enter her voice when she said, "I saw you strangle him. B-break his neck." She swallowed hard past the lump that was drying in her throat. So

much for not letting her voice show fear. “You murdered him. Why?”

His gaze narrowed. “You’re one of Rayne’s angels, aren’t you?”

Now Faye froze in surprise. He knew about Genevieve? About... about what they were doing? *He called you angel, remember?* she thought to herself. *Right before you ran from him.*

Because he killed someone!

Without thinking, Faye found herself taking a step back. It did not go unnoticed by the handsome stranger. His gaze snapped to her boots, and the air in the alley became thick with something so foreboding it was almost tangible. His eyes returned to hers, but his head remained lowered so that he peered at her through the top of his hooded gaze. “So I’m guessing you were there to meet with a man whose name you *thought* was Quentin Mulhill. To pick up information or goods, either one. You had no idea he wasn’t planning on keeping his end of the deal.” He smiled again, but this time it wasn’t as nice a smile. There was a hardness to it that turned the soft jade in his eyes to sharper emeralds. “Not even close.... Fortunately for you, I met up with him first.”

He took a step toward her as if to make up for the one she’d taken in retreat.

“Please,” she said, not really knowing why she was saying it. What was she going to ask of him? That he spare her? He’d already told her he wouldn’t hurt her. Did she want him to explain further? What he meant about Mulhill? That he just... stop being so monumentally imposing? But she didn’t have a chance to ask anything anyway, because he cut her off just as she was drawing the breath to speak.

“*What... is your name?*” he demanded softly, the words like a snake’s whisper. His tone was ripe with command, and his voice had lowered, the sound nearly as tangible as thick, silk ropes.

“Let her go, Zeke.”

Faye inhaled sharply, only realizing now that she'd been suppressing her breath. The man's hold on her seemed to wane, and the thick static *something* in the alley thinned out enough for her to turn in the direction of the new voice.

The green-eyed man tore his gaze from Faye to face the thick mists behind him. A second man stepped through them, taller even than the first. By a few inches.

Craaaap, Faye thought, disbelievingly. *This shit can't be real anymore.* The second man was blond with Caribbean blue eyes. He looked like the love child of a goddess of beauty and a contract killer, raised on motorcycles, magical training, and absolute mayhem. He looked like a killer. He also looked like you wouldn't even mind him killing you.

"I always knew it would be you who stopped me, Cain," the green-eyed man said.

Zeke, Faye reminded herself. *The new guy called him Zeke. Aaaaand apparently the new guy's name is Cain.*

"She can't stay here much longer, Zeke. You know that. She doesn't belong in your world." The one named Cain came forward, rounded Zeke without looking at him, and turned his back on him to look over at Faye instead.

Gutsy, Faye thought as those blue eyes settled on her. He smiled at her. Killer smiles were just everywhere today. "You okay, angel?" he asked, his voice and eyes singling her out in that moment like she was the only person in the universe who had his attention.

Yeah, she thought numbly as she nodded like a puppet. Absolutely nothing made sense. Everything was peachy.

"It's her, Cain," Zeke said from behind him. "Same body, same spirit - same heart. Tell me it isn't."

Cain turned to face him and Faye just watched as the two most beautiful men she had ever seen had a bizarre conversation about her in a magically isolated alley in what used to be Chicago.

"I'm not arguing with you," Cain said, shaking his head. Then he glanced back at Faye over his broad shoulder. "But

this isn't the time or place, Zeke." He turned back around, this time fully facing Zeke and locking eyes with him. "There's trouble coming." He waited a beat, as if to lend weight to the statement. "She isn't safe here, and I know that matters to you." He shook his head and added softly, "I can't protect her in here, Z."

Zeke considered the blond man for a moment, his expression shifting from anger and impatience to something very different, something more like comprehension and dawning concern. He lifted his head and stepped back. "I've sensed its approach," he said softly.

Cain said nothing to that. He just waited.

Zeke finally nodded. "Go, then. Get her to safety." He paused, then said, "And you too." He looked away for a moment before adding, "But so help me, Cain..." He closed his eyes and cut himself off, taking a deep breath. "Just please don't go far."

Cain turned, and just as it seemed he was about to speak with Faye again, the fog at the end of the alley behind the men split open in what looked like rays of black light. There was no other way to describe it. It was light. And it was black. And it was *wrong*.

Suddenly Faye was screaming, because that light shot forward and engulfed her in sharp-edged magic like a million needles composed of solid darkness. They pierced through and into her until chaos filled her brain, electrified her nerve endings, and turned her upside down.

It was nauseating and awful, but it lasted only split seconds. She opened her eyes a beat later to find herself staring up at a complete stranger, yet another man who was obviously not quite human, and who was in the process of lifting her into his arms.

She tried to scream again, but her voice was gone. Her mouth wouldn't even open. Her body would not move at all. She was literally paralyzed as the man cradled her form against his chest and stood with her.

She couldn't turn her head to see any of it, but she recognized the sounds of people chanting around her, of men talking, and of a portal opening. She'd witnessed enough spells and portals while working for Rayne.

No, she thought. *No!* Whoever this was, whatever he wanted, he was taking her somewhere else. A second location. *Nooo!*

Fear ramrodded through her. The light of the portal shed itself eerily across her face. The man who held her stepped toward it, and Faye felt the strong pull of its magic on her body.

Chapter Five

(Chicago, Illinois 1969)

“I have it on good authority that it’s destined to be one hell of a party.”

Zeke looked up from the newspaper he’d been studying and the full-page ad detailing an upcoming outdoor concert in Wallkill, New York. The paper had been floating in the river, most likely lost by gypsy-souled travelers who’d forgotten to roll their windows up while driving. Vans seemed full of them these days.

A tall white man with blond hair and unsettlingly blue eyes leaned a few feet away against the same wall Zeke was sitting on. Zeke hadn’t noticed him approach, which was rare. In fact, he wasn’t sure it had *ever* happened before that a mortal had managed to get any kind of jump on him.

But he was smooth enough not to show it. Zeke smiled and read aloud from the ad, “‘The Aquarian Exposition’,” he said. “It promises ‘three days of peace and music.’ What’s not to love?”

“You heading that way?” the stranger asked, glancing away to comb the river front with those blue-blue eyes. Zeke took the opportunity to study the man’s profile. There was something about him... something almost familial. Zeke experienced no anxiety at the man’s sudden company. Just the opposite.

But his question made Zeke hurt in a whole other way. He tried not to let his emotion show when he said, “No. I think I’ll be staying...” he looked out over the water now too, “right here for a while.”

He had no choice in the matter. He’d been slowly building up the distance he could leave his watery prison every day, but the amount was measured in meters, not miles.

The stranger made a contemplative sound, and then said, “Well, that’s a shame. It looks like quite a musical roster.”

Zeke glanced over the names of artists listed beneath the ad, his eyes settling in particular on the final performer. He tried not to let his frustration show.

The truth was, his experience with live music was limited to the odd street performer, river-front bar bands, and whatever strange and sometimes sweet sounds poured from the open windows of passing microbuses.

He'd only ever heard the cool, controlled notes of a turntable earlier that same year, in fact. It was difficult to find work, open a bank account, save enough for any type of living abode, and then schedule viewing times with agents when you were a tangible human being for a mere handful of hours every day. The fact that he had a very real need to remain in downtown Chicago - and that he was black - only made achieving those viewing times more problematic.

To top things off, being a man from 1915, Zeke had no current references to speak of. In fact, he had nothing current *at all*, in his possession. He could only imagine the conversations he would wind up having if he didn't find a more clever way to achieve his goals... *And what is the address of your last residence, Mr. Stone? Well, ma'am, that would be the bottom of the Chicago River. Somewhere between LaSalle and Clark.*

Fortunately, time was not only a fourth-dimension prison, it was a boon. Once enough of it passed, Zeke found he could take control over aspects of the human realm once more, and shortly thereafter, he could do so with the realms *beyond* it. He learned of dimensions he hadn't known existed before, places more powerful than Earth - places filled with *magic*.

Limbo, he learned, was like the *Inbetween*. And as such, it served as a dimensional barrier between worlds that allowed him to move from one to another and gain experience, knowledge, and most importantly, power.

Because the human world was itself so devoid of magic, it took Zeke longer than he would have liked to acquire what he needed in the way of that power. But he was nothing if not tenacious, and acquire it he did.

He was only recently beginning to catch up with the rest of human society on “normal” fronts, so to speak - a home, finances, that sort of thing. These, he conjured or reached through magical means. But one of the first human things he did purchase in a normal, human way was a turntable. Because while it was not technically viewed as magic by most other-realmers, one irreplaceable quintessence the human world possessed over all the others was *music*.

And he was pretty sure it *was* magic, anyway.

Still, because in the human world he could only travel so far and only for a few hours a day, he had yet to luck out and catch a live concert. The stranger was right. The one coming up in New York was all anyone was talking about.

Zeke held back a sigh, swallowing it instead. While he'd been standing there staring down at the newspaper ad in his hands, his eyes had returned several times over to the outline drawing of a small bird sitting on the neck of a guitar. The bird had the wings to fly away any time he wanted. Which meant he was there only because he wanted to be. He *chose* to be. That bird was free.

Zeke had honestly never felt more trapped in his entire life. Or *afterlife*.

“What if I told you there was a way for you to travel beyond the limits of this river, Ezekiel Stone - and hear those artists play up close and personal?”

Zeke's head snapped up. The blond man hadn't yet looked away from the water, but he had something clutched in his fist that hadn't been there before. It was a black leather jacket with some kind of white embroidered patch on the back. When the man did turn toward Zeke again, he simultaneously tossed him the jacket.

Zeke caught it on instinct, his head spinning. The stranger knew his name. His *whole* name. It was a name he literally hadn't spoken aloud, much less shared with anyone in particular, since before the morning he had died, fifty-four years ago.

Rather numbly, Zeke put down the newspaper and used both hands to turn the heavy black jacket around so he could see the patch on the back. Bright white embroidery stretched beautifully across the leather. It bore a human skull that somehow looked slightly more than human, and a single word emblazoned beneath it: *Monsters*.

Zeke lowered the jacket and looked back up at the stranger.

Piercing blue eyes met his. “Death has no hold on you, Zeke. You’ve never taken a life,” the stranger said, his tone one of quiet admiration. “You’ve only saved them.” He pushed off the wall and nodded to the river. “This isn’t a prison for you, not yet anyway. It’s a second chance.”

Zeke could have asked a lot of things just then, such as how the stranger knew his name, how he knew Zeke couldn’t normally leave, and who the hell the stranger *was* in the first place. But he didn’t ask any of those things, because that magnanimous, copacetic feeling was back, and accompanying it was a strong sense of calm assurance.

He knew he could trust the stranger. And he also knew then and there that his questions would be answered in good time.

“And as far as second chances go,” said the stranger with another nod at the jacket in Zeke’s hands, “that’s one too.”

Zeke glanced down at the jacket, considered it for a few decisive seconds more - and then he put it on.

It fit perfectly.

(Chicago, Illinois, present time)

Cain knew the moment it happened.

Once a person put on that jacket and rode under that particular patch, they were attached to Cain forever. Whether across state lines, mountain ranges or oceans, they would remain connected, tied by some invisible string that bound them together as brothers.

Cain had felt Zeke's *turning*. He sensed the ominous shift in those pivotal split-seconds when Zeke held another man's life in his hands and rather than spare it, he chose to end it. The warden leader had closed his eyes and exhaled, because the ordained had finally come to pass.

When he'd first met Zeke, Cain came upon him reading and re-reading an ad for what would come to be known as Woodstock, in a year that would become both infamous and magnificent within the annals of history. No Earth-bound soul had ever been easier for Cain to read. The music called to Zeke, the laughter, the adventure. But more than anything, it was the *distance* that was Ezekiel's siren song. It was the being *there* instead of *here*.

It was the *freedom*.

That was something Cain could give him. He was the only person in the world who could. But he could do so only because Zeke had been so selfless in his existence, placing the lives of others before his own with such tenacity, he'd literally come back from the dead in order to do it.

In 1969, death had possessed no more hold over Zeke than it had in 1915; it had no claim to his spirit. He was *untouchable*, so much so that Zeke literally couldn't pass through death's door if he wanted to. He remained here, on the right side of death but the wrong side of life, firmly trapped in his own kind of *Inbetween*.

Fate gave fickle rewards. It was kind of an asshole, actually. Being stuck in a constantly shifting form in one small area near a single river was the crap-assed reward Zeke had been given for saving more than a dozen lives on that river. But Cain knew a thing or two about fate's crappy rewards, and he had plenty of experience fixing them.

As long as Zeke remained untouchable by death, Cain could get him past that human world boundary. Zeke could leave Chicago. He could ride with the Monsters anywhere he wanted.

And that was what they did.

For starters, the Monsters MC and its newest member made it to a six-hundred-acre dairy farm in Bethel, New York by August 15th, and witnessed history unfold in a way it never had before - and never would again. And for the next ten years, Zeke rode alongside Cain, training to become a warden, and eventually taking a spot as alternate second-in-command in the clan.

Regrettably, the influence Cain had over Zeke came with a single condition. If Zeke ever turned the tables and *took* a life... well, everything would basically go *poof*. And unfortunately, Cain had felt the darkness yawning open in Zeke from the very beginning - back in 1969.

Standing beside him, staring out over the water where Ezekiel had lost his life and spared so many others, Cain could feel that there was something more to the man than longing, something more than loneliness.

There was an *edge* to him, one sharpened by bitterness and a directionless, desperate need for some kind of retribution that had honed itself year after year. Until that need for retribution had become a need for revenge. Revenge against who and for what, Cain wasn't sure whether Zeke even knew. He was just angry, and Cain had known right away that with him, it would only be a matter of time.

More than fifty years later, as Cain rode alone into the same city to pay a visit to an old friend, he took the slow route, allowing the drone of his V-twin and the rush of wind all around him to help him prepare for what he knew was to come. It did help, but not enough. Not for what actually hit him when he crossed warden clan lines and entered Chicago.

The moment he breached Sirius clan's territory, he was hit with the full force of several calamities at once. A slew of impressions and information worked its way through Cain's powerful mind, and within seconds, he had done away with his bike, all pretense of mortal travel discarded in favor of instantaneous transportation through portal after portal. As he tunneled through space and time, Cain pulled his phone from the inside pocket of his leather jacket and instructed it to make a "quick call" to someone specific.

The “quick call” instruction activated his half of a spell that had been a gift from the Time King years before.

“Cain,” the recipient greeted as he picked up the other end. He was breathless, and in the background could be heard sounds of battle. The second half of the spell was set into motion, isolating the recipient in what the Time King called “an imprisoned moment.” Time would slow for the man on the other end of the call, but only for a few seconds. Just long enough for Cain to get his message across and hang up. It would make up for this distorted dilation by shortening seconds elsewhere the same day, but the spell recipient could choose which seconds as long as they were chosen before twenty-four hours was up. If not, time would simply shorten the final moments before midnight. How it isolated the spell recipient was another matter entirely, and one that would have left most quantum physicists sputtering.

“Marcus, it’s four a.m.,” Cain said, his deep voice tight with uncharacteristic tension. “*Do you know where your clan leader is?*”

There was a very brief pause as both the reference to the old, famous public service announcement originally meant for children, and the gravity of Cain’s question in general, were processed. And then Marcus swore softly and vehemently on his end of the line. “...*Damnit*. She was just here!”

Cain didn’t have to tell the warden what he needed to do next, because Marcus hung up right after speaking, breaking the spell. He could sense the Sirius second-in-command was already in motion, racing to find the head-strong woman Cain had secretly sent Marcus to protect long, long ago.

Cain hung up and re-pocketed his phone, taking a precious few seconds to reign in his power. Then he turned invisible with no more than a thought and stepped out of his portal into a realm of fog and trapped spirits.

There were two trapped spirits here in particular. One was a woman who clearly didn’t want to be there, understandably frightened and confused. She was special, that was evident

right away. What was also plainly discernible to Cain was that she was *supposed* to be there, whether she knew it or not.

The other trapped spirit was Ezekiel Stone. And he was trapped by his own designs.

Cain studied him for a moment in silence. Zeke had tumbled from the higher echelons of his afterlife, that much was obvious. Like Lucifer, with his wings torn away, eyes on fire, and a warrior's spirit made jagged by a thousand cuts, Zeke was an angel who'd fallen into the muck of sin. So beautiful, and so broken.

There was something about a corrupted saint that would almost always make him the most appealing person in the room. And no one would quite be able to tell you why.

Zeke wore that corruption in spades. But that was good news to Cain. Because the thicker the muck, the more likely whatever it was trying to smother underneath was of value. That part of Zeke that joined Cain and his men fifty years ago was still in there somewhere. The ghost warden just needed to realize it.

However, this was perhaps not the best setting for a lot of self-actualizing to take place. There were too many volatile forces at work all at once in far too small a space and time was pressing in on them. The world outside of Zeke's *Inbetween* pocket was a powder keg sitting open and exposed in a building fire storm.

So when the time came, Cain dropped his invisibility and stepped into the limbo alley just as Ezekiel Stone's monster was beginning to show. "Let her go, Zeke."

A conversation later, Cain knew he'd made headway with his former clan brother when Zeke's influence voluntarily pulled back a little, and Cain felt the barrier between limbo and the human world begin to thin. Zeke was placing the woman - Cain read her thoughts and took her name from their surface; *Faye* - Zeke was putting Faye's safety first. That was another good sign.

But then a tear in what remained of the limbo pocket's barrier was brutally ripped open, and Faye's spirit was instantly dragged through it without ceremony. It happened in the span of a spliced-up second.

In the next moment, the limbo realm's barriers came crashing down completely just before Zeke Stone blurred into a speeding trail of ghostly blue aura and burning yellow eyes, Cain stepped back into the fog and vanished, and a terrible, nightmarish wail once more pierced the Chicago night.

Chapter Six

When the small silver tag on Genevieve Rayne's charm bracelet began to glow, she knew Faye was in trouble. The bracelet had originally possessed twenty-six small and thin card-shaped sterling silver tags, each tag inscribed with a rune. There were thirteen pairs of runes in the beginning, but Gen had used three pairs of them so far, the third set tonight.

One silver tag, she'd secretly shoved into an outer pocket of Faye's gun holster when she wasn't looking. The rune on its matching companion was now glowing red with warning and warming up against Faye's wrist underneath the sleeve of her leather glove. She recognized the sensation right away - and she'd been waiting for this.

The heated rune meant powerful magic had crossed Faye's path, and *that* meant trouble. Especially since powerful magic was not supposed to be on Faye's menu tonight. The only things she *was* supposed to have come across were a contact and a dozen prescription medications for a dozen unfortunate casualties of circumstance.

Genevieve didn't make a habit out of getting her people killed, whether they were her warden clan members or her *secret angels*. She'd had a bad feeling about sending someone different out tonight to begin with. So, from the moment Faye had successfully twisted her arm enough to meet the contact herself, Gen had been running various pear-shaped scenarios in her head just in case.

The moment she sensed the rune go off, she scanned the battle around her, knowing exactly what to look for. Earlier that night, three *bookas* - tall, white skinned humanoids with the heads of rams and white-out eyes - and a *fearfell* - another tall beast, but with rainbow-hued fur so soft it felt like feathers and teeth and claws so sharp they sliced like scalpels - had popped out of a portal just north of the US Coast Guard station in Calumet Park, Chicago. Their sudden appearance had terrified half a dozen late night revelers and threatened to draw the attention of the guard themselves. These were supernatural monsters summoned from other realms, in this case the

Unseelie Realm. Immediate action was called for, not only to protect the mortals and annul any memory on their part of having witnessed the creatures, but to protect the creatures themselves. They were not of this world and had not chosen to enter it - they'd done so at someone else's behest.

When this kind of thing occurred, wardens assigned to the territory affected by the anomaly were tasked with dealing with the beasts by sending them home if possible or neutralizing them if not, finding and dealing with whoever or whatever had summoned them, and making certain none of the human world remembered, recorded, or were affected by the situation. That meant several wardens with a variety of talents, including at least one mage to deal with clean-up.

This time around, Genevieve had taken *two* magic users - one for the actual job, and one extra for another job entirely. She had no choice but to use someone else's magic; her own was off-limits.

The second magic user was a man she'd been considering recruiting into her illegal activities for some time but had refrained from doing so due to the mage's relatively frail constitution. Benjamin Riley was a brave and practiced spell caster, almost too willing to jump into the fray when it came to protecting others. But when he was three years old, his innate magical ability and complete lack of instruction or guidance sent him accidentally careening into an unseelie fae dimension. When he popped back through to the mortal realm, he was different. Riley had no memory of the events that took place while he was sucked away; he'd simply been too young, but they left him with an untreatable condition that hobbled him in three noteworthy ways. Riley was afflicted with a perpetual limp that slowed him down compared to other wardens, and when that didn't get him, the diminished lung capacity often did. Most noticeable of all was that Riley was mute; he hadn't spoken a single word since his ordeal as a toddler twenty years earlier.

Still, his loyalty went bone-deep, and that was more important to Gen than anything, especially when it came to her more covert efforts. Plus, because he was mute Riley had

become a master at wordless spellcasting; he was a tremendous boon to have around when silence was paramount.

So she'd decided ahead of time that if Faye wound up in trouble, tonight would be the night to bring him into the fold. In preparation, she'd told him on the down-low to be prepared to separate from the battle and transport.

It looked like it was now or never.

Gen's ice-green eyes scanned the battle taking place on a small stretch of Chicago beach, settling at once on Riley. She marked his spot before scanning further to find Marcus Troy. Both wardens were busy battling, as was she, but wardens were accustomed to fighting and planning in speedy synchronicity. It was par for the warden course.

Gen moved with single-minded purpose, finishing off her *booka* opponent before sprinting toward Riley. He noticed her coming toward him out of the corner of his eye, and she gave him a single nod. Riley understood. A few seconds later, they'd both managed to slip away from the battle, and Riley was transporting them to a new location.

They exited the portal on a rooftop overlooking the East Bank of the Chicago River, and Gen was skidding to her knees to peer over the short roof wall to the alley below just as a deep male voice yelled out and two figures went sprinting through the darkness. She knew at once who they were. Faye Everett was the well-trained angel fleeing like a terrified animal into the shadows.

And Zeke Stone was the terrifying man she was fleeing from.

Gen knew Zeke's story. She knew what he'd once done, what he'd done in the time since, and most importantly, what he *was*. And though she felt deep down that the man behind the monster was more haunted than unholy, she wasn't going to let Faye be the Guinea pig to test her theory.

She signaled for Riley to follow her across the rooftops until Zeke vanished from behind Faye and reappeared directly in her path, bringing her to a skidding halt. Gen stopped, Riley

followed suit, and the warden leader signed for her mage to get ready.

There was no point in attempting to hurt Ezekiel Stone. She didn't want to go down that bumpy road with the powerful ghost, not only because she didn't particularly *want* to hurt him - he shared this territory with Gen, her warden clan, and her *angels* in peace, after all - but because quite honestly, without her magic Gen couldn't guarantee she'd come out of the confrontation alive, much less unscathed. Zeke was scary strong and growing stronger by the day. She could feel his magic pouring out all around him in fact, even from atop the nearby building. It was as if he were so replete with it, he'd lost the ability to contain it all.

So Gen signaled for Riley to cast something flashy and distracting, and a few seconds later, she saw their opening. She leaned over, cupped her mouth, and yelled, "Faye, *run!*" A second later, Riley's targeted blinding spell gave Faye the opening she needed to do just that.

Gen was prepared to follow the encounter up with further magic or even a direct confrontation with the ghost, but a strong grip on her upper arm yanked her from the building's rooftop ledge and spun her around before she could even stand on her own. It happened so fast, she might have lost her balance - she was rather clumsy these days - if not for the fact that if anything, the grip on her arm tightened.

"Congratulations, Gen. *You're dead.*" The furious visage of Marcus Troy glared down at her, eyes flashing, voice seething. The *you're dead* thing was something all combatants-in-training were familiar with. Make a mistake and you were dead, and your mentor was sure to remind you of that fact on a frequent basis.

But Gen was more concerned with the wellbeing of the woman running through the alleys below at that moment than she was with her would-be bodyguard's temper tantrum at being outwitted. She yanked out of his grip and gritted her teeth. "Not now, Troy. Faye needs help."

She went to step around him, prepared to get down to ground level even if she had to use her own magic to do so, but Marcus stepped right in front of her and shook his head. “No. She doesn’t. Not this time.”

Gen frowned up at him, confused as to why he wasn’t more afraid for Faye’s sake than he was. But then his expression softened, just a little, and more quietly he said, “Just trust me, Rayne. *Please*. She’s going to be okay.”

Genevieve felt stunned. At first, she truly had absolutely no idea what to do with that. As she stood there in silence, contemplating his words, Marcus turned his attention to Benjamin. “Riley,” he greeted with only slight sarcasm. “Welcome to the team, I guess.”

Riley pressed his lips together a little sheepishly and shrugged as if to say, “Thank you, I guess.”

Marcus looked back at Genevieve. “Faye Everett is as good as chaperoned,” he told her. “Believe me when I tell you that no harm is going to come to her tonight.”

That was the thing about Marcus Troy. He’d come to her clan wanting to sign up a long time ago, his background and origins cloudy, his abilities indefinable. When pressed for more information, it was never forthcoming. The man liked his privacy.

But he passed every warden test he was given with flying colors, and as the decades passed, his loyalty and dedication were proven countless times over. Gen *did* trust him. And she *did* believe him. She trusted and believed him because Marcus seemed to have a knack for *knowing* things. His ability wasn’t like Faye’s; he wasn’t a walking lie detector. But he had gut feelings, instincts that were slightly unnatural, that for whatever reason were *never wrong*.

With that in mind, Genevieve took a deep breath and sighed. “She’s out there with Zeke Stone.”

Marcus tilted his head a little and gave her a single nod. “Yes, she is.”

“And I never told her what he is.”

“No, you didn’t. You’re not a fan of preconceived notions. You like to give people the benefit of the doubt and allow them to make their own first impressions.”

Gen blinked a few times as he threw her own words and ideals at her, using them like a well-timed weapon. But the attack wasn’t as effective as it would normally have been; she knew something about Zeke and Faye that Marcus didn’t know. That knowledge reinforced her backbone. “I’d say he screwed up his first impression all on his own.”

Marcus actually smiled. It was tight and impatient, and his eyes were wary as ever, but some aspect of his visage softened. “Maybe,” he said. “But I happen to know that you also think first impressions are shallow and no one should ever take them for granted.”

Gen rolled her eyes. “For crying out loud, Marcus. Ezekiel is a killer.” That wasn’t the secret knowledge she possessed, either. It was just plain old knowledge.

Marcus said, “So are you.”

Now Gen’s jaw dropped just a little before she snapped it shut and clenched her teeth together in mounting aggravation.

Marcus seemed to recognize that he’d reached the end of his tether with his clan leader, and he looked away from her for a moment to chew on his cheek. Then, without looking at her he asked, “Just tell me. Do you honestly believe Zeke Stone is going to kill Faye, Gen? Or harm her, for that matter?”

The question filled the silence around them, allowing Genevieve to realize that the struggle taking place down below on ground level had moved on and left them behind. Gen had come to help Faye, and if she truly needed that help, then Genevieve was failing her right now. But rather than push past Marcus and run to her aid again, she stayed where she was and argued with her second-in-command. Why?

Because the answer to Troy’s question was...

“No,” she said.

She'd seen the way Zeke looked at Faye. There was no denying that kind of look, no confusing it for anything but what it was. And Genevieve knew Ezekiel... had known him for decades. She knew not only what he was, but *who* he was. And the latter was more relevant by far.

Unfortunately, almost equally relevant was who Fathom Kate Everett was - and whether Zeke possessed that knowledge himself.

“Okay, then.” Marcus placed a hand on Genevieve’s shoulder and squeezed gently, obviously considering the issue resolved. “Let’s get out of here. We have to play some catch-up.”

That was painfully true. They had a lot of illegal medicine to find in a much shorter time frame now. People were still suffering, and while those people had probably lost the ability to believe in or depend on anyone for anything at this point, Gen would rather lose a finger than disappoint them even one more time.

She ran a hand through her hair and said, “If Everett isn’t back at HQ in twenty-four hours, I’m going after her Marcus, even if that means I have to swim through a river of ectoplasm and fire to get to her.”

“Which it will,” said Marcus right away. But he shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans in concession, lowering his head. “And, fair enough.”

Genevieve sighed again before glancing over at Riley.

Benjamin Riley nodded in understanding and cast up a portal to take them all home.

Just before Faye was certain the portal would flash completely open and engulf her, the person carrying her was struck by something hard from the side. The impact was so strong, she sensed it for only microseconds before it temporarily destroyed her bearings completely. Direction became muddled and her skin went numb, but she could tell she was moving fast because her hair flew out around her like

a long brunette halo. There was a second impact shortly thereafter, a resounding ringing in her ears, and a cloud of ensuing darkness.

An indeterminate amount of time later, she opened her eyes as if from a dream. The world was an oval vignette, dark in the middle and blurry-gray on the edges. She blinked a few times and reached out with her consciousness for feeling in her fingers and toes, those grounding points of reality that would help her gain a foothold in consciousness.

When she was able to move her hands and feet, she closed her eyes again for a bit and pushed her palms against the surface beneath her. There was a layer of cold and hard, most likely concrete, covered by something softer and warmer that smelled nice.

Leather, she realized. She concentrated and caught the further scents of sawdust, something burning faintly, and general damp.

Faye pushed herself up, sliding along the leather to a seated position.

“Easy,” came a familiar deep voice and an equally familiar command. “Go slow. You were hit with quite a bit of magic.”

She recognized the man’s voice - *Zeke*. He was a few feet away, from the sound of it. She opened her eyes again and tried to focus. It was much easier this time.

The room around her was large and mostly empty, and she’d been right with her assessment that she was laying on leather and concrete. The sawdust-damp scent was explained by the stack of large wood crates in one corner of the space and the sliding metal door at one end. This was a warehouse, which probably meant that the Chicago River was close by on the other side of that door.

Zeke was crouched down with his broad back to her, but even from behind he was unmistakable. To Faye, he had the appearance of an animated comic book antihero, drawn wide-shouldered and narrow-waisted, with clothing that had clearly

been expertly tailored to his rare physique. Not many people looked like that in the real world.

And this was definitely the real world. The bruises forming across her body were all too real. She'd gotten caught in the crossfire of more than one spell, and she was going to feel it in the morning.

That was something no one ever talked about - the fact that magic left bruises. If you had a strong enough spell cast at you, there was sure to be a mark somewhere on your body later that would prove you'd been magic's bitch. Faye wasn't sure why this never made conversation in warden training sessions or during spell practice. Maybe it was just that... well, *most* things worth a damn were things that had to be earned, and earning them meant doing something difficult - and difficult more often than not meant *painful*. So she guessed it just went without saying.

Zeke had yet to turn to face her, but he clearly knew she was awake, or he wouldn't have warned her to get up slowly. He was focused on something else, and when Faye's line of sight dipped to see what it was, her mind and stomach processed it at different speeds. Her mind spun wildly out of control. Her stomach turned to stone.

It was another body.

"Did you make him dead, too?" she asked without any forethought. It appeared all of her usual verbal filters were temporarily inoperative, and her mouth had a direct, uncluttered line to her evidently suicidal brain.

But rather than take offense at her unsolicited reference to his actions against another man at the river, Zeke glanced over his shoulder at her and said, "Negative. He was never alive."

Faye tried to ignore the rush of hot heaviness that flooded her chest when his green eyes caught hers. His gaze was potent as hell though, so she failed and felt that heat creep further up her body and into her neck.

As if to take pity on her, Zeke returned his attention to the figure on the ground, allowing her to process what he'd just

said. While she did, he went on. “He’s a *thogail*. Do you know what that is, Miss Everett?”

She did, actually. Or she remembered the lesson on them, anyway. “A golem,” she said softly. Her voice came out sounding drained of strength and volume. “I think.”

He was moving the thogail’s clothing, searching for something, but she could see from his profile that he smiled at her response. “Yeah, more or less. Thogails are constructs made with magic from the fae realms and normally used to send a moving scry back to their creators.” He lifted the monster’s arm, pushed up its sleeve, turned it side to side, then dropped it again before glancing back at her. “Like a surveillance video.”

“You can only stop them with electricity,” she said, simply adding to the conversation as if she were repeating thogail knowledge for an oral exam. It was rote memorization, so it was easier than making real conversation in times of stress - and this one of those times.

But she’d never actually come across a thogail before; this was her first. The fact that only electricity would stop them explained the smoky-burned smell in the room. Clearly some type of electric attack such as a localized lightning bolt spell, or even a blast from a simple taser, had been used against the construct to bring it down.

And now it lay motionless across the room.

For the most part, it looked just like a human male, and a large one too. At least, at a cursory glance it did. But if a person knew what to look for, small differences would give golems and thogails away. The devil was in the details, so to speak, such as a complete lack of fingernails and toenails and the fact that the construct’s pupils never changed size.

It was trying to take me somewhere, she thought to herself as she stared at the fallen figure. *And...* She slid her gaze from the golem to the man kneeling over it. *He saved me.*

“Why did it...” She stopped, reconsidered her query, and asked, “Where was it taking me?”

“Well now,” said Zeke as he stood up, rising to his full impressive height. “That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it?” He turned to face her, instantly making her feel conspicuously small where she sat on the floor a few feet away. “Thogails are walking scrying machines that don’t normally interact with those they are spying on. Yet this one straight-up snatched you.” He closed the distance between them with a few long strides before crouching down again, this time directly beside her. His movements were fluid and easy, graceful in the extreme, reminding her that earlier that night he had been glowing an eerie blue, his eyes had been burning bright yellow-gold, and he’d broken a man’s neck with one hand.

And he just used my name. He called me Miss Everett. Talk about delayed reactions. Did I ever give him my name?

“How did you learn my name?” Faye pressed her palms harder into the surface beneath her, ready to use the leverage to jump to her feet if need be. When she did, she felt the leather beneath her touch again, and this time she chanced a quick glance down at it.

It was a black biker jacket. Not just any biker jacket, either. Any warden on the planet would instantly recognize the bright white inhuman skull patch emblazoned on the back of this particular leather jacket. She felt her eyes go wide. *So he was that Cain!*

“I can learn anything I want about a person when they’re sleeping,” Zeke told her softly.

Faye’s head snapped back up. He’d moved closer to her and was less than a foot away now. She hadn’t seen him move. But given the jacket she was sitting on, she supposed she wasn’t at all surprised to find he had untold skills.

“What... *are* you?” she finally asked him.

“You tell me, angel. Think back on your lessons again,” he teased gently. “What terrible beast in the night can steal a person’s thoughts, but only from the in-between world of their dreams?” His smile grew a little more wicked and a lot more beautiful, and his eyes shifted a few shades darker. “What

creature can even influence those dreams if he chooses? What horror can *haunt* them?"

Haunt them.

She thought of his ethereal, spectral appearance earlier that night. She recalled the terrifying wail that had gone up behind her, infiltrating the streets and alleys and causing her to falter. She looked down at the clothes hugging his body... beautifully tailored remnants of a bygone era. "You're a ghost," she whispered.

"I prefer the term 'vitality challenged,'" he told her, his stunning smile not slipping a bit.

"Really?" she asked, honestly curious.

"No." He grinned broadly.

She blinked, struck by the glory of that grin. And then he chuckled, the deep sound melodic in nature. What they said about ghosts and the things they could do with their voices was apparently true. Hence the wail that could paralyze rabid animals - or panicking women - and the laugh that could tear down the strongest defenses.

"I've never met a ghost before," she told him. "They're very rare. They can... only happen when death loses all claim on a person's spirit in the moments after death." Another warden Faye knew had once jokingly likened becoming a ghost to receiving a personal invitation to the greatest party in the multiverse, one so fantastic it was literally to die for. Only to show up freshly dead and be turned away at the door due to improper attire.

Zeke tilted his head to one side, his eyes shining. "You don't say."

"What did you do to piss off death?" Faye asked, apparently deciding that she would just go ahead and let her mouth continue to drive her face since it was clear all of her filters had officially gone on an adventure.

"I made a bad decision. Or a dozen."

Faye frowned. For the first time since she'd met him, she had the sudden sense that he wasn't being completely honest with her. For some reason, he didn't truly believe that whatever decision - or decisions - he'd made were bad. Maybe... just that they'd had bad consequences.

She looked down at the jacket he had laid her on. It was a very valuable jacket, all things considered. A lot of people would literally kill just about anyone or anything in order to rightfully own one. "Are you really... do you really ride with _"

"Not anymore."

She looked back up at him to see that all of the merriment had fled his handsome features.

"Why?" she asked, even though she absolutely knew for certain that she didn't want to hear the answer.

"I became too much of a monster," he told her, his eyes going cold.

And all Faye could really focus on was the fact that despite how ironically improbable such a thing was, Zeke the ghost was telling her the truth.

Chapter Seven

In the dim, unnatural light of the warehouse's overhead fluorescents, Faye watched the tall stranger lift the thogail construct into his arms and carry him across the room. He moved through the warehouse as if the golem didn't weigh the three-hundred pounds, minimum, that she knew it must weigh. Golems, thogails, constructs - they were all normally made out of material that was heavy in nature. But Zeke seemed unaffected by the physical aspect of his task, except... When he set the golem back down again at the metal door entrance, she noticed his form seemed less solid. When had that happened? He was becoming transparent, but it was apparently happening slowly enough not to notice right away.

"You're see-through," she whispered aloud, stating the fact more for her own benefit than for his since he was well across the very large room and probably wouldn't hear her. But he laughed just as he had earlier, the deep sound easy and filled with honest amusement. He had placed the artificial body on the ground and was rising again, his back once more to her.

"No pun intended?" he remarked, beginning to roll up his transparent sleeves. She could again see his grin in profile, but the way his muscles flexed each time he rolled the cuff of his sleeve up another notch was more distracting even than the smile. "You know," he said, "See-through. Because you can tell when someone's lying."

Faye took a step back; it was an involuntary reaction to a ghost she'd barely met using a pun. But it was also a reaction of surprise for a more serious reason.

Her withdrawal drew his immediate attention, bringing him around to face her. She took a second step back when his eyes caught hers. His green eyes were glowing again, this time shedding an aqua-blue light reminiscent of moonbeams through water.

"How did you know that I can tell when people are lying?"

“I scanned your surface thoughts while you were sleeping, remember?” he said, watching her carefully with those sea-light eyes.

She remembered, but she hadn't realized he'd learned as much. She wondered what else he'd discovered, what other thoughts of hers had been irresponsibly playing Marco-Polo on the “surface” like mental reprobates in a public pool. She was going to have to ask Genevieve if there was a way to protect one's mind while unconscious.

“What's happening to you?” she asked, though she was already considering several explanations as to his fading form. She'd seen him glowing an eerie blue, she'd seen him solid as any human, and now he looked as though he were a watercolor drawing on tracing paper. “Are you too far away from your place of death?” she guessed, noting that one of his eyebrows raised as if in interest. He turned to fully face her again, even while he continued to roll up his other sleeve.

Her eyes slipped down to his forearms, sculpted and proportioned as if he'd spent his afterlife at the gym rather than... whatever he'd been doing. What did ghosts do all day? “Or did you use too much magic earlier?” she asked. She was distracted, her mind focused on several different things at once. She'd always loved a man with well-built forearms.

“Like when you were dealing with the thogail?” she said softly, gesturing to the body behind him. “I assume you had to summon some sort of electricity, like lightning.” And that would mean he had cast a spell, because she didn't see any electrical sources in the room.

The ghost smirked. “You want to know all my weaknesses, angel?” he asked. He finished rolling up his sleeves and dropped his arms, pinning her with a look that made her feel like sitting down again. “Planning to use them against me?”

Faye swallowed with some difficulty. Gods, he was beautiful. *Yes*, she thought. *I would love to know your weaknesses.*

She needed to get out of there. Something about being in the ghost's proximity was affecting her. She wasn't thinking clearly at all. It wasn't like her to willingly hang around dangerous things, and if Zeke was anything, he was dangerous.

"Will I need to?" she asked softly.

Zeke considered her in enigmatic silence for a moment. Then he raised an arm and held his hand palm-out toward the large metal door to the warehouse. "You're free to leave when you feel comfortable doing so," he said as the edges of the door lit up and the metal began to slide upward. He wasn't lying to her; however she didn't need her special talent to know there were a lot of things he wasn't telling her.

As the huge metal door lifted in its tracks, Faye watched in mounting fascination - and a little more fear. She already guessed he was capable of casting up magic since he'd taken out the golem. He had that wail of his that could incapacitate people too. He could claim solid form as he had earlier, and he could pull people's spirits into Limbo. And now he was proving capable of manipulating the physical world even while he himself was incorporeal. Ghosts weren't supposed to be able to do that. He was exceedingly powerful.

What else could he do?

She wondered how long he'd been a ghost. When had he died? *Where* had he died? And how?

"However, I think it would be prudent to discover why your original contact was tasked with abducting you, don't you think?" he asked, his tone light despite the weight of the words. "And why a thogail was then sent for you when he failed." The door finished sliding open to go still in its tracks, and Zeke glanced back at her as he lowered his arm again. "More importantly, I believe it's paramount that we determine *who* is responsible for these orders. Wouldn't you agree?"

Of course she would. But now that the door was open, the very faint light illuminating the inside of the warehouse made her anxious. Too much time had passed. She needed to get home. She needed to tell Gen she was okay -

Faye's breath stilled in her lungs and her eyes went wide. She'd completely forgotten about the fact that Genevieve and Zeke had apparently gone toe-to-toe earlier that night. It felt like a million years ago that Gen had called out to her from that rooftop and told her to run.

"Oh no," she whispered, awed that she'd managed to get so utterly distracted around this man. She had a job to do, a boss to report to, medicine to find and deliver to people who needed it! "Is Genevieve -"

"Rayne is completely unharmed," Zeke told her, cutting her off as if he were still sucking up her surface thoughts. Or maybe it was just that easy to tell what she was thinking by the look on her face. "She has the equivalent of an army of undead gods looking out for her. Whether she knows it or not."

Faye frowned, processing that. He was telling her the truth, even if it was an analogy. He really did feel that Genevieve had that much protection, and Faye really wanted to know why. Wait. It *was* an analogy, right?

She mentally shook her head and decided it was an explanation she would ask for on another day. Maybe. "What happened back there between you?" she asked instead.

"Nothing, actually. Rayne had one of her mages throw a distraction at me, you ran, and I followed after you."

Faye watched him carefully. He was telling her the truth again. *Why did you follow me?* she wondered. *Why me? Is it because I saw what you did?*

No, she thought. He had already promised her he meant her no harm. So, what then? Was he going to pay her off to keep her silent? Was that how he worked? Who the hell *was* he, anyway?

She blinked and felt her jacket pockets, searching for her phone. It was still there. She pulled it out and touched the screen. But the screen stubbornly remained black.

"Sorry," Zeke said. He was lying; he wasn't sorry. "Either your proximity to the portal earlier or to the lightning spell must have fried it out." That much was probably true, and he

believed it. He just wasn't bothered at all by the fact that she had no means of communication with her people.

The next thing Faye checked was the holster at the small of her back. The gun was still there. The reason it hadn't been there while she was in Limbo was because she wasn't in her physical body. It made sense to her now.

She pulled the gun out, fully expecting Zeke to react in some defensive manner, but he seemed just as unaffected by her brandishing a weapon as he was by her dead phone. He simply stood beside the open door and watched her, his beautiful, eerily glowing eyes tracking every move she made with vivid, keen perception.

She turned the gun over in her hands, checked the clip. It was still fully loaded.

Okay, of course he isn't afraid, she thought to herself. *He's a ghost. He's already dead.* And these were normal bullets, meant to stop living humans in their tracks. Which was probably why he hadn't taken it off of her person while she was sleeping.

She let out a shaky breath, the cold of the warehouse seeping into her for the first time. She was tired and hungry, and she had too much to process. Slowly, she returned the gun to its holster, then ran a hand through her long, dark hair. It tangled around her fingers, and she yanked distractedly.

"You make good points," she said, her gaze slipping past him to the riverfront beyond. Without a phone, she'd have to catch a cab or a bus, but she wasn't far from a bus stop if she had her bearings right. "But I need to check in and explain why I'm coming in empty-handed."

She started toward the door, smoothing out her jacket over the weapon at her back.

"What if you don't have to go back empty-handed?" Zeke asked.

Faye stopped, giving him a questioning look. "What do you -"

Movement outside the warehouse door drew her attention to a number of shadows that separated from the thicker darkness around them. They stepped into the low, fluorescent light of the warehouse, revealing a handful of men. These didn't look like Sunday school teachers, either. One of them literally had a bad word tattooed across his neck for all the world to see.

Alarm bells instantly went off in Faye's head, and her hand slid to the holster at her back.

"Take it easy," said Zeke softly as he left the side of the doorway to join her. He gestured to the men, who nodded at him respectfully. "These are a few of my men. They're here to deliver something for me."

He turned to face them, and one of the men came forward, pulling a black backpack off his back and laying it on the ground in front of him to unzip it. Faye watched as he proceeded to pull several Ziploc bags filled with what looked like dozens of smaller transparent plastic bags inside them. All of the bags contained pills.

"Are those...."

"Most are pain killers," Zeke told her, nodding at the man to hand the bag to Faye. "I hope they're the kind your patients need. Just in case, I had him bring several different brands and doses. I believe there are also a few higher-end diabetes, autoimmune disease, and thyroid medications not easily covered by insurance in the mix." He watched as the man handed the bag to her, and she took it with numb fingers, staring down at it silently. "I wasn't certain what exactly you needed, so we tried to cover all the bases."

She stared at the bag for a few seconds more, looked at the other bags peeking out from the backpack, and then looked up into Zeke's no-longer-glowing eyes. They were green again, that starkly contrasting green that must have made him one of the most beautiful men on the planet. Or... *had* made him so when he was alive.

He was still slightly transparent before her, and she still had so many questions for him, not the least of which was now

how and why he would acquire this medication for her. She opened her mouth to try to formulate any one of those questions, but all that came out was, "I... I don't think I have enough money for all of this." Genevieve hadn't planned on such a large exchange.

Zeke's brow raised again, and he shook his head, nodding at the man a second time. The man picked up the backpack, still unzipped, and stepped forward. "May I?" the stranger asked, indicating that she should return the bag to the pack so he could close it up.

She did so, and then Zeke said, "I don't want your money, Faye Everett."

He indicated with his pointer finger that she should turn around. She didn't know what else to do but what he asked, so she turned around, and tried to hold still and steady as she felt the backpack being slid over her shoulders. The bottom of it bumped against her gun, but she ignored the sensation, not wanting to draw the newcomers' attention to the weapon.

When they'd finished placing it on her, she turned back around and faced Zeke again. She couldn't believe her fortune as far as the medication was concerned, though she was going to have to have it tested to make certain it was all safe and legit before passing it on to her "patients," as Zeke had called them. But she was *thoroughly* confused as to why this stranger - this *ghost* - would do such a thing for her in the first place.

She was confused about so *many* things.

"Then, what do you want?" she straight-up asked. She really had no clue this time around. Zeke the ghost was throwing her for a loop.

She did have a somewhat troubling feeling that owing a man like him any kind of favors could get very dangerous, very fast. Here he was, obviously in ghost form and unable to so much as touch anything, and he still commanded enough control and power to acquire an enormous amount of contraband at a moment's notice. He clearly commanded respect, if the silent obedience of the men outside that warehouse was any indication.

“I want your promise that you’ll be the one making the exchanges in my territory from now on,” he told her. “Normally Rayne sends someone else. This is your first time.” He paused, the corners of his lips curling up ever so slightly. “Am I right?”

She stared at those lips for a moment and nodded.

“Then give me your word that you will return tonight for another exchange, and I will guarantee to not only provide you with a complete shipment of the medications you require, I should have more information on our golem companion and the one responsible for creating him.”

He waited a beat for her to digest this request, and she tried her very best to do so. She really did. But the truth was, he was just an overwhelming presence in every respect. Tall, gorgeous, powerful, magical - and undead. It was enough to crisscross anyone’s mental circuits.

“I can tell your wheels are spinning,” he told her, stepping forward slightly to close the distance between them. And though he couldn’t touch her, she felt his nearness as if he were solid. More than solid. She almost felt a heat coming off him, electric and off-limits. But he came close enough to lean forward, his lips beside her ear. “I know you have questions, Fathom,” he told her, using the name she hadn’t heard anyone use in ages. It sounded like a magic spell coming from his ethereal lips. “I promise to answer them all. Just come back to me.”

He leaned back then and looked down at her, smiling in a way that set off sparks in his green eyes. “Do we have a deal?”

Faye looked from him to the four men waiting patiently several feet away, then back up at Zeke again. She didn’t even know his last name. She did, indeed, have questions. And he had promised to answer them all. And he wasn’t even lying.

“Okay,” she said softly, running her thumbs under the straps of the backpack and taking comfort in the weight she felt there. “You have a deal.”

Chapter Eight

“No.” Genevieve shook her head and continued to pace across the hotel room. It was a cliché, but the carpet beneath her boots literally looked thinner than the surrounding pile. Of course, it was a hotel room....

“No, that’s...” Gen muttered, stopping to pinch the bridge of her nose as if staving off an oncoming headache. “That’s not going to happen. I’m sorry, Faye but you’ve already seen more danger than you were supposed to. I can’t say I’m not grateful for the medicine you brought back, but I didn’t want to leave you there last night to begin with.” She sighed heavily. “Not with him.”

Marcus took a deep breath, watching his clan leader with an enigmatic expression. After a long pause, he finally said, “Okay, that’s true enough. I had to drag her away from that rooftop because she was already in over her head with magic.”

Faye knew what that meant. It meant Genevieve had been surrounded with enough magic to draw attention to herself, and in this day and age the less attention Gen got, the better. Especially from those who noticed magic in particular.

But Genevieve stopped pacing and gave her second-in-command a glare that caused him to blink and shrink away as if struck. “I’m just saying,” he added defensively.

“I used *zero* magic,” she said. “You know that.” Then she bit her lip and looked down, adding less fervently, “Not my own, anyway.”

Marcus shook his head, standing from the edge of the hotel bed where he’d been sitting. Much to Gen’s surprise, he reached out with lightning speed and grabbed her arm, lifting it until the charm bracelet she always wore dangled visibly on her wrist. “Using magic items you created in the past is still using your magic. Not everyone will notice it as the same signature because it will be warped by time – but some people will. Some very powerful people will.” He paused for effect, coming close to her. “I bet you didn’t realize that.” He looked like he was preparing for a fight; his eyes flashing challenge.

“How do you think *I* was able to find you so quickly?” he asked, his voice lower but his tone harsher.

Genevieve went visibly pale at his words. She’d already gone still, but now Faye watched as the fight nearly drained completely out of her beautiful, strong rebel leader. She’d never seen that happen before. It was disconcerting. She looked at the bracelet, a piece she’d always thought was just a family heirloom or something, and for the first time she wondered what the heck it *actually* was.

“Wait,” she said softly, hoping to not only get a question answered but to diffuse the tension a little. “What magic did you use? What is that bracelet, anyway? I’ve never seen you without it.”

But Genevieve yanked her arm out of Marcus’s grip with a short burst of strength and shoved her sleeve over the sterling silver decoration.

Marcus watched his clan leader for a moment before lowering his hand and turning to face Faye. “It isn’t important, Faye. The important thing right now is that you really can’t head back into Zeke’s territory without either giving Genevieve a heart attack... or going in with a lot of protection.”

Faye looked from one of them to the other. Genevieve didn’t disagree. In fact, she didn’t even look up.

“What kind of protection?” Faye asked.

“Like he said,” Genevieve said softly, “a lot of it.”

Faye took in her boss’s ashen appearance. She had that look a person could sometimes get right after a near miss, when they suddenly and fully realized just how very close they’d come to something seriously disastrous.

Her face was still pale, and when she spoke again, her voice scratched through a throat that had gone dry. “You won’t be able to go anywhere in Zeke’s territory without someone in my clan having eyes on you. That’s the deal, take it or leave it.”

Her clan? The Sirius clan? She was going to have the Sirius clan of wardens watching her?

“I’ll take it,” Faye said right away. Because she *was* going back in. The amount of medication she’d been able to acquire for people who desperately needed it was well worth the risk, especially if she knew she would have close to thirty wardens watching over her, and *especially*-especially given... how she felt about Zeke.

Zeke wasn’t a threat to her. Whatever Gen might think, whatever past she and Zeke shared or information she might have on him, it was irrelevant to Faye. When it came to the brass tacks of human nature, she ultimately relied on her intuition and her gift to guide her. So far, both had told her that the man – the *ghost* – apparently in charge of the shady doings of a huge portion of Chicago’s underbelly was not in fact her enemy. On the contrary, she was pretty sure he was on her side.

If anything *did* scare her about all of this... it was that she had no idea *why*.

Ezekiel frowned when the source spell he’d cast on the golem’s body at last divulged its secrets to him. This was a first. Whoever had created the construct was someone so powerful they were able to mask all traces of their magic no matter who was doing the tracing. The images that rolled through the ether before Zeke were indistinct, blurry, and shrouded in fog. At the same time, they were unsettling. *Disturbing*.

Zeke hadn’t expected this. Honestly, he’d fully expected Michael Clemens, the withered warlock bastard from hell to be the one behind the mayhem. The son of a bitch was rampantly infamous for sticking his undead nose where it didn’t belong, and even more notorious for taking things that didn’t belong to him. Specifically, magical things. Specifically magical, living, *female* things that could make him a lot of money.

Clemens had tried to run aspects of his dirty magic-for-sale business in and around Chicago on several occasions, and a few of those times he'd been unlucky enough to cross through Zeke's territory in the process. Zeke had made short work of him every time, not only because Zeke possessed vast control over the materials, both living and dead, in the area he'd claimed since his death, but because literally nothing could kill Zeke. Unfortunately, practically nothing could kill Clemens either, and the opportunist asshole had escaped to wreak more of his ill-gotten havoc time and again.

But Clemens wasn't responsible for the thogail. He wasn't the one behind Faye's attempted abduction. He supposed that made some sense, given that Faye had no apparent magic at her disposal. She wasn't a healer, which was a rare thing indeed and a favorite target for Michael Clemens. She wasn't a fae or a shifter, witch or a warlock, werewolf or vampire or otherwise. There was no money in it for Clemens.

The problem was, whoever *had* tried to take her was bigger than Michael Clemens. *Stronger*. And that was worrisome. What reason could they have for kidnapping a mortal with no ties to anything supernatural? What was their endgame?

Zeke sighed and straightened at the table he'd cast the spell over, taking a step back. He glanced at the clock on the wall and closed his eyes as the living, breathing energy that overtook him every morning and every night infused his spirit, filling him with a light that solidified his form until he was once more corporeal.

He curled his hands into fists, rolled his shoulders back, and took a deep, glorious breath. When he did, he caught a faint scent he hadn't noticed earlier. It was a woman's perfume, light enough to nearly go undetected, but decidedly different from anything he'd ever smelled in his apartment because it was feminine, clean, fresh, hinting at citrus and florals.

His gaze narrowed as he scanned the living room's interior. Over the years, he'd managed to fill the loft with the world's nicest things, objects he'd acquired through magic,

time, and patience. As far as he was concerned, he'd earned every one of them.

But at the moment, the only one he truly appreciated was the one lying on his bed. He zeroed in on it and strode across the room.

It was his Monsters MC jacket, the one he'd placed Faye on in the warehouse. He couldn't bring her back here; his apartment became incorporeal when he did. It was an inexplicable curse that was part and parcel to what he was. But the jacket was always solid. It was real.

He lifted it with a tenderness and care he hadn't shown anything in a very long time and turned it over in his hands, bringing it to his lips to gently inhale.

And right now... it smelled like Faye.

Marcus finished giving the Sirius clan leaders their instructions and then turned to walk back to the metal chairs lined up against one wall of the small gym. There was no one in the boxing ring at the moment, but most of the time, two or more members of the clan moved within its ropes, practicing for threats both physical and meta-physical. Rings were no longer the "rings" that were hastily drawn circles in the sand where people would compete in physical contests with one another, but in this case the terminology was more apt than normal. The ropes surrounding the ring were not only real, material boundaries that kept people inside, they were reinforced with wards that kept the *magic* inside. Those wards were usually created with spells requiring the drawing of rings. If not for them, the gym would have burned to rubble long ago.

Genevieve was on her phone, pacing in front of a few of the metal folding chairs. As he approached, her call ended, and she looked up, re-pocketing her phone. "It's all set," she said through a shaky exhale. "And whatever happens, I want you to know that I'm going to blame you."

Marcus considered that a moment, along with Gen's obviously frazzled state. She was still probably the most stunning woman he'd ever come to personally know, and she was stunning on every level, but it was clear circumstances were getting to her. And probably not just this recent thing with Faye Everett, either. "Okay, fair enough," he said, gesturing to the chairs behind them. "You look like you could use a drink."

Genevieve sat down next to him, but her leg continued to bounce nervously, and her phone was clutched tightly in her hands. The screen kept coming on accidentally and then shutting off and coming on again because her skin made contact with it. He hated touch screens for that reason. How the hell were you supposed to pick one up without automatically activating it? What if you did something serious without ever knowing it? Like deleting half your apps or photos or contacts or calling 9-1-1 just because you were trying to *touch* something that had to be carried around with you everywhere?

Marcus glanced across the room where two clan members stood guard at the entrance to the gym. He nodded at one of them, and the man nodded back, ducking through the exit. Then Marcus carefully grasped Genevieve's phone around its edges and tugged gently, hoping she would let it go. But this time, she didn't. Instead, her gaze swiveled to his and held it. "Marcus, do you know the story of Ezekiel Stone?"

Marcus blinked, letting go of the phone and dropping his hand. "No, I can't say that I do." Not fully anyway. He knew that Zeke was a ghost. He knew that Zeke was powerful, and he knew the man had limits as to how long he could remain corporeal and how far from the river he could travel. But that was about it.

Genevieve had known him a lot longer.

She pulled her gaze away again and stared at the boxing ring, her mind obviously seeing something else in another time and another place, most likely long ago.

“Ezekiel Stone was the wealthy only child of the son of an escaped slave whose white master was the one who helped him escape. Not many know this story.... Zeke’s grandfather was one of a dozen or more slaves purchased by a man whose solitary goal was to get them safely into union territory.”

It sounded familiar to Marcus. He remained quiet and listened.

“The white man’s daughter, a young woman named Katelyn, helped her father plan the slaves’ escape and smuggle them into the northern states. Zeke’s grandfather was one of the second group to be safely transported into Illinois. Fate is a twisted thing, and at that point it both smiled on Katelyn’s family and kicked it in the ribs. Kate decided to stay in Chicago and help the men and women they’d freed to get situated with jobs and living quarters. Later, when asked why she decided to stay the second time and not the first, she would shake her head and say, “I just had a feeling. I felt like I needed to stay.”

“See, Katelyn’s family had always had feelings about things. Her father had the ability to tell a person’s true intentions just by hearing them speak. Her grandmother on his side could sense when something good or bad was about to happen. And her great-grandfather had possessed the ability to invest in all the right inventions at all the right times, resulting in an impressive amount of wealth.” Genevieve stopped, took a breath, and looked up as one of her clan members approached with a drink in his hand. It was an energy drink, cold enough to have pieces of ice sliding off its sides, but trapped comfortably in a thick koozie displaying the Chicago Cubs logo.

That was the thing about Genevieve. Energy drinks calmed her down. It was just part of who and what she was.

She smiled gratefully and thanked him genuinely, taking the drink from his hands. Marcus gave him a nod, and the clan member left. She turned to Marcus. “Thanks,” she said, knowing full well he was the one responsible.

But he said, “Go on,” because *he* knew she needed to tell this story.

“Anyway, she was right to stay,” Gen said as she popped the top open on the can. “When her father returned to Georgia, there was a mob waiting for him. Somehow word had gotten out about what he was doing. Maybe it was the fact that almost none of his money came from the cotton field he had going to seed on his property. Regardless, he was exposed. And then he was hung upside down from a tree and skinned alive.”

Marcus didn’t outwardly react. There was something about living as long as he had – and seeing everything he’d seen – that made a person physically numb to things like this. That didn’t mean he didn’t know how wrong it was or feel anger that it had happened.

“Because Katelyn was safely across the country, she had access to their bank account and her father’s will. When everything was done and said, she sent moving companies to pick up what belongings could be salvaged and she started her life over again in Chicago, marrying a pastor who helped her and the escaped slaves.” She took a long pull from her drink and closed her eyes, relishing it.

Then she went on. “In 1915, when Zeke was in his late twenties, Katelyn’s granddaughter was around the same age. Both were wealthy at that point. A long-standing friendship between the two families had allowed Zeke’s family to benefit from Katelyn’s family’s ability to ‘know’ when and where and how to make certain business investments. There was an old friendship there. And between Zeke and Katelyn’s granddaughter, Madeleine, there was a new friendship forming too.”

Marcus thought about Madeleine, the famed woman Zeke had died trying to find in that river while he’d pulled up just about everyone *but* her. He knew almost nothing about her, nothing except that she was apparently as lovely in her actions as she was in her appearance. Incubi would have relished her. It was highly comforting for them when a person’s beauty ran more than skin deep.

“Remember how Madeleine’s family always had *feelings* about things, each person’s ability in this regard developing a little differently?”

Marcus nodded.

“Like her great-great grandmother, Madeleine’s ability was in sensing danger. In August of that year, as a good portion of Chicago was gathering on the banks of the river for the Western Electric yearly picnic, Madeleine got one of those bad feelings. She warned Zeke not to get on any of the boats meant to take them from Chicago to Michigan City. But her hastily sent message to him hadn’t given him a reason for her warning.”

Gen let out a breath that was somehow forlorn and frustrated at the same time. “Zeke’s never been one to assume the best of people. Just the opposite, in fact. Which is strange, given his background and its propensity for human beings going out of their way to help others.” She shook her head. “I think he’s just always harbored a fury over what happened to the man who helped his grandfather escape. And of course a general fury over the situation existing in the first place. And when Madeleine sent her warning, he assumed she was trying to keep him safe because his skin was darker than the average Western Electric employee’s. His thoughts never really went beyond that.” Her head dropped a little and she fingered the top of the energy drink can. “Not until it was too late, anyway.”

Marcus knew what was going to come next. Zeke obviously boarded one of the boats – the S.S. Eastland. And the damn thing capsized, killing more than eight-hundred people and creating one very strong ghost in the process.

“Madeleine was never on the boat. She heeded her own warning, keeping herself and her family well away from the impending disaster.” Genevieve turned to look at Marcus. “Does Faye remind you of anyone, Marcus?”

He went still, his brow furrowing as he looked from one of Genevieve’s ice-green eyes to the other. He was going to ask her what she meant by the question, but even as he

prepared to speak, the pieces of a very old puzzle were beginning to slide into place in his head.

Faye – *Fathom* – Katelyn Everett had lived in Chicago her entire life. Her first name was a reference to depth normally used nautically. And her middle name was Katelyn. That was the first clue to slide into place.

Faye's parents had been affluent enough that she didn't have to work if she didn't want to. She certainly didn't need to put herself in danger as she did. The wealthy landowner's daughter had behaved in a similarly selfless manner all those years ago. And that was the second clue.

The third was that Faye worked for Genevieve because she possessed a unique talent – the ability to tell when someone was speaking the truth and when they were lying. It was a kind of “feeling,” and one that had been passed down in different ways through her family over the generations, which was why they were wealthy in the first place.

Genevieve had never mentioned Katelyn's last name in the story.

But now Marcus realized she didn't need to. He swore under his breath, bewildered. “Faye is Madeleine's descendent. That's why Zeke is after her. She must look exactly like Madeleine.”

“And just look at all those light bulbs going off over your head,” Genevieve said softly. “So now tell me, Marcus. Do you think that if Zeke finds out she's actually *related* to the woman he loved and lost more than a century ago, the woman he cared for so deeply that he defied death to the point of denying it his soul and more than a dozen others, he will ever – *ever* – let her go?”

No, thought Marcus. And he could speak from experience on that one. “No, he won't,” he admitted, his tone numb and his voice barely more than a whisper.

Zeke would never let Faye go. But she could leave Chicago when she wanted. She would grow old and inevitably

leave him again even if they did get together. In the end, she was living, and he wasn't.

And there was only one way to even those odds.

Chapter Nine

Faye listened intently to the sound of her boots on the pavement and the feel of the inside of her pockets against her knuckles as she made her way closer to the invisible boundary lines Marcus and Genevieve had drawn out for her on their map. They were the lines marking Zeke's territory, and once she crossed them, invisible or not he would know.

It was unusually quiet. Her leather soles echoed like those of a Londoner on cobblestones after a rain. Normally there were more cars on the streets, more people bustling about this time of night. But every now and then, for no obvious reason, a town would clear out a little, its streets would thin, and the air would simply fill itself with less sound. She guessed this was one of those times.

The strange silence did nothing to distract Faye from her spinning thoughts.

It was mid-to-late October, and the sun was setting by six now. She was normally planning something for Halloween around this time every year. It was her favorite holiday, and her best friend's favorite holiday as well. Together they usually did something semi-big to celebrate it properly. Her best friend was autistic, so one year they'd thrown a huge party for several of the autism groups in town. Another year, they'd traveled to New Orleans for the parades. Most of the time, they just thoroughly enjoyed dressing up, decorating Faye's house, and passing out tons of candy all night long while they marathoned Halloween episodes of television cartoon series.

Ironically, so far this year they'd each been too busy to get together to plan anything. And here Faye was on her way to meet up with a *ghost*.

"Fathom."

Faye stopped abruptly, her body going completely still under the effects of an uncomfortably delicious kind of shock. She had been in her head, hadn't been paying attention. And Zeke had found her.

Now she realized she'd come all the way to the river's side and hadn't even realized it. She stood at the top of a landing with steps leading down to the water's edge. The depth of the dark suggested it was later than she'd thought. Fog filled the streets around her and floated over the water's flat, glassy surface. And the only sound in the night was that of a gentle breeze knocking the metal rigging of a single sailboat against its mast.

Until the sound of footsteps behind her joined it.

"You've been walking in a daze for several blocks," he said, his deep voice the same caress of silk that she remembered. His tone was gentle, teasing almost.

When she finally managed to slowly turn and face him, it was his solid form, tall and resplendent, that greeted her.

Ghosts rarely had the ability to manipulate matter around themselves that Zeke so obviously had. He had changed his clothes. Rather than the well-tailored centuries-old garb that did nothing to hide the strength of his physique, he instead stood before her in jeans, a form-fitting charcoal gray t-shirt, several leather-cord pendants with various symbols, and a black leather jacket. And apparel still couldn't do a damn thing to hide his perfection.

"You look amazing," she thought to herself, exhaling softly while she lowered her long lashes over her eyes a little so she could surreptitiously try to take all of him in. And then those eyes grew very wide as she realized she'd actually said it out loud.

Her face flushed hot, and her head snapped up.

But Zeke chuckled disarmingly and shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "Damn," he said softly, his stark green eyes admiring her openly in a manner she was far too embarrassed to emulate. "I had literally just been thinking the same thing."

He studied her for several more intense moments, and Faye had no idea what thoughts came and went in her crackling brain during that time. She only felt her flush

deepen. He was making a mess of her and he hadn't even touched her.

But then he smiled warmly and turned to look at the buildings and shadows around them. "You've got your share of chaperones tonight, I see."

Faye blinked. She followed his gaze, peering hard into the various darknesses. But she couldn't see anyone at all. No movement. No sound. In fact, she and Zeke appeared to be utterly and completely alone on that cement platform on the bank of the river. Which was, of course, impossible. This was Chicago. It was a bustling metropolis.

Zeke returned his attention to her. "From the looks of it, Gen sent her entire clan to watch over you." He let out a breath that was partly chagrined laughter. "I guess I can't blame her."

But again, Faye saw no one. She didn't even see any other *civilians*, to say nothing of clan wardens. She wanted to ask, "Wait, *where?* Where do you see them?" But she felt stupid and oblivious in her inability to detect so many people apparently watching her. She didn't want to draw further attention to her ignorance. Besides, what she was really curious about was where all of the other *normal* people went.

So instead, she looked up and down the bank of the river and carefully said, "We appear to be... *alone.*" There. That covered all the bases nicely. She followed it up with, "Where are all the boats?" Night tours were regularly given up and down the river not only because the river was so unique in its famous backwards flow, but because the buildings and their lights on either side of the river were so stunning.

One day, she was going to take that tour herself. She'd seen the lights from a helicopter and a plane, from the tops of several different high-rises, and of course she'd walked up and down the river's walk at night, but though she'd grown up in Chicago, she'd never actually taken the river tour.

One day. Because to Faye, there was no skyline greater than that of Chicago's at night. She desperately loved her city.

But at that particular moment it was giving off a decidedly strange vibe. Almost as if... it wasn't her city at all.

"I suppose you could say they've been delayed," he told her. "Listen," he then said, changing the subject abruptly. "I know you came tonight with expectations, so I want to put your mind at ease right away." He turned away and strode to a leather messenger-backpack bag she now noticed was sitting on the ground beside a low wall lining the foggy, empty street. He picked it up and brought it to her.

"Here is the medication you came for. We've included everything on Rayne's list." Zeke held the bag up and smiled. "It was a long list. I get the feeling she was testing me." He chuckled softly and patiently waited for Faye to take the bag from him.

Not for the first time since she'd met him, Zeke the ghost surprised the hell out of Faye. She wasn't used to people being mature, not playing games, and keeping their words. She wasn't accustomed to people going out of their way to put people's fears to rest or reassure them. She especially didn't normally deal with men who had their shit together enough to know that one of the quickest ways to a girl's heart *wasn't* to withhold something she needed until it was somehow reciprocated. That was a *huge* no-no, in fact. It was to give willingly, freely, and quickly while outwardly expecting nothing in exchange. Settle the girl's anxieties and immediately put her mind at ease – *that* was the way to a girl's heart.

Through her nice, calm nerve endings.

Like he had the night before, Zeke once again used his finger to signal for Faye to turn around. It was only then that she remembered she was wearing a backpack for this very reason. She glanced up and down the river, double-checking to make certain no one *untoward* was watching, which in this case would have been some kind of unwanted authority. But they really did seem to be eerily alone.

Rather than turn around, she slid the pack off her back and was about to unzip it for him when he said, "Take this one.

Trust me.”

She paused and looked from her empty military-style canvas bag to his leather bag that seemed to be a backpack that could also become a messenger bag, constructed of thick, rugged leather. “Okay,” she said. She did trust him. There was nothing dishonest in his words that would make her do otherwise.

She handed him her bag and exchanged it for his, which he handed to her unbuckled so she could see the medicine inside. She took it graciously, and he helped her slip back over her shoulders. “Thank you for this, Zeke. I’m not sure you know how much it means to a *whole lot* of people.”

Zeke’s expression was enigmatic. “I do know,” he told her quietly. She watched his face as his features softened and his movements slowed. “And you’re very welcome.” He patted the bag to indicate it was secure, and Faye turned back around.

There was something about the man then and there in that moment that made him the most beautiful thing in the world to Faye Everett. She felt stunned looking up at him, rocked to her core by his humility and kindness. She was suddenly filled with so many different needs – like the need to know more about him. Who was he? Why was he here? How had he died?

How had he lived?

But she wasn’t able to ask anything at all before Zeke was turning away from her to descend the final few steps to the river and make his way to the water’s edge. He gestured to the single vessel tied to the dock beside him. “I... thought we might spend some time alone tonight,” he told her hesitantly, clearly nervous to breach the subject. “To talk, nothing more.” He smiled broadly. “I promise to be on my best behavior.”

Faye stayed where she was and looked from him to the boat behind him. It was the single boat she’d heard earlier, a small sailing boat about twice the size of a skiff, absolutely pristine and newly cut. It looked as though it had never even sailed before. The name scrolled elegantly in black across its white forward bow was, *Madeleine*.

“I can imagine,” she joked numbly, almost mumbling the words. “With all these invisible clan members watching us and what not.” Her voice sounded far off to her. Her eyes were on the boat – and the water beyond it.

Zeke said nothing more and only waited as she finally, *slowly* made her way down the stairs to join him. “What’s... going on?” she asked. He didn’t actually mean to take her out on the water, did he? On this particular river? Right here and now?

Zeke placed one booted leg on the boat to hold it steady and close to the dock. The boat immediately straightened out beneath his boot as if it, too, were very much under the influence of his supernatural control.

“A boat ride,” he told her, at once confirming her fears. “We don’t have to go far. I’d simply like the chance to get to know you better, and it’s a beautiful autumn night.” He glanced at the boat as if to check it was at its most steady, then held his hand out for her to take. “After you,” he said with a smile that was part rake and part redemption.

Faye didn’t take his hand, not right away. Instead, she glanced over her shoulder at the buildings and alleyways that he’d indicated were supposed to be crawling with Sirius wardens. She wondered if they really were.

Then her gaze fell on the dark gray plaque at the top of the stairs that stood on a single pole in a small nook beside the nearest bridge. It was the plaque the city had erected to memorialize the 1915 Eastland Disaster. Faye was quite familiar with the story of the Eastland Disaster. But she hadn’t realized until that very moment that she was standing in the exact spot where it had occurred.

She took a deep, cleansing breath to calm her increasingly off-kilter nerves, then turned back toward the boat and the man standing beside it. She glanced down at the hand he held outstretched for her. *Even his hand is perfect*, she thought helplessly. And it really was.

Okay, why shouldn’t I get on the boat? she thought next. She had wanted to ride the river for such a long time. So what

if the night was strange and foggy and too quiet and the boat she would board was *right* over the spot where the Eastland had gone down? So what if this very location might just be the most haunted place in Chicago? And so what if the man she would be with on the boat was an *actual* ghost himself?

Suddenly Faye was hugging herself.

It's not him I'm afraid of, she thought. *It's not him. Not really.*

“Faye.”

His voice was gentle, concerned. Faye closed her eyes and let out the breath she'd been holding. It came out shaky, but as she placed her hand in his, she said, “Fine. I'll get on the boat. But just so you know, I'm not overly fond of boats.”

Zeke's fingers curled over hers, but at her words, his grip tightened slightly more than necessary, drawing her attention. She looked up at him just as he moved in closer, his tall form shadowing hers.

“Is that so?” he asked, his jade green gaze almost glowing in the shadows of his face and the foggy lamplight. “Why is that, exactly?”

Faye forgot her words for a second. Her mouth had promptly gone dry. He was having far too much of an effect on her. And then suddenly, she was *realizing* the effect he had on her – and in a rapid influx of pique, she yanked her hand from his. His hand remained where it was, his fingers slowly curling over the now-empty air. But his gaze remained intensely trained on hers.

“Are you using some kind of magic on me?” she asked the ghost point-blank.

She expected Zeke to get angry; most “bad guys” became irate when found out and confronted. But Zeke only cocked his head a little and narrowed his gaze questioningly. “On you, angel?” He smiled wryly and gave a single shake of his handsome head. “No.”

Faye studied him carefully. *He isn't lying.*

Okay, she felt truly dumb. *Of course he's not lying*, she told herself. *He's not a "bad guy."*

"Why would you believe that I was using magic on you?" he asked.

Faye blinked a few times in embarrassment. "No reason," she answered hastily, shrugging.

She of course was lying.

But to distract him from that blatantly obvious fact, she stepped closer to the boat and placed her hand on his arm for balance, almost flinching away when she felt the breadth of the bicep beneath her fingers.

She lifted her left leg, prepared to place it on the very gently rocking vessel, and hesitated, placing it back down.

Zeke leaned in beside her. "Are you okay?"

"Um... yeah. I mean, maybe. I mean, it's just that..."

"You're afraid of boats, aren't you?" he asked, speaking the question as if he already knew the answer. His tone of voice was that of a man who was figuring something out.

"A little I guess," she admitted. "Or not so much the boat, but the..." She broke off as her gaze trailed from the deck of the boat to the river beyond it.

"You're afraid of the water," he said, his tone now one of slight bewilderment. "Have you not learned to swim?" The question wasn't cruel or judging, just curious.

"Yes, I have," she said. "It isn't water in general, just this river." Then she laughed, shaking her head. "It's stupid. It's just that every generation in my family seems to have the oddest luck with this river – going all the way back to my great, great, great, great-something-grandmother. It's almost like we get our special abilities in exchange for misfortune where this river is concerned." She shrugged, still laughing nervously. "I just didn't want it to be my turn yet."

But Zeke's eyes flashed. After a beat he asked, "What kind of misfortune?"

“Well, my father fell through the ice in Archer Heights when he was a kid and was pronounced dead for more than a minute before they were able to revive him. His aunt’s fiancé did the same thing years before in another part of town and lost several toes to frost bite. My father’s great uncles were playing near the river as children when one of them slid right in while it was raining and the bank was slick. He was tangled in something near the bottom.” Faye shook her head, sighing. “On back the stories go until that great, great, great, great-something-grandmother I mentioned? She nearly died in the Eastland Disaster.” Faye turned and nodded at the plaque that waited at the top of the stairs. “She and her entire family were supposed to board the Eastland the morning it happened. A gut feeling kept her off, but the disaster killed the man she loved, along with more than eight-hundred others.”

Her tone lowered as she remembered her grandmother and mother telling her the stories of Madeleine and Ezekiel Stone. “Apparently he died saving a number of people from the ship, so they erected a statue of him in one of the cemeteries here. She survived and he was a hero, but her world was still shattered. And this river still gives me the willies.”

Faye hadn’t looked up at Zeke for a long time. She’d been staring at the plaque and the water’s surface, back and forth as she spoke. But after a while she realized he wasn’t responding, and in fact, he hadn’t moved at all for a long time.

With a strange burgeoning sense of trepidation, Faye looked away from the plaque and the water – and up at Zeke. She gasped softly, unwittingly taking a step back.

But Zeke’s hand struck out with lightning speed, his fingers wrapping securely around her wrist to pull her back in to his now eerily blue body. His form was shrouded in the ghostly aura, and his normally green eyes were glowing yellow as they had when she’d first seen him break a man’s neck and drop him in the river.

Faye started to tremble when his power lashed around her, drawing her in, pulling tight like ropes composed of electrical currents and dark magic. “*What was her name?*” he asked slowly, his voice now echoing with ghostly power.

Whose? Faye's bewildered mind fumbled. But she was caught in the sway of those yellow glowing eyes, and somehow they made her remember. *My great-something-grandmother*, she thought. *He wants to know the name of the woman who almost died on the Eastland.*

"M-Madeleine," she whispered.

And then it hit her. *Madeleine.*

With dawning comprehension so strong it gave her the will to pull her gaze from his, Faye turned her head to take in the name scrawled on the front left side of the boat a few feet away.

Madeleine.

Blood began to pound in her ears as she recalled the name Zeke had assumed Faye "didn't go by" when she'd first met him in that alley.

Madeleine.

Faye's knees went weak, and Zeke's grip on her arm increased, helping to hold her up. It was *his* name now that was echoing through the comprehensive chambers of her mind, it was *his* blue glow, *his* dated clothing, *his* proximity to the river that had her thoughts reeling and her heart pounding a thousand beats per minute. *Zeke.*

Which was short for... *Ezekiel.*

"Zeke," she choked out very, very softly as she returned her gaze to his. "H-how..." She trailed off, bit her lips hard to center her focus, and started again, her voice now completely compelled by some unconscious third party, because her conscious one was far too freaked out. "H-how did you..." she swallowed so hard she could hear it even over the pounding of her heart, "*die?*"

Ezekiel Stone pulled on her wrist and slipped his free arm around her waist until she was off-balance and falling against him. She had no strength to fight the embrace, only the will to continue to gaze up into the yellow-gold prisons of his eyes.

His voice was barely recognizable, it was so dripping with power when he finally answered her.

“Oh, I think you know.”

Chapter Ten

Marcus ran a hand through his hair and turned away from the scene by the river. He shook his head, “I don’t know about this.”

The warden beside him gave him a questioning look. “What do you mean?”

Marcus glanced back and then turned again. “Something feels... off.” Zeke and Faye had been standing beside the river conversing for the last five minutes. Every once in a while one of them laughed. Their gestures were normal, their tones of voice were normal, but for some reason, the hairs on the back of Marcus’s neck were standing up.

He pulled the phone from his jacket pocket and tapped the screen. He didn’t have to wait two seconds before the call was answered.

“What’s wrong?” were the first words he heard on the other end of the line. Genevieve’s voice was tight with anxiety.

“I don’t know,” he replied softly. “Nothing probably. But something doesn’t feel right.”

“What are they doing right now? Where are you?”

Marcus turned back to the couple talking by the water. “We’re at the river’s side, West Wacker by the Clarke Street bridge. They’re just talking.”

There was a pause on the other end. Then Gen asked, “Marcus, exactly how close are they to the river? How close is *Zeke* to the river?”

Marcus narrowed his gaze on the two figures in the distance. “Faye’s about two feet from the edge. Zeke’s standing with one leg on the boat he has docked there.”

The silence on the other end this time was heavy, as if it were filled with revelations his boss had yet to reveal. “Are there any other boats or people around?” she asked, her tone low with trepidation.

“No, he’s obviously pulled something there so they could be alone,” Marcus told her. He’d noticed the river and surrounding areas were unnaturally empty earlier. But he’d expected as much, too. Zeke no doubt wanted privacy. It probably royally ticked him off that there were wardens watching him, and there was no way he wasn’t aware of that fact.

“Wait...” Genevieve paused. “You said he has one foot on a boat? As in, part of him is actually *on* the water?”

Marcus’s gaze swiveled to the figures by the river. “Yeah...” But his voice trailed off as he realized the significance of Zeke’s proximity to the river. Where he had died. In pretty much the exact location it had occurred a hundred years ago.

Which... would give him immense power and control over his surroundings.

He lowered the phone and bellowed an order. “Move out!” He was up, re-pocketing his phone and jumping off the side of the three-story building without bothering to end the call. If his instincts were correct, there was no time.

Despite his shouted order, the two figures speaking with one another in the distance did not react. They didn’t turn to look his way, they didn’t appear to stop talking, nor did they even acknowledge the existence of the thirty-or-so men and women now converging on their location in plain sight. That was all the confirmation Marcus needed that his earlier gut feeling had been dead on.

That wasn’t Faye and Zeke. It *had* been them. It had been them all the way up to the moment that Ezekiel Stone placed his booted leg on that boat, hence connecting himself to the power of the river that had taken his life. And then Zeke had taken over *everything*.

What Marcus and the others were looking at now was nothing more than an illusion of what had been. It was no different from someone placing a still photo over a CC video feed.

The illusion dissolved and vanished the moment he drew close enough, and someone in the clan swore aloud. The river was calm, quiet, and most of all, it was empty of any sign of the two they'd been assigned to watch over.

“Well, what now?” a clan member asked.

Marcus looked at the empty spot where the boat had been moored earlier. On the river, Zeke had all the power in the world. He could open portals, skip dimensions, even vanish into pockets between the worlds like Limbo or the *Twixt*. By this point, with that kind of power behind a ghost like Zeke Stone, they could literally be anywhere.

“Fall back,” Marcus said, his tone reflecting his inner turmoil. Because now their only option was literally the last one Marcus wanted to utilize. Now they needed to use *magic*.

Everything that happened after Zeke had grabbed her was a bit of a blur for Faye. She felt the banded weight of his arm around her waist, the strange electric hot-cold of his aura as it surrounded her, and time began to do a kind of dance through her mind, fractioning the events of the next several minutes.

What she did know was that Zeke turned with her and boarded the boat in one smooth, fluid motion, pulling her into the cockpit with disconcerting ease. His grip on her was unrelenting; she could sense that it was unbreakable, yet she felt no pain. He wasn't digging any fingers into her and he wasn't bruising her. It was just very clear that he had no intention of letting her go.

But Faye knew damn well she didn't have a hope in hell of escaping the ghost in that moment. The scope of the situation hit her at once in that blur of motion and action around her, and all the facts of her circumstances cascaded before her mind's eye like downward floating puzzle pieces that drifted onto some cosmic table before flashing magically into place.

This was where Zeke had died. This place, *right here*. One of the things she had learned in her training was that

ghosts were most powerful in the location where they had died. The closer they were to that exact spot, the stronger they would become. Of course, this was simply accepted as a given, since no warden alive had ever had occasion to deal with one personally. They were that rare.

But Faye was definitely inclined to believe it, because it did explain a lot. For instance it explained why she hadn't seen or heard anything from the wardens assigned to watch over her. With one boot inside the boat floating on that river, Zeke had no doubt managed to manipulate his surroundings enough that the Sirius clan felt no need to intervene.

Once they were both aboard, Zeke took her further toward the stern. His arms wrapped tight around her confused Faye. They felt like the most wonderful prison a person could ever be encased in. She was trapped in an embrace of velvet-lined iron, and the contact was making her dizzy.

He stopped, turned her around, and gently but firmly forced her to sit on one of the two facing bench seats. "*Don't move,*" he ground out, his altered form giving his voice an unearthly quality that raised goosebumps across Faye's flesh. It should have terrified her, his form, his voice, the sun-flare fire in his eyes. But a strange state had come over her, one that took hold of her trepidation and blunted it.

He leaned over her, tall and menacing, and used his unyielding hold on her wrist to pull her in close. Acting more on instinct and training than on fear, she tried to look away, her mind recalling warnings about the compelling powers of ghostly voices and the bottomless wells of their glowing eyes. But the fingers of Zeke's free hand gripped her chin and forced her head up.

She met his gaze.

And she had to be honest with herself. The insane truth was... she didn't feel like fighting him anyway. True, she was flush with that not-unpleasant sort of numbness, like a euphoria that was considered euphoric for no other reason than that it took away one's pain. And she had a strong feeling it was Zeke's magic that was causing it. It buffered her mind

from the true danger of her situation, like alcohol, a lack of sleep, or teenage hormones. But it was more than any kind of magic, and she knew it.

From the moment he'd cornered her in that alley and promised her he wouldn't hurt her - and she'd known he was telling the truth - she'd been fascinated by Zeke Stone. And that fascination had only grown in the moments since. It had evolved.

While her heart did pound out a fast, erratic rhythm, it wasn't due to fear. There was something else there as well, and it was potent.

She went still, held rapt by everything about him.

"There is literally no way that you can leave this vessel unless I let you go, Fathom," he told her, the phantom quality to his voice still there, but his tone a touch softer, perhaps more intimate than it had been a moment ago.

His nearness crackled at her, a combination of pleasure and near-pain, bringing her nerve endings to life. His ghost form touch was causing ripples of sensation to move through her, half heat and half something she had never felt before. Her lips parted of their own accord, as if she needed to draw in more air, and Zeke's eyes momentarily cut to them before returning hers. Now that she was up close, Faye was able to see the expanded pupils at the center of those golden rings of fire.

She could so easily fall into that darkness.

Suddenly his thumb was brushing softly – *feather soft* – over the plump flesh of her bottom lip. She inhaled sharply at the new, far more intense sensation, her lower abdomen tightening.

His pupils expanded further, nearly engulfing the fire around them completely. "What's more," he said, while he leaned even further in, "even if you did somehow manage to get off the river, my influence stretches for more than seven square miles in every direction."

He paused, his burning gaze gliding over her features as if he were fascinated by them. When he spoke again, he merely whispered. “You would have to run very far to escape me, little one... and very fast.”

I don't want to run, she thought irrationally. But it was true. She had no desire to be gone from his presence, despite the inherent danger involved in being kidnapped by a supernatural being. Besides, with her family's history she *especially* had no desire to attempt anything rash while on this particular river.

As if he could read her mind, Zeke's lips curled into a slow, satisfied smile. It was like looking into the face of a cat who knew the mouse had nowhere left to run. And now he could take his time playing with it – as cats were wont to do.

Faye blinked when Zeke slowly straightened once more to his full, imposing height and finally released both her chin and her wrist. She unconsciously held her arm close and absently rubbed it, watching him warily. He stepped back and turned to face the water and the bow of the ship before stepping up onto the deck with more fluid grace. There, he whispered the words of what was obviously a spell, but not one she was immediately familiar with.

Some of the drugged sensation that had come over her began to lift, and she closed her eyes as new, slightly more troubled thoughts began to float through her head. Faye raised her legs up onto the seat with her, hugging her knees tightly to her chest. Her hair fell over her face when she did so, and she took some comfort in the partial curtain.

She listened. The spell he softly canted was either inhuman or ancient; Faye recognized neither the language nor the construction of the grammar. But she *did* recognize the pulsing, glowing spiral that curled out of the darkness over the water up ahead and expanded further as Zeke continued to conjure it.

The swirling anomaly produced a chaotic wind that rippled the surface of the river and whipped at Faye's long hair. At once she knew what Zeke was doing. This was a

portal spell. Not a *transport* spell, where a single person or several people were sucked away in instantaneous real time from one location only to pop out a split-second later – again in real time – in some other place, possibly even in another dimension. This was instead an actual portal, one she had always likened to the Stargate from the Sci-Fi television series. It was a round, pulsing, spiraling doorway of sorts that would remain open for as long as its caster wanted and was capable of making it so.

Anything could pass through a portal, any vessel at all, no matter what type or how large it might be. From row boats to aircraft carriers, it didn't matter. In fact, Faye had a theory that portals were responsible for some of the disappearances that had purportedly occurred in the Bermuda Triangle.

Most mages lacked the ability to cast such a broad-scoped spell. But Zeke could do it. Here on this river, it seemed he was capable of just about anything.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her voice tiny compared to magic around her. But Zeke must have heard her, because a second later he finished his spell and partly turned to peer down at her over one broad shoulder.

His eyes were now glowing solid, bright white.

Faye gasped softly, unable to stop her natural reaction to the sight.

“We need to talk,” he told her, his voice now amplified not only by the ghostliness of his form, but the power of the magic he was casting. “I'm making sure we have the chance.”

Faye swallowed hard. She had already guessed as much. What she really wanted to know was - “Where?” she whispered.

Zeke turned to face her fully as behind him, the swirling spiral stopped expanding - and changed colors. “To a place your friends can't follow,” he said.

Faye's gaze swiveled to the waiting portal. She wasn't numb any longer. Quite the opposite.

No, she thought. *That can't be....*

But Zeke stepped down into the cockpit across from her. “As long as you remain with me, you will be safe,” he told her. “But do not leave my side, little one.” He shook his head in warning, the white of his eyes diminishing back into the yellow-gold fire of his ghost form. “And stay close.”

Faye could feel her heart beginning to race as the boat they were on suddenly picked up speed, aimed for the direct center of the portal. Her lungs shifted into double-time with a burgeoning panic. She released her folded legs and gripped the edge of the bench seat beneath her as the boat lifted from the river, water cascading from either side of it as if it were a toy in a massive bathtub.

The portal then lashed out, several of its spiraled tendrils uncurling from its depths to reach toward the boat and latch on. Faye screamed, jumping up from the bench seat.

At once, she was caught up in Zeke’s arms; he wrapped around her so fast, so strategically, she knew he’d expected her to react this way. He’d probably planned on it.

Her body was pulled against his with efficient and dizzying speed, her back pressed hard to the solid wall of his chest. One of his hands closed over her mouth to quiet her scream, and his lips lowered to her ear from behind. “*Easy,*” he commanded, his deep voice laced with so much power, it suddenly coursed through her like the magic spell it so obviously was. At once, she was caught in its sway, her struggles ceasing.

“You know I won’t let anything happen to you,” he told her, his whispered words against her skin sending confounding waves of sensation through her. “But don’t draw attention to yourself here, Fathom. My magic can only disguise so much of you.”

All she could think then was, *He’s not lying*, as her eyes widened in blunt fascination and the spiraling portal flashed with bright finality around her.

Chapter Eleven

Faye's eyes were closed tight; she'd instinctively squeezed them shut the moment the portal had sucked them in. She just couldn't look.

It was bad enough that she was being abducted by a ghost; what was far more frightening was the portal she'd been taken through. Its color had changed just before its tendrils unwrapped and reached out for them on the river, shifting into a telling and foreboding mixture of deep, dark purple and black lightning.

It was the color of the gateway to the realm of the dead.

The scream trapped in her throat bubbled away as if boiled off by fear, and Faye turned inward, forcing herself to take solace in the darkness of her mind. There, she breathed. *I'm not going to die*, she assured herself forcefully. Less forcefully she added, *He wouldn't kill me... would he?*

No. He had promised he wouldn't hurt her. And he hadn't been lying.

So... he must have a way of keeping me safe, she reasoned with herself. *Of keeping me alive*. Even in the realm of the dead.

Faye pricked her ears, waiting to hear the sounds of those very dead surround her, overwhelm her. She was tense and knotted in her captor's arms, utterly unaware of what to expect.

She definitely hadn't expected to hear... music. Rather than the moaning of lost souls, she could hear a faint *music*. It was familiar and ancient and eerily cheery, strangely reminiscent of music boxes and carousels, but tainted by some inextricable, unexplainable darkness.

The tune was carried to her on a slight breeze that was laced, not with the smell of rotting corpses or dank earth, but with the scents of cotton candy, cocoa, and kettle corn. She listened further and caught the tiny chime of distant laughter.

Faye swallowed past the dry tightness that had formed in her throat, lifted her face a little, and slowly inhaled. These sounds and these smells didn't match the mental images she'd unwittingly conjured of decomposing zombie meat and mold-covered tombstones. This sounded and smelled more like some kind of park or faire.

Zeke made a sound, muttering something under his breath before he removed his hand from her mouth. A second later he leaned over and whispered in her ear, sending a new deep shiver through her. "Welcome to the Carnival of Night."

Faye didn't fail to notice that while Zeke had uncovered her mouth, he still hadn't released her. She also didn't fail to notice that her own hands clutched at him as much as his did her. *I'm just scared, that's all*, she told herself. She was terrified, and ghost or not Zeke was very solid beneath her touch. That was the only reason she clung to him. It was the sole reason she wanted him so close.

It just sucked that she could tell she was lying.

"Open your eyes, angel."

Faye opened them slowly, still quite unsure of what she would find after the gateway-to-the-dead red and lightning of the portal they'd gone through. But when distant diamond sparkles of light made it through the small, tentative slits of her sight, the glimmer took her over the way candy takes over a child in a sweets store.

She couldn't help but throw her eyes open wide and gazed in wonder at the valley below.

The boat upon which she and Zeke stood floated steady and still, impossibly frozen at the top of a hill overlooking a sea of illumination. The dark river beneath the ship's hull sparkled with the reflected lights of thousands of rides, booths, and attractions, giving it the appearance of liquid glitter. More impressive however was the fact that it flowed *up* the hill rather than down it, cascading against gravity to progress over the rise and into the darkness behind them.

At the bottom of the hill and the backwards-flowing river stretched a nearly 360-degree valley filled with a scintillating incandescence that expanded clear to the horizon. Some of the lights were turning; they were carousels and Ferris wheels. Others flashed and beckoned or rose and fell like hammers or axes.

The river beneath them seemed like a carpet of rainbow colors and magic that would lead them into the amusement park below the way the yellow brick road led Dorothy to Oz.

Zeke finally slid his arms away from her and took a step to the side to peek over the side of the boat. Her body felt cold at once without the security of his embrace - but it also felt free. Not that it would do her any good on a boat in a scary river in a strange dimension.

“I thought you were taking me to -” Faye broke off, suddenly embarrassed to actually say it out loud. But then she remembered the portal and the fact that Zeke had basically kidnapped her, and courage returned to her like a snapping rubber band. “The land of the dead,” she finished with more force.

“I was,” he told her frankly.

“But...” Her voice trailed off as her eyes roved over the landscape.

“This was a last-second diversion.”

She narrowed her gaze on him, taking in the details. *He's not lying... but this isn't the whole story, either.*

“Go on,” she said while he continued to appear thoroughly distracted by their current circumstances. She assumed he was studying the water underneath them. Had he perhaps not expected it to hold them in place the way it was? The river was almost cartoonish in its behavior. Faye literally had no idea what to expect out of it - or of this entire encounter from here on in.

“The Carnival of Night exists in an in-between dimension,” he explained to her, going slowly as if choosing his words with some degree of care. “You can... make it to a

lot of places from here, you might say.” He turned away from the water and faced her. “Visitors from a few of the sovereigns’ realms have made use of the Carnival as a doorway for some time now. Others choose to come here purely for fun.” He shrugged. “There’s a lot to do and the food is the best in the realms.”

Faye’s brows raised, her interest piqued.

“Some of the people here are nearly permanent residents.” He paused, turning to look at the massive amusement park. “But they are rare. There’s a darkness to the faire that is almost indescribable. It’s like....” He seemed to fish for the right phrase.

But Faye already had a feeling she knew what he meant. Something about the lights, the warmth of the breeze, and the sound of the far-off music, had her thinking about pumpkin patches and apple orchards and bonfires. She imagined she could smell cinnamon somewhere on that scented breeze, and it sparked childhood autumn memories. She said, “You mean like Danny Elfman and Tim Burton are the carnival directors.”

Zeke quirked his handsome head to one side and gave it a little shake. “I’m sorry, I’m not certain that I’m familiar -”

“Oh,” she said. “Sorry. I forgot you’re a lot older than you look.” She peered out over the valley lights and tried again, her earlier fear slipping rapidly away. “It’s like the way... the air feels when you first catch a random, stray breeze and somehow *know* that it’s officially Fall. Or the way fog makes the world seem like it’s not there anymore, and the thought doesn’t make you sad, it excites you. And... it’s like thunderstorms, or a clock chiming midnight, or mists around the base of a mausoleum’s angel, or the number thirteen written in black and gold.” She stopped, looked down at the sparkling, rainbow-glitter river, and said softly, “If you can see and understand the inherent beauty in these things, then you can come in... if not, then you don’t belong.”

Faye fell into silence staring at that swirling, flowing stream of mystery, only realizing after several long seconds that Ezekiel hadn’t responded.

She looked up at him and was at once caught in the hold of his gaze. His eyes were green again, vivid and glowing, but no longer blue. “Exactly,” he said, his tone strange, as if his throat had grown tight.

“So...” Faye ventured with a glance at the park behind him. “Are you telling me the Carnival thinks we don’t belong? And that’s why we’re stuck up here on this hill?”

He shook his head, his gaze intensifying. “Oh, no,” he said, smiling wryly. “It very much believes you belong, Fathom. In fact, the Carnival is the sole reason we’re here.”

He gave the glittering lights in the valley behind him a side-long glance before returning his attention to her. “It was the *Carnival* that pulled us here from the portal. Not me.” He gestured to the river beneath them. “We aren’t on this hill because the faire won’t let us in. We’re here because the river obeys my commands. And *I’m* telling it to hold us here.”

Faye blinked. “What? *Why?*” But she wasn’t even sure which she was asking - why the Carnival had brought them there, or why he wouldn’t allow them to go in?

“Because it knows that you’re alive and that I am not. It knows that I was, for lack of a better word, *absconding* with you.” His smile was tight now, his body visibly more tense. “And it knows that you’re afraid. So the Carnival came to your rescue.” He looked like he was half-irritated and half-impressed.

Closer to sixty-forty, Faye thought.

She suddenly really wanted to be down in the Carnival, surrounded by other people. Or fae. Or whatever. “Why... don’t we just... go down there? I mean, you said not everyone can get into the Carnival.” She glanced over her shoulder even though she knew she wouldn’t see anything. It was for reference alone. “So no one can follow us, right?” She turned back to face him.

He’d said that he was taking her where none of her friends could follow. It was the entire reason he’d taken her through the portal.

But he wasn't placated. "Actually, there are a disproportional number in your particular circles who can."

Faye thought about that. It made sense, actually. She ran in some pretty powerful - and strange - circles.

"Fortunately, it would take them some time to locate you through the ether of the portals and the in-between realms."

"Fortunately for who?" she thought.

She bit the inside of her cheek a moment later when Zeke's darkening expression confirmed that she'd actually asked the question out loud. She sighed and rolled back her shoulders. "So, what are you going to do, Zeke?" she finally just asked. *What are you planning to do with me, specifically?* She truly had no idea of his intentions when it came to her. He couldn't kill her if he wasn't going to harm her. So what did he plan on her doing in the land of the dead? And for how long? And why?

Ezekiel Stone took a deep breath and let it out slowly through his nose, regarding her steadily. It was unnerving to be the object of such unwavering attention from someone so attractive. It was like being chosen out of a crowd of millions by your Hollywood crush. And then pursued by him.

And kidnapped by him.

"I very much like it when you say my name," he told her, completely off topic. But his words had an unnerving effect on her. They made the air around her feel too warm, and her legs feel too *un*-solid.

She swallowed hard. It was audible in the palpable silence.

"I honestly don't know, Fathom," he at last responded to her question in a soft tone. "And for what it's worth, that's in response to your *unspoken* question - the one regarding what I am going to do with you, specifically."

Faye's lips parted with slight, but indignant surprise.

"Yes, I can read your mind," he confirmed for her easily. "The river and our proximity to it makes it possible in this

case.” His eyes glittered with hypnotic promise, reflecting a few unspoken things on his part too. “As to what I am going to do right now -” He lifted his right hand and snapped his fingers. The clean, sharp sound was much louder than it should have been, echoing in the darkness on the edge of this in-between, mystery realm as if it had been a *bang* rather than a snap.

At once the boat began moving again, but the forward motion wasn't jarring; she easily retained her footing as the vessel smoothly lifted over the ridge and then, against all odds, floated down the rather steep incline as if it were much more level. She felt as if she were on the *Jolly Roger* and it had been sprinkled with pixie dust.

They were literally flying, only a small portion of the boat's stern in contact with the water. Faye felt herself moving toward the bow of the small ship, passing right by Zeke as she stepped up from the cockpit to get a better look. She was drawn in by the glittering spectacle of the approaching Carnival. It was an absolute wonder to behold, and for a brief moment, she felt above it all, as if she were soaring in a dream.

Zeke's mastery over the boat seemed effortless. His control over his surroundings had, if anything, grown stronger.

Could he control me like that too? she wondered as she both watched and heard the Carnival drawing closer.

She felt rather than heard his next words at her ear. “I could bend your body so easily to my will, little one.”

Faye shuddered and out of instinct, attempted to step away from him. But there was no boat left in front of her; she'd gone to the very edge. When she stepped forward, Zeke's arm snaked around her middle, and his hand flattened against her stomach to pull her hard against his chest. She froze in his arms, breathing heavily.

“I could bring you to your knees before me,” he continued as if she hadn't moved. “I could make you writhe, and not in agony but in ecstasy the likes of which you've never dreamed. And I could do it all without even touching

you.” As if for emphasis, his fingers tightened against her taut abdomen, sending her heart into hyperdrive. She was dizzy now, floating inside, burning up, every nerve coming alive. “And believe me,” he hissed as his other hand curled gently around her neck, his fingers nudging her chin upward. “I long to do these things to you more than I believe I have ever wanted *anything*.”

Faye’s eyes closed, her head succumbing to his command to fall back against his shoulder. She was overwhelmed, swimming in a sea of sensation that pulled her down like a river. She felt his lips touching her ear then, the intensity of the contact almost violently blissful. “You would lie down for me,” he told her as his lips trailed from her ear to the side of her throat. “And you would let me in... your body would beg me to do it.”

Oh god, Faye thought desperately. What is he doing to me?

“Nearly nothing, little one. Not yet.” He left a kiss, searing hot like a brand at the junction of her neck and collar bone. “Imagine what I could do to you if I tried.”

Chapter Twelve

His words taunted and echoed through her rapidly heating consciousness. But they managed to *truly* register just before being caught up in the building flame inside her and incinerated. She realized something about those words, something vital. It was so potent, it forced her eyes open and infused her limbs with renewed strength, breaking spell he had over her.

The boat touched down in a flat desert plain cut cleanly through by the river. The second she felt it stop moving beneath her, Faye surged forward. Her renewed strength tore her from Zeke's unsuspecting embrace. She followed her momentum through, taking a running step before leaping with trained grace and skill from the front of the boat - to the packed earth of the riverbank.

She crouched low as she landed, allowing her bent form to absorb the impact. And she breathed. "*Don't,*" she told him without looking up. She had no idea what his reaction had been when she'd broken free of his hold, and at that moment, she didn't care.

Her entire body instantly ached as if she'd been ripped free from a morphine drip after a fight with a dragon. It was wholly unnatural. *It's the magic,* she told herself. He had been drowning her in it, and he probably hadn't even realized it.

She felt a small tremble, down deep in her bones, and gritted her teeth against it.

Zeke didn't want her. That was the kicker that had infused her with a sudden burst of strength and will. Zeke Stone wasn't interested in Fathom Everett. Not really. Zeke wanted her *ancestor*. He wanted a memory. He knew nothing about Faye at all. The fact that he hungered for her with such relentless ferocity after having barely met her was just more proof. It was too unnatural to be anything but ghost's long-running obsession with someone from the past. He wasn't feeling desire for Faye; he was feeling a century's worth of pent-up, built-up need for the woman he'd lost a hundred years ago.

Faye stayed where she was, crouched and prepared to run despite the ache and cold. She spoke through tightly-clenched teeth. “*Don’t* do that to me, Zeke. I’m *not* Madeleine. I’m *not* your toy. I’m not an object to be used and flooded with magic at your whim.”

She opened her eyes and looked up toward the sparkling lights perhaps a quarter of a kilometer away. More softly, she added, “It’s enough that you took me from my home without my permission. You don’t even know me.” She closed her eyes again and shook her head. “So stop attacking me.”

It was silent around her for a long time. A gentle breeze made an almost spiritual whisper as it crossed the desert and chased through her hair. The music and scents from the Carnival beckoned more than ever. The combination of warm breeze, scents, and sound made her feel just a little bit better.

Finally, Zeke spoke. “You’re right,” he said. Faye opened her eyes, gasping in surprise because his voice wasn’t coming from the boat on her left as she had expected, but from the desert on her *right*. She turned her head to find that he was standing several feet away, framed by the dark contrasts of nighttime desert and nighttime sky. She was now between Zeke and the river that had ferried them there. He’d somehow left the boat and moved all that distance without her hearing or seeing him.

Of course, she reminded herself. *Ghost*.

She studied him where he stood. He... also seemed to have changed clothes again, which when she thought about it, might not be all that difficult for him to do, being a ghost and all. But why?

He still hadn’t gone back to the dated clothes he’d died in, as beautiful as they had been. He was again dressed in modern, expensive clothing, but this time everything from the engineering boots to the t-shirt was black.

And there was another black leather jacket. But this time, it was *the* black leather jacket, the white skull across his back serving as a warning to anyone who saw it.

As far as Faye was concerned, it was a warning to her too. He was so beautiful, she hated him. She hated him because she knew she could never have him, and that was usually okay - she was used to disappointment in the romance department. But he'd as good as lead her on, made her think for just a tiny while that she was... *worthy*. That really hurt. And it really made her angry.

"I'm sorry, Fathom," he told her as she looked him over, unable to help herself. "I was out of line."

Damn straight, she thought, but there was no real strength behind it.

Zeke Stone stood at-ease, a veritable Michelangelo's *David* in jeans and leather, and there was a disturbingly large part of her that wished she hadn't bothered to break free of his hold. His strong hands were at his sides, his green eyes brilliant but no longer glowing, his posture one of a beautiful man feeling a mixture of uncomfortable emotions.

"I know you're not Madeleine," he said softly.

Faye straightened at that, slowly coming to her feet. *Do you?* she wondered. Because her senses told her he wasn't lying. But his behavior earlier would suggest otherwise. Could she trust her abilities any longer? Was she losing her touch?

The ache-like pain Faye had initially felt after her jump from the boat was fading fast. But she was still colder than she reasoned she should have been. She felt like she had fever chills. She wasn't technically a warden, so she didn't have the nearly constant experience dealing with magic users and the after-effects of their spells the way everyone else in the Sirius clan did. She had no idea whether this kind of residual discomfort was normal, but she planned to ask about it the next time she saw Genevieve.

It was Zeke's turn to look *her* over now, his starkly contrasting eyes slowly traveling the length of her body to her shoes, and back up. After a beat, she realized that he was being thorough because he was looking for any sign of injury. She glanced back at the river. It *was* quite a distance away. For all

intents and purposes, she'd just taken a running long-jump off the front end of a boat onto a hard-packed ground.

"I'm fine," she told him with a sharp gesture and a brief shake of her head. "I've been trained to fall." Which was true. One of the first things you learned to physically do in warden training was fall - because you would *always* fall. The trick was to fall without getting hurt.

Zeke was silent, and though she saw a muscle tick in his jaw, his expression was still unreadable. After a few more long, tense moments, he finally said, "We're not in the realm of the dead, but even here someone like you will draw too much attention." She saw his throat move as if working through the same tension as his jaw. "Stay close to me."

His eyes flicked to her own neck, where she could still feel the fire of his trailing kisses. His tone was notably tighter when he added, "I promise to... behave myself from now on."

His eyes re-caught hers, and he gave her a one-sided smile. It was clear from the smile that he'd meant his last comment as a sort of joke. And it was clear from the shards of jade in his eyes that it wasn't a joke, but a lie.

Faye blinked. *Well...* she thought, hugging herself against a residual chill. *That's...* She internally swore, shaking her head. She didn't actually know *what* to think of that.

He didn't offer to take her back home. He was still planning to try to take her to the realm of the dead. Instead, he'd promised to be on his best behavior "from now on." Which meant he planned on keeping her with him for a while.

Exactly how long was a while? And to what end?

Faye swallowed hard, hugging herself tighter. "You can't just open another portal back?"

He shook his head, just once. "No."

"Why not?" she wanted to know.

Zeke took a deep breath and sighed heavily, shrugging off his jacket. He approached her, and she gave herself brownie points for bravery because she stayed where she was and let

him come. He rewarded her by helping her to slip on the jacket. It smelled amazing... like leather and faint cologne and after shave and Zeke.

As he straightened it out around her, tugging one zippered side of it over the other like a robe because it was so huge on her, he said, "Whether we move further toward the Land of the Dead, or back to the mortal realm, I can't get us there alone now."

He finished adjusting the jacket and shook his head with a small smile. She assumed he was amused at how tiny she was inside it. But she was too grateful for its warmth to say anything.

He let go of the jacket and motioned for her to turn around.

But Faye stared at his circling finger and swallowed nervously. She could literally still feel the hardness of his chest pressed against her back from mere moments earlier, and she wasn't sure she wanted to put herself in such a vulnerable position again so soon.

He put her fears more or less to rest when he raised his other hand and she saw that he had a backpack strap in it. Her eyes dropped to the pack dangling from his grip. She hadn't noticed him grabbing *that* either, and she was sure he hadn't had it a second ago.

Ghost, she reminded herself yet again. *It's just more magic.*

When she looked back up into his face, his smile was wider. He seemed to be genuinely amused by her wariness. "I would be happy to carry it for you, believe me," he told her. "But if we are separated while traveling through whatever portal we find, I have a feeling you'd be more comfortable knowing you have it."

Again, he wasn't lying.

Damn, she thought. Aside from his penchant for abducting people, Ezekiel Stone was just about the perfect man. And to be fair, he'd only abducted her. And only once. It

was really too bad he didn't have a thing for her the way he did her very-great-very-dead grandmother. *Double damn.*

"Yeah," she said softly in agreement, turning around so he could slip the pack over her shoulders. "You're probably right." The bag was made of very soft brown leather, it was well weighted and the strong leather scent of it told her it had to be brand new. She wasn't sure whether it was the pack itself or magic that made it virtually weightless against her back. But either way, it was the kind of leather bag almost everyone pined for. It was too bad she'd have to return it to Zeke later.

Lots of things were too bad tonight. *Triple damn.*

When she turned back around, she tucked a lock of wind-blown hair behind her ear and said, "So you can't pull up a portal here. Why not?"

"The Carnival of Night is unique, a kind of *living dimension*, for lack of a better description. Magic is the blood that feeds its veins, and that magic is strong. Only the sovereigns have the kind of power it takes to transport out of here through magic that thick." He paused for a moment, looking down before he quietly added, "Well... there is one other who can -..." But then he broke off and shook his head as if the subject wasn't worth discussing. "You and I on the other hand will need to ride a permanent portal out."

"Okay..." she said. "Where are they? The permanent portals."

"There." He nodded at the sea of entertainment less than half a kilometer away, from the sound and sight of it. "I'll take you through the Carnival. The portals are supposedly littered throughout the park." He turned back to face her, more serious now. "But they're hidden and very hard to find. To locate any of them... we'll need help."

His expression was grim, his green eyes following her other hand as she nervously tucked a second lock of hair behind her other ear. His gaze lingered there before trailing down over her collarbone and neck then meeting her eyes one last time. He stepped back and faced the Carnival lights in the distance. "We should get moving."

She wondered what he was thinking.
If only I could read his mind too.

Chapter Thirteen

She wondered what he was thinking and thought, *If only I could read his mind too.*

Thank the Storyteller she can't read my mind, Zeke thought. She did *not* want to know the notions that were making their Machiavellian way through his head at that moment.

The shit had really hit the fan. Everything had gone just about as pear shaped as it possibly could, and now Zeke had far fewer options open to him than he wanted. His plans *never* failed this spectacularly.

This wasn't how this night was supposed to go down.

But he wasn't quite himself. From the moment he'd first seen her running from him by the river - he hadn't been himself. She was *doing* things to him.

He had to admit that it was Faye's physical likeness to Madeleine that had first set him upon her like a wolf on fleet-footed prey. But bewilderingly, that initial shock and wonder at her appearance had passed in no time, flat. That very same night, while he trapped her spirit in a pocket of Limbo and closed in on her, he fully realized several important things: *One*, Faye was special - kind, strong, beautiful, selfless. There was no denying it. She was absolutely precious. *Two*, he needed to be around her, learn more about her, make sure she didn't run away before he had the damn chance. He needed it like he needed air. Or rather, like he *used* to need air. And *three*, Faye Everett was definitely *not* Madeleine.

It surprised him a little that his fascination with her had not waned with this cognizance, but grown stronger. All this time, the only woman he had really been able to think about to any serious degree had been Madeleine. And now suddenly, there was someone else.

It wasn't that he felt guilty for being captivated by another woman. Why should he? Especially after a century? He'd literally died trying to save Maddie - and she hadn't even

been on the boat. She'd gone on to marry someone else, have kids, live a long and happy life. All after Zeke had been crushed to death by godforsaken *furniture* and pinned down beneath the waters of a dead-calm river on a random, ironically peaceful summer morning.

It wasn't guilt he felt at all. Not even close.

It was *hunger*.

When he first caught Faye up in that make-believe alley in Limbo and peered deep into her soul, he understood for the first time in his existence what it meant to be starving. When he was alive, he'd never gone without food. His family had been lucky; he'd always had what he needed. He was only working for Hawthorne because it was another step toward his ultimate goals. Zeke was admittedly fortunate that while living, he'd never personally suffered any of the multitude of agonies he witnessed in the living around him in Chicago during the hundred-plus years since.

But now... Now he fully recognized that he hadn't had sustenance in ten decades. And he needed it. He was starving. He was *ravenous*, and Faye Everett was a candy store.

All at once, Zeke wanted to know *everything about her*. The moment she'd left his territory that morning, he'd gotten to work. He knew it would take his people several days to get past the securities a warden clan automatically placed on the identities of anyone who joined them, but Zeke sent them to work on it anyway. He tasked them with traveling every available avenue to gather information on the beautiful little interloper who had braved his territory in order to acquire medicine for the needy. *Christ*, her story was so selflessly Dickensian, it was almost ridiculous. But mostly... it was bewitching.

She fucking fascinated him. She intrigued him. And he just got hungrier.

He needed to see her again. Immediately. He needed to see *more*.

So he set it all up and made sure he could deliver what was necessary to keep Genevieve Rayne and her people satisfied. He just had to prevent Faye's would-be guardian angels from deciding he was a threat to her and coming between them.

That had been his plan tonight. He'd fully meant to just... get to know her better. He wanted to talk to her alone, earn her trust. He had intended to turn on the charm, and nothing more. True, his plan was to keep them near the river, where his powers were the greatest - but only because it gave him an advantage over her. What guy wouldn't utilize an advantage when it came to impressing a pretty girl? Especially one like Faye?

But then the river had reared its dark side... as it so often did. And Faye had revealed her fear of it to Zeke.

And then she had revealed so much more.

Zeke's hands curled into fists at his sides as he thought about it now and they walked through the Carnival's surrounding desert. They were almost at its gates. He cut his gaze to his beautiful companion walking two to three feet away. It was too far for Zeke. Without thinking, he reached out lightning-fast and grabbed her upper arm, tugging her closer. "I said stay close."

He released her immediately when she pulled her arm back out of his grip, surprise written across her features. She didn't say anything though, and he was grateful for that. He really didn't understand why he couldn't control his actions around her.

When he had been alive, he *never* would have done to Madeleine what he had just done with Faye on the boat. Granted, he now had buckets of magical influence at his disposal, and that hadn't been the case back then. Maybe it influenced *him*.

Or maybe it's just Faye, his inner voice growled.

The memory of her trapped in his arms flashed through him - the complete contact, the deep closeness, the way he'd

held her *hard* against him, his hands against her stomach and wrapped lightly around her throat... Gentle. But wanton. *Dangerous.*

Zeke passed a hand over his face and willed his at the moment far-too-solid body *not* to reveal just how much he wanted the woman beside him. Even the *memory* of having her in his arms was enough to make him hard. He had to use a good store of magic to keep his desire from becoming visible.

This isn't good, he thought. Forty-eight hours and he was on the verge of a new kind of madness. Was this a ghost thing? Because he sure as hell felt more monster than man in that moment.

His gaze cut to the symbol on the back of the jacket Faye now wore. He'd grabbed it before moving too far from the river because he knew fewer problems would head their way if people saw the insignia. It had that effect on troublemakers.

She had rolled up the sleeves as best she could, but she was still positively swimming in it. He inwardly groaned at the thought of the body that was hiding in there right now. He'd had it in his arms only moments earlier. She may have been small compared to him, but she was strong.

Now he sighed. It couldn't have been a "ghost thing." He'd had scores of women in the last hundred years. Life had blessed him with a countenance that was pleasant to the eye - and death had cursed him with more than enough time to use it to his advantage. Once he'd achieved solid form and could maintain it for several hours twice a day, he'd made good use of it.

But he'd never lost control around any of them, never felt the need for them or the hunger he was experiencing now. He never really even *cared*. Not about any of them.

He swore internally at the shameful acknowledgement. *I am a phenomenal asshole.*

He forced his hands to uncurl at his sides *again* as he continued to mentally go over what had happened at the river's edge, trying to make sense of it all.

When he did, when he laid the sequence of events out in front of him, he began to understand where it all went wrong.

It was as if Faye realizing she was Madeleine's descendant had a prophetically powerful effect on *both* of them. Zeke didn't know if he could really say he'd been surprised - it made sense, after all, given her appearance - but certainly, something about Faye having the same blood in her veins as Madeleine meant profound things to him.

Still, it was worse for Faye. She'd immediately put all the pieces together, who he was, what he was doing there as a ghost on that river, why he wanted to get to know her - *all* the pieces. And whatever fear she'd been feeling toward the river quadrupled and refocused on Zeke.

She was instantly terrified of him. She was terrified that he would read too much into her ancestry, that he would think it was something like providence that she was there. She was afraid she would lose her freedom, that he would behave irrationally - and that he would even do something crazy to make sure she couldn't leave him again. Like kidnap her.

Or *kill* her.

As if it works that way, Zeke thought now. Ghosts couldn't keep someone with them by killing them; ghosts were rare for a reason. It took *extremely* special circumstances to create a ghost. There were only two ways that Zeke knew of, in fact. One was the way that *he'd* become a ghost. And the other...

Zeke roughly jerked his thoughts back from that dark and winding path. It lead to nowhere good.

He mentally returned to earlier that night and the way Faye's fear of him had acted like the first falling domino in a cascade. He'd *felt* her sudden burst of intense distrust toward him - and reacted in kind. He, in turn, was instantly afraid of Faye. He was afraid of her running. He was afraid of her hiding. He was afraid he would lose her.

It was a Catch-22 that culminated in a consequence Zeke enacted with such brutal speed and precision, anyone

witnessing it would have thought he'd planned it all along.

He'd already had one booted foot on the river. His powers were already at their strongest.

In the blink of an eye, he was using them for the very thing everyone had been afraid he would use them for.

And then... on the boat....

The truth was, he didn't know what had come over him. He'd simply been standing there, so close to her, watching her peer out at the Carnival lights. He'd been scanning her thoughts, and he could feel her general sense of wonder - about what he was doing with the boat, about the distant amusement park, about the shimmering river beneath them. About everything.

And suddenly, he had her in his arms.

His veins had been burning. He would never forget that sensation. He pulled her close, his power flooding them both, and the need that coursed through him scrambled his thoughts, making mince meat of his control.

He knew in his heart - at the very core of things - that he would never be able to allow harm to come to Faye Everett. The need he felt for her was as much a desire to bring her pleasure as it was for him to take it. More so, in fact. He needed her to trust him, to want him - and to need him right back.

On the boat, his magic had set about doing exactly that.

He mentally shook his head. A part of him was relieved she had pulled away from him. Escaped him. Of course, a part of him lamented it too. Because he was a male.

"Now what?" Faye asked softly, breaking him out of his thoughts.

They were around fifty feet away from the outer gates to the Carnival. The gates were tall and topped with points - but they were constructed of colorful circus tent material. More like a soft, easily permeable wall around the park rather than a set of "gates," the Carnival's protective outer barrier was

obviously magical in nature. No one could get through it. The material would not tear, it would not ignite, it was unclimbable, and anyone who tried to do anything remotely like any of these things would often find themselves in a forever maze of mirrors, begging and pleading to be set free while promising to never come back again.

The sovereigns could transport directly into the park if they chose. Almost all others had to be admitted.

Zeke stopped and stared at the entryway, which was an open awning flanked by two “ticket booths.” He knew the creatures who worked those ticket booths. He knew them very well.

“I have a feeling you aren’t going to have any problems,” he told her, his tone low. “The Carnival brought you here. It’s probably been waiting for you.”

He glanced down at Faye, who looked more nervous by the second. He tried to brush her mind to gather her thoughts, but failed to read anything. He pressed a little harder - still nothing.

Zeke glanced over his shoulder the way they’d come. The boat was no longer visible, and neither was the river. Their distance from the water and the Carnival’s overriding influence had already managed to disarm Zeke of at least one of the weapons normally in his arsenal. He wondered what else had been rendered useless.

“What about you?” Faye asked.

He took a deep breath. “I’m with you,” he told her with a hard look. “Insist on it. Do not cross through that archway without me beside you.”

Faye blanched a little. *Good*, Zeke thought. She should be scared. “Do you understand?”

She nodded. “Yes,” she said softly.

“Once we’re in, we’re in,” he continued. “The Carnival can no more tell exactly what is going on inside its gates than a person can tell exactly what is going on inside their body.”

Again, Faye nodded. They turned back toward the gates and approached. “Here goes nothing,” Faye whispered.

Here goes everything, Zeke thought.

Chapter Fourteen

He looks like a normal living, breathing man, Faye thought as she studied her companion under the veil of her lashes and a few locks of stray hair. *Okay, that's a lie,* she corrected. He looked like a male model and a mafia boss, and she was pretty sure there was no such creature. It certainly wasn't normal. But he was no longer glowing like the ghost he actually was.

He looked *solid*. Her eyes slipped slowly down the length of him. He looked very solid.

“Those ticket booth operators seemed to know you,” she said by way of conversation. Well, by way of conversation with ulterior motives.

Zeke either didn't catch the hinting note in her tone, or he chose to ignore it like a gentleman. He said, “We've had dealings.”

I just bet you have, her inner voice said sassily. *And so what?* it said next. *You jealous, Fathom?* Zeke's eyes cut to her as if he could feel what she was doing - and thinking. But he couldn't be. As soon as they'd passed through the park's gates a few minutes earlier, he'd told her he'd lost the ability to read her mind. *“And I don't know what else I may have lost, so when I say stick close, I really mean it. There are some unsavory individuals in the park's shadows.”*

Now Faye felt Zeke's attention on her again and hurriedly looked away behind the protective wall of her hair, but not before she knew he'd caught her out. She ignored the way he continued to gaze heavily down at her and focused on the lights and noise of the rides they passed. But when she did, she noticed the ride operators watching her instead.

She ducked her head a little lower and peeked out from beneath her long lashes. It was a posture she was well familiar with.

“The world completely overwhelms you, doesn't it?”

Faye blinked. She looked up at her beautiful companion. *Okay,* she thought. *Maybe a male model, mafia boss, werewolf*

in human form. Because eyes that green are not even human.
“What do you mean?” she asked.

He smiled.

Her inner voice swore and her belly did a flop.

But he shook his head and spared her from his attention, choosing to focus it on the ride operators who'd been ogling her. They hastily turned back to their duties the moment his gaze singled them out. She wondered how much of that was due to the jacket he wore again. The park's inner temperature was absolutely perfect - more magic. So when they'd been admitted by the two fae women at the gates, Faye had given him back the jacket.

Those fae women... she thought helplessly, recalling the way the twin fairies had undressed her male companion with their eyes. *You know damn well they knew him. Biblically.* She blinked then, wondering why the thought sounded so angry in her head. Why did she care?

“You are an enigma,” Zeke said while they continued to walk. His voice brought her firmly back into the moment. “You have to be the bravest person I've ever met.”

The... bravest?

He shook his head, still smiling. “Lots of people turn to crime, and they all have their reasons. Personal survival, apathy, a feeling of not having anything left to lose. But you literally turned to crime for the opposite of those reasons - and you have everything to lose. Acting rashly when you're already in the gutter is just... basic.” He shrugged. “Acting rashly when you're in the clear is...” He chuckled softly. “Well, it's insane. But you're not insane. And you do it anyway.”

Now his piercing eyes cut to her again, making Faye want to turn and run.

“That makes you either very oblivious or very brave. We've already established you're not oblivious, seeing as how you do all of this so that other people won't have to suffer.” He tapped the backpack she was carrying, and Faye blushed.

“So you’re brave,” he continued, his smile broadening. His hand traveled from her pack to the hair she was trying so hard to hide behind. “But then you do this,” he said, lifting the locks and denying her the curtain of her privacy. His grin was all teeth, brutally beautiful. “You hide.” He chuckled again, slowly releasing her hair so that it slid between his fingers like silk.

“And I think I figured out why.”

Faye didn’t say anything. Her heart was hammering again. His voice, his nearness, the way he touched her hair - they were a loaded deck against her, scrambling her ability to behave like a normal human being. But she knew he didn’t need her to say anything anyway.

“Everything you do, you do because the world overwhelms you.”

Faye’s steps slowed a little as his words came full circle. Something was falling into place inside her, something that fit perfectly into a space she hadn’t realized was empty.

“You face danger because the suffering of others is too much for you to bear. You *feel* it too much. Just like you feel everything... Which is why you also hide.”

She turned his words over in her head. It wasn’t news to her. She lived with these feelings. But the fact that *he’d* been the one to notice and say as much was having a profound effect on Faye. She could hear his honesty in every syllable; he meant every word. He wasn’t feeding her lines - he was sharing an observation. And there was something else.

He was impressed with her. It wasn’t surprise that rang out most clearly in what he said. It was admiration. The words might have been a little masked, and he hadn’t come right out and said it directly, but in effect - Zeke Stone was *praising* her.

Faye wasn’t sure what to do with that. She honestly had no idea how to respond. Her blush had deepened, and she wanted to run more than ever - but it was due to her awkward inability to accept praise, not due to fear. At the heart of it, Faye was deeply touched.

But after a few seconds of silence... she became less touched and more concerned. Zeke had been slowing his steps beside her while she was thinking. Each one was careful and measured, and when she looked up, it was to find his gaze skirting around them, cutting to the shadows, watching warily.

They were currently winding through one of many expansive booth and game sections they had passed since entering the Carnival. As in the other parts of the park, people milled all around them, the colors and noises nearly deafening at times. Amongst the revelers were humanoids with pointed ears, some with horns, or scales rather than skin. There were bipedal creatures with folded wings behind their backs, bat-like and leathery. And there were others with wings like a dragonfly's or a moth's. Everywhere, children high on sugar and nighttime squealed their glee, dodging under the reaching arms of guardians to run mad and untethered like possessed lemmings and the free spirits they were.

"You never told me what was so dangerous about the park," she ventured. Everyone seemed so happy. Strange, but happy. What was it he was so worried about?

Zeke didn't alter his behavior; his eyes and stance remained vigilant. Without looking down, he asked, "Notice anything off about the people around you?"

Faye glanced at the revelers again, but only saw more of the same. "If you mean that they're all inhuman, yeah I noticed that." But even as she said the words, she realized what it was he was hoping she would realize. It wasn't that the park had people from other realms in it - it was that *all* of them were from other realms. She felt her eyes widen as she looked over her shoulder just to make sure. "Wait. There are no humans here."

Zeke was watching her when she turned back around. He wore a smile that told her he was pleased, but the merriment of it didn't reach his eyes. "There have been a few others, but you missed them," he told her. Then Faye nearly stopped walking when he tucked her protective curtain of hair behind her ear and his fingers brushed her skin. She knew her cheeks were

reddening when he added, “You were too busy trying to remain unseen yourself.”

Faye processed his words as he dropped his hand and returned his attention to the crowd. “So what does that mean?” she asked.

“Let me know when you see a human.”

And as if fate had ordained it, that was when Faye saw one. She had layered blonde hair, was perhaps just shy of middle-aged, and was wearing ripped jeans and a tailor-fit leather jacket in bright red. The platform combat boots on her feet matched the jacket. She walked slowly, like Faye and Zeke, but there was no worry in her features. Instead, she seemed curious - and expectant. As if she fully anticipated that at any given moment, something was going to happen. Something that would change the flow of everything around her.

That itself was strange. But what really set the human apart from everyone around her was that a few seconds after Faye noticed her, the woman’s form faded a little. In and out. Solid and un-solid, the woman’s figure faltered. The woman herself didn’t seem to notice. She continued walking, her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket, as if nothing out of the ordinary was occurring. Faye blinked, wondering what the hell she was seeing. The woman in red seemed like some sort of specter to Faye, a person who was only partially there in the park. She was *glitching* every few seconds.

“What happened?” Faye asked softly, unable to take her eyes off the woman. “Why did she do that?”

“Because she’s dreaming,” Zeke said.

Faye’s head snapped up. “She’s what?”

Zeke nodded at the woman. “Humans can’t normally visit the Carnival of Night in their solid forms. Very few have ever ventured here as you are right now. I know the Nightmare Queen did. I think the Phantom Queen may have at one point - not sure on that one. But in general, the only time humans

come here is when they're asleep. And that's why you're only able to see *part* of them."

Faye thought about that. "So you're afraid I'm going to stand out because I'm more solid."

Zeke didn't say anything.

"But why would a human, solid or not, stand out in this crowd?" she probed, still confused about his concern. "I mean, I think I just saw a guy with elk antlers and butterfly wings."

"The Carnival is owned by the Nightmare King. More or less. Nightmares are incubi. You know that, right?"

Of course she knew that. It was supernatural training 101. But she just nodded.

"The only humans who ever find their way to the park had to have come into... deliberate contact with an incubus at some point."

Faye felt her face warm again. There was no mistaking what Zeke meant by "contact." He was telling her the only humans who came here had been sexual partners to incubi.

He spared her any embarrassment, however, by continuing in his explanation. "And since Incubi choose mates based on internal beauty, only the very 'best' human beings, so to speak, will find their way into the park."

Okay... she was following so far. And it was interesting. But she still had no idea why any of this was a bad thing.

"Normally that's not a bad thing," he said.

She looked up at him again. "I thought you said you couldn't read my mind any longer."

"I can't," he said, and he was telling the truth. "I don't have to read your mind to know that's what you were wondering." He shook his head, his smile of amusement genuine.

They continued walking, making their way right past the human woman who faded in and out. The woman smiled and nodded at them, and they returned the gesture.

“She seems so solid when she isn’t glitching,” Faye said absently when the woman was out of earshot.

“She is,” said Zeke. “If you touched a dreamer here, they would feel solid. Real. But the subconscious is only part of a person. Granted, it’s probably most of what makes a person. However, there is still some aspect to the individual left behind, hence the not-all-here look.”

“Would they become less solid when they’re fading in and out?”

“No. And believe me, it’s a strange sensation to feel something solid under your fingertips when the skin you’re touching is not always visible.”

Faye fell silent for a few beats. Then she remembered that he’d been about to tell her why it was a bad thing that only good humans were allowed in the Carnival. “So why is it a bad thing now?” she asked, knowing he would remember where he’d left off.

“Because right now, the Carnival is crawling with bounty hunters.”

“It’s what?” she asked, turning sharply to look behind her, this time in search of something telling, like maybe... Boba Fett, or... The Rock. “Why?” she asked, still searching. But everyone looked the same to her. She honestly had no idea what a real bounty hunter even looked like. Stephanie Plum perhaps?

She settled on looking for someone with that *hungry* appearance she always associated with bounty hunters. *People willing to turn over complete strangers for money*, she thought. *You’d have to be pretty hungry for something like that, right?*

Zeke’s voice lowered considerably when he answered her this time. “Are you familiar with an unseelie race known as the Taal?”

“Sure,” she answered absently, narrowing her gaze on a particularly hungry-looking humanoid with messy blue fur and enormous eyes. It was only after they’d passed the creature by that she realized she thought he was suspiciously hungry-

looking because he so closely resembled *Cookie Monster*. “In training, I got the basic Cliff’s Notes version,” she continued, speaking of the Taal. “They’re sort of like... unseelie fae vampires.”

Beside her, Zeke laughed softly. “That’s the most basic and shallow description of an entire race of beings I think I’ve ever heard, but... yeah. In a few words.” He gently took her by the elbow and steered her sharply to the left, taking them between a few booths and a number of rides that looked exhilarating.

When they’d come back out to another path and he’d looked down the length of each of them, he let her go and continued. “I’m sure she also told you they were all male.”

“Yep.” It was hard to forget a detail like that.

“What Genevieve probably didn’t tell you - though she should have - is that the king of the Taal, Lord Malek, is sick right now. Actually, all the Taal are. Something’s happening to them,” he told her, shaking his head. “And all at once, they’re being forced to find their mates. If they don’t, they are driven mad. And the one who needs a mate the worst is Malek himself. His condition affects the state of his entire nation. When he’s strong, they are. When he’s weak, they are. When he’s batshit -”

“They all lose their minds.”

Zeke nodded, just once.

“Insane unseelie bloodsuckers,” Faye mumbled. “Sounds like a B-movie title. Or the name of a rock band.” And it sounded like a nightmare in the making. Genevieve had told her more than Faye had let on. She was well aware of how powerful the Taal were. They were Tuathans, fae of the highest and most powerful order. The Seelie and Unseelie kings were both Tuathan, as were their queens. Few other individuals or races within the two realms bore this designation, but the Taal were one of them.

“It actually is the name of a rock band,” Zeke told her.

Faye blinked, her head snapping up. “Seriously?”

But the moment she saw the look on his face, she knew he was teasing her. She would have recognized the sound in his words too, if she'd been paying attention. But she was too distracted by the prospect of crazed, bloodthirsty Taal to be paying attention in the moment.

He laughed softly, and she gave him a look, not amused.

As if to placate her, he stopped them both suddenly. Gesturing to the stand on his right without looking at it, he asked, "Cotton candy?"

Faye's eyes grew wide. "It goes without saying."

Zeke stepped up to the stand's window, and a tiny hand on a great-big arm shot out at once, its little grip tight around the gold-colored paper cone beneath the biggest cloud-like blob of cotton candy Faye had ever seen. "Rainbow colored!" she breathed excitedly. She'd never seen anything like it.

He handed it to her, and she took it gingerly. There would be no greater thing in heaven and earth than cotton candy if it weren't for how sticky it could make you if you weren't careful. But after a turn of the cone and a thorough inspection of the gorgeous confection, Faye made a scrunched-lip face.

Zeke tilted his head questioningly.

"I can't eat this without using my fingers," she told him.

"And you're worried about being sticky," he reasoned, still smiling.

Her gaze narrowed on him again. "I hate being sticky, okay? It's just a thing with me!"

Now he laughed loudly, the sound not unlike a kind of candy itself. Faye blushed, then rolled her eyes. She pinched a puff of candy between two fingers and tore it away from its mother cloud, then popped it into her mouth, no longer willing to wait to find out what a rainbow tasted like. It melted immediately, of course, dissolving to nearly nothing in split seconds.

But as it did, Faye was transported. She closed her eyes and moaned softly, losing herself to the revolving flavors of

grape, cherry, strawberry, orange, lemon, apple, and then grape again. She tore off another chunk and hurriedly shoved it into her mouth, gasping as the flavors shifted, now blackberry, raspberry, mango, banana, and peach. Again and again, she pulled off bits of the floss and placed them on her tongue, only to be shocked each time as the essence of the candy changed to new and different cycles of flavors, some she normally didn't care for, and many she had never before experienced. She loved them *all*.

Only when she reached for more but came away with air did she finally open her eyes again. Zeke was watching her. But he wasn't laughing at her, as she'd been expecting. Instead, there was a different look in his eyes, something... she didn't quite recognize. It was something that made her feel as though she was becoming cotton candy herself - unstable and insubstantial, as if she could melt to absolutely nothing at a moment's notice.

Or with so much as a touch of his lips.

"Can I get you another?" he asked, turning slightly as if he were about to approach the stand anyway. No doubt he fully expected her to want more, especially given how few calories were actually in cotton candy. But she shook her head. "No, thank you," she said. Then she grinned broadly. "Not yet anyway."

He laughed again, the joy reaching his eyes this time. It was a stunning look on him. *Killer smile*, she thought helplessly. The Taal weren't the only ones going a little mad.

Faye blinked. *The Taal!* "Zeke, you didn't finish telling me -"

"About the Taal and the humans. I know." He took the empty cone from her fingers and tossed it into a nearby receptacle that had to be the cleanest and emptiest Faye had ever seen. Then he nodded at her hands. "Here, hold out your hands in front of you." He demonstrated. "Like this."

She did what he asked, cupping her hands and holding them together about a foot in front of her. She jumped a little and gasped when they began to fill with water. It was a small

miracle she didn't automatically drop it all, but somehow she didn't. Instead, she just watched as the cool, crystal-clear liquid built up in her hands and then stopped near the top.

"You can make water," she guessed. Her tone must have reflected how impressed she was, because he appeared slightly proud when she looked up at him.

He shrugged as if it was nothing. "It's water. I can do a lot with water." He glanced around them, then toward the general direction of the park's gates in the far distance. "Even here, it seems. At least that's one thing I was able to keep."

"It's perfect," Faye said. She allowed the water to coat her hands completely, then slowly poured it out over her sticky fingertips until all traces of the candy were gone. He handed her a paper towel, which he must have acquired at the stand when she wasn't looking. "Thank you," she said again, meaning it.

"It's nothing," he told her. "Let's go this way. I'll get you something a lot better than water to drink."

He led her off in a new direction, and when they'd gone a few paces, he said, "The Taal king has a lot of powerful contacts, and one of them is a witch. Positively ancient. This witch told him that his mate would be human. That she would be special somehow. And that she would have a kind heart." Zeke made a face. "Or something to that effect. I don't know her exact words. The end result is that the entire multiverse knows Malek Taal is on the lookout for a special and kind human female."

Zeke looked sidelong at Faye, his expression meaningful. "When it comes to humans, they also know that The Carnival of Night only hosts special and kind ones."

Faye was beginning to understand. Unfortunately, she was beginning to understand *a lot*. "I see," she said softly. "Hence the plethora of bounty hunters." Though, she had yet to notice anyone in Mandalorian armor. "But wait. How do they do that if the women are dreaming?"

“If the bounty hunter has the right tools, they can pull a being from their world into this one through their dream by turning the dream into a portal of sorts.”

Wow. Now that's a nifty trick, she thought. “So they're just... kidnapping random females and lugging them over to the king and going, ‘Is this the one?’”

“More or less. At this point, he's desperate. Don't get me wrong, the man can keep it together. He's king for a reason. But his need is leaking out in disastrous ways. He needs a queen yesterday, so he's willing to pay an unimaginable finder's fee to the one who brings her in.” He shrugged. “Clearly the price tag is high enough that people are willing to take their chances with grabbing the wrong girl.”

“What... what happens to the girls when they're not the one he's looking for?”

“That depends on how hungry the Taal are. Most are never seen or heard from again.”

Faye had heard rumors of the unseelie sovereigns having to “deal” with Taal problems of late. She'd assumed it was something political. Now she knew the real reason.

But her inner voice piped up reassuringly. *The only special thing about me is that at the moment I'm more solid-looking than the other humans here*. “I don't understand why you're worried about me, Zeke,” she told him lightly. “I'm human, yes. But I'm no healer or witch or whatever. Besides... we're sure to find a portal soon. Right?”

She knew she was lying to herself. That was the crappy thing about her - *special* - ability.

Zeke didn't have to say anything. When she looked up at him, he caught her eyes with his and held them. They stopped walking. “I'm not going to let anything happen to you, Fathom.” He cupped her cheek with infinite gentility, and she found herself leaning into it, his touch a welcome bastion of strength. “All right?” he finished.

She nodded. It was exactly what she'd needed to hear.

But a moment later, when he swore softly and his hand slowly dropped away, the warmth he had infused her with vanished as quickly as it had come. She followed his gaze up and over her shoulder, and turned around to see a large, dark figure separate from the shadows beside one of the food stands. “He knew we were coming here next,” Zeke said, shaking his head in wonder. “Son of a bitch.”

Zeke had reached out and shoved Faye behind him before she could fully process what she was seeing and what he was saying, much less what he was doing. He kept one arm around her, holding her close behind him, but she kept close all on her own. Real fear was coursing through her now. All she could think about was how the “wrong girls” were never seen again.

“We can make a break for it,” she whispered, ready to turn tail and run for all she was worth.

But a *feeling* behind her suddenly had her slowly turning in place for a much different reason. A second tall figure stepped out onto the path behind them around the same distance away as the first.

And then a third did the same.

She heard herself swear under her breath this time. “Scratch that,” she whispered shakily. “*Boba Fett* brought friends.”

Chapter Fifteen

Faye could feel Zeke's muscles flex and twist as he looked left and right above her. "Get your kids out of here!" he bellowed at the carnival attendees. More scrambling ensued, but it must not have been fast enough for Zeke. "Now!" he added, his tone taking on ghostly power.

Now people ran full-tilt, picking up their little ones to hug them close as they raced by. Within seconds, all that remained were Zeke and Faye - and her bounty hunters.

Faye tried to remember her training, her fighting moves, tried to formulate some kind of plan. But her brain felt like it was icing over and filling with fog. She truly had no idea what they were going to do.

They were flanked by the enemy. The hunters were large, they seemed to be wearing something like padded leather armor, and they appeared to have long-range weapons, if the bulky shapes of their guns were any indication.

There was strangely still too much shadow to make out their visages, so Faye couldn't even tell what species they were. But they were too big to be human, and that had a bearing on where she would need to aim any kicks she would have otherwise landed between their legs.

Faye watched with eyes that felt too huge in her face. She could only assume the bounty hunters hadn't out-and-out attacked them yet because they didn't want to risk killing their mark. But any moment now, she and her ghost companion were going to have a very calculated attack to deal with, and the hunters had possessed a lot more time to plan its execution than Zeke and Faye had spent planning their escape.

She squeaked in surprise when Zeke's arm snaked around her waist, lifted her up, and swung her around so that she was now in front of him and facing him. He'd done it effortlessly, moving her around as if she were a ragdoll. "Faye, I want you to hold tight to me," he told her earnestly. "And shut your eyes. *Don't look.*"

Faye wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly at first. He had lowered his voice, and there was *so* much blood rushing through her eardrums. But she was running on adrenaline now, and that meant making fast judgments, which meant working on assumptions - so she was already wrapping her arms around his narrow waist and pressing her cheek to the solid wall of his chest. Frankly, she couldn't get close enough. He was her port in a very uncertain storm.

But when he repeated himself above her, and she caught the influence of his ghostly powers leaking into his voice again, she looked up at him through her now-wild hair.

"I said do *not* look, Faye. I mean it. Shut your eyes."

Faye lowered her head at once and squeezed her eyes shut tight.

Immediately, objects were filling the air. She could hear them whizzing past, the sound a cross between the flight of primitive blow darts and the firing of sci-fi movie blasters. She felt rather than heard one or more of the objects strike Zeke, their impacts like dull thuds that reverberated throughout his tall frame. But he was staunchly silent, and Faye's anxiety began to peak.

Then she was struck herself, one of the objects that had been sailing through the air finally embedding itself in her arm, and the urge to open her eyes grew fifty-fold. *Don't look, don't look, don't look...* she mentally repeated his instructions like a mantra. Her arm didn't hurt at all; the shock of the situation graciously strong enough to bottle the pain and save it for later. And Zeke was a ghost, so whatever was hitting them probably didn't effect him anyway. He was still standing, and she could still feel his muscles flexing under her cheek. He was fine. She was numb. There was no need for her to defy him and peek.

But... what *were* those things flying through the air? What *was* it that had hit him? What had hit her? What was it doing to him? What was it going to do to her? Were they going to be okay? *Don't look, don't look, damn it don't look....*

Faye's oh-so-reasonable, highly logical inner voice at long last spoke up, taking over the internal conversation with frustrating ease. *But why?* her internal voice questioned oh-so-reasonably. *Why not look? Honestly, what does he not want me to see?*

And of course, that was all it took. That was all it ever took.

Fathom Kate Everett could personally vouch with absolute honesty that ignorance was bliss. Because she'd once been ignorant of a great many things that she was no longer ignorant of, and she admitted freely that she'd been a much happier person before she had learned what she'd learned. But she would also be the first person to admit that while ignorance was indeed bliss - it was also ignorant. And ignorant was just something Fathom Kate Everett was not willing to be.

So Faye slowly, carefully lifted her head - just a little - and peeked between the small gaps of space amid strands of her thick, dark hair. She kept her eyes mostly shut, peering through tiny slits in her vision in the hopes that Zeke wouldn't notice.

But the wisps of blue vapor and aura she immediately caught sight of had her opening her eyes much wider and further angling her head for a better view.

While she was hugging him tight around the waist, Zeke Stone stood over her with his arms outstretched to either side, palms up. His fingers were slightly curled as if he were in the process of clawing something invisible. Every muscle in his body was flexed and unyielding, his booted feet planted shoulder-width apart in a stance of strength. His body was glowing again, the ghostly blue that she'd rapidly come to associate with his ghost form. And his eyes were burning like angry twin suns as he looked from one side of the lane to the other.

She froze where she was, staring up at him in all his glory, until curiosity won out and her gaze finally followed his down one end of the path.

The bounty hunter there was no longer shooting at them. In fact, at first Faye couldn't make out enough in the shadows to tell *what* he was doing. It seemed like he was just standing there.

The Carnival was actually fairly well lit, especially with the multicolored neons and blinking lights of the rides lending to the general glow of the massive park. Yet it was still impossible to see the man's face. *It has to be an obscuring spell*, she reasoned. She could have turned her head completely around to try and catch a glimpse of the hunters behind her, but then Zeke would know she was peeking. *If he doesn't already*.

She remained where she was and narrowed her gaze, focusing harder on the solitary hunter's hulking form. Little by little, his outline became clearer, as did the outlines of his clothing. Finally, she could tell that his skin was like a human's, without scales or feathers or spikes. Other than that, she could see that it was very dark and shiny, like black trash bags. She couldn't make any real color out at all in the unnatural darkness surrounding him - until she saw the red.

At first it was only a darker darkness spreading across the man's chest. But it was slick, reflecting the overhead lights, and when the hunter began trembling and twisting, literally writhing on his feet, Faye noticed that it reflected a ruby hue. The dark stain spread rapidly, overtaking the figure's chest entirely in seconds before spreading to his abdomen, and then his legs.

Faye stifled all sound that wanted to escape her throat when the man fell to his knees. He hunched forward, and the obscuring shadow fell away from his face, revealing his features at last. Even if the man had been human, Faye would not have recognized him as such. There was too much blood covering his face for her to distinguish one body part from another. Where the nose ended and the cheek began, she had no idea. Blood was all there was.

And it kept coming.

It rose out of him, pouring from his mouth, streaming from his nose, leaking from his eyeballs, and squeezing through every one of his pores as if it had collectively decided on an exodus. She realized with dawning horror that stole her breath and paralyzed her vocal chords that the skin she'd thought was shiny and dark like trash bags was actually just soaked in blood.

By the grace of the Storyteller, Faye somehow managed to shut her eyes. It was too late now, but better late than never. In the new darkness behind her lids, she was inundated by the sounds around her that she hadn't noticed before. Like the gurgling. Choking. And a second pair of knees hitting the dirt.

Then Zeke was shifting beside her, grabbing her by the upper arms and spinning rapidly with her. "Let's go!" he commanded, forcing her to move with him. Her legs were uncharacteristically wobbly, having gone to licorice strips once the realization that the bounty hunters were choking on their own blood fully set in.

"I... can't..." she said as nausea awakened in her belly, threatening to reject the tiny amount of sugar she'd ingested. Absently, she wondered if her vomit would come out rainbow colored.

She'd half expected Zeke to grow impatient, to pull her along with more force, or to berate her for doing what he must know by now she had done. But rather than do any of those things, Zeke abruptly stopped and turned toward her, lifting her into his arms, backpack and all. Just like that, she was being cradled tightly to his chest, her face tucked into the crook of his neck as he ran.

She'd always wondered what it would feel like to be carried like this by someone who was running. She'd expected it to be jarring, but she wasn't exactly surprised to find that Zeke's footfalls across the grounds of the Carnival were slight, as if he were half-running and half-gliding.

Ghost, she thought faintly. There were little white dots swimming all around in the darkness behind her lids. She recognized them as the "stars" one saw when they were short

on oxygen and she knew she wasn't breathing. She was terrified. She was sickened. She was being carried away from ruthless vampire-serving bounty hunters through a carnival owned by sex demons, while in the arms of a man who had been dead for more than a hundred years. For some reason, her lungs just didn't feel like putting in the effort at the moment. Maybe they were overwhelmed.

She could relate.

Chapter Sixteen

“Pssst!”

Faye blinked and opened her eyes. Was that.... Had she actually just heard that? Or was she losing her tentative grip on reality?

“Pssst! Hey, you!” she heard again.

Zeke kept running, so Faye placed a hand on his cheek and said, “Stop.”

At once, he slowed and came to a stand-still. “You okay?” he asked, his beautiful face filled with concern. “Do you need to....” He looked embarrassed. “You know... are you sick?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I mean... a little. But that’s not why I asked you to stop.” She looked around them, searching for the source of the voice she’d heard.

She found it in the form of a skinny, white-bearded man dressed in what looked like post-apocalyptic garb, from the goggles on his head to the steel-toed ancient leather boots on his ankles. He was so thin, she had the impression that if she touched him, it would hurt because his bone would press into his skin. But his grin was enormous, and his eyes were large and clear and bright.

“You seem to be in need of a portal,” said the man, his voice high-pitched and scratchy like dead, dry weeds in a stiff winter breeze.

This time, Zeke heard him, and he spun around, still holding Faye tight to his chest. When he saw the skinny man, he frowned in confusion. He looked from Faye to the man and back. “How did you know he was there?”

“He called to us.”

“He did?”

She nodded. “Actually, he said, ‘*pssst.*’”

His brows arched. “And you heard *that*?”

“Actually, I said ‘*pssst*’ to *her*. You didn’t hear me because I wasn’t speaking to you, spirit. Now come along,” said the man, turning away from them and waving behind him as if he wanted them to follow. “You’ll need a safe place to hide before I take you to the portal. I can provide that.”

Zeke just stared after him for a few seconds, his lips parted in fascination. “What... the....”

“Do you think that’s DaVinci?” she asked quietly.

“Name’s DaVinci!” called the man just before he disappeared between the flaps of a small dark tent. “Hurry now! Time’s on no one’s side!”

“Yeah, I do,” said Zeke with a quirk of his lips.

“Okay.”

Zeke shook his head and strode toward the tent, but not before he searched every shadow around them with the gold of his unnaturally luminous eyes. Then he used his boot to push one of the tent flaps aside and ducked low - *very low* - to take them inside.

“Lay her here,” said the rickety man, who limped toward a bed - *a bed?* - and gestured to it with knobby fingers attached to a pair of long, knobby arms, which were visible because the man had ironically chosen to dress in a white tank top and leather vest. His ancient body looked as though it wanted to cave in on itself beneath the weight of the leather and gear he wore. His wild white hair reminded her of Einstein’s, and he wore one monocle that made one eye look twice the size of the other.

So this is the famous DaVinci, Faye thought. She’d heard so much about him, she couldn’t help but be slightly fascinated. Rumor was that he spent most of his time in Florida, keeping a nearly permanent residence in the “It’s a Small World” ride at Disney World. *He looks like a steampunk engineer from a video game*, she thought. She made a mental note to pay close attention, because *those* were the characters who always ended up giving you something valuable that would change the course of the game for better or worse.

Wait. There's a bed in here... and shelves with books, and an archway that leads to a hallway... and there are doors in the hallway? Okay, this is all clearly impossible. The tent was obviously enchanted.

“What is this place?” Zeke asked, giving voice to the questions Faye naturally had piling up in her head. He placed her very gently atop the queen-sized bed, which appeared to have been dressed in the finest bedclothes, from satins to velvets with lace. It also looked as though it had never been slept in.

He pulled off her backpack and rested it on the floor near the bedside table before gathering the pillows behind her and nodding for her to lay back.

“You’ll want this,” said DaVinci, ignoring Zeke’s question. He was holding out a medium cut-crystal vial stoppered with a black cork. The vial’s liquid contents shimmered in lavender and white swirls.

“What is it?” Zeke asked, eyeing it cautiously.

“Healing,” DaVinci said simply. “And hydration.” He nodded at Faye, specifically toward her arm. Zeke took the vial while Faye looked down at her arm, recalling the sensation of being hit with something while under the bounty hunters’ fire. The only outwardly visible sign that anything had happened to her was a slight redness on the side of her bicep - and the small black symbol that had mysteriously drawn itself across her skin.

“What the hell -” she hissed. It resembled a tiny, intricate ouroboros, a serpent circling around to catch its tail in its mouth.

“It’s a tracker,” said Zeke. “We need to get it out of you.”

“How?” Faye asked, her stomach doing a flop.

“I can get it out,” he said. “Just lay back and close your eyes.”

But Faye didn’t move. Her mind’s eye did an uninvited and automatic recall of very large men positively drenched in their own blood. She knew Zeke had been responsible. He was

capable of manipulating water. Blood was mostly water. Hell, *people* were mostly water. So he'd manipulated them. Much to their unfortunate demise.

Zeke caught her gaze with his, holding it fast. His expression was hard. "You looked, didn't you." It wasn't even a question. That was how sure he was that she'd gone against his instructions.

She nodded, unable to stop her body from beginning to tremble.

Zeke took a slow breath, in and out through his nose. "And here I was hoping you were only sick because of the excitement. Some people are like that... especially the sensitive ones."

Faye didn't say anything. She felt terrible.

"Well, you see where it got you," he continued.

She still didn't say anything.

"I have to get the tracker out of you, Faye. I'll do it without hurting you. In fact, I can do it without making you feel anything unpleasant at all. I promise." His voice had taken on an almost pleading quality. It was subtle, but it was there. He was scared too. "If you'll let me."

Zeke reached out for her very slowly, as if half afraid that he would scare her off now and she would pull away from him at a critical time. But it wasn't like that for Faye. That wasn't the reason she was upset or sick. She was sickened by the fact that he'd been *forced* to do what he did. By the fact that he hadn't had a choice. She hated the fact that he'd been made to do something he found so distasteful himself, he had told her not to look.

Because he was ashamed.

Faye didn't think Zeke Stone was a bad person, nor was he wrong for what he'd done. She thought he was *strong*. And she thought he had suffered enough.

So before he had a chance to reach her hand, both of Faye's hands shot out twice as fast and took hold of his. "I

know,” she told him. “And I know you only did what you had to do.” She shook her head, stubbornly willing the faint remnants of her nausea to fade completely away so she could focus. “And I know you won’t hurt me, Zeke. The thing is, you shouldn’t have to do what you did. And *I* don’t want to hurt *you*.”

Zeke blinked. He looked genuinely thrown off course for a moment, his gaze searching her face. She watched as the gold faded from his eyes, revealing the beautiful green beneath. Likewise, the blue haze of his ghostly aura dispersed, leaving him in solid, human-looking form but for the fact that he was just too pretty to be completely human.

He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then closed it again and just stared down at her. At a loss.

So she asked, “Zeke, is there any other way to get this out of me? I mean, we have a healing potion here....” She turned to DaVinci for confirmation. “Right?”

The old man nodded once.

She addressed Zeke again. “So you can basically do anything.” She shrugged. “Within reason, that is. We can cut it out, for instance.” She swallowed hard, her throat a little dryer than a second earlier. “I’m okay with that. Then maybe you don’t have to use any more of your powers.”

But he shook his head. Then he went still and studied her in silence for several long moments. Finally he shook his head again, running his hand over his face and muttering something unintelligible.

Looking down at the bed as he spoke, he said, “There’s no other way that I can think of. The tracker isn’t a single device. It disperses markers once its hits your bloodstream. By now, microscopic beacons are swimming freely through your body from head to toe.”

Faye glanced down at the ouroboros, feeling a lot like the tail in the tattoo.

Zeke sighed heavily. “I can gather them all and put them back in the tracker for easy extraction, but... then they *have* to

be removed from your body. Otherwise, the moment I stop focusing on the tracker, it'll just do the same thing all over again."

Faye watched the emotions chase each other across his face and made a command decision. "Then do it." She laid back on the bed and closed her eyes, resting her arm out to the side for easy access. "Just do it now."

There was a long silence before Zeke spoke up again. "Are you certain?"

"Damn it, Zeke, don't second guess me." Her eyes flew open. "Once I decide on something, that's it, okay? I *hate* it when people ask me if I'm sure. Just *do* it already!" Her tone was rising with each second of mounting anxiety. If he didn't "bleed" the tracker out of her soon, she would lose her nerve - because in the end, all things considered, he really would be pulling her blood out of her body. It was unsettling at best.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, the corners of his mouth pulling up. "Close your eyes again. I can no longer read your thoughts, so I have a feeling I can't influence your emotions either. But think of something pleasant for a while, and I'll at least make sure you feel no discomfort."

Faye nodded, resting back and shutting her eyes once more. She tried to do what he asked, tried to think of pleasant things. But something was distracting her. It was messy in her mind, thoughts whizzing by like fireflies - or blow darts - moving so fast, she couldn't grasp any of them completely. It was like trying to look through dirty or foggy windows, or trying to make out the bottom of a murky and disturbed lake.

No, it's an ocean in a storm, she corrected herself. That's what she felt like. She felt like she was a very small boat caught on an angry sea in a perfect storm.

She'd never been overly fond of dangerous water.

"*No*," she heard suddenly. It was Zeke's voice. He swore vehemently, then yelled, "No, not yet!"

"I'm afraid so, my friend. They want her badly, it would seem. They're arrival is sooner than expected."

Faye opened her eyes. Beside the bed, Zeke was rising to his feet. He and DaVinci had turned toward the tent's entrance flap a good forty feet away, focused on whatever lay beyond it. When she heard the men speaking to one another far too close for comfort, she knew why. There were nearly half a dozen different voices - half a dozen different bounty hunters. Just *right* there. Outside the tent.

She found herself holding her breath as they listened.

"They're supposed to be here. The readings are clear."

"Mine show the same."

"Maybe they transported."

"You can't transport out of the Carnival, Kelse." Then, muttering under his breath, "*Blasted newbie.*"

A deeper voice cut in, its calculated and dangerous calm naturally forcing the others into silence. "The signal is the same for all viewers. And I can feel her. She's here somewhere... *Hiding.*"

Faye's eyes widened as fear narrowed the air passage in her throat. She looked down at her arm. The ouroboros was still there. It had given her location away.

"I'm sorry, Faye," Zeke said softly. "I didn't have enough time to find all of the markers, gather them together under the mark, *and* get them out."

Faye nodded. Her voice trembled when she whispered, "DaVinci, can they find us here?" She assumed the tent was invisible to them or they would have stormed it already. Maybe it was enchanted. Maybe the bounty hunters would never find a way in?

"Not right away," he told her. "But the Tanith hunters have proven resourceful." He shook his head and clucked his tongue disapprovingly. "They've taken so many from across the lands in recent months. You're fortunate the Carnival brought you here - to me."

But Zeke didn't look like he appreciated the fortune all that much. His expression was dour and his jaw set. "We have

to move. Right now.”

He offered Faye his hand and helped her off the bed. Once standing, Faye pulled her hoodie back up over her arm and zipped it all the way up as Zeke put her backpack over his own shoulders. He had to loosen the straps all the way to do so, and under different circumstances, that might have made Faye smile. But right now, all she could think about were *bad* things.

Like the people in pain who were waiting for that medicine. And the tracking device that had to be bled out of her arm. And the entire fae vampire race that may or may not kill her by the end of the night. She wasn't even counting the fact that before she and Zeke had left Chicago, a golem had been created and sent to retrieve her - and she still had no idea why.

Was there anywhere safe for her any longer?

“You'll have to go out the back,” said DaVinci. He knob-kneed his way around the bed to the long hallway Faye had noticed earlier and gestured to the darkness at the other end. “If you leave through the front door, the entrance will become visible.” He shook his head. “We can't have that.”

Zeke glancing nervously over his shoulder toward the sound of gathering voices just “outside.”

“Besides, this will give you a nice advantage,” DaVinci added with a wide grin. “You'll see.”

“Where is the portal, old man?” Zeke demanded, nearly growling out his words. From the looks and sounds of it, Faye could tell the ghost's patience had worn tracing-paper thin.

“You'll see that too, *old man*,” DaVinci shot back. His eyes twinkled, and he winked, still grinning broadly, before he turned to head down the hallway on his own. “Well, come get a move on then. We clearly haven't got all night.”

Zeke, an old man, Faye thought. *Yeah, I guess... he is, isn't he?*

Zeke took hold of her arm and asked, “Faye, can you -”

“Walk on my own? Yeah, I’m good,” she assured him, showing him by breaking into a running walk beside him. They met DaVinci at the other end of the impossibly-dimensioned hall, and he gestured to the door, which was a tall gold-gilded wood door that looked to be comprised of solid oak. Carvings decorated every inch of its surface, the etching depicting carousels and Ferris wheels, and somehow even managing to depict the glowing effect of light over a massive, eternal park.

It was the Carnival in all its glory.

“Once you pass through the door, look for the exit and take it. You’ll know what I mean when you see it. Do not hesitate to take it, understand?”

“Where does it lead?” Zeke asked. But the bright-white flash of powerful magic temporarily blinded them, even where they hid apparently safe at the end of the interdimensional hallway, and DaVinci gasped, shaking his hands in the air erratically.

“There’s no time! You must go *now!*” DaVinci suddenly reached for the doorknob, turned it, and swung the door outward. In the next moment, he was using clearly supernatural strength to shove both parties through the now open door and into whatever lay beyond. “*Take the exit!*”

Faye stumbled forward as the door slammed shut behind them. But Zeke easily caught her, pulling her close as he looked around, taking stock of their location.

“Take the exit,” Faye muttered, joining Zeke in scanning their surroundings. When she did a full circle, it was to find that there was no door behind her. Instead, there was a small lane that wound through several rides she hadn’t yet seen in the Carnival. In fact, everything was unfamiliar, as if they were in an entirely different part of the park. There were no park employees here, and there were no patrons. They were alone, and this part of the Carnival seemed for all intents and purposes to be abandoned.

She slowly moved away from Zeke and took a few paces back, stepping up onto a small platform. Zeke watched her

carefully. “What are you doing?”

“Testing a theory,” she said. She looked around for a few more levels to climb, and once she was up high enough, she peered out over the park. She was right. In the far, far, *far* distance, she could see the carousel she and Zeke had passed earlier. “Zeke, we are hell and gone from DaVinci’s tent and that part of the park. He was right about the back door. It bought us some time.”

Zeke nodded. “Okay, let’s not waste it.”

Faye rubbed her upper arm where the ouroboros mark lay hidden beneath the sleeve of her hoodie. Was it her imagination, or was it beginning to feel strange? It was buzzing or something. Not quite hot, but almost.

She stepped down from the platforms she had climbed, still absently rubbing her arm.

“They’ll make it drive you nuts,” Zeke said suddenly. Faye turned around to find the undead Monsters warden standing over her, his expression grim, his eyes flashing.

“What do you - “”

“The Tanith seal,” he told her, nodding to the hand she held over her upper arm. “That’s what that is.”

“Oh,” she said softly. “I didn’t know.” She had never heard of them. She could tell he knew it, too, but was gentleman enough not to rub it in.

“It can get very hot or very cold. It can buzz or itch or just plain hurt. The longer a mark tries to evade capture, the worse the seal will feel. They can turn it off any time they want, of course. But Tanith hunters aren’t known for leniency. They’re a guild of hardened assassins and hunters from across the realms who’ve all taken the same vows and passed the same excruciating initiations. They exist to acquire their marks. No matter what. So if making you uncomfortable enough to finally surrender gets them closer to their goal, then that’s what they’ll do. Short of causing you permanent damage, that is. Because that would just get them closer to death.”

“Because there’s always a chance I’m the ‘right girl,’” Faye filled in sarcastically. But her tone lacked the strength it normally possessed. She was tired, thirsty, and becoming distracted by the uncomfortable sensations beneath the stupid “Tanith seal” on her arm.

“Find the exit, and I’ll take the blasted thing out in the portal,” Zeke told her.

Faye eyed him from the side, and from behind another protective curtain of hair. Zeke was a tower of pent-up power and potential, and his fury was literally leaking out of him at the moment in visible streams of wispy blue and gold that alternately streamed with outlines of what looked like black, sparkling smoke. Faye recognized warlock magic when she saw it. It seemed Zeke had layers.

She watched him for a moment, fascinated by everything about him. The ghost needed no food or water, no sustenance the way the vampire or the werewolf did. He needed no sleep or rest like practically everyone else. So his magic never needed to be replenished. There was simply an unlimited store of it inside him.

He didn’t seem to have any mortal weaknesses either, which made sense - because he was already dead. Fundamentally, ghosts were *far* more dead than vampires actually were, for instance.

It truly hit Faye then, just how strong an ally - or enemy - a ghost could be. She could literally think of no other supernatural creature who had no mortal weakness and who did not need *some* type of sustenance to sustain it, even if just rarely.

She shook her head, the full gravity of what she was looking at washing over her. Ezekiel Stone was a veritable one-man army, and he was a one-man army that could *never die*.

Off-handedly, she wondered what his other powers were. Her eyes trailed over the outlines of the strong muscles in his long legs... the frankly tight *perfection* of his rear... the broad, massively strong expanse of the back that lay hidden beneath

that deliciously dangerous black leather jacket.... *There's no escaping that particular army*, she found herself thinking. And she wasn't sure she wanted to escape anyway. In fact, she was pretty certain she didn't.

Escape.

Her eyes flicked to something over his shoulder. It was a light, so dim she missed it the first time she'd looked in that direction, and would have missed it again except that this part of the park was less lit-up than the rest of it, so dimmer lights stood a better chance of being noticed once your eyes adjusted.

Escape, she thought as she peered down the lane at the faint red glow. *Exit.*

She focused on the light until she was able to make out letters, and finally to read it. "Exit!" she exclaimed suddenly, jumping up and down. "Zeke, that neon sign at the end of this lane reads 'Exit' in the Incubi language!"

Zeke turned to look at her, then at the sign. He swore again, but this time behind a beautiful smile. "Nice work, Angel," he said, referring to her status as one of Genevieve's Angels and shooting her a look of approval over his shoulder.

She blushed.

"Come on," he held out his hand, and she took it readily. The two ran hand-in-hand to the exit sign without pausing. But when they reached it, Faye was confused.

"It's just a burned-out sign," she said dejectedly. It was hanging at the top of a weathered wooden fence that stood a mere eight feet tall. There was nothing they could see underneath the sign; the wood was plain and smooth, if a little warped with age. And there was nothing anywhere *around* the sign either. "What gives?"

But Zeke's gaze narrowed thoughtfully. "The Carnival of Night is supposed to go on forever. It's endless. So what is this exit doing here?"

"Maybe it's like those exits you find in corn mazes. Just emergency ways out for those who want to leave."

Zeke considered that. “Possibly.” He tilted his head to the side and stepped closer to the sign. “What was it the old man told us, exactly?”

“Take the exit.” A kernel of an idea was beginning to sprout in Faye’s mind.

“In fact, he said, ‘Do not hesitate to take the exit,’” Zeke clarified, smiling again.

They glanced at each other, the same thought clearly occurring to them both at the same time. “You do it,” Zeke said. “The Carnival invited you here. You’re the favored. If this is going to work for either of us, it’s going to work for you.”

Faye nodded, and Zeke got behind her, slipping his arms around her middle. Faye tried not to think about how being held by those arms made her feel. She reached up and grasped either side of the dull red neon sign, pulling it from its place at the top of the wooden fence.

The portal that instantly flashed to swirling life around them both was so bright and encompassing, the pair were immediately lost in its magical pull. Hence, they didn’t have the chance to notice a second portal open up a little further down along the Carnival’s outer rim. Nor did they see the enigmatic leader of the Monsters warden clan stepping out of it.

Chapter Seventeen

Cain watched the portal swirl shut in the distance, knowing full well who had just scrambled into it. The corners of his mouth turned up. “They aren’t going to be happy with where you’ve sent them,” he said softly, seemingly speaking to no one. He was still looking at the empty space where the breach in space and time had been. “At least, Zeke won’t be.”

“Something tells me that ghost is rarely happy about anything,” said a weedy voice from the shadows beside Cain. DaVinci stepped out onto the path next to the Monsters warden leader and waved a cane in the general direction of the place that Fathom Everett and Ezekiel Stone had just left. “Though I have to tell you, he looked happier just now than he has in about a hundred years. Even the McLaren twins at the front gates hadn’t managed to make him as happy as that Fathom girl has.”

Cain’s small smile became a grin. He looked down at the elderly man. “That was the point, right?”

DaVinci harrumphed softly and began to walk away in a crooked man fashion. “I suppose,” he said, almost to himself. A little louder and over his shoulder, he said, “You brought trouble into the Carnival tonight, ancient one. Mind taking care of that before you leave?”

But when he turned to see why Cain didn’t respond right away, it was to find that the warden leader was already gone.

DaVinci made another chuffing sound, turned on his heel once more, and continued on his way.

Zeke sighed after studying the colors and pattern of the portal walls, then ran a hand over his face. It would never cease to amaze him how he could still feel physically irritated enough that such idiosyncrasies helped even though he was dead.

“I can’t tell where the hell this portal is going,” he muttered. “But it isn’t the Realm of the Dead.” That last part, he said more to himself.

“Is... that really a bad thing?”

Zeke turned to face Faye, who was sitting behind him on the “floor” of the portal, her back against the portal’s swirling, iridescent wall. He didn’t know what to tell her, not about the land of the dead, so he shifted the subject of conversation to what was necessary. “If I knew where we were going and that it was somewhere safe, I would wait to remove the tracker.” As much as he hated to.

Faye looked down at her arm, considering his words. “I forgot about the ‘no magic spells inside portals’ thing.”

He was sure she probably hadn’t so much forgotten as she’d become overwhelmed by everything that was happening. The rule against casting spells inside portals was so standard for anyone being taught about magic, it was a little like saying, “don’t spit into the wind” at this point. Bad things could happen to your magic when you cast it inside a portal. Not always, but often enough. “Don’t drink and drive” wasn’t a rule because drunk drivers *always* got into wrecks.

The shifting time and space inside a portal meant that the laws of physics while traveling through one weren’t so much laws as *suggestions*. And if physical laws didn’t hold, then even magic, which was outside physical law anyway, could become unpredictable. Spells didn’t *always* go wrong. But you only had to accidentally turn someone inside out once to learn that sometimes was enough.

“This is an inherent ability, one that comes with being a ghost. It’s not a spell, for what it’s worth. And when I use it, I’m not attempting to conjure anything outside of what is already there.” He sighed and lowered himself to one knee before her, resting his forearm on the other knee. “There shouldn’t be any problems with using it in here.”

“Then why did you want to wait?”

He felt himself smile. “When it comes to you, I would rather not take any chances.” *Ever*.

He watched her face carefully and didn’t fail to notice the slight increase of color to her cheeks just before she pulled her

gaze from his. His smile wanted to get bigger - but he held it in check, opting not to gloat.

Faye rested her head back against the portal wall and closed her eyes. She was sitting with her legs pulled up tight to her chest and her free hand pressed firmly over the now red and probably quite sore Tanith bounty hunters' seal. Her features were drawn, and she was on the pale side, despite her most recent blush.

Zeke knew she was trying to be tough. She was doing her best to hide any signs of distress. But he'd existed a long time. He'd witnessed the human emotional effects of two pandemics, five wars, a depression, and countless natural disasters, riots, protests, and economic recessions. By now, he was an expert in human facial expressions, especially when they were distraught.

Faye was not happy. He needed to get the tracker out of her.

As if *she* could read *his* mind this time, she said, "It's possible this portal will pop us out in some place the bounty hunters have access to." She shook her head, giving a small shrug. "I mean for all we know, it's going in a big circle and will take us right back to the Carnival. Either way, it could be that the second we hit air, they'll be able to track me." She paused and looked up at him. "So get it out of me now. I'll take my chances with the magic."

Zeke deliberated for all of two seconds longer, then nodded.

Wherever the portal was going, it was what some called a "long-runner," and they would be inside it for a while, long enough at least for him to do what he needed to do. He had a feeling DaVinci was trying to look out for them in this respect.

"Here," he said, taking great care as he lifted her arm and nudged her hand away so he could clearly see the tracker's entry point. The ouroboros symbol had grown larger and become more dimensional, indicating that the hunters were now utilizing more than one form of "persuasion" on Faye. The area was probably a confusing combination of hot and

cold, most likely buzzed somehow, and he was betting the pain was sharp.

Zeke made a few promises to himself, dark and not at all redeeming, then asked, “Do you trust me?”

Faye searched his face, and at length, she nodded. “Yeah. For some reason I do.” She smiled teasingly.

Zeke couldn't read her mind, and he didn't have the gift she had, so he had no choice but to take her word that she was being honest behind that smile. Which he decided to do, because it was more pleasant than the alternative. And... the way she was looking at him right now made him feel funny. *Good* funny, not bad. He nodded. “All right, then. Let's do this.”

He pulled the backpack he'd set down closer and unzipped it. “There are bandages in here. I'm pretty sure we stuck just about anything a person could need inside to appease your boss.” *Because it's important to me that Genevieve Rayne trust me - or she won't let me near you again.* “Like you, the pack is special too.” He winked at her. “It can hold a lot more than it would appear capable of holding from the outside.” He had been looking forward to seeing Faye's reaction when she realized as much later on. But she probably wouldn't think much of it now, given the pain she was having to fight.

She surprised him once again when she made a sound of wonder and exclaimed, “It's a *Bag of Holding!*”

“You're kidding me,” he whispered. “You know what a *Bag of Holding* is?”

“Duh,” she scoffed. “Dungeons and Dragons is not just a game for old guys who love math.” Then she made a face and added, “Well, not anymore anyway.”

He laughed. “I guess not.” Shaking his head, he said, “Though if you want to compare it to magical D&D items, it's more like a *Handy Haversack*. Whatever you need will normally find its way to the top so you can grab it first.”

Faye looked at the backpack with the blown pupils of a woman who had just found her ultimate accessory. “Where has this bag been all my life?”

Now his chuckle tickled something inside him, something that made him feel physically lighter. He got the items he would need and re-buckled the pack. “It’ll just be a few seconds more now,” he told her, setting the bandages down within easy reach. He caught her gaze and held it. “The tracker will come out fast. I promise.” What he didn’t tell her was that it would *bleed* like it had come out fast. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she said hastily.

He knew better than to ask her if she was sure this time. “Close your eyes for me again, angel,” he told her, lacing the command with a little magic. “And this time, keep them shut for me. Okay?” The last thing he needed was for her to see her own blood pouring out of her before he could will it away. It might be the last straw in just how much she could take right now.

She nodded, licked her lips nervously, glanced once more at her arm, then shut her eyes a little tighter than necessary.

Zeke gently placed his palm over the Tanith seal, willing his hand to become insubstantial and ghost-like as he did so that the contact would hurt her less. His flesh and bone became transparent, tinged with blue. But as he concentrated, the blue turned darker and began to shimmer as if laced with black glitter.

Zeke was one of the few supernatural beings across the multiverse who was aware that recently, dimensions had collided, changing the course of fate - and of history. Before the collision, werewolves in the mortal realm had gone through something that had caused most of them to die off, and the others to become what they had termed “Dormants.” Those Dormants were highly prized and sought after by their werewolf mates, and once found, the Dormants were marked by their mates as if for safe keeping.

This was no longer the case. Whatever had happened before had not happened in this timeline, and there were no

longer “Dormants.”

However, when there *had* been, Zeke had known of a few werewolves down south who could attest to the fact that removing someone else’s mark from a person’s body required a lot of skill, some degree of regular magic, and hell of a lot more *dark* magic. Luckily, Zeke had all three in spades. Magic, both good and “bad,” was what made him what he was. And his skills, he had honed over several lifetimes.

He reached for the darker part of his magic now, the stuff that shimmered enticingly and made delicious promises. It was the magic that summoned and seduced, the kind that mage councils whispered about, that the unknowing feared, that the experienced cautiously utilized, and that the ignorant forbade. He found the magic ready and waiting within him, coiled like a mighty serpent prepared to strike. He set the shimmering beast free at long last, allowing it to rise up from that unfathomable place inside him where he stored so *many* dark things.

It harkened to the siren song of blood and pain, and Zeke fed it, knowing there was no other way. It was as one of his favorite authors who had once written: *In the end, these kinds of things always went back to blood.*

Carefully - so carefully - he let the dark magic taste what it wanted, and he used the sacrifice of Faye’s blood to add to his power, turn the magic back around on itself, and take away Faye’s pain. A little blood for an end to pain. Many would readily agree it was a fair trade.

He could tell when the hurting stopped; the furrow in her brow uncreased and her eyelids relaxed a little, not pinching shut so tight. Her lips parted, and he heard her inhale a deep, shaky breath. It was probably the first deep breath she’d taken since this had all begun.

That’s it, he thought, just let it take you. We’re almost done.

He kept his focus sharp, homing in on the tracker with all of its miniscule pieces that so badly wanted to spread throughout her body. He’d been keeping them locked in tight

since DaVinci's tent, but now he was able to crush the tracker altogether, compressing it to half its size before willing it to leave Faye's arm the way it had come.

It obeyed. And she did bleed. But Zeke was on top of things, pocketing the relatively tiny tracker and vanishing the blood the moment it left her body. Any substance possessing the element of water, he could move dimensionally from one place to another if the amount was small enough. As long as she didn't have to see it, it was worth the extra magic he was having to use inside the portal.

"There," he finally said as he picked up the bandages and strapped them gently but firmly in place with a few rounds of wrapping. "All done."

Faye hesitated before opening her eyes. But he'd been careful. When she looked down to find nothing but a clean bandage, her face lit up with impossible-to-hide relief.

Zeke found himself staring, struck nearly dumb by her profile. The strong, defiant curve of her jaw, the plump outline of lips she had a habit of biting while nervously pondering, the full sweep of her long, dark lashes, and the way her thick, dark hair so badly wanted to cascade around her like protective curtains waiting to be pulled shut... they were *perfect*.

But what struck him silent wasn't her beauty. It was how her beauty was so different from Madeleine's. It was a kind of beautiful that was all her own.

One that Ezekiel Stone nonetheless once *again* found himself fatally enamored with.

Damn, he thought. This was really something. How did a man manage to find his lost love's identical twin, fall in love with everything about her that was *different* from that lost love, and then realize... he might never have been in love with the other girl in the first place?

Oh, double damn. Suddenly his chest felt like it was caving in. He closed his eyes and pushed to his feet, turning away from where Faye sat. He didn't want her to see what he

was feeling - what he was thinking. He didn't want her to know.

He didn't want her to know that he regretted his actions all those years ago, regretted saving those people. That he suddenly felt like he'd done it for no good reason. That he suddenly felt like he had done it because he was young and stupid and had no idea what love felt like.

Zeke didn't want Faye to think for one moment that he wasn't the man she thought he was. He couldn't bear it.

So, this is love, he thought with a touch of rancor. Love was realizations and pain. *Never could I have fathomed...* he thought winsomely, almost smiling. It was a bitter smile that pulled at his lips, though. Bitter-sweet and wrong. *Fathom...*

“Zeke? You okay? Taking the tracker out didn't drain you or anything, did it?”

The concern in her tone was nearly the last straw. *She* had been the one to actually bleed. He was already dead. And she was worried about *him*?

This time when he swore in his mind, the word was coarse and sharp-edged. He was falling deeper each second. And the harder he fell for Faye, the more he knew it hadn't been love that had driven him a century ago. And if it wasn't love that had kept him solid after death so he could save all those people - then maybe he didn't deserve to be a ghost after all.

Maybe Death had more of a hold on him than he thought.

Especially now. Given all the people he'd killed since that day. Whether they'd been evil or not, he'd taken their final breaths all the same.

No, he thought desperately. *Not again. Nothing can take me away from her again. Not when I've only now found her.*

But Zeke had a terrible feeling he was playing poker with his soul, and the deck was stacked against him. The house always won.

“I’m fine,” he assured Faye, answering her question at last.

“You’re lying.”

Her words slapped him in the back, and he straightened, rolling his shoulders as he turned to face her. “That has to be the most annoying talent anyone has ever possessed, you know that?”

Her laugh was just as bitter as his missing smile. “Believe me, you aren’t the first one to tell me as much.” She shook her head slowly. “It doesn’t change the fact that you’re lying. You’re not okay.”

She tilted her head to one side, studying him closely. He wondered if his inner turmoil were outwardly visible. He’d resumed solid form when he’d finished getting the tracker out of her, so nothing was transparent at the moment. Was anything else amiss?

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “What happened?”

She was still a little pale from her ordeal, and he could imagine she was hungrier and thirstier right now than ever. Which irritated him further - because again, here she was, concerned about him instead.

“Damn it, Faye, leave it alone.” His voice was tight, his words short. He made a concerted effort and softened his tone before adding, “Please?” He could feel the tension in his jaw - and riding through every muscle in his body.

She didn’t say anything, but she did look away.

“Look, I’m more concerned about you right now,” he offered, grabbing her hand and holding it while he rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. Her hand was a little cold, which was saying something given his status as a ghost. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I’m good,” she told him, still not looking - but not pulling her hand away, either. “A little thirst-” Her words were cut off when the portal shook.

It was like a wave moving through a slinky. There was a general rumble that vibrated through Zeke's boots and broke off their conversation, and then he was grabbing Faye around the waist and moving fast with her, pressing her back against the silicone-like portal wall. He braced his hand above her head and held tight, his chest pressed to hers, as the portal floor bucked beneath their feet.

"What's happening?!" Faye asked, her panicked voice muffled by his chest.

"I have no idea!" he admitted, his mind spinning around magic consequences inside portals and the chances of something going awry. *But whatever it is, it can't be good.*

Chapter Eighteen

Cain entered the area that lay at the heart of the stench he'd picked up from across the park. Rust, iron, battlefields after the slaughter – the scent was blood, and it almost never changed. He lifted a hand, two fingers poised and ready to vanish the mess that remained after Zeke's timely attack when something new – something far stronger despite its vastly smaller quantity – cut through the blood to enter his senses.

He froze, fingers raised, and his eyes flashed from very blue to fury-burning red.

He didn't bother with his cell phone this time. Instead, he closed his hell-fire eyes and sent out a call through the powerful channels of his singular mind.

Marcus.

There was a brief moment devoid of a response.

But then, *I'm here. What is it?*

The voice was harrowed with worry. It was rightfully concerned.

The Rubicon had arrived. It was zero hour.

Scramble, Cain commanded with every fiber of his being.

And the connection was broken.

The portal shuddered, the waves passing through it building like an incoming tide. Until at last, with in a crescendo of violence, a final wave ripped through the portal exit, tearing it open to the deafening sound of on-sight lightning and thunder. Through this rip in time and space, Faye and Zeke were unceremoniously ejected, the portal spitting them out as if they'd gone bad in its massive stomach.

Zeke tried to maintain his grip on Fathom, but there was no tousling with the forces of the cosmos. The strength of their exit was too great, too violent. Zeke felt the flesh come away from his fingertips, his hold on Faye at last ripped away.

“Nooo!” He bellowed into the unnatural wind that next ripped his word from his lips and sent it flying into nothing. The air in his lungs was the next to go, vacuumed out of him by some overwhelming force.

He couldn't see where Faye had gone; the world was flashes of black and white cut through with hard-hitting hail. They pelted him relentlessly when gravity acted on his body, pulling it downward.

Zeke was belly-up and mere meters from the water's surface when he finally recognized from the buildings on either side where he was. He was in Chicago - right above the river, perhaps a few blocks from the place he'd died. In the last split second before impact, Zeke managed to flip over and pull into a diving position.

He hit the water without a splash, and sank instantly to the bottom. But when his hands hit the slick muck on the bed of the river, there was no disturbance. No dust swirled upward from the impact, no slime curled around him, no trash was disturbed from its Styrofoam slumber to go floating quietly away.

That, in itself, was upsetting. More upsetting was the fact that a few seconds later, as Zeke began to make his climb back to the surface, he realized that while he was rising, it wasn't because his hands were pushing through the water. He didn't even *feel* the water. He should have been freezing, in fact. But he wasn't even cold. Hell - he wasn't even wet.

What the – Shit, no. I'm not solid anymore.

The river, he thought. I'm back home. And once again, he would be trapped according to the time constraints of his curse. His turn as a solid human was over; it was the ghost's turn now.

“Greetings, Mr. Stone.” As Zeke's head broke the surface, again not causing a single ripple, a deep voice greeted him from the concrete riverbank a few feet away. Zeke followed the sound to find a group of men standing at the water's edge. Except for the one who had spoken to Zeke, they faced him in stony silence. There were around a dozen of

them, tall and lean, handsome enough that they were possibly not quite human. They were dressed in a variety of dark garb and boots. At their forefront, perhaps half a foot taller than the others and *definitely* not human, stood their obvious leader.

He held Faye against his broad chest with a single hand at her throat.

“Good of you to drop in,” the man finished.

The stranger looked familiar, though Zeke was certain this was the first time they’d ever met. He wore tailored clothing in solid black, the darkness exactly matched by the pitch of his thick, black hair. The only color anywhere on the man was in his eyes - which were so blue, their hue almost had no equal.

Almost.

Zeke had only ever seen eyes like that once before, on one man. In the back of his mind, he catalogued the information, making a connection that at that moment he had no time to think about further.

Trapped in the black-garbed man’s dangerous embrace, Faye didn’t move. She didn’t say anything. She didn’t even make a sound. She *couldn’t*; the stranger held her so completely, her feet dangled off the ground by several inches. She could only grasp at his gloved hand where it was wrapped securely around her slim neck. It was a wonder her face wasn’t turning red. There were no popped blood vessels appearing in her eyes, no outward signs that she was choking to death. In fact, she didn’t seem to be in much discomfort at all, despite the man’s grip. But she was utterly silent, and there was also no denying the fact that the newcomer had her completely at his mercy.

Fury erupted inside Zeke, a volcano of protective hatred that spilled over from the place where it had remained simmering for a century, boiling the water of the river around him instantly. Bubbles roiled and popped, steam rising from the surface of the river into the darkness overhead.

Zeke drew on the strength of his killing river and used it to throw a cacophony of magic at the man. He willed the ground to buck up beneath the stranger, willed the air around the newcomer's face to draw away like a vacuum, and willed the blood to leave his body in an unceremonious, crimson rush. He prepared to take Fathom from his grasp just as the worst of his attack kicked in so that she would remain safe.

But the ground beneath the blue-eyed man remained calm, the air undisturbed, and the man's blood stayed right where it was in his veins. Everything magical that Zeke threw at him simply didn't work.

His attack turning instinctive rather than strategized, Zeke's ghostly power released a wail into the night, filling the alleys with the desperate sound of rendered souls. The men behind the stranger clutched at their ears and stumbled back several steps, forming a gap between them and their leader.

Zeke rushed forward with phantom speed, blurring into nothing but a blue-white mist, his aim to rip Faye away from the man by taking the man's arm right out of its socket. He might not be solid at the moment, but he could still manipulate his immediate surroundings to a great extent by focusing his power into a new form of attack. Some would call it poltergeist activity. Zeke supposed they weren't far off, given that because it could be exhausting, he only used the ability when he was enraged.

Like now.

He pulled more power from his surroundings and re-focused it once again, this time choosing to forego wasting it on the stranger, who could clearly cancel the magic out. He instead kept the gathered power to himself and sent it into his extremities. He'd practiced this a lot over the decades. The effect could be terrifying, which was one of the many reasons he was deeply respected – or feared – by the men who worked for him.

To his dismay, the stranger did nothing to avoid Zeke's oncoming attack. He simply stood his ground, slipped his free

arm around Faye's waist as if to taunt Zeke, and then lowered his gaze so that it became shadowed in vivid contrast.

Once Zeke reached him, he understood why the man was not afraid.

The ghost's fingers passed right through his enemy's body, unable to find purchase despite the concentrated magic. As a result, Zeke's form continued past him at full throttle. When he stopped abruptly to turn and try again, the force was so sudden and violent, the men who had already stepped back from their leader were thrown airborne. Several hit the walls of alleys and slid to their feet, righting themselves quickly. Others hit the ground and rolled, but again recovered with unnatural speed.

Zeke tried again to make blurring, violent contact, and again failed. He stopped altogether and spun on the stranger, black magic roiling out of him.

"I sense your confusion," the man said, his tone just shy of real sympathy. "And yet I can't imagine why. After all, you royally screwed the continuity of the universe, Zeke."

Zeke focused his power into making his body temporarily solid enough to touch down, his boots making contact with the ground between the stranger and his men. He kept his back to the men. He didn't care about them. He might not be able to hurt them, but they couldn't hurt him either.

Faye was all he cared about, and she was in front of him.

"Using magic in a portal," the man chided. He made a tsking sound, shaking his very handsome head so that his blue eyes flashed menacingly in the overhead lights. "Surely you know better. I imagine my brother trained you well, after all."

Your brother.... It hit Zeke again, the knowledge he had been saving for later: Whoever or *whatever* he was, this man before him was almost certainly - Cain's brother. As in, *the* Cain.

The leader of the Monsters clan.

"Not to worry though," the man continued. "You didn't break anything but the rules with your little stunt." He smiled

meaningfully. “This is all me.”

Zeke ignored him, trying to think. He hadn’t even been aware Cain *had* a brother. Did... *anyone* know he had a brother? And what did that mean, exactly? Especially for their current situation and Zeke’s hopes of retrieving Faye safely from the stranger’s grasp?

This isn’t good, he thought just as he had in the portal. Cain was not an opponent anyone in their right mind would willingly take on. What did that make his brother?

“Your brother’s never mentioned you,” Zeke offered carefully, if for no other reason than to stall and hopefully get more information. “I don’t even know your name.”

The stranger eyed him carefully, his sharp gaze wholly unnerving in its similarity to Cain’s. “Then you’ve determined who my brethren is,” the man reasoned.

Zeke nodded, just once.

In the man’s arms, Faye managed to move – just a hair. Enough to get Zeke’s attention, not to mention her captor’s. “Impressive, angel,” said her captor, peering down at her. “But you realize you’re only forcing me to strengthen your bonds.”

Faye went still again, this time her arms actually falling to her sides as if all of the will had been sapped out of them. Her neck relaxed, and she rested her head against his chest. The blue-eyed man’s expression as he looked down at her was one of satisfaction.

Zeke’s fingers were still solid from his concentrated efforts. So he let his now-solid fingernails carve red moons in the palms of each hand and kept himself right where he was. It would do no good to attack the man again. Zeke needed another plan.

Then he noticed that Faye had kept eye contact with him all this time – and her eyes were wide and shining bright. There was something in them that made Zeke think she desperately wanted to tell him something. But of course she couldn’t talk. It was clear to Zeke by now that the stranger was using magic to keep her silent; it had nothing to do with any

kind of choke hold he may have had on her, which was why she had never been in any pain. In fact, it seemed the man barely held her at all... except for where his muscled arm encircled her waist.

Zeke felt his eyes light up.

Faye's zippered hoodie had come open somewhere after the portal, and her t-shirt had been shoved up in the ensuing tussle, revealing the fit abdomen underneath. He could see that she'd tightened her stomach in fear – and the stranger in turn gripped the taut flesh with wide, leather-encased fingers as if to reinforce his hold over her.

The effect this had on Zeke was visceral. Somewhere in every alley within a several-mile radius, animals began to cough up blood. But when Zeke realized what he was unconsciously doing, his mind severed the connection.

Damn it, take it easy, Zeke scolded himself, reigning in the rage that threatened the world around him. Stay focused! He's doing it to get under your skin.

And Zeke could feel the other man's magic now. It was clear the stranger was holding it *well* in check, like a black hole he casually kept in his pocket. Every once in a while, Zeke caught a whiff of suffocating darkness like an errant breeze from the ninth circle of Hell – and felt something brush barely past him like the *slightest* kiss of death.

And it was *strong*.

"I'm Abel," the man told him calmly. "And this here..." He looked down at Faye with a combination of curiosity and dawning admiration. "Would be Fathom. I take it she's your long-lost love." He smiled again and looked back up at Zeke. "Or something like that." His tone dropped a touch, his smile turning dark. "I'm familiar with the concept."

Then he took a deep breath and sighed. "But the truth is, though I will absolutely be leaving here with your girl, I'm not actually here for her. Well – I mean, I'm *here* for her," he said, waving with his free hand at the river and Zeke and the buildings around them as if to indicate Chicago and that area

in general. “But I’m not *here*-here for her,” he explained, gesturing this time to himself as if to indicate that “here” meant alive in the universe.

The little hairs on the back of Zeke’s neck stood at attention. He was watching the stranger more warily now for several reasons. One, the man had just admitted he fully planned on leaving with Faye in his clutches. And two, his behavior gave Zeke that growing sense of unease that comes from knowing you’re not only dealing with someone highly powerful, but someone potentially unstable.

“She’s valuable to me for one reason only, ghost warden. She’s been in recent contact with the one I *am* here for.” He looked back down at Faye in profile and closed his eyes, leaning in. When he was close to her hair, he inhaled slowly again. “I can still smell her magic on you, little one.”

His smile became all teeth, white and predatory as he turned his head upward.

As if speaking to the night itself, Abel said, “You’ve let your mask slip, love.” His otherworldly voice lowered. “Just long enough.”

Zeke’s head was spinning. He could barely look away from Faye – but what the stranger was saying right now struck a familiar and devastatingly important chord. He had a feeling he knew exactly who it was the stranger was referring to.

He was talking about the woman who couldn’t use her own magic because if she did, it might give her location away and she would be *found*. He was talking about *Genevieve Rayne*.

Faye began blinking rapidly, her eyes wide with a now shared fear. *She knows. She knows who he’s looking for. She’s trying to tell me not to say anything.* He wanted to assure her that he wouldn’t – which was a lie because he absolutely would sell Genevieve out if Faye’s life were on the line – and that was when Zeke realized he couldn’t read any of her thoughts despite their proximity to the river. It was literally right in front of him and he’d just taken an incorporeal bath in it, yet when he tried to reach out with his mind and touch hers,

there was a dark, foreboding wall in his way. In fact, that same wall blocked all of Zeke's magic.

It was the stranger. *Cain's brother*. It was Abel.

Zeke's gaze narrowed when he caught the sound of laughter. It was coming from Abel. The man was chuckling softly, shaking his head. His blue eyes flashed with eons' worth of arcane intelligence when he again settled them on Zeke. "You're both trying so hard to hide the truth from me. It's adorable. It never occurred to you Zeke, that while you can't read Faye's mind right now, I might be able to read *both* of yours?"

Zeke would have gone cold if he hadn't already been dead.

"I've got what I came for," said Abel then. "Let's go boys."

He lifted Faye into his arms to cradle her against his chest and turned as if to leave, but Zeke said, "You're the one who sent the thogail, aren't you?"

Abel went still, his back to Zeke, his arms still securely holding Faye close. But Zeke saw his head lift a notch before the man glanced back at him over one broad shoulder. "Now what would make you say that?"

Zeke blinked. He studied his enemy closely. *He... did send the golem, didn't he?* But in all honesty, Abel looked as surprised by the news of a golem as anyone not guilty of creating it would.

Abel's gaze narrowed on Zeke, and his blue eyes sparked with the glow of red magic. His command clearly laced with a new kind of influence, Abel demanded, "*Tell me about the golem, ghost.*"

"Hold up, Zeke," came the deep, familiar voice of the tall, blond-haired man who stepped out of the shadows and into the clearing. The Monsters clan leader normally had eyes that looked exactly like Abel's, more blue than paint could create. But right now, they were glowing a terrifying blood-fire hue Zeke had never before seen.

Abel's brother - Cain. Cain spoke, his voice a low roll of magic so thick and yet so constrained, it felt like a finger on a cosmic trigger. "You don't need to tell him a goddamn thing."

Chapter Nineteen

Faye could literally do nothing but watch and listen. She was quiet and still, having no choice but to remain that way in the stranger's arms. Whoever he was, Abel was so powerful, she could sense that he utilized little to no effort in rendering her motionless and mute. Terrible thoughts of being paralyzed and wide-eyed while her abductor ransacked her mind for information or just out-and-out killed her were running rampant through her head, especially when he turned away as if to leave with her.

I should have made Genevieve make me a warden, she thought helplessly. At least if she were a real, full warden - out fighting supernatural evil on a daily basis and not just running drugs for those who needed them - she would have a sentinel.

Sentinels were magical beings assigned to protect wardens the moment a person officially became one. No one knew where the sentinels came from or why they appeared. It was simply accepted that a sentinel would be there to step in when the warden needed them *most*. There were rules, of course. Limitations. But something was better than nothing.

She could really use a sentinel right about now. Pity she wasn't a warden.

"You're the one who sent the thogail, aren't you?"

Faye's heart thudded with hope as Zeke posed a question in the tense silence and Abel's retreat stopped.

Oh God, she thought. *Thank you Zeke, thank you....*

But then Abel turned his attention - and, she could feel, his anger too - on the ghost, and Faye's fear ratcheted right back up to where it had been before. Maybe it was some kind of expansion of her gift, or maybe it was just plain instinct, but Faye knew in her soul that if Abel wanted to, he could snuff Zeke out of existence right here and now. That was the kind of power she sensed in him.

But everything changed in a flash-bang moment with the deep, familiar voice of the man from the alley, the one she'd come to know as Cain.

“On second thought, don’t tell him a goddamn thing.”

Above her, Abel’s face hardened into an emotionless mask that did little to hide the well of emotion surging behind it. He slowly turned, still clutching Faye like the worthless sack of guts she felt she was in that moment.

The stranger’s blue eyes met their match as Cain stepped out of the nearby shadows, and the shadows seemed to want to come with him. He was swathed in the night, dressed in head-to-toe black like his brother. Faye focused on the leather jacket he wore, catching the white embroidery of a familiar patch along its back. And suddenly she knew who he was.

Of course, she thought. He’s Cain - the legendary leader of the Monsters clan.

The same warden clan that Zeke was obviously a part of. He had the jacket.

She’d heard plenty about the Monsters’ prominent and renowned Cain over the last year or so, despite the fact that none of the members of the Sirius clan other than Marcus had ever claimed to meet the man. Warden clans operated on separate territories and rarely overlapped, so there wasn’t anything unusual about that in and of itself.

Still, if she could have moved her body or face in any capacity, Faye would have frowned just then. Because what *was* seriously unusual was that she hadn’t made the connection between Zeke, his jacket, and the alley-stranger Cain and the Monsters in the first place. Why was she only now putting it all together? It was so obvious it wasn’t even something to figure out. It was like a non-issue - a non-puzzle! Zeke had been a member of the Monsters clan and had the jacket to prove it, and Cain was his former leader. *No wonder Cain had wanted to help him!*

Why hadn’t she even given any thought to all of this until now? It was almost as if she’d been actively *made* to not think about Cain and who he was. *Like some kind of spell*, she thought. Could it be? And if it was, who else might be under the spell to not think about Cain more than necessary? And how far did that spell go?

Was it in fact possible that the Sirius clan members *had* actually met Cain and... just didn't remember? Because they'd been forced to forget? And, if so, was it like that for *all* of the clans? Most importantly - *why*?

Faye's head was spinning a million miles a minute. It was as if in taking away her ability to physically move, Abel had forced her mind to move instead, and it was in overdrive.

Her focus returned to Cain, whose attention was thankfully on Abel and not her. He seemed taller than he had when she'd seen him in the alley, if that were possible. He also appeared more... *pale* maybe. She didn't know how else she would have described it. He looked more *stark*, for lack of a better word. It was a strangely good look on him, darkly appealing - and it was also patently frightening. Because those incredible blue eyes of his that were so unnaturally vivid in the planes and angles of his handsome face, were glowing a much different color now.

Abel smirked at the Monsters clan leader, his anti-expression yet an extension of his mask. "It's good to see you, big brother," he said softly.

Faye's eyes widened with sudden extreme surprise when she was able to spout, "He's lying."

In the very next split-second, that flash-bang moment occurred. She realized she had renewed control of her own body, not only because she could once more talk, but because she'd been actively trying to move her body all along and hadn't even realized it. When the control was returned to her - she assumed through Cain's sudden appearance - she became animated in every possible way.

As a result, she jerked violently in Abel's arms, her fingers curling around the lapels of his jacket as her right knee rose immediately to strike him in the side of the head. The impact made a cracking sound, shocking and unsettling, and Abel's grip on her relaxed out of sheer surprise. She turned again, using her hands on his chest to shove away from his hold and drop to the ground. As she fell, she twisted just

enough to land on her hands and knees, absorbing a bit of the impact with bent elbows.

A precious moment passed while she attempted to gain enough stability to shove her feet under her and run. In that second, she felt Abel's shadow loom over her, and she knew she would feel his hands on her again in the next.

But nothing touched her. Instead she heard another violent sound mere inches above her body - the thud of two large and heavy objects striking one another at a break-neck speed. Directly after that, the entire world seemed to erupt into a cacophony of galactic proportions.

Bellows of anger, monstrous growling, the lightning-sizzle of powerful magic, what sounded like wrecking balls slamming into brick walls, and honest to goodness *thunder* surrounded her on all sides. The explosion of furious activity was so sudden, it made Faye dizzy.

On instinct, she dropped fully down, pressing her palms and chest to the cold ground before using the new leverage to push herself into a roll. She went several feet, noticing weapons and debris littered across the ground as she went. Everything from strange looking guns to stranger blades to... *body parts*... were being lost or discarded in the mounting madness.

She stopped rolling and righted herself amidst an air heavily charged with heat and spell power. Once her boots were beneath her at last, she balanced in a crouched position, shoving her long, dark hair out of her face so she could see what the hell had transpired.

“Holy hell...” she whispered in awe. “It’s the Monsters.”

Zeke felt the wave of Cain's negating power roll past him a few slight heartbeats before Faye was using her gift to smart off about Abel lying - and Zeke knew she'd been successfully freed from her captor's influence. Like the next domino in line, Zeke's form became solid at once, his own control reinstated just as Faye's had been.

At once he rushed at Abel and his prisoner, intending to rip her from his offensive arms, but in the moments that followed Cain's silent counter-attack, all hell broke loose.

Zeke needed to be solid to grab Faye, and this was all he could think about as he blurred toward them. But in his haste, Zeke failed to recognize that having a physical form left him vulnerable to physical attack.

He remembered very quickly when he was hit from the side by what felt like several tons of muscle moving at impossible speeds. Zeke's vision clouded with pain and a ringing erupted in his ears as he went sailing through the air, his attacker's jaws firmly clamped around his right arm and ribcage. *Apex*, Zeke thought as he stared down at the thick, dark fur.

Apex were neither werewolf nor vampire. They were both. And they were death on two-tofour legs and a diet of blood.

Zeke felt every joint in his body come apart, several bones snap or shatter, and tasted iron. Fortunately for the century-old ghost, decades of battles with enemies both human and otherwise had trained his body, if perhaps not his love-struck mind. It immediately shifted back into ghost form, instantaneously healing his injuries as it went. At the same time, Zeke spun in his captor's grasp, angled to where he needed to be, and then re-solidified with his arm already embedded deep in the Apex's chest.

The mighty beast gave a terrible high-pitched whine of pain just before Zeke squeezed his fist around the monster's heart and yanked with all his might. His fist broke free of the Apex's chest cavity with a crunching sound and a spray of gore, and the furry beast dropped like a rock to the cement below. Zeke followed after, tossing the still-beating heart to the side as he touched down.

The Apex wasn't dead. Its evil heart would literally regrow. Few things could permanently kill an Apex, and contrary to logic that wasn't one of them. Too much dark magic held the beasts together, and they could regrow

anything. The heart was just another muscle; the slightest traces of it left behind would be enough to rebuild upon.

But the beast was out of commission for the time-being. So Zeke proceeded to scan the area for the only thing he actually cared about.

What he found was nearly every member of the Monsters warden clan in hand-to-hand combat with Abel's men. The only Monsters member missing from the fray was Cain himself.

Abel's gone too, Zeke realized. But again, he barely cared. Where is she....

Then he saw her. She was bent beside a stone set of steps not far from the water's edge. Her dark eyes were wide, her hair wild. Her body was crouched low as if she'd just landed and was preparing to run. He refused to allow himself to feel anything as potentially hindering as pride when he noticed she was scanning the chaos too. But he did *hope* she was looking for him.

When her eyes met his and she straightened as if to make her way in his direction, the pride he'd held at bay for all of two seconds filled his chest - and then turned to lead when the hulking shadow behind her separated from the darkness beneath the stone steps and loomed over her.

"Behind you!" Zeke spared no time for a separate warning, instead calling out to Faye as his body went ghost and a blue trail of vapor was all that was visible of his charging advance. The shadowy figure opened its arms wide, the breadth of its finger-to-finger arm span long enough that Zeke knew right away it was a dire werewolf rather than an Apex. Dires were a good deal larger than the average werewolf, and they were the only weres who could assume half-wolf, half-man forms that looked like the classic werewolves of fifties' Hollywood. It was something they very rarely did because the form was quite painful to maintain. But apparently this one was either under strict orders - or he liked pain.

Either way, it was a good thing. Dires were larger, but easier to kill. *Unless it's a dire Apex*, came his chilling afterthought.

Faye heeded Zeke's warning and reacted to his shout with well-trained speed. Rather than make the rookie mistake of spinning around to face whatever might be waiting behind her, she immediately dropped back down to the ground again and rolled over to look up.

To her credit, she didn't even scream at the sight of the massive black wolf-man towering over her. Instead, Zeke was pretty sure he heard her creatively string together a few choice four-letter words.

Zeke went solid again just as he reached them both, and he didn't slow. He ploughed into the werewolf at full speed, using his momentum to take the beast back into the shadows. They slammed into the cement wall of the stairwell, knocking chunks of rubble loose to send them skittering across the ground and into the still-steaming river.

The werewolf roared in anger and pain, letting loose with a deafening but guttural sound that was nearly as terrible to hear as Zeke's infamous wail. Zeke grasped the monster by the fur on its chest, intending to pull him back away from the wall behind him for another round of body-slammings, but the beast moved first. He grabbed Zeke's offending hand with his own massive, furry claws and squeezed hard and fast - shattering every small bone inside.

Zeke gritted his teeth against the pain and was about to shift into his ghost form again when the werewolf leaned in close. "He needs your girl alive to find Rayne," the werewolf snarled, vocalizing each awful, growling word mere inches from Zeke's face. "But when he's done with her, guess who gets her next?"

Zeke felt his eyes go from blue to gold, the burning-sun hue that took over when the fury did. *He's goading you*, some inner voice warned. But it was hard to hear it over the rush of blood through Zeke's eardrums.

“And we don’t need to leave her alive when we’re finished with her.” The beast laughed, the sound like the grating gates of hell swinging shut.

Zeke snapped. He shifted into ghost form, and before his right hand could even fully heal, he was shoving his left hand through the werewolf’s neck so that he could rip out the bastard’s spine when he went solid again. Dire, apex, vampire, werewolf - it didn’t matter - they all died when their spinal cords were severed from their heads.

But he wasn’t thinking straight; the werewolf had seen to that. And he failed to notice that while he was incorporeal, the werewolf had been making a move as well. The moment Zeke returned to solid form, it wasn’t difficult to figure out what the beast had done.

While Zeke’s hand was inserted around the werewolf’s vertebrae, the monster’s fist was embedded in Zeke’s chest, and his clawed hand was wrapped securely around his heart.

The pain of the intrusion was incredible - but it was a backburner sensation compared to the shock and horror he felt at his enemy’s move. Zeke wasn’t sure what would happen if he had his heart ripped out. In all his decades of fighting bad guys, it had honestly never happened to him. But if the ear-to-ear grin on the dire werewolf’s toothy face was any indication, it was something to be avoided at all costs.

The smart thing to do would have been to shift immediately back into ghost form and move quickly away - but all of this reasoning on Zeke’s part was happening in the most miniscule fragments of time. And he knew he’d run out of that time when he felt the werewolf begin to tighten his grip for the final pull.

There were few seconds left for him to prepare for the pain; he was forced to let go of all thought, want, need, hope, fear, and action in that moment, and the sensation was disturbingly familiar. Flashes of massive crates sliding across boat decks and the echoes of hundreds of screams gone silent beneath the water haunted him in that odd space between the

heartbeats - that time that takes no time when you suddenly realize you were probably going to die.

He had no choice but to accept it. No one ever does.

But accept it though he might, his possible death did not arrive. Instead, the werewolf with his clawed fingers wrapped so securely around Zeke's heart threw back his head and howled in wretched torment, and his grip on Zeke's heart slackened.

Zeke blinked, looked down, and found that the pink-slicked shine of a long, thick blade had been used to rapidly slice off the monster's offending arm. Zeke blinked some more and followed the line of the weapon, which was a cross between a knife and a short sword, to the woman holding it.

She looked like a heavy metal cover heroine where she stood with a single hand wrapped around the hilt of her blade, the other hand wrapped around the grip of a gun. Her hair was warrior-wild around her, a halo of beauty in battle, her clothes were stained with dirt and muck, and her cheek bore splatters of blood from the arm she'd just amputated.

"Do me a favor, Zeke?" she said without taking her eyes off the werewolf - who remained where he was solely because Zeke's hand was still wrapped around the bones of his neck. "Get that thing out of your chest?"

Zeke shook his head in wonder. "*Damn, girl.*"

Then he pulled his left hand back in a ripping motion, rendering the werewolf's spine in two. As the beast stopped howling and fell limp to the ground, Zeke shifted. The moment he was incorporeal, the werewolf's arm joined the rest of his body on the pavement.

Zeke stayed as he was, his ghostly blue, gold-eyed form exactly as it had been the moment he and Faye had met. "Slaughter suits you, angel," he said, one corner of his mouth pulling into a sly smile. "You'd make a hell of a warden." *A Monsters clan warden*, he added mentally. Because he wanted to keep her.

Faye had the ever-more-impressive guts to return his smile with a stunning smile of her own. Her grips adjusted surely around the holds of her weapons. Dark eyes flashing with intelligence and will, teeth white against her flushed pink lips, she said, “You know... I’m beginning to think so too.”

Chapter Twenty

The thing Hollywood never lets on about when it comes to fights is that the thrill of an actual fight goes away. It does so suddenly, painfully, and looks and feels a lot worse than they would have you believe.

When a fight is over, there's a brief interlude of bliss, especially if you won. But then, all at once and without warning, every single punch, kick, scrape, bruise, laceration, bump, roll - you name it - just up and decides to make itself known to your nerve-center brain, and every ounce of energy you thought you had well in stock vanishes.

It's the adrenaline leaving your system and the cortisol flooding everything in its place. The *feel* of the fight comes in all at once - the physical awareness of nails torn away from their nail beds, hair pulled out at its roots, teeth knocked loose, ears ringing from being boxed, nausea from sternum strikes, skin sensitivity from abrasions sustained head to toe, and deeper sensitivity from the bruises just underneath them. To say nothing of sprains, muscle or tendon tears, and broken bones.

Short of the broken bones, at least as far as she could tell, Faye was feeling all of it. She didn't move when sleep faded and awareness began jumping up and down in her brain. She didn't want to shift positions or open her eyes. She barely wanted to breathe. The space around her was quiet, and she could sense that the bed she was on was soft, the blankets heavy and comforting. She was just beginning to *feel* a little too much.

In reality, no matter what fiction might insinuate otherwise, people who *actually* fight, especially those who do so for a living, and people who find themselves in a state of real post-trauma pain on any kind of a regular basis – people like wardens – have a *nonfiction*-based way of dealing with it.

It's called medicine.

Fathom knew this. She'd seen Genevieve Rayne take care of her wardens over the past year. She'd been privy to the

wisdom of a clan leader who couldn't use magic, and so knew better than to look a gift horse like human science in the mouth when it was so effective.

Faye thought of that medicine, slowly rolled over in the bed, and wondered where her backpack was. There was medicine in it aplenty, and she had no qualms about stealing some of it for herself just then.

But when she rolled over, a comforting scent wafted toward her. Faye went ahead and opened her eyes to find herself in a nondescript room with undecorated off-white walls, a single window covered with Venetian blinds, and a side table with a touch-activated reading lamp. Beside the lamp was a cup and saucer. The cup was steaming.

Faye was honestly not all that surprised to find that next to the steaming mug on the saucer was a handful of pills. "Oh gods, thank you," she whispered, sitting up completely. She chalked the supply up to Rayne and her warden care, and had never felt more grateful. Because of her secret work for Genevieve, Faye easily recognized the variety of medications. There was of course pain medication, both narcotic and non-narcotic, nausea medication, migraine medication, and meds to protect the stomach lining.

She could have listed their brand and generic names, possible interactions, proper dosages, and whether or not they were often covered by insurance. *Maybe I should go to school to be a pharmacist*, she thought distractedly as she reached for the coffee and medicine. The coffee was smooth, sweet and creamy, and just the right amount of hot.

"Oh saints have mercy..." she muttered a little louder this time, closing her eyes.

"I'll take that as proof that I got it right."

She opened her eyes to find Zeke was standing beside the bed. She hadn't heard him come in - but then again - *ghost*. This morning he was dressed in perfectly worn blue jeans, a form-fitting green t-shirt that matched his eyes and clung to every ripped inch of his upper body, a few leather pendants and bracelets, and scuffed black engineering boots.

She was vaguely curious about the pendants. Actually, she was also curious about a lot of things, like his currently solid form - and when and where he actually *could* and *could not* be solid, because she could swear it had gone wonky. But she was nearly sweating with the effort it had taken to sit upright in the bed. Overnight, the soreness from the fight had set in, and with each passing second of consciousness, the pain was exponentially multiplying. So she settled with, “Yeah. It’s great. Thank you.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, taking a seat on the bed beside her. “The pain will be gone soon.”

Yeah, I know, she thought, still grumpy. “I know how pain meds work.”

It was a harsher response than she normally would have given, but rather than become offended, Zeke laughed. And for once, the beauty of his laugh didn’t impress Faye. Thus was the nature of pain.

What she *really* wanted was to be alone until the migraine and the throbbing in her face and her - *everywhere* - passed. “Did you need something?” she asked, hoping he would get the hint.

If anything, his grin expanded. “I see torture wouldn’t work on you as an interrogation tactic. You’d just get mean.”

“It doesn’t really work on anyone,” she told him pointedly. “People will just lie to make the pain stop, so even if they talk, it’s worthless.” She paused to drink more coffee, taking a moment to relish the heat moving down her throat. The warmth was so nice, it felt as if it were spreading, filling her chest and extremities. “The only real way to get the truth is by taking the opposite approach,” she said, impressed by how much less it hurt to talk now, mere minutes after she’d taken the medicine.

Zeke just watched her for a minute, his smile easy and his eyes sparkling. After a bit, he said, “I know.”

Oh. Yeah, I guess he would, she thought. *Being a warden and all. Or an ex-warden. Whatever.*

“Cain calls it ‘asking nicely’.” Zeke grinned again. “But really it’s just getting the prisoner drunk or high or both.” He laughed and shook his head. “Not that he’s ever had to resort to either to get the info he needs from someone.”

Faye pondered that for a moment, her brain feeling foggy when she tried to focus on the subject. So she stopped and asked, “How is everyone else?” She thought of the fight the night before and the wardens who had spread out across the riverbank, engaged in bloody battle with the enemy.

Zeke tilted his head to the side and regarded her closely. “They’ll live to fight another day. Feeling better?” The change in subject was abrupt - but it made Faye realize that the change in her physical state had been abrupt too.

“Um - *yeah*, actually.... I mean....” She trailed off. Nothing hurt anymore. She didn’t know when it had actually happened, but she suddenly realized that she felt absolutely fine. No headache. No stomachache. No bruising, no torn muscle and tendon ache, no nothing. “I think those meds were seriously strong or something,” she mumbled, looking down at her body as if it would reveal the answers, but she was still fully dressed, so all she saw was her clothes.

“You could say that.” Zeke stood from the bed and walked over to the pile of her belongings against one wall of the safe room. He took a knee and unzipped her backpack. “Since they were healing potions.”

Faye blinked and lowered her nearly empty mug. “Say what?”

Zeke glanced back at her over his shoulder. “They’re healing potions.” Changing the subject without warning again, he said, “I’ll have a stand-in make your deliveries today for all of this,” indicating the bag of prescriptions in her backpack, “and set something temporary up until Genevieve is back in town.”

There was so much to digest in everything he’d just said, Faye was ironically struck dumb. She watched him turn away again and continue to rifle through her things as a thousand frightened and angry words bounced off the walls of her mind.

But Zeke paused in his rummaging, and she saw his back straighten as he sighed. Without turning to look at her, he said, “You don’t have to say anything, angel. I can hear your questions loud and clear, remember?”

Crap. She had forgotten about that little gift of his. Her cheeks flushed with the usual amount of embarrassment one felt at knowing their thoughts were not their own.

“Relax,” he said. “I’m mostly staying out.” Now he did turn back, his eyes meeting hers over one broad shoulder. “You just happen to be screaming these thoughts at me.”

“Well...” she muttered, “it’s important.”

He nodded. “I agree, and I understand. And to put your mind at ease, the magic wasn’t Rayne’s, so it can’t be traced to her. She’s safe. The spells were property of the Monsters warden clan. And they were disguised as medicine because that’s how most wardens disguise their healing spells when and if they can get their hands on the magic.” He shrugged. “As you know, healing magic is rare.” Then he pulled her phone out from the backpack and walked it over to her. “Contact anyone you need to contact and let them know that you’ll be out of touch for a few days. I’m afraid you can’t go back to your apartment, not until we get all of this settled.”

Faye blinked up at him, looked down at the phone, and then blinked up at him some more. “All of what, exactly?”

Zeke’s brows rose. “Golems? Bounty hunters? Any of that ringing a bell?”

Faye rolled her eyes, plunked the empty mug on the bedside table, and took the phone from his hand. “All right, shut up.” But before she could think of anyone she might need to contact, she asked, “Wait. How long exactly is it going to take to ‘get all of this settled?’” She made air quotes and stared at him.

His expression did nothing to quell her worries. He had the look of someone who wanted to lie but knew he wouldn’t be able to get away with it. So instead, he said, “I really couldn’t say.”

“You can’t say or you won’t say?”

“Well, if you can’t, then you won’t. Right?” He smiled.

Faye gritted her teeth. “So should I just use the phone to make hotel reservations instead?”

He shook his head. “You have a choice,” he said, his smile disappearing. “You can stay here in the interim safe house *wolf’s den* with a dozen oversexed, rowdy motorcycle club members, or you can stay in one of the shamefully posh hotels that happens to be under their protection. Either way, the accommodations are already chosen for you and taken care of.”

Without missing a beat, Faye shrugged with faked nonchalance and said, “The former is fine.” She reached for her empty mug and held it out to him in an attempt to disguise the fact that she was teasing. “I’d love some more coffee, if there is any. And can you point me toward the shower? I mean, if there *is* one for me, that is. If it’s just a communal one, no worries - I’m okay with that. I’ve been to a gym, after all.”

Zeke froze beside the bed, his gaze narrowing. His striking eyes darkened, shifting from jade to emerald, and his towering form felt *heavier* where it hovered over her for some reason. But his brow furrowed, softening his expression a little into confusion.

Faye smiled brightly. “Kidding.” She shoved the mug into his hands and shook her head. “Ghosts have no sense of humor.”

Almost at once, the razor’s edge of Zeke’s gaze blunted and he straightened a little, wrapping his fingers around the mug as he chewed on the inside of his cheek and stared her down. “I hope that isn’t true,” he said pointedly, “since I was planning to invite you to a comedy dinner play tonight. I’d hate to be the only one not laughing.”

Now it was Faye’s turn to blink. “A play?” She scooted to the edge of the bed, her attention completely refocused. “An *actual* play - as in an actual *dinner* play? Like, with individual

tables and a real stage and real actors and a dinner menu and drinks and a reason to get dressed up in the clothes you keep wrapped in plastic in the back of your closet for years?”

Zeke’s lips tightened with the obvious effort of hiding his smile. “Yes, that’s generally what dinner plays entail. Especially the plastic-wrapped clothing.”

Faye’s mouth snapped shut, her skin feeling flushed. “Why would you think a dinner play would be to my liking?” It was. Very much so. But she wanted to know how *he* knew.

“Lucky guess again,” he lied, this time smiling broadly, probably because he knew she could tell he was lying, and was enjoying a bit of revenge. “And also, you were wearing a *Mark Twain’s Diaries of Adam and Eve* t-shirt under your hoodie the night we met.” He shrugged, gesturing the passage of time. “And now you have a pin from *The Play that Goes Wrong* on the pocket of this hoodie.” He shrugged again. “I put two and two together. You like plays. And hoodies.”

Faye pursed her lips, looking down at the pin on the zip-up that she’d laid next to the bed. She looked back up at him and waited. And waited. “Well?”

Zeke raised a brow.

She sighed impatiently. “So invite me, already. I promise I won’t give you a hard time if you have no sense of humor and don’t laugh.”

“How kind of you,” Zeke said. It was strange how sometimes, he seemed like someone who had stepped out of a history book, no matter how he was dressed or how solid he presently was. He shook his head and then straightened again, holding out his free hand. “Fathom Everett, would you be so good as to accompany me to the Vander-Bruin playhouse tonight at eight-o’-clock for a night of dining and entertainment?”

Faye tried not to roll her eyes again and instead just said, “Of course. Doofus.”

He tilted his head and nodded. “Then it’s a date.”

Faye grinned broadly, thoroughly excited. She did love plays. She also loved actual movie theaters. In short, she just enjoyed being entertained and stuffing her face with cheat food at the same time.

“In the meantime, I’ll help you get settled into your hotel room.”

“But I never said I would go to a hotel, I said - ” She cut off mid-speech when his eyes caught the light and she could feel that razor’s edge of his again. “Right. Thank you. That would be fine.”

Zeke turned away to walk across the room toward the door and mumbled something under his breath about smartass women being the death of him if he weren’t already dead. Which reminded Faye of something.

“Hey, wait,” she called softly. Zeke paused at the door and waited.

“I’m confused about something,” she said, getting off the bed to begin gathering her things. “You’re solid right now. You don’t look any different from any other living person in that respect. But sometimes you’re all - well, you know - ghostly. And I actually thought you were doomed to be that way a lot more than you seem to be.” She hoped she wasn’t offending him by saying so. But she also figured that as a century old ghost, it was probably a little more difficult to offend him than with a simple, logical question.

“This is Monsters territory,” he told her, his eyes scouring the room around them to indicate the building beyond. “Cain’s clan has allotted space in every main warden territory, and when they enter that other clan’s area, the space is theirs.” He looked down at the floor, his gaze growing distant. “When I became a member of the Monsters clan, I was granted certain abilities. They don’t extend beyond the borders of what is theirs, but while they’re here, I can pretty much be as solid as I want.”

Faye considered that, her eyes shamelessly skirting over his very solid form. “Got it,” she said softly, turning away to put on her shoes.

“I’ll wait for you outside.”

But Faye barely heard him. She was thinking about the Vander-Bruin playhouse and whether or not it was in that “temporary territory” that was allotted to the Monsters clan. She couldn’t help but remember the bounty hunters at the carnival. Something inside her told her they weren’t the kind of hunters to give up so easily.

Suddenly, Zeke’s hands were wrapping around her upper arms, and his head was above hers. She jumped a little, but settled immediately against his chest when he gently squeezed and said, “It is. There’s no need to be afraid, Fathom. Not only is the playhouse in Monsters territory, it’s in mine. And I’ll be there with you. I promised I wouldn’t let them take you, remember?”

She did.

“I meant it.”

He had. And more assuring to Faye, he also meant it now.

She had never been more grateful for her gift than she was in that moment.

Chapter Twenty-One

Noises Off was written in 1982 by an English playwright, Michael Frayne. And for Faye, it was arguably the most hilarious play ever written. By all rights, she should have been vibrating with excitement, especially since she had to admit she looked ravishing in the back-of-the-closet dress she'd pulled out for the occasion. But instead of grinning ear-to-ear and looking forward to purchasing three boxes of peanut M&M's to down during the showing, and rather than hoping that her seats would be right in the front and that it would be warm enough for Zeke to take off his jacket and show off what he had underneath, Faye was chewing on her lip and mentally loop-practicing kicking off her heels so she could run. It wouldn't be easy. They were a pair that literally laced up her leg and tied above her knees.

What was I thinking?

She pondered her clothing choices distractedly as they left the sidewalk across from the playhouse and crossed the street, Zeke's hand gently but firmly guiding her by the elbow. She let him, and for what had to be the tenth to twentieth time, she looked over her bare shoulder at the crowd of patrons exiting expensive cars in the valet parking lot. They were dressed to the nines and headed in the same direction as she and Zeke. The loose-knit throng of play-goers moved briskly and with a quiet but giddy anticipation fifteen minutes before the house opened.

But Faye couldn't help but wonder.... How many of them were regular patrons? How many were there that night because they *actually* wanted to see the play? And how many were there for other reasons entirely?

Such as personally dangerous reasons?

She nearly tripped when her shoe bumped a loose stone in the path before them, but Zeke's steady grip proved very useful when he righted her almost before she noticed the slip-up.

"Thanks," she said distractedly.

He didn't answer. And she barely noticed. Her gaze slid from the people in their finery around them to the sparkling lights of her favorite city skyline beyond. It was gorgeous. It was always gorgeous. But then it slid to all the shadows *between* those lights in which people could hide. Maybe even from which people could snipe. At her, specifically.

I shouldn't have worn red, she thought. It was so *very* visible in a crowd.

"The only people taking up sniping positions in those shadows are there to protect you, Fathom."

Faye startled a little from her thoughts and looked up at the striking figure walking beside her. *Like a model in a cologne ad*, she thought, her attention shattered and splaying in a million directions.

"And you were born to wear red."

Faye blinked up at her beautiful companion, and though she felt a telling heat infuse her cheeks, she also experienced a hiccup of uncertainty. It was something about the way he was watching her, the way he held her, and the way his normally jade-colored eyes were hardened into emeralds. A part of her wanted to graciously acknowledge his compliment, and even pay him one of her own. It was the same part of her that desperately wanted to believe that this was just a regular date with a gorgeous man and she was going to have a wonderful night. She deserved to have a wonderful night. Didn't she?

But the rest of her was perhaps a larger portion of her than the oblivious, fun-date part, because before she could say anything at all, the various odd pieces of the night came together to form a kind of realization. And it was dark.

"Oh my god," she whispered hoarsely, her throat having gone spontaneously dry. She tore her eyes from his to look up ahead at the entrance to the playhouse, and then once more over her bare shoulder. And stopped in her tracks.

Zeke stopped as well and came around to stand in front of her.

“Zeke... please tell me I’m not bait.” Faye’s eyes skirted through the people, shadows, lots, buildings, alleys, and then turned on him again. “Tell me you didn’t bring me here for the sole purpose of luring out bounty hunters.”

But Zeke... didn’t tell her that. He didn’t reply at all. Not only did he *not* assure her that her conjecture was wrong, his expression hardened further into a mixture of regret and stark determination. And Faye felt like running – fast and far – right then and there.

Which was probably why she could see every muscle in Zeke’s body preparing for quick action. His form towered over her, making her feel like Leia Organa standing before a *more-machine-than-man* Anakin Skywalker.

“Jesus,” she whispered, feeling dizzy.

“Fathom... I’m sorry,” he said softly, stepping close enough that she had to crane her neck to look into his gemstone-sharp eyes. “Chances are nothing will happen tonight. The truth is, I’ve thought of bringing you here since the night we met.” He fell silent briefly, then added more quietly, “And... I want to send Malek Taal a message.”

There was that hardness again, that razor’s edge that Ezekiel Stone had about him that awakened the fear centers of Faye’s mind. Despite the truth she heard resonating in his words, she was afraid. On instinct perhaps, she looked down at the hand he still had wrapped around her arm at her elbow. She gently tried to pull out of his grip.

But he wouldn’t let go. Instead, he cupped her cheek with his other hand, and Faye was torn between jerking away from him entirely out of a building fury - and leaning into him because his touch felt so good.

She was stubborn however, and the former won out. Before Zeke could continue with his explanation, Faye was yanking free of his grip and taking an angry step back. Her arm smarted slightly where she’d wrenched it from his fingers, but she chose to ignore the sensation and the danger that it signaled. She was already mad enough.

“You should have just told me,” she accused softly. She kept her voice low but was unable to blunt the shards in her tone. They were as sharp as the faceted cuts of her date’s eyes. “I could have *prepared* for an attack,” she stammered. “Worn armor or something! Or at least had the option of saying ‘no’ altogether!”

Her voice had risen, but when she looked around to see if anyone was noticing, she found something far more disconcerting. The people around her who had been heading to the box office of the playhouse only seconds before had either slowed dramatically or stopped walking completely. Some seemed to be suddenly and inexplicably engaged in conversation with one another. Others were outright watching the two of them, no excuse offered.

Not a single couple had continued in their march toward the building once she and Zeke had stopped themselves. The others were shadowing the two of them. They were....

They’re wardens, Faye realized with a sinking in her gut. They’re all wardens. Every one of them.

“Oh Zeke... what did you get me into....”

”*Fathom.*” Zeke’s voice was deep and powerful, and it echoed like a shout through her, at once drawing her attention back to him. His eyes no longer boasted pure emerald. Now their irises were edged with the glowing golden light of the ghost who watched from behind them.

He’s using magic on me.

“I need you to hear me, Fathom. And I need you to understand,” he told her, and more of that deep, perfect sound wrapped around her and moved through her, entrancing her with every breath. “I made you a promise.” He shook his head, just once. “I can’t keep that promise if there is even a shred of a threat remaining to your existence.”

He slowly reached for her, once more attempting to cup her face, this time with both hands. He moved cautiously, as if he was well aware that his hold on her was not only tentative, but forbidden, and he didn’t like the idea of either. When his

fingers brushed her hairline and his palms were warm against her cheeks, Faye forced herself *not* to close her eyes.

He stepped into her, the hard angles of his body in full contact with her own. Warmth flooded her as he leaned in to speak softly in her ear, his breath cool, but the brush of his lips against her earlobe hot as fire. “Now...” he said, his thumbs brushing her cheekbones with the tender possessiveness that every woman craves. “Please accompany me inside, Faye. Sit with me and eat and drink. Enjoy the show - and know that absolutely no harm will come to you while you are in my theater.”

Faye could not possibly know whether it was the powerful magic lacing his intimately commanding words or her own special gift that reassured her he was speaking the truth. And it surely mattered. But just at that moment, Fathom Everett forgot just how much.

When Mr. Stone slowly straightened above her and took a single step back to offer her his hand, she hesitated only a moment before placing hers inside it. He smiled, clearly relieved, and the smile reached his eyes enough to take the gold out of them.

Ezekiel turned with her, once more returning them toward their waiting destination. Faye walked beside him in silence, her mind dancing and tumbling, tripping over the words he’d spoken and what they might mean. Without his lips beside her ear, without his presence towering over her, holding her near, and dwarfing her will with its own, she was able to replay what he had told her and hear it with sharper clarity.

... *Know that absolutely no harm will come to you....* She allowed the phrases to flip over and float, spin around and fall, and dissected them as she did. ... *while you are in my theater.*

His theater. He owns this place, she thought, something uneasy opening up inside her. *This is all his.* What did that mean?

She kept walking, one foot in front of the other as if her feet were moving of their own accord. But as she unconsciously kept pace with the man at her side, she chanced

a glance at the couple coming in close behind them and to their right. The woman was tall and lean, and when Faye looked closely, she noticed a tattoo on the inside of her wrist in the shape of a “Z.” The letter was drawn with the horizontal line running through it that some people used to differentiate it from the number 2.

Upon even closer inspection, Faye realized the line was actually a slim dagger.

And she’d seen that symbol before. *Where?*

As they approached the tall arching double doors to the theater, the tuxedo-clad men standing to either side of the entrance each gave Zeke a single nod. Zeke stepped through, taking Faye with him into an opulent foyer beyond. Red carpet muffled their footsteps, and wide, curving stairwells rose from either far end of the room into what must have been box seats above. Red velvet curtains hung tied against the gold papered wall of the foyer, their richly hued material highlighting the framed era posters of a host of world-famous movies, musicals, operas, and plays.

The scent of popcorn, coffee and chocolate accosted Faye, making her mouth water. The *chinking* of glass on glass drew her attention to the concession area, where treats both alcoholic and non- were being served to the attending masses, and a tall chocolate fountain beckoned the prepped fruits laid out beside it. At a separate concession counter, bonbons, finger sandwiches, tiny cakes and pies, pastries of every different variety, and mousse-filled chutes of fine crystal had been placed in rows beside waiting beverages.

Faye watched as smiling, laughing people wandered by to take what they wished, apparently free of charge. They did it as if it were nothing, as if they were accustomed to it.

It was bewildering to Faye in the extreme. This theater and everything inside it were literally a dream-come-true experience to the young woman. To attend her favorite play in such exquisite surroundings while enjoying such fine indulgences - and with such a prevailing figure of a man as her date - was an *impossibility* that she’d long ago accepted.

An impossibility... that was now proving very possible indeed.

Faye felt dizzy from it all. In fact, a slight crackling in her ears made her turn away from the concession counter and close her eyes. She shook her head, slowly and just a little, as if to clear it. Her balance faltered, forcing her to lean into Zeke's hand where it still held hers.

His fingers closed more tightly over her own, and Faye felt him slide his free arm around the back of her waist. The move cleared away her dizziness but replaced it with more confusing heat. "Come," he said, pulling her close and again speaking directly into her ear. "Our table is waiting."

She nodded, her unease forgotten as they approached and climbed one of the flights of red-carpeted stairs. A part of her was eager to see where the table was with respect to the stage. *But wait... what about the candy?* another part of her wondered. Cheat food was important.

"Don't worry," Zeke told her with a brilliant smile. "Everything you desire is waiting for the lady of the house upstairs."

At that, an indescribable thrill moved through Faye for *so* many reasons. While her wild imagination couldn't help but conjure up a host of refined and delicate desserts that may or may not be waiting, her body flushed warm from head to toe at Zeke's choice of words and the telling title he had given her.

Lady of the house.

Never in her wildest dreams could a woman imagine being treated with such attentive care as Faye was in that moment. It was almost enough to... almost enough to make her forget.... *Something.*

Something.

A touch of her giddy smile slipped away when they reached the upper floor landing and two more gentlemen in tuxedos pulled back yet more curtains to reveal a single large box with an intimate table and two red-velvet cushioned chairs.

Faye's breath caught at the sight.

Along either end of the box were display tables illuminated by small, beautifully carved crystal gas lights that shone their soft light over a surplus of serving trays of different shapes, colors, and sizes.

Atop those trays were all of the things Faye had imagined, and then some. The sweet treat images she'd conjured in her head were recreated here in very literal fashion, down to the last intricate detail. And it all smelled as divine as she had dreamed it would.

How... is this possible? a tiny voice in her head wondered.

She blinked a few times when the buzzing-crackling returned faintly to her ears and Zeke led her to her chair. She sat down almost mechanically, allowing Zeke to slide the chair in afterward. But her eyes strayed to the many fineries surrounding her, from the dimly lit crystal chandelier overhead to the richly appointed tablecloth to the crystal decanter and set of goblets on the table in front of her.

Her gaze narrowed on the goblets. There was something expertly etched into their bases from beneath. On sudden, strong impulse, Faye reached up and lifted the glass nearest to her before anyone could fill the goblet's bowl with any kind of liquid. She turned it over.

The symbol was a "Z" with a sword running horizontally through it.

And Faye's thoughts coalesced at last. *It's his symbol*, she realized. It was Zeke's mark. She'd seen it on the plastic bags filled with prescription medications in her backpack. Zeke owned the theater and everything in it. *And it's the same mark the woman outside was wearing*. She worked for him.

Faye glanced over at Zeke, who had been standing beside one of the display tables, placing desserts onto a plate, presumably for Faye. But when her eyes fell upon the broad expanse of his back, Zeke stopped moving. He stopped piling up goodies - and straightened.

They all do, she realized further, her eyes watching him, her heart beating out an increasingly rapid rhythm. *Everyone here works for Zeke. They're not wardens.* She thought of the men who had met them at Zeke's warehouse - and the words of warning Genevieve had given her about the ghost Ezekiel Stone.

They're criminals.

This was all an elaborate setup. She was not only bait, she was bait in an operation so dangerous, Zeke probably hadn't even bothered to run it by any of the clans in order to get their help. He knew very well they wouldn't. In fact, they might have even tried to stop him.

Slowly - *oh so slowly* - Zeke lowered the plate he was holding to the display table and turned around. When his eyes met hers, all of her fears were confirmed.

And when he looked over her head next to the men who were still standing behind her and nodded, Faye heard familiar sounds and knew they were drawing weapons.

The house lights flickered, zapped, and went out, leaving only the small gas lamps to illuminate the darkness. Faye shoved out her chair and jumped to her feet, finally feeling clear-headed enough to mobilize.

Thatta girl, said an unfamiliar voice in her head. *You really are as strong as they say.*

Faye's eyes widened in the new darkness, every hair on her arms and the back of her neck standing on end.

Now then little brave one, just do exactly as I say and no one has to die tonight.

"They're here," Zeke said, all hint of former gentleness gone from his tone. His once more ghost-gold eyes shone stark and bright where they locked on her in the dim light. His tall, broad form was outlined in an eerie blue glow. Though he held her with his inhuman gaze, his command was to his men. "Tanith took the bait; he's in her head. You know what to do."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The men at the entrance to the private box turned at once and left Zeke and Faye alone in the gas-lit darkness. But before she could react to the turn of events in any intelligent, strategized capacity, Zeke closed the distance between them, forcing her to crane her neck as she stared wide-eyed up at him. He could hear her breath catch, freezing in her lungs. He knew he was frightening. He only prayed that she would make an effort to see past the monster to the man on the other side who would do anything to protect her.

“Listen very carefully,” he told her quickly. “The leader of the Bounty Hunters of Tanith was in your thoughts - *because I willed it*,” he said, placing great emphasis on his words. “His presence was necessary to sound an alarm of sorts,” he explained. “But he is even now being forced *out* of your thoughts - *also* because I will it.” He glanced down and nodded at the dress she wore like a goddess and a sacrifice, indicating the spell it contained. “There’s a warding there,” he said, stopping short of naming the dress as the delivery device outright just in case someone was actively listening to them. After all, Tanith was out there somewhere, and probably a lot closer than Zeke thought. Thus was the nature of those particular hunters and their leader.

When Faye looked down at her own body and comprehension dawned in her lovely features, he held a finger to his lips to indicate “keeping quiet.”

The ward that had wrapped itself around her, the one Zeke had painstakingly forged into the fabric of the red dress one of his men had retrieved from her apartment closet, had been activated by the bounty hunter’s presence. Now it was strengthening exponentially with every given second, protecting her from a multitude of magical attacks. The one downside was that just as it shielded her mind from unwanted interlopers who would mean her harm, it shielded her from Zeke as well. He couldn’t read her thoughts. And in that moment, he truly wanted to.

He just wanted to know that she understood why he was doing what he was doing. She was far more likely to cooperate and keep herself safe if she trusted him. Right now, that was *all* he cared about. One way or another, he was going to end the danger to her tonight.

“Can you sense that he’s gone now?” he asked, feeling the ticking of every second peel ominously by. Time was not on their side.

Faye gazed steadily up at him, her eyes searching his for something - he knew not what. And then she nodded. Slowly. “He’s gone,” she whispered. She touched her fingertips to her temple and frowned. “I can’t feel him here anymore.” She shook her head and shrugged, likely having difficulty describing the sensation.

Zeke was relieved. If she couldn’t sense him, then the plan was on track so far.

But Faye looked warily around at the shadows, and he knew they were both wondering the same thing: Where *was* the man who’d just been in her head? Exactly how close was he to them now?

He also knew she was bewildered, overwhelmed by the series of events unfolding, to say nothing of the feeling of the magic that was encompassing her. He was aware that it could feel heady. But there in the depths of her dark pupils, he also saw what felt to him like salvation. It was the stirrings of real trust.

When he least deserved it.

“Fathom.”

He pulled her attention back to him from the shadows, and this time he held her gaze with yet more magic. The act at once felt necessary and traitorous. “An old friend of mine is waiting for you on the other end of a portal that my men have opened in the basement of this building,” he told her quickly, choosing his words carefully, given the shadows were most likely listening. “Once you step through, you’ll be in her kingdom. She and her husband will protect you,” he said,

giving Faye's hands a gentle squeeze. "I promise, you'll be safe with them. But you must do two things for me."

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted at once with impending questions. The words "old friend," "kingdom," and "portal" were no doubt whirling around in her head, conjuring up all sorts of images. But they were more questions than he had no time to answer. So he placed a finger to her lips to silence her and hoped that the earnestness he was feeling was properly conveyed in his eyes.

"There's no time. My friend will explain when you get through the portal." He leaned into whisper. "Now, promise me, Faye. One, promise that no matter what Tanith and his hunters threaten to do to the men you are with or to anyone on this side of the portal for that matter, you will *not* go with them willingly. Just don't do it."

He wouldn't have thought her eyes could get any wider than they already were. But they did. So he pressed on while he still had any kind of advantage.

"And two, once you're through the portal, close it behind you and don't come back through. I'll come and get you once it's safe."

Faye continued to stare at him for several painful beats. And then those beautiful dark, enormous eyes of hers *narrowed*.

Zeke hesitated, taking his finger from her lips to lean back again warily.

Faye cocked her head to one side, bared a little bit of teeth, and said, "If you honestly believe that I would ever promise you either of those things, Ezekiel Stone, especially when I so obviously have the advantage at the moment because you don't have time to argue with me, then you're out of your ever-loving ghostly mind. Entirely off the reservation." She shook her head slowly, then leaned in quickly, filling the space he had vacated. "And you clearly don't know me very well."

Zeke blinked in somewhat stunned silence. He had expected some hesitancy, sure, and probably a lot of resentment on her part - but her out-and-out refusal to do what he asked of her hadn't been something he'd seriously considered. Or considered at all.

And she was right. He was pressed for time. And perhaps he *didn't* know her very well. Or maybe in his rush to protect her, he was just *forgetting* what he knew. After all... she hated letting people suffer. She hated it so much that she risked her own safety and future to make it stop happening on a daily basis.

It was beyond frustrating, but she was holding all the cards on that one.

"*Fine*," he said, feeling the heat light up his eyes. "You're right. I don't have time to argue with you, you *stubborn* -"

She placed her own finger to his lips now, further shocking him. He was barely solid enough at that point for her to make full contact with him, but the second she did, he solidified further as if his body had a mind of its own and desperately wanted her touch.

She hissed her next words, each one a harshly whispered epithet of now dead patience. "Now *you* listen to *me*. I'll go through that portal. And I'll try not to get captured. And that's all I'm going to promise you. Because this is fucking crazy and I'm *pissed* at you, Zeke."

Zeke stared, dumbfounded. *Well...*

"Don't even look at me that way. You ruined a date night seeing the funniest play in the world," she continued, whipping her finger away from his lips to make two fists at her sides. "*Now you owe me.*"

Zeke gazed down at the tiny dark-haired angel of vengeance before him and was pretty sure he'd never been more in love with a person. Or more frustrated. But the sound of bullets firing somewhere else in the building ripped through him almost as surely as the actual bullets themselves would have, jerking him out of his shocked state.

“Fair enough,” he practically growled, grabbing her by the upper arm to escort her very rapidly to the exit to the private box. On the other side waited six of his men, the contingent he’d assigned to get Faye safely to the portal. Zeke could see they had just drawn their weapons, alerted to danger by the gunshots.

The two men closest to the box exit glanced back at Zeke.

“Go,” Zeke commanded. The men hurriedly turned to face Faye, each gesturing for her to come with them and walk between them, very obviously prepared to grab her and begin walk-running if she failed to move on her own. Zeke could feel her resentment broiling, and it was plain as day on her face, but she remained stoically, seethingly silent and moved forward to join them.

And for some *insane* reason... Zeke couldn’t stand it.

There was so much wrong with her leaving like this, angry and hurt, that the very same part of him that so desperately wanted to protect her was the part of him that wanted to undo every single thing he’d done so far that night.

He felt like he was stewing in a spiritual acid bath of regret and need.

He couldn’t let her go. Not just yet. Not like this.

She wasn’t aware of what he had planned. He’d had no time to explain anything to her, and informing her of it would have increased the chances of Zeke’s enemies learning of his plans anyway. But he wasn’t the man she thought he was; he wasn’t placing her in the danger she was sure she was in.

The dress he had warded not only protected her mind, it acted as veritable armor on her body as well, shielding it from most physical and magical attacks. And the people waiting for her on the other side of the portal were none other than Poppy and Kristopher Scaul, the Winter Queen and King, two of the sovereigns who sat at the venerated *Table* and ruled over the Thirteen Kingdoms.

Nothing was going to get to her while she was with them.

Faye also had no idea what Zeke was actually planning on doing once he and Tanith were face-to-face. Zeke knew what motivated the infamous bounty hunter. The ghost had an edge here that might very well allow them to get through the night with a minimal amount of bloodshed. On either end.

He'd thought this through. And despite Faye's obvious assumptions to the contrary, he'd even involved a neighboring warden clan, pulling in experienced fighters from the next territory over. He just didn't trust the clan members as much as he trusted his own men when it came to personally escorting the woman he loved to safety.

The woman I love.

Zeke swore internally as his body began to solidify of its own accord. He was already in motion before he fully realized what it was that he was about to do.

It was while Faye was *here*, on *this* side of the portal - and with him - that she was in the most danger, despite the dress and the wardens and the intricacies of his thought-out plan. Things could always go wrong - and dresses could always come off. Few things ever worked perfectly. She was far better off long gone by now.

So it was with a resounding lack of rationality that Zeke strode forward, closing the distance between himself and Faye one final time. He kicked himself inside non-stop, but also relished every single split second when he slid his arm around her waist from behind, spun her around, and pulled her hard against his now solid chest.

"I care for you, Fathom. Desperately. Please know that, and *please forgive me.*"

His words burst out of him, dire and fraught, a distressed whisper across her lips that contained all the fervent anxiety a man could dreadfully feel. Then his mind then went into white-out mode and he behaved as a man driven solely by the woman in his arms as he shoved his fingers through her hair, tilted her head back, and claimed her lips with his own.

If his men reacted their boss's actions in any way whatsoever, Zeke completely failed to notice. He failed to notice the entire world outside the small, perfect realm that consisted only of him, Fathom Everett, and that kiss.

A thousand times, he'd imagined kissing her and tried to conceive what exactly it would be like. He'd imagined soft lips and a sweet taste, and he'd hoped the kiss would come as much from her as it was from him.

In the end, kissing her was exactly as he'd expected. And it was everything that he didn't.

And it was everything better.

He'd fancied her lips would be soft, but he never could have guessed that her lips would be *this* soft, like a fine silt dusting of talc across smooth skin. He'd never imagined that she would also be wearing mint lip balm that tingled slightly against his flesh, fresh and cool. Or that when he pressed further in desperation, she would open to him at once - and taste like some kind of rare, expensive candy. *Sugared violets*. A delicacy.

And never in a million years could he have guessed that when he clutched her closer, his arms nearly doubled around her tiny form, an almost inaudible moan would escape her lips to hum against him - a surprised protest that died easily, allowing the softest sound of surrender to take its place.

Sweet, *delicate* surrender.

Faye gave into him, her body molding to his, her hands forming tight fists around his suit lapels. She clung to him while he tasted her and time ticked by dangerously somewhere far, far away, in that world that wasn't their own.

And then, quite unexpectedly, Zeke heard a throat clearing. The sound interrupted Zeke, not from the darkness around them, but from the darkness *inside*.

Get her out of here, Zeke. Do it now.

Zeke was shocked to find that it was his own voice commanding him from that darkness and cutting harshly through his senses. It was the voice of the man that

surprisingly yet remained alive and well, just trapped inside the stupid, *stupid* monster.

That part of him that wanted Faye's safety more than it wanted Faye's kiss. In fact, more than it wanted anything.

That man was *damn* strong.

Zeke broke the kiss and pulled away just enough to hold Faye's face in his hands and whisper across her now-swollen lips. "Go. Get out of here. Get through the portal and don't look back." His words were broken and hoarse. He feared they might be the last words he ever spoke to the woman he had only just found, and that fear stole his breath, making it raspy with desperation. All he could feel were the years, the decades of lonely cold and darkness that Faye's new light had shoved aside over the last few days.

And how it could all come crashing back in on him....

As if they knew that Zeke needed help letting go and were well aware that if they didn't intervene, he might not ever release her fully, Zeke's men leapt into simultaneous action at his shaking command. The two who had flanked her earlier rushed the couple, grasping Faye gently but firmly by her upper arms to pull her from Zeke's grasp.

He let her go, watching with a wretched kind of helplessness that felt far too familiar.

And as they disappeared into the shadows of the hall that led to the hidden stairwell and secret passages beyond, Zeke shifted fully into the ethereal blue vapor of his ghost form. At least without a solid body to feel with, Faye's sudden departure couldn't physically hurt so damn much.

"That was touching, truly."

The speaker's voice was deep and slightly accented, and faintly muted by the metal and magic barrier of a Tanith hunter's helmet. The vapor of Zeke's wavering body shifted, turning to face the new, extra-dark shadows of the hall that had once been behind him.

"If not a little insulting," continued the voice as a figure separated from those shadows, his armored body darkly tinted

specifically to blend with the night and its murky brethren. He carried a kind of weapon in his right hand, and his left was empty, seemingly at ease at his side. “You underestimate me,” the infamous Tanith told him, his vaguely weary tone implying that he was not in any way bragging, just simply stating the truth.

He continued. “I know where you’ve sent her, Stone. I’m well aware of the tunnels running beneath this building, and I could be in the Winter Kingdom within minutes to meet and greet your long, lost love. But... I suspect you’ve lured me here because you want to make a deal.”

The bounty hunter fell silent for a moment, and Zeke could sense that the man behind the metal mask was waiting - watching - calculating. It was what he did.

At long last, the hunter said, “I’m a reasonable man, and I do enjoy getting paid. So... here I am, Mr. Stone.” He lifted his weapon over his shoulder and holstered it in some unseen slot at his back, now both hands free. “I can’t wait to hear what you think will top the bounty on your girl.” If the man’s face had been visible, Zeke was sure it would be wearing a cold smile. “By all means, make it good.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

I wish I was wearing different shoes.

Of all the thoughts that could have coalesced in Faye's mind – thoughts of the remnant, passionate heat moving through her despite the cold of the dark tunnels around her, thoughts of the harsh turn the night had taken, thoughts of the hired goons hunting her down, and most of all thoughts of the ghost-man who meant well but was just a little too dangerous to be safe and who had just kissed the hell out of her – *this* was the one that kept running like a loop in her addled brain:

I wish I was wearing different shoes.

In the background, her mind toyed with the more important things. Like the fact that Zeke had been telling her the truth when he'd held her face in his hands and promised her that he cared for her. *Desperately*. In fact, he'd been telling the truth about everything – the portal opened for her, the people he'd planned to have waiting for her – all of it. She could tell he'd put in far more effort than she'd at first given him credit for.

He truly believed she would be safe if she could just get through the portal.

And when he'd at last told her in a broken voice to "Go..." his final command had held so much raw emotion, it was clear to her that he was breaking inside.

Damn, I wish I was wearing different bloody shoes!

She really did. Because it was a given that if she'd known she would be running for her life tonight, she wouldn't have chosen heels to run in. She kept *almost* twisting her ankles, and the very last thing she wanted to do to herself just then was make it easier for the bad guys to catch up with her or harder for her to escape.

So, when the men in evening wear who were guiding her none-too-gently through the carved stone passageways beneath the playhouse finally stopped at the top of another set of winding stairs, Faye firmly held out her hands and loudly insisted, "Wait."

The men holding her released her.

She repeated herself. “Just wait. Okay?” Then she bent to begin untying her lace-up heels.

The guards seemed surprised by her sudden command – and confused – as if torn between wanting to follow their scary ghost-boss’s orders to the letter and wanting to make sure the woman he cared about stayed happy and healthy.

The group of men who’d gone down the stairs ahead of them and had been touching their smart phone flashlights to the torch sconces embedded in the wall as they’d descended. Each time they did, bright light was transferred from the battery-operated devices onto the torch, transforming into fire as it lit up the ancient wood and cloth.

Magic, of course, Faye thought absently. Gives new meaning to the British term, ‘torch.’

But the men below stopped when they’d noticed that Faye and her companions were no longer following behind them. Faye could see the flickering shadows from their flashlight-fires around the corner a dozen stairs down.

“You good?” One of them called up.

“Yeah. She’s changing her shoes,” said one of Faye’s personal escorts. She kept working on the laces but rolled her eyes. She wasn’t *changing* them, she was taking them off – so that she didn’t injure herself, and just in case she had to make an all-out break for it.

She could hear them below now, whispering to each other. Sound carried quite clearly in this stairwell, apparently.

“*You gotta be kidding me,*” said one.

“*Well maybe she can’t walk in ‘em; they were pretty high heels.*”

Faye found herself smiling at that as she unwittingly listened. One shoe was off. One to go.

“*So maybe she shouldn’t have worn them,*” insisted the first guy.

Then a new voice, one Faye was surprised to find belonged, not to a man but to a woman, said, “*Dude, it’s not like she knew this was gonna go down. I mean, that was sort of the point, remember?*”

Faye blinked. She’d admittedly been so wrapped up in her own shit, she hadn’t even made a point of looking at her companions’ faces. Which was stupid, and not at all like her. In the trauma of the unfolding night, she realized she’d simply come to unconsciously think of her companions as her suit-wearing underground bodyguards.

My bad, she thought almost numbly. The surprises were beginning to pile on top of one another now, too numerous to separate and react to.

“We’re going on ahead to open the portal,” called up the first guy, clearly wanting to be heard this time.

The man to Faye’s right replied, “Go ahead. We’re almost done here.”

She caught the sound of footfalls below again, this time moving away and much more rapidly. Faye finished with the second shoe, then pulled all four straps of both heels through her hand and wrapped them around one wrist, standing again. She’d gone as fast as she could.

“I’m ready,” she said simply and started down the stairs at a much faster pace, herself. The ground was so cold beneath her nylon stockinged feet, but it was also much more manageable. Her guards didn’t bother grabbing her arms again, as she was obviously moving as fast as she could now without resistance.

But halfway down the stairwell, the man on Faye’s right jerked forward suddenly and viciously, clearly having been struck violently from behind.

Something kicked him, came her immediate recognition.

He fell forward, his balance ruined.

Faye cried out in surprise and tried to turn toward his attacker, but an arm slid around her throat and squeezed tight,

freezing her on her current step. “*Fucking wards...*” a harsh voice hissed in her ear. “It took *for-fucking-ever* to find you.”

The guard to her left was also turning, and pulling a gun from a hidden shoulder holster beneath his jacket. But the man holding Faye was ready and faster. A gun with a silencer screwed to its barrel entered Faye’s line of sight, and a silenced bullet shot through the back of her guard’s skull to exit somewhere on the left side of his neck. Fortunately, Faye couldn’t see that part.

Whatever had attacked them had chosen the perfect place to do it. The stairwell would act as a funnel – and the guards ahead were already out of the way. As the gun the second guard had pulled clamored noisily to the stone steps below and his lifeless body tumbled after, Faye wondered vaguely if the people who’d gone ahead were even still alive.

The second guard’s body disappeared half a dozen steps down, rounding the same corner the first man had taken. Faye could see the flickering shadows of the torches outline her would-be protectors’ shadows as that first man tried to stand, only to see he was about to be run-down by the second. In any other non-lethal and not-utterly-horrifying situation, this might have been funny. Comedy of a kind along the same lines as *Noises Off*.

But instead, Faye only felt her heart beating so hard and so fast, it was literally painful. She wasn’t getting enough air.

She genuinely feared for her life.

Down below, the first guard’s agility surprised her when he leaped over his dead companion’s limp, tumbling form, barely preventing it from tripping him up a second time. He at once began to climb the stairs again at a full run, his leather-soled footfalls echoing in the otherwise silent stairwell.

“*Damn*. I was hoping he’d break his neck and save me a bullet.” The man holding Faye leveled his weapon on the approaching shadow, and Faye knew the guard wouldn’t stand a chance, no matter how agile he was. She wanted to warn him, but the air was literally trapped beneath the squeezing

arm of her attacker. Stars swam in her vision, and it was becoming more difficult to think straight.

Her brain's last-ditch effort at coherent ideas was to remind her that she still held her high-heeled shoes in one hand, their straps wrapped securely around her left wrist. Wildly and without much forethought, Faye let go of the offending arm around her neck and instead swung her own arm down and then hard and fast upward, hoping the shoes would find their mark. She imagined one of the heels ideally spearing through an enemy eyeball.

That didn't happen. But she did luck out when her attacker moved to the side behind her to dodge the shoes. His grip in turn lessened on her throat. The pain of returning sensation prickled through Faye's neck and head as her air-passages once more expanded to take in much-needed oxygen. She tried not to waste time gagging or coughing, instead using what little momentum she had won to twist as much as she could in the man's grip. She turned to the right and sharply raised her right arm, slamming it into the bottom of his outstretched gun hand. The gun swung wide just as her assailant pulled his trigger.

The armored man cocked his helmeted head to one side and said, "You know you'd most likely come to regret making this deal."

"No," Zeke said quietly. "I wouldn't."

The bounty hunter watched him as steadily as ever. Finally he said, "I believe you." Then he added, "But it is quite a boon."

"So is she."

There was a brief pause where Zeke imagined the man was smiling behind that infamous mask of his. "Again – I believe you," Tanith said, the humor evident in his accented, slightly mechanized voice.

But an electric current suddenly rode over Zeke's ghostly skin, raising the hairs on his arms despite technically not

having any arms. Alarm bells sounded in his head. At the same time, Tanith partly turned as if searching the darkness down the hall behind him.

“Something’s wrong,” the hunter said.

“Someone else is here,” agreed Zeke, but he was already moving, as was Tanith.

The bounty hunter stepped back, his dark form blending with the hall shadows until within split seconds, he was gone. The ghost saw the last of the notorious hunter vanish just before he, himself entered the familiar passageways of Limbo.

He traversed the passageways with the inhuman speed and experience of one who’d traveled them for a century, following the “scent” of the only thing in the universe he cared about.

At the back of his thoughts was the knowledge that he’d just granted the leader of the Bounty Hunters of Tanith free access to these same passageways – indefinitely. It wouldn’t be long before the capable and feared hunter was as familiar with the murky realm as Zeke. He would then possess yet another menacing skill in his already daunting arsenal. Limbo would offer him entrance to countless worlds where would-be bounties could have otherwise escaped him. Zeke hadn’t exactly scored a point for the good guys.

But he wasn’t lying when he’d told Tanith it was worth it. *She* was worth it.

Where are you?

She hadn’t made it into the Winter Kingdom; he could feel the sovereigns of that kingdom in a troubled state. Something had gone wrong with the portal... they couldn’t get it open. There was a misconnection....

Zeke sensed... *discord*. It was perceived like a discoloration of the universe, it sounded like a quiet cacophony, and it felt like something was knocking the dimensions of time and space just *slightly* off from one another.

He sensed chaos.

His unearthly eyes widened. *Chaos.*

No, he thought. Not that.

Not him.

Terror spurred his magic to reach farther and faster than ever before. Until, like a light in the forever darkness, Zeke at last caught the beating of Fathom's precious heart. It was pounding at light speed.

To his astonishment, he found it was in perfect synchronicity with his own.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The bullet hit the wall, sending a chunk flying. But her captor responded with supernatural speed, and his arm blurred back into position, leveling the gun on the shadow that had been coming up the stairs once more.

Fortunately for her would-be guard, the firing shot and flying rubble had given him ample warning, and the guard stopped just out of sight, most likely furiously planning his next moves accordingly.

Faye's captor sneered and swore under his breath; Faye knew he was well aware he no longer had the upper hand with that particular guard. So rather than fire off another shot at thin air, he lowered his weapon, shoving it somewhere out of sight, then wrapped his free arm around Faye's writhing body, showing renewed determination to hold on to her.

His strength was as supernatural as his speed; Faye didn't stand a chance at avoiding the hold.

"It's the dress, isn't it? It's charmed or something." She couldn't even cringe at the words that were hissed into her ear. She was beyond that, in the realm of rapid-fire heartbeats and absolute terror. She made no sound, jerking violently when the air was trapped painfully in her lungs by her captor's grip. "Wherever you go, the goddamn *dress* goes. I get it. Fucking bright for a dead guy."

In record time, he'd jammed one strong arm under her ribcage to squeeze the breath from her lungs, and the other was again wrapped securely around her throat. Stars already swam in her vision, and her ears were beginning to roar with the sound of blood. He had her in a sleeper hold, or some version of it.

Over the roaring in her ears, she caught the whispered words of a spell, cast by the man holding her. She recognized a few of them, though the order was strange. Others sounded older. They also sounded - slimy. *Wrong*. He was calling up a portal of some kind, and wherever he was setting it to go was not a place Faye really wanted to go.

But suddenly the man broke off and swore. “Fucking *dress!*”

She felt his grip around her chest shift, his fingers curling around the top edge of her gown as if to rip it off. She suddenly had enough inhaling power to prepare to scream, and she really felt like doing so. But a hissing-sizzling sound broke her off when her captor’s hand jerked away from the top of her dress. The smell of scorched flesh filled Faye’s nostrils; tendrils of blackened smoke wrapped upward in curling ribbons from his now clawed fingers.

More cursing erupted from his sneering lips as Faye reached for the burning appendage, intent on harming it further to gain the upper hand. He yanked the hand out of her reach before drawing it back to ball it into a fist. She knew he was going to drive it into her side, probably rupturing some internal organ there. Kidney? Liver? What was on the right side? Anything?

But before it could make contact, gloved fingers wrapped firmly around the man’s wrist, stopping him cold. Faye’s eyes followed the new fingers up the line of the new arm, all the way to the new face - to find a helmet instead. She recognized the design of the helmet; it belonged to a Tanith hunter, black and obscuring.

”*Never* damage the mark,” the hunter said, his voice disguised by the mask he wore. She recognized that too, however. He’d been one of the hunters outside DaVinci’s tent in the Night Carnival. He’d been the one in charge.

Out of the frying pan....

The Tanith hunter gave her captor’s wrist a sharp twist and yank, forcing a cry of pain that pierced her ear. But the elbow around her throat loosened dramatically, coming away enough for her to slip sideways and turn her head. Someone had pulled the arm away from her.

Zeke!

Ezekiel was still emitting a blue glow, and those eyes of his were still radiating golden light like twin stars, but he was

solid, as was the grip he had on his opponent's wrist. He and the Tanith hunter had flanked her assailant, pinning him between them.

Zeke gave the man's wrist a twist similar to the Tanith hunter's, freeing Faye up entirely. She didn't waste any time being grateful. Instead, she took advantage of her newfound freedom and rapidly fell downward, her instincts taking her to the ground in a drop and roll move. As she rolled, more bullets were fired into the confined space of the stone, spiral stairwell.

The guard, she thought. Her assumption was confirmed when she heard him run up the stone steps after firing.

Faye felt she'd moved far enough out of the way when her legs hit the wall. She stopped rolling and straightened on her knees, shoving her hair out of her face. She expected to see her three unlikely heroes - a ghost, a bounty hunter, and a gangster - standing around the man who'd attacked her while he bled out from new bullet holes. What she saw instead was three obviously confused, highly wary men looking all around - *listening* - because their opponent had suddenly vanished.

Her captor was nowhere to be seen.

"What the hell?" the guard muttered, coming to a stop as well. He was standing two steps down from the other two, both hands wrapped securely around the grip of his gun, his suit and tie disheveled, allowing a peek of some sort of tribal protection tattoo on the back of his neck. "Tousled bodyguard" was a good look on him.

"Where did he go?" she asked softly. She wasn't happy to hear the tremor in her voice. But she didn't even know what her assailant looked like. He'd been behind her the entire time and she'd never gotten a good look at him.

No one answered her right away. Of course no one knew where he'd gone. They would go after him if they did. What she really wanted to know anyway was *how* he had gone. And whether he would be back.

"He vanished when Nate fired at him," Zeke told her, pulling her eyes to his. Faye wondered whether he was able to

read her mind again, especially when he said, “It’s Randall Price.”

Price, Faye thought as the blood drained from her face and the droning of blood through her ears grew more distracting. She knew all about Randall Price. Every warden had been given intel about the man, including photographs. Randall Price... was a serial killer. He liked to cut people up. He’d kidnapped one of the women working with the warden clans, along with two of her friends.

Most importantly, Randall Price worked for Victor Maze. And Victor Maze was actually the chaos god, Viciium Mehimii.

What this meant was that Price had been granted certain abilities, not the least of which was the ability to cheat death. To a point.

The clans had captured Price not long ago, and despite the most unlikely odds, the man had actually escaped their custody. The night he broke free, every single warden clan in existence had been slammed with jobs involving supernatural threats to the mortal world. All hell had broken loose that night - literally.

Some wardens whispered admonishments that the sovereigns hadn’t killed Price outright rather than keep him prisoner. But Faye knew the truth. Genevieve had filled her in. A few of the less forgiving, perhaps wiser kings had gotten together and done exactly that. They’d killed Price. Several times, it would seem. And they hadn’t been subtle about it.

Which was how they’d ultimately learned that he couldn’t be killed. Not as long as he was working for Maze.

Faye swallowed hard, her throat sticking on a growing lump. “Oh,” she said softly. It was all she could think of saying.

Zeke held her gaze, but his next words were directed at the bodyguard two steps below him. “The others?” he asked. His voice had a ghostly echo to it, deep and unsettling.

“Dead,” said his guard.

Faye's stomach would have dropped if it hadn't already been in her shoes. *All of them?* she thought. *They're all dead?* She thought of the woman who had defended Faye to her companions. Dead now.

They'd all been taken out by this one man... and then he'd just disappeared.

Zeke suddenly closed the distance between them, his approach so fast, to Faye he seemed to be a dark blue shadow gliding in a single stride across the stone floor of the stairwell. His form towered over her, his eyes boring into hers. He grabbed her wrist with one strong hand, his fingers cold like an iron vice. "I'm taking her out of here," he said, obviously not speaking to her even though he was peering into her soul. "Clean the place."

Faye felt the ominous weight of his command and knew he wasn't talking about sweeping or mopping. He finally tore his eyes from hers to glance over his shoulder at the two men behind him. "Remember our deal, Tanith."

The bounty hunter in his black armor nodded, just once.

Tanith? Faye registered yet more shock at the realization that this was not only a bounty hunter of Tanith standing before her, but the leader himself. *He made a deal with him?* Her mind reeled. She could no longer feel her legs.

Zeke slipped his free arm around her waist. With a tone deepened into a ghostly echo, he said, "Let's go."

Zeke could, in fact, read Faye's thoughts once more. He could hear every single panicked word that played unprotected through her frightened mind. When she tremulously asked a question and then mentally kicked herself for asking, his teeth began to grind. He answered the question she really needed an answer to and watched her carefully as his last remaining guard confirmed what he feared - the others were all dead.

Now the four of them stood in dead quiet, watching and waiting for the vanished bad guy to make another move.

He could sense how terrified Faye was. Not that it would take mind-reading abilities to do so. She was an open book at the moment, in more ways than one.

Price had done something to the warding in her dress, negating it just enough, which was why he could read her thoughts. It shouldn't have been possible to annul such strong magic, not for a nobody once-mortal serial killer with dead, whitening eyes and an ironic pair of wire-rimmed glasses. But at least it hadn't been easy for the undead servant of Victor Maze. Zeke could still smell the burned flesh that resulted when Price wrapped his hands around the protected material of the dress.

What he couldn't figure out was why the man was attacking Fathom Everett. What did he stand to gain by taking her out? What did Maze stand to gain? What was she to them?

Zeke was now pretty sure it had been Maze who sent the thogail golem after Faye several nights ago. But if the chaos god had wanted her dead, he could have done it then. Instead, the golem had attempted to abduct her.

He's the chaos god, he thought as he listened carefully and searched the shadows for the slightest sign that Price was still in the stairwell with them. *Or the entropy god or whatever*. He was still a little unclear on it all. *Maybe he just wants to sew chaos*. Zeke did know Maze had a personal vendetta against the sovereigns and their ilk, and if the warden clans were anything, they were sovereign ilk. So to speak.

The best way to piss off a warden was to go after his or her loved ones. Zeke wasn't technically a warden any longer. But maybe Maze didn't know that. Zeke did, after all, still have the jacket.

So maybe he was trying to hurt Faye just to get to Zeke, and through him, the Monsters clan. The Monsters were the most powerful warden clan by far, with direct ties to the sovereigns. And maybe they were going the abduction route first because the only thing worse than harming her physically would be hurting her psychologically.

At that thought, Zeke strode forward and grabbed Faye's wrist. "I'm taking her out of here." She was surprised by his sudden act, but she didn't try to pull away. His eyes held hers. "Clean the place," he said, knowing it would mean the end of his theater when purple-black, warlock flames engulfed it entirely to shatter all possible connection that Maze and his people may have created within its walls.

He stepped closer to Faye, feeling the warmth of her mortal form in contrast to his own ghostly aura, then looked over his shoulder to regard the tall, infamous man in black armor behind him. "Remember our deal, Tanith."

The bounty hunter nodded and Zeke slipped his arm around Faye's waist. "Let's go."

But he didn't get any further. A shadow swarmed him, one only he could see. Zeke didn't have time to react before he was suddenly and rapidly paralyzed with white-out pain that began in his side and spread throughout his form like a gasoline-fed bonfire.

Stabbed, he thought. *The shadow, the weapon - they're in....*

Limbo.

The shadow pulled back, and as it did, it became less diaphanous, more human-shaped, but remained inky black. Zeke watched it smile, the only contrasting shade in its form. Then he caught sight of the weapon in its grip. A steel square shank spike shone with a brief streak of light and blue-aurating blood. It shifted continuously from appearing brand new to rusted and pitted as if left in water for a century.

Zeke recognized the nail. It had, in fact, been left in water for a century.

The large square-cut building nail existed in Limbo, that space and time between life and death, where a version of his form currently resided. The nail was immaterial, insubstantial, a wraith to anyone existing fully in the mortal realm. But to Zeke, it was solid and real, because as much as any mortal existed in three dimensions, Zeke existed in four.

A hard chill moved through him. In Limbo, time was moving separately, covering more ground. There, he couldn't move, couldn't speak, his semi-transparent aspect fortunate it didn't have to breathe.

In the mortal world, a mere split second had passed since he'd been stabbed, but Faye looked up at him anyway, her eyes questioning. She could sense something was wrong. "Zeke?" *What's wrong with him? Is he okay?* her mind echoed. *He's not okay.* He heard it all loud and clear, but couldn't reassure her.

She was right. He was not okay.

The nail was the kind used in the early twentieth century - in boat building. And it was perhaps the only thing in both worlds that could specifically kill *him*.

Zeke felt the Limbo shadow draw close once more, *saw* it step closer, and heard the words it whispered into his ear. "*Mission accomplished.*" Randall Price's voice hissed with a quiet, triumphant laugh, then faded to nothing.

The blood-coated weapon dropped from his shadowy grip to fall noisily to the ground, echoing through the shadowy recesses of Zeke's in-between world. His gaze dropped to the four-sided spike. A tiny series of initials were carved into one side, followed by a date. It would have been one of the first nails hammered into place during the boat's construction, if not the first. Commemorative. Said to bring good luck.

The initials read, "JSBC," and the date "1902," for the *Jenks Ship Building Company*, who in 1902 manufactured and assembled the tragically ill-fated *SS Eastland*.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Zeke,” Faye repeated, stepping back in the stairwell to look him over. But he was wearing black and it was dark in the stairwell. If he was bleeding, it was well disguised.

And if she was honest, Faye was too distracted to tell for certain anyway - what with the infamous bounty hunter at her back.

“I’m fine.” He was blatantly lying. She watched his face harden into an impassive mask of decisive action. “Bryce, I’m taking Miss Everett someplace safe. You know what to do.”

“Yes sir. I’ll clean up the theater.”

You mean you’ll destroy it.

Zeke’s eyes cut to her again, perceptive. But if he could read her mind, he didn’t say. “Are *you* okay?” he asked instead.

Faye hesitated, actually unsure, and looked down at herself. She nodded. Then she looked over her shoulder. Tanith was gone. “I am now.” *Sort of.*

Zeke gently but firmly took her hand. “Let’s go.”

The night became a blur at that point. Zeke moved her too quickly through the underground passage and equally underground tributaries for her to gain her bearings, much less ask him where they were going - or why he’d been working with the bounty hunter. By the time they were climbing an increasingly steep set of stairs to what she assumed was the surface, Faye was frankly stunned.

Zeke opened a trap door at the top of the steps, and a dim light illuminated the landing. “It’s about time!” someone male said, offering Faye a hand up.

A different voice, this one female, asked, “Any snags in the spell?”

“No,” Zeke shook his head, lifting Faye by the waist until her bare feet touched down on smooth stone. “But we were tailed. I had to lose them before activating the final portal.”

Faye shoved her wayward hair out of her eyes and peered around the dimly lit area in which she now stood. Two women and two men filled the space between the overarching walls of what appeared at first glance to be a natural cave. That wasn't what Faye'd expected.

But the bizarreness of how far underground they *still* were took a back seat to the *people* standing before her. She had to do a double-take before she could accept she was really seeing them.

"He had to actually skirt through a few shortcuts in Limbo to clean the trail," said one of the men.

The Phantom King, Faye thought. *Oh my... I swear, that's actually the Phantom King.* She looked at the woman beside him again, a redheaded beauty with a clearly magical air. *And yeah. That would be the Phantom Queen.*

Faye touched her forehead distractedly, half-expecting her fingertips to come away wet with perspiration, or burned from fever. But when she felt neither, she thought, *Maybe the bounty hunter got me and I'm actually unconscious.*

An even worse thought piggy-backed on the first, helped along by the fact that the Phantom King was the sovereign in charge of souls who died unnatural deaths. And he was *right there.*

Or I'm dead.

"What's the matter, Fathom?" the infamous Thanatos asked with a lopsided, utterly gorgeous and disarming smile. "You look like you've seen a ghost. Or two."

The queen's name was Siobhan. It was well known in warden circles that she was a powerful warlock, and seeing her in person now, Faye could believe it. She practically radiated dark, heady magic.

The beautiful red-head elbowed her husband in the ribs, causing his wayward grin to slide into a soft chuckle.

Beside Faye, Zeke shook his head and made a frustrated sound. "Faye, I'd like you to meet a close friend of mine," he said, pointedly turning away from the Phantom sovereigns to

face the other couple. Thanatos, who sucked in his lips and made a show of looking ashamed, caught the obvious burn.

“This is the Winter Queen, Poppy Nix,” Zeke said, nodding at the other woman in the cave, an equally attractive woman with multi-hued brown hair that cascaded to her waist and framed her face in curling tendrils. She had eyes the color of clean, shallow ice, stark and stunning. Faye noticed right away that her eyes and those of her husband’s matched in color.

Faye took Poppy’s friendly out-stretched hand and shook it readily, blushing when she realized that she was *actually* shaking the hand of an *actual* sovereign in *actual* person - and the queen was *nice*. In fact, Poppy took Faye’s hand in both of hers, embracing it warmly.

“Hi Faye,” she said easily.

“And her no-account husband, Kristopher Scaul.” Zeke’s gaze narrowed as he nodded to the very tall, blond man who stood behind the Winter Queen - a man any warden would recognize on sight, not only because very few men in the world had hair, eyes, or a build like his, but because he was an obvious shoe-in for a frankly famous superhero. It wouldn’t have surprised anyone if the man called out for *Mjolnir* and the legendary hammer obediently came sailing through the air to land in his outstretched grip.

Now the Winter King was grinning too, but he saved any derogatory come-backs for later and turned his smile on Faye. “Welcome, little one. It looks as though you’ve had an interesting night.” He nodded at Faye’s bare feet.

She looked down. She’d completely forgotten that she was barefoot. And normally she would have been freezing, and probably in pain. How the hell had she forgotten she was barefoot?

But then it hit her, and her idea was confirmed by the twinkle in Kristopher’s ice blue eyes. The Winter King could control the weather, making temperatures both rise and fall. He’d no doubt heated up the ground for her, specifically around her feet.

Before she could thank him, Zeke turned to the Phantom sovereigns at last. "And this is my best friend, Thane...." He patently ignored the man in question and smiled down at the Phantom Queen beside Thanatos instead, making sure his expression turned decidedly appreciative. "And his *much* better half, Siobhan."

Oh, I know who they are, Faye thought, smiling as genuinely as she could at the both of them, despite her general shock at the turn the night had taken. *I know who they all are.*

"Man, you're lucky you're already dead," laughed Thanatos, shaking his head as his eyes sparked with silver fire. *Possessive even when joking with his bestie,* Faye thought. *That's actually hot.*

"It's - it's a pleasure to meet you all," Faye finally squeaked, her voice almost dry enough to crack completely and make her cough. Was she supposed to curtsy at the sovereigns now? Or maybe bow? Or... did she tell them that she already knew who they were? That she'd learned all about them in training, just like every warden did? She'd heard so much about them and all they'd each done.... Did she dare even look them directly in the eyes?

And what the heck were they suddenly doing here? In the middle of their mad-dash flight from crazy bounty hunters and serial killers?

Were they even safe stopping here and chatting like this?

Suddenly, Faye felt dizzy.

She realized she was trembling when the Winter Queen stepped up beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "The pleasure is ours, Faye," she said. "Believe me. We're meeting a miracle, to be honest. The one he's been looking for all these years?" She laughed, and the sound chimed very slightly like icicles in the quiet after a blizzard. "We were pretty sure he was making you up."

Poppy - whose name was actually Persephone, if Faye remembered correctly - squeezed gently but firmly, as if the embrace could help stave off the shakes.

And it worked.

Probably more magic, thought Faye gratefully. People who illegally delivered medicine to those in need had a saying: “Better living through pharmaceuticals.” Actually, a lot of people had that saying. But Faye might change it now to, “Better living through pharmaceuticals *and magic*.”

“Frankly, we thought either Zeke was lying to keep us from ragging on him, or ghosting had finally claimed the last of his sanity,” said Kristopher.

Faye frowned. “Ghosting?” she asked softly. *What does he mean by ‘the last of his sanity?’*

“Being in two states at once takes its toll on a being,” explained Thanatos. “There are two sides to every soul, like a coin. Light and dark. It doesn’t take a lot to flip one, and Zeke was already offramp, if you know what I mean -”

Zeke moved beside Faye, and she looked up in time to catch him narrow his gaze on the Phantom King. He gave the slightest shake of his head, his countenance turning dark. A warning.

Thane’s expression shifted, becoming thoughtful. He cleared his throat as if he’d said too much already, and ran a hand through his thick black hair.

But Faye was well aware of what he’d been intimating. Ezekiel Stone was a rather notorious overlord in Chicago’s historically seedy underbelly. He was flush with power in the mortal realm that he’d gained through illegal - and immoral - means. After all, when she’d first met him, he’d been in the process of killing someone.

She knew. It came as no surprise to her. What *did* surprise her, a little, was that she didn’t care.

To Thane’s left, Siobhan the Phantom Queen rolled her eyes. “Damn, I’m so tired of ‘dark’ being synonymous with ‘wrong’ or ‘evil.’” She had one of those sexy, slightly scratchy voices that painted her words with even more magic. The warlock shook her head, sending locks of her gorgeous mane

cascading across her cheeks. “Let me show you what ‘dark’ magic can do, sweetie.”

She looked down at Faye’s bare feet before her gaze travelled up, and her expression became decided. She nodded, wove her hands in some unfamiliar and intricate manner, and spoke words that actually echoed throughout the cave.

Faye inhaled sharply when the air around her crackled with energy, riding along her skin in fingers of dark electricity. It didn’t hurt; rather it was exhilarating, like being struck by lightning in a dream. No pain, all power. She closed her eyes, soaking it in.

As the magic moved over her, Faye felt goosebumps raise where the tendrils of energy had been - and she felt something else too. Material.

The crackling stopped and Faye opened her eyes to peer down and find herself fully dressed from head to toe. Vintage graphic tee, red hoodie, black leather jacket, distressed blue jeans, thick socks, comfortable boots. She could feel underwear too - and best of all, these were all her own clothes.

She laughed, shaking her head. “Okay, I’m not even going to ask you how you did that.” And they were her *favorite* clothes. “Or how you knew....”

She looked up, catching Siobhan’s proud smile. The warlock shrugged. “Magic, my love. *Dark* magic.”

“Thank you,” Faye said gratefully. But her own smile slipped when she glanced up at Thanatos just in time to catch the look he shared with Zeke. It was immediately clear to her that while Faye had been going through a wardrobe change, the two of them had been wordlessly communicating. Perhaps even telepathically. Faye would have no idea.

She just knew that whatever message had been passed between them was not good.

Faye watched Thane carefully as his eyes trailed over Zeke’s form, keen and observant. She didn’t fail to notice that they stopped around Zeke’s middle.

Something is wrong, she thought. Something I can’t see.

“We can catch up more later,” said Siobhan, who smiled warmly at Faye, no hint of artifice in her expression. There was worry there, though, and she was lying when she suggested they could talk more later. “Now we need to get you out of here. Both of you.”

That wasn't a lie.

So Faye nodded, and the two kings suddenly turned as one. They each lifted one arm to the space in the caves behind them, both outstretched palms beginning to glow. Thane said, “This will take you to the Second Circle. It's within the mortal realm but connected enough to Limbo that you can rest easily without danger to either one of you.”

“Thank you,” said Zeke as a portal opened up one last time, and Faye could see parts of yet another cave beyond. This one, however, was decorated lavishly. Second circle? She would have to ask later.

Zeke took her hand and led her past the sovereigns to the portal entrance. He looked back at them and nodded. “We'll be in touch.”

Thane grinned, “I know you will. You need me to get you out of there.”

Then he and the Winter King simultaneously waved their fingers outward, and Zeke and Faye were caught in a pulling force. As it stole around them, Zeke had just enough time to swiftly draw Faye against his chest and wrap his arms around her. A split second later, they were yanked backward through the portal.

Faye squeaked and closed her eyes, ducking her head against Zeke's chest. She felt him twist with her, and a beat later, he was cushioning their impact as they landed and rolled, Zeke cradling her from head to toe.

The portal exit closed almost immediately behind them. When they rolled to a stop, Faye felt the chill of more stone rise up from beneath her. Zeke was on top.

Naturally, Faye thought, mostly bemused. But his body was solid against hers, as unyielding as the ground beneath

her.

They remained motionless for an unknown time before Zeke removed his arms from where they'd protected her, and braced himself against the ground. He lifted himself up and looked down at her. The glow of real, lit torches on the wall behind him cloaked him in an aura and offset the golden fire in his eyes.

The torch flames danced, the gentle, rhythmic pop and crackle in stark contrast to the cacophony of the portal and everything that had come before it. For a moment, time itself seemed to slow down and take stock. The sound of Faye's breaths was shallow and ragged, and it joined the crackling fire in the silence.

Faye gazed up at the beautiful man with glowing yellow eyes. She felt every concrete inch of him along the length of her body. She caught the hint of his expensive cologne and something like... *magic*. And she suddenly found it very hard to breathe.

"Are you okay, Fathom?" the beautiful man asked her, his unnatural gaze branding her soul.

No, she thought, swallowing hard. *Definitely not*.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I'm not okay.

She was *somehow, for some crazy reason, stupid* attracted to an undead equivalent of a Chicago mob boss who'd just barely gotten her out of a whole lot of trouble that was basically all his fault to begin with.

Well, maybe. She supposed she may have had something to do with it. She *was* involved in something illegal, after all.

He moved on top of her, shifting his weight to one strong arm so he could brush a lock of her hair from her cheek with the other. "Always hiding behind your hair," he said softly.

She steeled herself against his beautiful voice, averting her eyes to look at the room instead.

The cave was large, but not so big she couldn't see its edges. It was round. There were what looked like pews, and an altar in front of them as if it were an underground church. "Where are we?"

"We're in Hell, little one."

Faye blinked and looked back at Zeke. He was smiling.

"Or rather, what was once referred to as its 'Second Circle.'"

She knew Zeke could damn well tell she was baffled by his response, but rather than immediately explain, he leaned in close enough that she felt the minty-cold breath of his words across her skin. "What sin have you committed to wind up here, beautiful?"

"Well, I killed a man once," she said, narrowing her gaze on him. "Oh wait, that was just you. *So far.*" She emphasized the warning.

Zeke flashed white teeth and laughed, the deep sound rumbling against Faye's body. She felt her throat go dry and swallowed to clear it. She really couldn't understand it. How *could* a ghost be so... *solid*?

“I’m already dead, my love...” His smile faded, and something dark passed through his gaze - and was gone. But the feel of it lingered as Zeke said, “This cavern was carved out by Francis Dashwood in the mid-eighteenth century.”

She knew that name. “Dashwood, of the *Hellfire Club*?”

His smile was back. “The very same.”

Though they also irreverently referred to themselves as, *The Order of the Friars of Sir Francis Wycombe*. As luck would have it, Faye had googled the club at some juncture and taken that Google-tributary-detour that in the end saw her very familiar with its long, deep history. “It was said to have distant ties to something called - “

“The Order of the Second Circle,” they finished together.

“And this is it?” she asked next, tilting her head back to get a look at the wall behind her.

“You almost sound disappointed.”

She looked back up at him. His eyes were still glowing gold, which she’d come to recognize as something he did when emotionally charged. But there was a teasing pull to his smile.

“Well... I mean, I can’t see any of it really,” she said softly. Then she whispered, “What with you on top of me.”

Zeke tilted his head to one side, studying her in long, drawn-out silence. His expression remained unchanged until at long last, he grinned and pushed himself up, gracefully rising to his feet before leaning down to offer her his hand. Faye looked from his glowing eyes to the blue aura still surrounding him like an unholy, body-sized halo to the hand he offered her.

She took it.

It was warm. Just like the devil’s hand was rumored to be.

His fingers closed over hers and he lifted her effortlessly, holding on until she had her booted feet firmly beneath her.

Faye looked around. The room was in fact larger than she’d at first thought. The ceilings were also higher. She

glanced at the sconces, crossing the floor to the closest one. The fire burning the torches was definitely magic, their flames would have eaten up the oxygen in the room in no time otherwise. There was a great deal of magic permeating the cavern, if the perfect room temperature was any indication.

Tapestries hung on a good portion of the carved walls, obviously antique but well cared-for. Each depicted intricate Dante-esque images, but from multiple religions and faiths going back as far as the twentieth century B.C. Everything from the Norse pantheon to Zoroastrianism to various Animism faiths were represented in the intricately woven threads.

There *were* pews, but they were carved from stone themselves, and they formed a number of perfect quarter-circles around a raised six-by-six-foot dais that looked as though it was topped with pure gold. She moved down one of the aisles toward it, curiosity drawing her.

“This isn’t one of the caves that you can tour in Wycomb,” she muttered. She’d seen plenty of photographs of the cave system that was rented out to filming companies and private events. This one was new. Even the type of stone in the cave was different.

“No, it isn’t,” said Zeke, who remained where he was and watched her. “This cave is *beneath* the others.”

“Beneath?” She would have thought it impossible except - she could tell he was speaking the truth. “How the hell...” she whispered, stopping beside the dais to turn a full circle. She couldn’t help wondering about water levels and entryway points. The cave she was in must have been forty feet underground.

Zeke grinned. “The cave system was carved out in a hill.”

That’s right. It was. She remembered now. “And no one knows this is here?”

“Not since Benjamin Franklin passed. He was the one who helped design the cavern and its entrance, which has since been filled in. Now no one but the Vampire King and his

friends is aware it's here," Zeke said, shrugging off his suit jacket to lay it over the back of one of the pews before rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt.

As he spoke, he paced casually in her direction, his gaze darting over the room's furnishings. His gold eyes burned like the fire in the sconces, just as hot, just as magical. "They haven't for hundreds of years. Roman has since placed decades' worth of wards in layers over the cave, and it serves as a safehouse of sorts. It's the only warded safehouse close enough to Limbo or the river that I can enter it." He paused before adding, "No one who wishes harm to its inhabitants can enter." He stopped halfway down one of the aisles between the pews and placed his hands on the tops of the pews on either side.

"And he's okay with you using it."

"He happens to be a friend."

Of course he is, she thought, experiencing a strange shiver. "You have a lot of very powerful-" *and very dangerous*, "friends." It actually scared her a little. But it wasn't as scary to her as Ezekiel Stone's downright sinful appearance in that tailored waistcoat.

Faye forced herself to turn toward the dais, then gazed down at it. After a few seconds, she realized what she was looking at. "Holy..." she whispered. It *was* covered in gold. The gold was thick enough to carve into even more images, these more pornographic than the others. Yet the top as a whole was polished and shiny.

"More of the *unholy* than the holy takes place in the Second Circle of Hell," Zeke said from where he still braced himself casually against the stone pews. She glanced over her shoulder at his figure, the muscles of his forearms making her feel strange inside.

"That's... that's right," Faye said, recalling the designation of Dante's second circle. It had been dedicated to those who'd committed acts of lust. Faye had the sudden unexpected impression that it would be far from painful lay out naked on top of the gold altar; the carvings were thinly

spaced so that the majority of the priceless altar was a smooth surface.

She swallowed against a tightening throat, mentally kicking herself for the images she was conjuring, all of them involving Zeke and herself. Not that she could help it. “Interesting carvings,” she half-squeaked, half-whispered. And then, even though every ounce of common sense inside her was telling her not to, she asked, “What did they sacrifice on this altar?”

“Virgins,” Zeke spoke directly in her ear.

Faye jumped a little, but he was now right behind her, and his arms snaked around her to hold her fast. Before she could react further, he was lifting and turning her to place her none-too-gently on the altar. He kept his hands around her waist and pulled her further up the dais as he followed her onto the so-called sacrificial mount.

Faye found herself resting in the center of the altar, Zeke looming over her on his knees, one strong leg on either side of her hips as if to cage her in. She pressed her palms to his chest defensively, the rock-hard, utterly unyielding feel of him beneath her touch her final undoing. He was smiling when he braced his hands against the stone by her head and leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“Shall I show you how the virgins were sacrificed?”

Faye’s thoughts went into fevered overdrive, keeping rapid-fire time with her hammering heart. *Oh gods, have mercy-*

Zeke laughed, the ghost-powered sound sending delicious, powerful shivers through Faye’s body. “There are no gods here, little one.” *Not in Hell*, he spoke directly into her mind, the sudden intense, and intimate intrusion forcing a gasp from her tight throat. It was all she could manage before Zeke claimed her mouth with his and Faye’s mind exploded into white-out bliss.

It was only a kiss. It should not have had the power to lay waste to Faye's defenses the way it did. But as he parted her lips and took from her with a hunger both gentle and demanding, Zeke could sense that any thoughts of decorum or restraint, logical discretion or vigilance were fading echoes on the outskirts of her consciousness. He knew because of the way her hands against his chest stopped pushing and instead curled into the material of his shirt, gripping him tight. He knew by how she rose to meet his kiss, opening herself up to him. And he knew because he was in her mind.

He wasn't supposed to be, not this far from Chicago and its river. But the nail that had with such impending finality pierced his side had also inadvertently more closely connected him with his river than ever before. He may be slip-sliding toward a more permanent nonexistence, but until the moment he was snuffed out completely, his ghostly powers were stronger than ever. In fact, they raged so thoroughly through him, they felt like a tidal wave or white-water rapids. A breaking damn. He barely had control over them, and he felt more of that control slipping by the second.

He didn't even mean to read her thoughts. But he was grateful that he had. If he hadn't already been in her mind, listening in on her adorable if shame-filled X-rated thoughts of him and what he could do to her on that altar, he wouldn't be positive that her reaction to him now was genuine.

It had long been rumored that ghosts had the power to make people feel things, such as fear. His ghostly howl was an example. But Zeke knew firsthand ghosts could breed other emotions as well. It wasn't easy and it didn't work on everyone, but close enough to the water, it could be done.

He'd used his power to incite empathy - say amongst a group of bullies. He'd used it to make a weathered old man feel humor and softly chuckle where he sat alone on a park bench. He was proof the rumors of a ghost's reach were true, though he'd never used his power to rouse passion in a victim. It had never occurred to him - until now, as he felt himself drowning in his own capabilities and wondered how long he could hold them in check.

Zeke's hand left the cold altar to snake under the small of Faye's back, lifting her against him because he frankly couldn't get close enough. And when he felt her small body become pliable against him, her throat releasing the softest sound of pleasure, he made a sound himself. A deep, low rumble rose through him and filled the cavern, a growl of desire and darkness, the ghost in him wanting as much of her as the man.

Zeke recognized the monster. He knew what it craved. And for the first time in his existence, he feared it. He feared what it wanted most of all.

It was the other way to make a ghost.

No, he told himself, unwilling - *unable* - to give up what he had in his arms then and there in that moment just because of something that would never come to pass. *Never*. He wouldn't let it. Never before had he even allowed himself to consider it. He wouldn't begin to now. Not now.

This moment was vital. Fleeting. Precious.

He was dying. He was leaving all sense and awareness once and for all, and before he left, before he gave it all up for good, he would damn well share this blessed moment with the woman he loved. The ghost would not interfere. It wouldn't have what it wanted - Faye, by its side forever. Zeke was still a man. The man was still as strong as the monster.

"Fathom," he whispered, breaking the kiss to once more speak into her ear. She shivered beneath the onslaught of his power, the sound of his voice, the aura around him which now surrounded her too. "Raise your arms, little one."

He'd already done away with her jacket and hoodie, using magic for the heavy lifting. But these final layers he would enjoy with his hands - and her submission. She did as he instructed, her lids heavy with building need and mounting pleasure, and raised her arms as he sat her up. With his free hand, he pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it to the side. A hard beat passed with him torn between wanting to *see* her and needing to *feel* her before the latter won out and Zeke was

running his hands up her back and lowering his lips to her collarbone.

He could see the ghostly trail he left upon her skin with each kiss, each glorious press of his mouth to her flesh, the mark like a brand. His darkness was spilling out of him, heating up, and helping him to lay claim his chosen one.

She was his. No matter what happened to him now, from this night to forever, she would always be his.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Mine.

The word echoed through Faye's thoughts, a mirror reflection of Zeke's ghostly growl, and a twin to the burning possession he was leaving across her body like a brand. Too far under his spell to recognize what it was about his voice in her head that seemed strange, she instead absorbed the word - owned it.

You're mine, he repeated more firmly. *Always.*

She'd heard the Monsters clan were a possessive group, alpha to the core. Zeke was like his brothers in this respect. His grip on her was firm, his fingers pressing in just shy of bruising, just gentle enough to drive her exactly *mad*.

In a dizzying series of commands and surrenders, of advances and yields that Zeke completely controlled like a puppet master in the shadows, the ghost rider removed Faye's clothing, stripping her bare before him even while he remained fully clothed. Until, still on his knees on the altar, he grasped her by the waist, his hands nearly spanning her entirely, and pulled her into his lap. He draped each of her legs over his, forcing her into a position that left her fully exposed.

A sharp intake of breath saw her most vulnerable parts pressed against the hardness in his pants, forcing a fierce blush to claim her cheeks and neck. The primal vulnerability of her state - the supreme control of the man who'd placed her in it - had a mesmerizing effect on Faye. She really was a sacrifice before him. She was lost to the moment, utterly and completely. He could have made her do anything.

He would only have to ask. And she would have done it.

When his teeth scraped their way from her shoulder downward, Faye hissed a sharp intake of breath, knowing full well what was coming. His mouth closed over the hard nub of her right breast hot and tight, finally seizing the taut, rosy flesh he had been teasing with expert, exacting fingers. Faye cried out, back arching, fissures of intense lightning-pleasure electrifying their way across her nervous system. Zeke held

her there against him, claiming the leverage she'd given him, biting down ever so slightly until she cried out again and felt her moist core clenching, her building need surely leaving its evidence on Zeke's clothing.

The ghost's grip on Faye tightened, keeping her in place when he turned his dark attentions to her other breast. There was no escape for her, the severe sensations he released upon her unforgiving, ruthless. She lost track of time as he tortured her, and the desperate sounds she made became distant in the thickening mists of her waning sanity.

At last, she could feel every muscle in his body go rigid as he slowly, painfully released her nipple and raised his head, his growled command reaching around her like a hand at her throat, both tender and terrible. "*Look at me, Fathom.*"

Faye obeyed, unable to do otherwise. She lowered her head, opened her lust-heavy lids and looked upon the visage of the man claiming her.

Teeth bared in the dim light, brow hooded with dark intent, body outlined by a field of eerie, indigo magic, and eyes glowing like the sun fires of the Second Circle, he was the dark angel, the punisher, the fallen one come to claim her and drag her to Hell.

More heat flooded her at the sight of him, impossibly more desire, a need turning exquisite in its brutality. Somehow she managed to draw enough steady breath to whisper a single word. "*Zeke.*"

The Monster swore, the sound an infernal promise. His hands kept the promise, one finding the heart of her wet heat to slide across her slick lips to the hardened button at their juncture. She bucked in his arms when he touched down, but his other arm snaked around her waist to hold her prisoner to his ministrations. His deft touch circled and pressed, As her voice escaped her in tiny fraught mewlings, Zeke's tongue and teeth once more the closed in on a tender nipple that could barely withstand any further attention from him, coaxing it to its last, agonizing bliss.

Lightning once more shot through Faye, a white-hot touch from heaven, this time followed by a hard, thunderous tremor that shook the foundations of her spirit and drew a scream from deep inside. It echoed off the cavern walls, probably not the first scream of ecstasy they had absorbed. When Zeke removed his hand from her core to free his hardness from the bindings of his pants, Faye knew it wouldn't be the last.

The sight of him, massive and pulsing to the eye, had too much power over Faye. But the burning heat of him, rock-hard and promising against her exposed lips racked her small form with wanton hedonism, covering her body in a thin sheen of sweat that did nothing but highlight every sexual aspect she possessed to the Monster's ravenous watch.

His burning gaze scorched over the planes of her form, taking it in like a starving man at an Unseelie banquet. He looked so hungry, he was angry, filled with rage. He was absolutely deadly and positively terrifying.

But he was also unquestionably magnificent. Monsters could be so very... *beautiful*.

The beautiful Monster clasped Faye by the waist, lifted her without ceremony, and centered her over his rage before lowering her down.

Faye's mouth dropped open, her head falling back as he slowly stretched and filled her, piercing her heat with his own, inch by agonizing inch. She made a soft, choked sound of surrender as he pressed deeper, found her clitoris again, and stars began to swim behind her closed lids.

A rumble shook the altar beneath them, sending torch-made shadows dancing across the cavern walls. It was a low reverberation that rose in Zeke's chest and vibrated against Faye, the sound melding with the ghost's indigo aura, disrupting it to send it spinning and twirling like fingers of mist. The temperature in the room was changing, dropping degree by degree, but Faye could barely care; Zeke was seated deep inside her now, claiming her more thoroughly, more completely than anything else ever would.

Nothing had ever felt this good. It was an impossible kind of sensation, like standing in a bonfire and relishing the burn.

More, she thought. Crazy. Senselessly.

She needed more. It would be her undoing, but -

Zeke's ghostly rumble grew into an otherworldly growl that somehow caused the torch flames to dance and the walls to tremble. It wrapped around Faye like a silken rope, red against her skin, red like blood. A whisper-thin lace of fear brushed through Faye, but tragically, it only fanned the inferno she'd been damned to suffer. Her ragged cries quickened to a hyperventilated pitch when Zeke partly withdrew - then pressed back into her. She clutched at him, her nails seeking purchase in something that might give.

As if he knew what she needed, Zeke gently, exquisitely pulled her body against his chest, and she found her bare skin suddenly flush with own. He'd used magic again, ridding himself of his clothing. For her?

Regardless, Faye took advantage of his new vulnerability, no matter how trivial it might actually be. Her arms wrapped tight around him, her nails at last finding purchase in the corded muscle of his perfect back as Zeke again lifted and lowered her onto his punishing length, dug himself deep, and made his own mark on her very soul.

Over and over, he pulled out, never leaving her completely, before forcing himself back in to the absolute hilt. As his speed increased, Faye's mind spun inexorably deeper into some swirling vortex of forbidden pleasure. All around them, the cavern transformed. The cave filled with mist, the torch fires shifted into the sparkling flames of dark magic, and the whispering echo of Zeke's Monster curled around their working bodies, claiming their sacrifice.

At long length, the ghost warden's pace reached a crescendo, the friction and pressure alighting new infernos within Faye's body. Eyes shut tight to the pleasure-pain, Faye held on to Zeke for dear life as the first of countless climaxes burst over her and rolled through her. A tear escaped her closed lids, sliding down her cheek, and a soft kiss utterly at

odds with her lover's mercilessness drank up the pain, tasting its sweetness with deep-felt reverence.

Zeke's hands cupped her cheeks then, and his lips once more claimed hers, this kiss deeper, more demanding, and yet somehow gentler than the others. She lost herself to it and to the orgasms tiding through her one after another, until she was aware of a tightening deep within her - one that opened her eyes once more.

Zeke broke the kiss and gazed into her soul. "*Mine*," he said aloud, the sound utterly unnatural and awe-inspiring against her lips. Then he threw back his head and roared as his own climax let loose inside her, a burning torrent that flooded her core, searing her from the inside out.

The sensation skyrocketed Faye into one final orgasm, and her scream joined his own, filling the cavern with a beautiful cacophony of entwined madness.

Eons passed in this madness. Wonderful, perfect eons.

Then slowly, little by little, the beautiful Monster and his willing sacrifice came down from the mountain they'd climbed. Her ragged breathing, the crackling flames, and Faye's weary, contented sigh were now the only sounds in the Second Circle of Hell.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Cold....

The word echoed through Zeke's thoughts, distant and indistinct. Ghosts had no need for sleep, but Zeke had been floating in a miasma-like state of half-consciousness, his arms wrapped securely around Faye where she slept curled up against his chest. The dais was enormous, no doubt intended for sexual conquests involving more than two people, so there was more than enough room for the both of them. Zeke had summoned blankets and clothing for them both before they'd settled in one another's arms to wait for word that the coast was clear for Faye.

He hadn't yet received word. Normally he would be with the other wardens and sovereigns, dealing with this mess himself. Safehouses were all too often used by the loved ones of the leaders in the supernatural world, their mates and kin easy targets. It would be nothing new for Fathom to wait alone. And she was a warden; she knew things like this came with the territory.

But she wasn't *actually* a warden. She was simply a good person who'd come across wardens in the pursuit of doing the right thing. And... Zeke didn't want to leave her.

He could give her anything she wanted here. Between all the magic users he knew and himself, he could have supplied her with all the furnishings she could dream of, every food or drink she could imagine, and any entertainment she could desire.

He just really didn't want to leave her.

He'd only now, more than a hundred and twenty years after his birth, experienced his first true happiness. And thanks to the wound that nail had given him, it would probably be his last.

So cold... The voice again. And now Zeke knew why it sounded strange. It wasn't his own.

"Zeke... keep me warm."

The mumble came from beneath the covers, where Faye had tucked her face under layers of hair, her arms, and the blankets. Zeke sat up, propping himself up on one elbow. In response, Faye shivered violently, the tremor moving through her body like a wave, and curled more tightly against him.

Alarm shot through Zeke. On instinct, he concentrated on his own form. He felt for the wound in his side, for its deleterious effects upon his body. The wound was still there, and it was very much still draining what little remained of his semi-human existence away forever. But his side didn't hurt nearly as bad as it had earlier, and the chill of impending death had completely left his body.

"Oh God... no." his whisper was shaky in the stillness of the cavern.

Pressed impossibly tight against him, Fathom shivered again. This time when she did, she let out a soft, miserable moan.

With a dawning, horrific comprehension, Zeke scrambled off the altar and pulled the covers down. Like a bat exposed to harsh light, Faye attempted to burrow further beneath protection that was no longer there. He couldn't see her face, hidden as it was by her hair. But her tiny fists were curled tight - and white as bone.

"No..." Zeke whispered harshly again, shaking his head against what he knew was happening. "No, *no*, please..." He leaned over Faye's form and gently brushed the hair from her face. Her eyes were shut tight, her teeth were gritted hard enough behind her lips to flex the muscles in her jaw, and her cheeks were as pale as her hands.

She was dying.

That was why his wound didn't hurt.

Somewhere in the night, Ezekiel Stone had surrendered to his death. The man in him had surrendered to the Monster. And in return, the beast was rewarding him. It was taking away his pain. And giving him his mate.

He was still dying, but in his place, Faye would become the ghost. As he faded to nothing, she would be damned to walk between worlds for an eternity. His desire to have her with him was so strong, the demon inside him was heedless of the terrible irony that rather than bring them together, it would forever tear them apart.

As Zeke recognized the horror of what was transpiring, the torch lights around the cavern snuffed out one by one, casting the room into total darkness.

A beat later, they burst once more to life, this time with eerie blue flames that climbed twice as high and licked the ceiling.

The air swirled, and with it a building mist that coiled around Zeke's legs, spinning into eddies where it sparkled like black glitter. Zeke slowly turned, feeling a presence around him that he'd never before sensed. Climbing from the mists were shapes, rising until they coalesced into humanoid forms.

Ghosts.

Dozens of them.

Every ghost that had ever come to be - throughout the eons - was rising in that cavern right then and there. As he watched, they became increasingly solid, and in every one, Zeke looked upon eyes that mirrored his own. Yellow-gold like the sun.

They were there to witness. And to welcome.

There were only two ways a person could become a ghost at death. One was the way he'd done it, unwilling, unknowing, but fated by action and desire alone. And the other....

The other was to possess an individual... and then take their life.

Zeke shook his head no. But as he did, beneath his outstretched, protective arms, Faye's body stirred on the altar. Zeke spun back around and took a step back as her tightly curled form unwound itself and rolled onto its back. The indigo hue from the sconces around the room streamed from the torches toward her, tentacles of blue, flickering, dancing

fire that found her at the center of their circle and wrapped around her like a shroud, encasing her in the same blue glow Zeke wore.

No....

Faye's body began to rise, levitating from the dais to ascend several feet into the blue-lit atmosphere. An ominous heaviness was in the cavern, so thick it was nearly a sound, a *taste*. Like dark chocolate, strong alcohol, and lots of black magic.

A breeze picked up, brushing through Fathom's long, free locks before sending the blankets flying like birds into the air. He watched them in a transfixed state of horror that felt like a nightmare he couldn't wake from.

Possession - Possession was first necessary before a ghost could be created by another. But possession was a strange concept. It could refer to so many things. And as far as ghosts were concerned, Zeke knew *exactly* what it meant.

No ghost had more thoroughly possessed a woman than he had only an hour earlier that night right there on the golden altar of the infamous Second Circle. By making love to her, he'd claimed and possessed Fathom's body. By reading her unspoken thoughts, he'd claimed and possessed her mind.

And his damned ghost powers, dark and hungry, had been strengthened by his killing wound and seized their opportunity. In unspoken but undeniable selfish need to have Faye there by his side for eternity, his awoken darkness defied the last vestiges of his willpower, escaped the grasp of his control while he'd been in the throbbles of unimaginable passion, and proceeded to drain the life from her little by little.

They were killing her. And they were finishing her off even now.

Zeke threw his arms over her protectively, his fingers curling into her side as he roared into the still cavern air. "*Thane!*" he bellowed, his deep, desperate voice echoing magically against the cavern walls like an earthquake. He tried so hard to pull back his power, to corral and re-contain it, he

tried so *very* hard to take back control of the Monster within him. But it wouldn't listen. What it wanted, it wanted too badly.

The ghosts surrounding him further solidified, stepping toward him. They were a throng of the long-lost, a congregation of watchers and deathly fellows. Cohorts, brothers, sisters, peer spirits of the afterlife trapped and gathered to behold a wonder that Zeke now knew had never before been accomplished.

Zeke half-growled, half-cried out, his booted feet firmly planted, his fists curled at his sides, his head thrown back so the heavens and every space of dimension between would hear his cry. "***Thane!***" Pieces of the cavern walls cracked, splitting open at the sound. They separated, pieces of long-ago carved rock crumbling to the cave floor. But the blue tendrils of power encasing his soul mate wavered and wriggled - yet maintained their killing grasp.

"Zeke!" Thanatos the Phantom King stepped out of the cavern shadows and into the blue light, the ghosts surrounding Zeke and the altar disturbed by his sudden presence. They at once parted to allow him passage. Thane looked from one of them to the other, and as he did, each bowed their heads. Whether in reverence or fear, Zeke couldn't tell. Probably both.

Then Thane looked from Zeke to the levitating, unconscious form of Fathom Everett.

"Oh Zeke... What have you done?" he asked softly, approaching the altar. Even the mists parted to allow the death lord passage. But Zeke knew the question was rhetorical. Thane knew what he'd done.

Thane's ancient silver-gray eyes took in the blue tendrils, the ghosts, and the torch fire. He turned his attention to Zeke's side, where the wound given to him by Eastland nail lay open and bleeding into Limbo, killing its host.

The king of the unjustly departed had certainly seen enough death to recognize it when it was happening. He knew it when he saw it now.

And he also must have known what Zeke needed to do, what his one hope in saving Fathom was, because he strode forward, brushing past the ghost warden to approach the altar. “Go,” he said as he stepped up to the dais and held his arms out beneath the floating woman. The tendrils streaming from the torches obeyed the will of the powerful sovereign and proceeded to lower Faye gently into his waiting grasp before a moment later, severing their ties. Now the fires burned in the torches alone, and the ghosts in the cavern took a collective step back.

“The way out is open for you,” the Phantom King said, hugging Faye’s body close to his chest and turning to face Zeke. “I’ll get Fathom some help-”

But Zeke was already gone.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Where’s Stone?” asked Kristopher Scaul when Thanatos exited the portal from the Second Circle at a long, fast stride and entered the Winter King’s throne room.

The portal slammed shut behind him. Thane didn’t stop walking as he replied, “He went after the weapon Victor Maze’s little troll stabbed him with.”

The Phantom King held Fathom Everett close to his chest, knowing there was little he could personally do to help her. The last thing she needed was more of *his* kind of magic. They needed help.

Across the large white marble room, Scaul turned from the fireplace mantle, where something in the hearth flickered and danced more than usual. Thane presumed it was Pi, the young, precocious fire elemental. The tiny flame used existing fires to visit the sovereigns of each realm and sometimes run messages between them.

Scaul’s brow was furrowed. “He’s what, now?” he asked, clearly at a loss.

Thane felt a well of frustration deepen within himself. *This is all my fault.*

He should have told his friends about Zeke’s wound. The moment Zeke and Faye disappeared through the portal into the Second Circle, Thane should have shared. He hadn’t because he knew that if he did, Siobhan and Poppy would want to go in after Zeke right away.

And of course - they would have been right to do so.

Thane just... thought they had more time. The wound would have killed Zeke slowly enough that they would be able to use locator spells to find the nail that caused it and heal him. In fact, when Zeke had called him, Thane had been in the process of searching for his wife in the hidden pocket dimensions she used to test dangerous magics. It was difficult to locate her when she was “between universes,” as she put it. He’d been planning to ask her how to reconstitute something

that might have rusted away when he heard Zeke's cry. He'd answered immediately.

But as Thanatos felt Fathom's life force recede while the death grew stronger inside her, he knew he'd messed up. Royally. *Unbearably.*

"Erikk," he said, using the name the Winter King went by amongst those he'd known the longest and those who were closest to him. It was his first and given name.

"I need you to bring any powerful, trustworthy warlocks here to the castle right away. And find my wife. She's doing new spell runs." He winced internally, knowing he'd catch hell from her for what he'd allowed to happen, but also knowing that Siobhan would wait until this was all over before she let loose on him. "And also... your wife." And that one was going to hurt too, though it would most likely be Scaul who brought the hammer down on him, rather than Poppy. But both women were renowned warlocks; he needed them for several reasons.

"Have them accompany you into Monsters territory in Chicago and ask to see the mate of their second, Angel. You won't get anywhere near her without the girls with you for diplomacy reasons, trust me."

Thane strode right past a tall, powerful, and distinctly confused-looking Winter King and walked straight into one of the many corridors leading off the larger room. He was headed toward the guest quarters and their warm beds. They wouldn't be ultra-warded the way the master suite and most of the rest of the castle was, which would help when the healer and warlocks arrived. The guest quarters were also room temperature to protect visitors from the killing cold of the Winter Kingdom.

It only took a few seconds before Kristopher's boots were keeping quick pace with Thane and the tall blond was beside him. "What the *hell*, Thane?"

That's fair.

In Thane's arms, a hard, bone-deep shudder rolled through Fathom's frame. Thane gritted his teeth and tightened

his grip, feeling time press in on them. “We need the healer, Erikk. And you can tell the Monsters clan its for one of their own.”

Then he went on to tell the other king everything he knew, or at least as much as he’d gleaned during his brief, silent encounter with the ghost warden in the underground tunnels.

“So, he has to either find the nail or....” Scaul broke off as he stepped back from the bed and turned on his heel to leave the room in a rush of cold, frosted air and transport magic. He clearly understood they were running out of time.

Thane lowered Fathom carefully onto the large four-poster bed of the first guest room he came to and pulled the plush covers around and over her as if he were swaddling a baby. Then he straightened and gazed down at her.

He’d severed the connection between her and Zeke’s magic as soon as he’d recognized it, but he already knew he’d severed it too late. Zeke’s ghost had been working on her all night, and he hadn’t even realized it.

Now it was down to the wire. Scaul had summed it up perfectly: Find the veritable nail in the haystack, or -

“Thane!”

Thanatos turned to regard the woman who had plainly just come through the guest room door, her hair flying out behind her, her body pulsing with magic. It wasn’t just warlock magic, either. All manner of powers were roiling off her like a wellspring of the magic domain.

“Kristopher told me what happened,” said Poppy as she rushed to the side of the bed. “I tried to ready witch magic and anything that might heal as well as my own stuff,” she continued.

That explains the cacophony of magic types surrounding her.

“Kris has gone for the others and they should be here soon. In the meantime, I’ll try everything I can to slow down

the ghost's progress in the meantime." She nodded down at Faye's telling blue pallor. "Stand back."

Thane nodded and began to take a step back, but half-way, his progress slowed. His boot touched down. Something wasn't right. Something with this scene, right here, right now, in front of him, wasn't right.

He blinked. *Poppy calls her husband Erikkk*, he thought. Alarm shot through him. *Just like me*. "And you called him Kristopher," he whispered aloud, sudden horror taking his voice away. He was bewildered with himself in that moment. Honestly, how many times could a man fuck up in one day?

The figure pretending to be Poppy had his back turned toward him. But it stiffened at his whispered words. "*And I told you...*" came a low, hissing growl, "*to stand the fuck back!*"

The imposter's head jerked around to face him. But the visage that looked upon Thane now was neither beautiful nor friendly, and absolutely not welcome. It was however, one of disgusting familiarity.

Within the space of two seconds, several things happened next.

In the first second, Randall Price, his eyes gone white with cataracts of death, flashed a bizarre grin filled with too many teeth. Lightning-fast, change overtook the rest of Price's appearance, ridding him of the hair and body that had disguised him long enough to get close to Faye and replacing them with his own.

In the same single second, Thane realized two things. He realized that the chaos of magic surrounding Price was chaotic because of Victor Maze - the chaos god. And he realized that Price had transported directly into the guest room. He'd chosen the guest room specifically for the same reason Thane had - because guest quarters lacked prohibitive wards in order to provide lodging to visitors from all manner of realms.

Yet, in the Winter King's castle, even *that* shouldn't have been possible. There was so much dark magic flowing around

and through Price, it frankly would have killed a normal man. Price was now nothing more than a crazed right-hand extension of Victor Maze.

In the latter of the two seconds, Thane raised his arm, focusing his own deadly brand of phantom power on the interloper. But Maze's lackey had been ready, no doubt expecting to be caught out. So he was just plain faster.

Thane's harrowing attack coiled in his palm but went no further. Price's waiting spell hit him first. He couldn't even tell where it came from when a column of something massively destructive and hideously painful struck the king square in the chest. It continued right through him to exit the other side before coring its dreadful way through the walls of the castle beyond.

It seared everything inside him along the way, scorching muscle and bone, cauterizing arteries and veins. Thane was lifted off the ground, the impact throwing him across the room. If any sound escaped his throat, it was utterly drowned out by the deafening thunderclap that shook the room.

He hit a wall, bounced to the ground, and rolled. But he didn't feel it. He was numb to these collisions and their relatively tiny pains. His midsection in comparison felt like it was collapsing into a black hole.

He couldn't even bare to look down at himself as he tried to find his legs first, then attempted to push himself up. He failed, hitting the ground again.

"*What the-*" someone's shocked voice said. The newcomer's words were muffled by the ringing in Thane's ears. But he would recognize Siobhan's voice anywhere. Just like he would recognize her form, which was probably why Price had chosen to disguise himself as Poppy instead.

A thread of fear went through him at the thought that Siobhan would see him like this. He could only hope and wish that it didn't look as bad as it felt.

"*Thane!*" Siobhan cried, and he heard her lighter footsteps running full tilt. He also felt a sudden, thick infusion

of dark magic filling the room. She was readying a spell.

But just like Thane, she never had the chance to use her magic against Randall Price. Because before she could let loose with any attacks, he heard the sucking *pop* of an instant transport, and he absolutely knew that Price had left the castle.

A cry of fury and frustration from Siobhan was followed by her warm hands helping him up. He found the bedpost and used it as extra leverage to finally regain a standing position but leaned heavily on the wood.

“Oh, holy gods... Thane - what - what the hell did he do to you?” Siobhan’s words shook, and that boded ill. Now more than ever, Thane didn’t want to look down. But he knew he needed to.

So, he did.

He was instantly sorry. The only damn thing worth seeing in the entire room was the worried but stunning face of the love of his life. Not nearly as pleasant to look upon was the now-empty bed from which Fathom Everett had been abducted... and the twisted, charred, still smoking foot-wide, inches-deep hole in his chest.

“Oh Hecate, oh... *no.....*” Siobhan was running her hand through her hair, pacing rapidly away from him and back again, muttering to herself in a high-pitched, nearly hysterical voice. “*Fuck*, he took her, that psycho-pig of Maze’s goddamn *took* Fathom! And you’re seriously hurt, Thane.” Another cry of frustration. “Come on Erikk, hurry the hell up with those mages!”

“Hey,” Thane said, seriously proud of himself when he managed to not only speak but make his own voice sound relatively steady. “I’ll be okay. I always heal, remember?”

Fate wouldn’t let the Phantom King die. Someone had to do his job, after all. And no one else wanted it.

He just had to admit that he’d never been hurt quite this badly before.

”*How the hell did he even manage this?*” Siobhan demanded in that same too-high voice, gesturing to the wound

and obviously not knowing whether she should touch it, bind it, or not even look at it.

“I don’t know,” he said softly, shaking his head. But it had gone through him like a flashlight cut through darkness. And maybe that was what it was. Victor Maze was made of chaos. He had every kind of magic at his disposal. Maybe he’d figured out something about Thanatos that even the Phantom King hadn’t known. Maybe Thane could be seriously hurt by something *opposite* to what he was. Like light to darkness. *Or like life to death.*

Siobhan ran her hand through her hair again and continued muttering, “Who knows where he’s taken her or what he’s going to do -” She whirled around, swirls of dark, sparkling magic showing up around her for a brief moment as she lost control of it, and it slipped away unused.

“And - ” She looked back up at Thane, coming close once more. “He did a number on you, love.” Her eyes dropped to the gaping, blackened wound that took up a good portion of his chest. She shook her head. “Are we... do we stand a chance against Maze, Thane? I mean - do we *honestly*?”

Thane didn’t dare tempt fate by trying to assure her with a smile, much less his usual cocky grin. Instead, he simply nodded and said, “Sure we do.” And it felt like a lie.

Chapter Thirty

Zeke sped through the ghost dimension as a sentient blue blur with a core of pure gold fire. On either side of the ghost, the mortal realm passed by like the view beyond the blurry windows of a runaway train, indistinct but recognizable. Hope alone carried him at his impossible velocity. Hope. And it was remarkable that it could do so - because he had so little.

The problem was catastrophic, the solution mockingly simple. But sadly, simple did not mean easy. Nor did it mean *likely*.

The Zeke's ghost magic would lack the power to finish killing Faye if it were brought back under his control. The way to bring it back under control was to once again make the *man* inside Zeke stronger than the *ghost*. And the way to do this was by saving his own life.

The only way to heal the wound Randall Price had given him before he snuffed out for good was with a healing spell. Healers were rare, but that wasn't the problem, not for him. While there were very few healers for the *living* in the mortal realm, there were plenty of warlock spells in existence for mending the *undead*.

The problem - the main, big, bad issue with all of this - was that almost without fail, a necessary physical component of undead healing spells was the use of the same object that had caused the mortal wound in the first place. For instance, some undead healing spells might need a silver or gold bullet or an enchanted blade or a drop of poison.... In Zeke's case, the necessary component was the very first nail hammered into the hull of the SS Eastland.

On the day the ship capsized in 1915, sections of the Eastland had been pried apart, drilled apart, and sawed apart so that bodies - some living, most otherwise - could be extracted from the vessel. Zeke recalled the sections that were dismantled, and he knew that one of them had been the ship's oldest hull panel. The nail, along with its surrounding ship material, had been tossed aside, where it rapidly sank twenty

feet down and embedded itself in the river's then-polluted base.

If it wasn't rusted completely away, it would be there still. *Somewhere*. All he needed was the tiniest bit of it for the spell to work.

When he reached the river's edge, he pooled what remained of his strength into two tasks. He rematerialized into solid form on the river walk concrete beside the SS Eastland memorial plaque. Next he spoke the soft, desperate words of a location spell.

And then Zeke Stone performed a perfect head-first swan dive into the murky, secret-filled waters that had seen him do the very same thing more than a century ago.

She was comfortable where she was in that white-out miasma of nothing. She floated, formless, thoughtless. Given a hundred years, she would never be able to properly describe where she was or what she was feeling. Other than - "nothing." Nothing hurt. There was no fear. There were all the colors of a thousand rainbows, and there was nothing but white. And not even really that. Faye was in a realm beyond description - beyond life.

She would have stayed. Given no choice, and not even knowing she should want one, she would have stayed there in the nothing where everything was fine because it didn't exist. She would have stayed, just like everyone had before her.

If not for that distant, needling pain that had started up in her right arm.

It was distracting. She started noticing it. She started *thinking*, and therefore existing again. She had a brain suddenly - and it had a song stuck in it of course, like usual. What was it this time? *Ground control to Major Tom....* It was David Bowie. Space Oddity.

The miasma of white and colors swirled like an oil spill on the ocean. She was at peace here. Except the pain was now in her left leg too. It was still far away, but closer.

She tried to ignore it, tried to stay. Her peaceful brain sing-songed, *And I'm floating in a most peculiar way....*

Wake up, pretty....

She shook her spiritual head.

Something moved through the white oil, disturbing it and sending it into frantic eddies. Her stomach dropped a little. She had a stomach now too, it would seem, as well as a brain.

...better wake up....

No, her new brain thought. She didn't want to.

The pains in her arm and leg grew into pulsing throbs and spread. All four of her limbs hurt now. And her... her chest hurt.

She frowned, her peace finally shattered as she began to fall through the milky rainbow. A voice found her somewhere underneath it, far away from it, and greeted her in dawning awareness. "Wake up, pretty thing."

Faye's eyes blinked open to a world of grounding pain and terrible comprehension. This was the real world. This was life again. It was so *very* uncomfortable... especially compared to the nothing she'd just left behind. She wanted to go back.

Particularly when the grinning, white-eyed face of Randall Price swam blurrily into view.

Faye closed her eyes again, willing it all to go away.

"No, no, no, you'd better wake up now, pretty thing." He laughed.

Faye blinked again, refocusing on Victor Maze's white-eyed lackey.

He leaned in, his laugh turning into a wet chuckle. "You're bleeding," he said, then winked.

It took a few seconds for reality to click fully back into place - and then everything came slamming into Faye's memory like rapid-fire stills from a movie: The Second Circle, Ezekiel Stone, making love on an altar, the blue flames in the

torches, the terrible cold sinking into her, transport magic everywhere, the peace of nothingness, the pain that took her out of it.

And now... *him*.

Faye's gaze slipped from his face to the bloody scalpel he held casually in one hand. With mounting horror, she realized what was causing her pain. She looked down at herself.

Blood had already blossomed from the wounds he'd given her, nearly soaking her clothing through. And now that she was fully aware of her body, she was aware of how blood loss made it feel.

A low queasiness threatened her stomach. Stars floated through her vision, zipping around and popping out of view. Fear, gut-clenching and powerful, somehow got Faye to roll onto her side, affording her a view of her location.

She was at the junction of an alley and the riverwalk right beside the Chicago River. In fact, she recognized this location at once. She was near the memorial plaque for the S.S. Eastland. A red-brick building corner was a few feet to her left, and a streetlamp a few feet beyond that. She tried to use her hands to push herself up from there and found her captor had at some point secured her wrists behind her back. She flexed and unflexed her hands, curling them into fists and pulling.

That was a mistake, she thought as the bindings tightened and her fingers began to go numb.

She had no idea how badly her arms were cut; she couldn't see them. But she could see the wound on her sternum where it peeked out from under her t-shirt. It was clean cut to the bone, and it was bleeding with every beat of her heart.

Her gaze slid further down to the pulsing, bubbling red that appeared and disappeared on the thighs of her jeans. *So, they're the same*, she thought.

Price had just taken the blade and swiped through each body part as if he were checking locations off a list with a

surgeon's tool.

Faye's mind couldn't quite process the senselessness of that, so she concentrated on the bindings around her wrists instead. Not metal. Something like tape, she guessed. It got tighter the more she pulled.

She could try a spell on the bindings when he wasn't paying attention. Until then, she could try to find something sharp.

Dizziness swept over her, momentarily making the ground rock back and forth beneath her. She closed her eyes, took a slow, deep breath through her nose, and curled her knees in toward her chest before rolling the rest of the way over.

Some part of her training must have kicked in. She was on autopilot, her body carrying out tasks and planning that her conscious mind couldn't yet even fully grasp. Within a few seconds, she had rocked back onto her feet and her boots were under her. She stood slowly, sliding heavily along the brick wall of the building on her way up. It hurt like hell; the bricks and mortar sliced further into the wound she already had. But at least she was standing.

"Oh, that's impressive," said the comprehensively insane Price, "That's good, very, very good." He nodded. "Yes, indeed."

What spells did she have that could help? She wasn't a healer. But she could slow her heart down a bit with a warlock spell she'd been taught. And she could mend and tighten her clothes over the wounds, forming compression. Or tourniquets. Sort of.

Faye glared at Price when another tide of nausea rose, but she suppressed it, letting her hatred fuel her willpower. Still, she used the absolutely normal physical reaction to her advantage, turning quickly away from her assailant to pretend to retch.

As she made the sounds, she whispered the words to the spells on her inhaleds and prayed he wouldn't notice if she

stopped bleeding. *There's already so much blood*, she thought, which caused her next retch to be all too real. The blood-stained clothes would provide ample camouflage.

When she'd finished and she felt her clothes mending and tightening and her heart slowing, she pushed herself off the wall with her shoulder, winced at the pain, and turned to fully face Price. One benefit of the warlock spell was that she was calmer now. She was determined to take whatever else he was planning to do to her head-on.

"You're a survivor, pretty thing. You can even get back up without using your hands."

He lifted his chin a little and his smile was back, but this time it was mirthless and cold as he moved closer and leaned in.

"But can you swim without using them?"

He shoved her then, both hands slamming into her middle with tremendous force. He hit her so hard and so fast, it was the same as being punched in the solar plexus without warning, and Faye was engulfed in an agony unequalled. It took her breath away.

She went stumbling back, and her third step hit nothing but air. She was falling. But it was a short fall before the water took her, shockingly cold. With no air in her lungs and no spell on her tongue to free her wrists, Faye began to sink.

She stared wide-eyed up through the water's surface as she descended. The city's skyline, as ever unmatched in its beauty, glimmered like eternal Christmas behind the dark outline of Victor Maze's servant.

Price leaned over the river, and she heard his final words, muffled by the water. "Ooooh no, there's *really* blood in the water now!"

Then the lights faded behind him, and the cold, wet darkness consumed her.

She'd always known she would die in this river.

Chapter Thirty-One

He almost had it. It was practically in his grasp. Within seconds of casting his wide net of magic, he'd sensed the location of the nail as if he were viewing a map top-down and it were pulsing red. He was right; it had traveled along the riverbed an impressive distance over the years, but by some miracle of fortune, at least a good portion of the metal spike yet remained.

He was almost there.

Zeke...

Zeke stopped dead in the river's depths. No water rippled. Despite his solid form, he displaced nothing, as if he still wasn't there. Only an eerie blue glow traveling beneath the river's surface gave away any of its secrets.

Zeke frowned, turning back to look over his shoulder at the wet darkness from which he'd come. Had he...? Had he *imagined* that he'd heard her calling out -

... Zeke....

Faye! His reaction was immediate and powerful. He dropped the magical "net" he'd cast to pin down the nail's location and gathered up his unused power. Then he concentrated solely on Fathom.

But without her concerted effort to speak to him, her thoughts were too distant, too soft, like fireflies in a fog, muted and scattered. The only one that had shone through was his name.

Fathom, he responded, praying she would call out again. *Where are you?*

There was no answer.

Something was wrong. She had sounded weak. And he could *sense* that weakness in her, almost *feel* it through the atmosphere of her mind. They were connected now, whether he wanted them to be or not, thanks to the ghost in him. He could sense her fading. And yet, her heart was hammering

wildly. It, too, was like a firefly in the fog - erratic, fluttering, barely there.

He knew she'd been attacked by his ghost power, but... had he already hurt her this badly? Was Death taking her? Even now?

Faye, where are you? he demanded, speaking the words clearly, concisely, and with a good deal of volume into her thoughts. The moment he received any kind of response to her at all, he was ready to act with his saved magic.

But her own thoughts simply swam away in response, like oil on water, moving out of his reach to become evasive and frustratingly elusive.

Oh, this wasn't right. Something was indeed very, *very* wrong.

Zeke's side began to throb again. He glanced down at it to see that the bleeding had grown worse in Limbo. In that realm, he was nearly dry. And once he was bled dry, it was over. In both worlds.

Zeke gritted his teeth, infuriated. Where the hell was Thane? If Faye was that bad off, why hadn't Thane done something? Or contacted Zeke? *He would have*, he realized. If Thanatos was with Faye and she'd taken a turn for the worse, the Phantom King absolutely would have reached out to Zeke. In fact, he probably would have brought Faye directly to him.

No. Thane wasn't with Faye. And since Thane would never willingly leave the love of Zeke's life at a time like this, then he'd left her *unwillingly*. Which could only mean that someone had taken her. Someone like Randall Price.

Fathom! Zeke called out again, turning full circle under the Chicago River. There was still no reply. The clock ticked. Zeke could almost *hear* it ticking. Dread encapsulated him. He didn't even dare think it. *Is it already... already too-*

Ze... Zeke.

The name was spoken so very softly and so very late, for a split second, Zeke wondered whether he'd simply imagined it. But just in case he didn't - because this was absolutely

everything - he latched onto the response, like a predator hearing his prey in the underbrush just before he begins the chase.

Once he had hold of it, of the sound and the mind behind it, he re-initiated the location spell, focusing it on the precious, priceless heart behind the mind that had called out to him.

In that moment, the deadly nail was triaged to a backburner because death was already there with Faye, and the bastard was all over her. So, Zeke allowed the location spell to home in on its new focus, and when it finished, he was bewildered to find that the shining red, pulsing beacon of her faintly beating heart was, of all places, in the *Chicago-fucking-River*.

In fact, she wasn't far from where he'd first begun his search.

He was already moving. Never before had time been more of an enemy to him than it was in that moment.

Really? a voice in his head asked. It was his own - the voice of his past. *Never?*

Zeke was suddenly jarred in the water as Flashes of the SS Eastland emerged, unbidden. The water around him changed, turning color and temperature, taking on the faint transparency that came with daylight. He was assaulted with sound bits of hellish screams, of wild, frantic splashing, and he suddenly surfaced to find himself surrounded by a river filled with hundreds of heads of beautiful hair and hundreds of lacy dresses, punctuated by the dots of the tiny floating bodies that were their unmoving children.

The onslaught of horrors he'd long-ago suppressed battered at him, playing unchecked through his memories to further delay him.

Panicking now, Zeke felt a deck beneath his feet. He looked down to see that he was sliding across a ship's wooden planks. He heard a terrible groaning and looked back up to see the rope pop loose around a tower of full, heavy traveling trunks.

He knew what was coming, felt the echo of it more than a hundred years later. Even a second time, he could do nothing to stop it.

His death slammed into him full force, the weight of half a dozen trunks sailing across the deck, loosened from their bonds. They hit him with the force of a wrecking ball and pinned him to the railing. His ribs shattered, his head concussed, and his vision went black.

A brief moment of chaos, and he felt the cold of the water next. It engulfed him, shocking at first - and then... *not*.

He opened his eyes to find that he was floating alone in the water, separate from the enormous ship as it slowly and gracefully rolled over like a massive, tired beast wanting to change sleeping positions. Zeke watched the disaster unfold, not unlike the few and the fortunate watched from the sparse lifeboats of the Titanic. The only difference was that he was watching it transpire beneath the water's surface.

And - he was watching a second Ezekiel Stone.

The ghost Zeke's gold-glowing eyes were glued to the other figure, and his brow furrowed with something like... loss. And pain. He was transfixed by the man he once was.

The other Ezekiel pulled himself out from beneath the weight of the trunks as the water took hold of them, making them light enough to ease his escape. Only he didn't actually pull himself out. Not really. Zeke could see that now.

The other Ezekiel had only *separated* himself. As his lifeless body remained where it was, slowly sinking to the river's bed with the objects that had killed him, a clueless and newly formed ghost Ezekiel swam hurriedly to the water's surface. Then he dove back down again. One after another, he took hold of struggling, drowning women and with strength he should not have possessed, he dragged them through the chaos-boiling water to the surface.

Five times. Six. Seven....

The new ghost swam through terrible tangles of people scrambling upward, jumbled and turned around. Some people

used the struggling bodies of others for leverage, stepping on their shoulders and heads, drowning them in the process. Some let go of their children, hoping the children would at least float to safety as their own heavy skirts and corsets took them further down.

Eight times. Nine. Ten.

Young Zeke found and grabbed whoever he could in the disorganized, terrified fray and saw them to the surface. But most of the people on the ship were just like him - killed instantly by falling furniture and trapped within the lower decks of the submerged ship.

Eleven. Twelve.... All the while, the newly formed ghost continued searching endlessly for the one he wanted to save most of all, not realizing that she had never boarded the boat to begin with.

She wasn't in that water. She was safe.

Zeke watched himself in this confused afterlife desperation. He looked on as his younger ghost defied nature, logic, and reason - and even death itself - for selfless love. It was the first time he'd ever witnessed what actually transpired that morning. It was the first time he'd seen his own death, to say nothing of his own dead body.

Why was he seeing it now? Why was the past taking shape around him, filling the emptiness with movement and sound, why was it happening at *this* time, of all times?

They say your whole life flashes before your eyes when you die.

He'd heard the maxim. It hadn't happened for him, though. He'd entered a post-death state without ceremony of any kind. He didn't even realize he was dead until later.

So maybe... maybe it was happening now. Because now, he really was dying.

And Zeke's "whole" life was right there in that scene before him. Really, it was everything that had ever mattered to him. All he had ever wanted was to save the woman he loved. To know she was safe.

But she's not.

*And Zeke, she is in that water. Right now. **She's not safe at all.***

Zeke half-growled, half-screamed in absolute anguish, bringing the heels of his palms to his eyes to press them painfully inward. *No. No, **no!*** He wasn't back *there*. *He was here*. He wasn't *then*, *he was now*.

It had happened. It had killed him. Along with more than eight-hundred others.

But right now, another innocent was in the killing grasp of this god-forsaken waterway. And he needed to escape death one more time to save her.

He dropped his hands and blinked in the murky depths, glancing all around again. The SS Eastland was gone. He was once more alone.

Even fully submerged, the water did not truly touch him. He wasn't wet, not like he had been on that fateful morning. Zeke the ghost was *trapped* by the river's curse, but by the same token, it had none of the usual powers over him. In fact, he had powers over the river.

His eyes widened again as the realization struck him. He could have been controlling the damn thing all along! Not to mention the bloody wound in his side! It was *blood!* There was *water* in blood! Why hadn't that occurred to him sooner?

Because it's the Eastland nail, he answered himself. The spike was killing all aspects of him, including his ability to think.

He couldn't heal the wound. But he could damn well slow down the bleeding. Especially while he was not only *close* to the river - but *walking along the bottom of it!*

So, he did.

He moved. He slowed his bleeding. And he used the water to speed ever faster toward the pulsing beacon calling to him through the river's shadowy distance.

I'm here, Fathom. I'm coming.

It was the only thing she could think of doing - calling out to him with her mind.

Zeke.

She knew it was possible. He'd spoken directly into hers earlier. Maybe they were connected enough. Maybe he would hear her.

At the very least, if nothing else, she would die knowing she'd in some way spoken her favorite word - because it belonged to the man... with whom she'd fallen in love.

She almost smiled when she realized as much.

There would be no hate or regret to follow her out of this life. On her mind and in her heart, she wanted only him. Her beautiful ghost lover. Her enigmatic, complicated, selfless, and brave as hell Ezekiel Stone.

Faye blinked and frowned when something moved to her right in the water. She slowly turned to look, her moves sluggish with secured hands and a drained body. But there was nothing there. *I'm hallucinating*, she realized. *Seeing things as my mind starts to go.*

Fathom knew she wouldn't be able to stop herself from inhaling soon. The burn, the undeniable urge to draw air into her lungs, was becoming increasingly painful. There were old brain commands kicking in. Old Brain commands couldn't be ignored.

And she knew that once she did, that would be it.

Another blurred shape swam through the darkness of the water, this one in her left periphery. She automatically turned to get a better look, but again - there was nothing there. Just water, murk, and bits of soaked, floating debris.

Very well, she thought. She was losing focus now. She hadn't been able to stop the bleeding. She'd already been drained by some unseen force in the Second Circle. She was now beyond weak. Her heartbeat *too* slowly, and she knew her blood pressure had sunk too far.

So had *she*.

When her tied hands at her back gently bumped the slimy bottom of the Chicago River, she thought of how she was *fathoms* down, and the irony of it all. She closed her eyes.

One last time, she called out to the man who was her own magnificent Monster.

...*Zeke*....

It was the last fleeting thought she had before she opened her eyes and prepared to inhale.

And that was when she saw them. *People*. All around her.

There were dozens of them, each surrounded by eerie blue light, all of them watching her with glowing yellow-gold eyes. There were men, women, and children in all manner of dress. She knew what they were.

At the sight of them, there was no fear for Fathom. There was not really even any surprise. In that tiny fraction of a second, she almost felt as if she knew them.

In a way, she did.

And then she parted her lips and inhaled.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Faye parted her lips and inhaled -

Just as Zeke slid his arm around her waist and pulled her against his chest to slant his lips over hers. When she inhaled, the ghost rider filled her lungs with air, fresh, pure, and life-giving.

He'd reached her with literally no time to spare. The moment he claimed her lips and pulled her into his embrace felt like disarming a bomb with a second to go or grasping the wrist of a hapless cliff dangler just as they let go.

Whatever strength had allowed her to call out to him, to slow her heartbeat, and to survive to that moment had become his *own* godsend that night. It was the greatest gift a man could receive.

Zeke exercised his power over the water in the river, splitting the hydrogen from the oxygen as if he were a living, breathing bolt of lightning. In the process, he ionized the remaining water around them both.

At first, he felt Faye startle in his grasp, surprised by the sudden contact, and no doubt equally surprised by the unexpected supply of oxygen within her grasp. She went still in that momentary shock, every muscle in her body bunching up. But the fundamental need to breathe naturally won out, and she relaxed against him in no time. She continued to inhale, accepting her first under-water breath as one that, rather than kill her, saved her life.

If the night's events hadn't been so calamitous, Zeke might have smiled against Fathom's lips just then. Because he came to recognize something so profound, it literally left his skin crackling with goosebumps. As Faye relaxed and trusted him to give her what she needed, Zeke realized that more than a hundred years after he'd first set about this very same task, he was *finally* completing it. He was, at long last, saving the woman he loved from drowning in this river.

Zeke reached around Fathom to take hold of the tape that had been used to secure her hands behind her back. He

shredded it and grasped her wrists gently, knowing they would be sore. She was hurt in so many ways, his sweet, kind, selfless angel. She'd been knocked around, sliced up, kidnapped, nearly drowned. As he thought of this and Fathom pulled her wrists out of his hands to place her palms on his chest and grab onto his shirt for all she was worth, Zeke felt several powerful things at once:

He felt a low, boiling fury. It was like nothing he'd ever felt before. It wasn't explosive or rash, neither was it fast to burn away. Rather, it was a steady and pure loathing, a need like a human's need for food and water or a vampire's need for blood. The latter was undoubtedly more accurate. Because there was simply no scenario in existence that would end that day without Zeke first exacting retribution for what had happened to his girl.

He felt *unimaginable* reparation. Regardless of what it meant for him, despite the fact that it might very well be the literal *end* of him, Zeke was filled with a sense of relief, of respite and fulfillment so strong, he was partly afraid that it was all a dream. The fact that she'd been right *there* when she'd hit the water and not further down or in a different river altogether, the fact that she'd possessed the faculty of mind to call out to him with her thoughts, the miracle that he'd made it to her in that irrefutably precious nick of time - it was all that he had ever wanted. Ever. This, right here, was everything that Ezekiel Stone had ever really wanted out of his existence. There was nothing greater than this. And there was no one better than Fathom Everett.

But also, with building contention, Zeke felt just plain strange.

He chalked it up to the ionized water. The creation of negatively charged ions was what happened when you separated the oxygen and hydrogen in water. And he'd assumed it was this charged water that caused a tingling to spread over his skin. He didn't have to open his own eyes to know that his aura was also changing. It colored the world beyond his lids, shifting it from blue to green, then yellow, and finally to bright white.

But this static-like sensation wasn't dissipating. There was no evening-out as the ions found other things to bond with. The energy was only growing stronger.

He could also feel that they were rising; the river was lifting the couple toward the air and the night. He didn't have to do it himself; the water swirled around them like a liquid tornado, and as it did, the cold currents in the river were inexplicably replaced by warmer ones.

Suddenly, amidst the millions of bubbles the vortex released, the static-like sensation on Zeke's skin literally materialized, coalescing into plasma. He opened his eyes. All at once, thin ropes of bright-white electricity wrapped around Zeke's arms, legs, and middle like snakes or twine.

The development was beyond startling, and Zeke's knee-jerk instinct was to break his kiss with Faye and recoil, putting distance between them for fear that she would be electrocuted. But... the voltage-laden spirals didn't actually *hurt* him. Nor did they seem to hurt Faye. There was no paralysis, no burning. Just... a strangeness.

It was warm and new, and the feel of the lightning-cables wrapped gently around his body was more akin to donning clothing fresh from the dryer on a bitter cold day than anything else. He closed his eyes again, for the first time ever deciding that he would simply let fate do what it wanted with him. He'd accomplished the one thing he had ever truly wanted to do.

Nothing else mattered. Not now.

They rose faster now, propelled by the steam-creating clash of hot water against cold. When they broke the surface and Zeke felt night air slam into them, it came with the waterfall susurrus of boiling bubbles, crackling electricity - and men's voices calling out in surprise.

"What the - back, *back!*"

"Holy shit, get back from the water's edge!"

Zeke slowly broke their kiss. Faye blinked her eyes open, exhaling a shaky breath. All around them, the world turned in rainbow spirals and waterfall prisms shot through with whip-

like ropes of electricity. Though he knew she was weak from blood loss and the damage his ghost had done to her, Faye gazed upon it all through eyes that rapidly grew from heavily lidded to open wide with stark wonder.

She was shocked enough that she squirmed in Zeke's grasp, turning right and left, attempting to take it all in. *What's... what the hell is....*

He could hear her thoughts, bewildered and afraid. But she wasn't afraid for herself; it was fear for him that filled her when she turned back to him and gazed mutely at the bright white light surrounding him.

Zeke? she asked, her voice clear in his mind now. Her brow was furrowed, despite the highlighted wonder in her eyes. *Are you... are you okay?*

Zeke smiled down at her. If this was what it felt like for a ghost to finally be snuffed out of existence once and for all, well - there were worse ways to die. The strangest thing was, he felt absolutely fine. He felt better than he had in a very long time, in fact.

I want to say yes, he told her, his internal voice teasing. *But you'll know if I'm lying.*

She became further alarmed at this.

Zeke, what's happening? she demanded. He followed her gaze as she noticed the people on the riverwalk. Thanatos and Siobhan were there, along with the Winter sovereigns, and a pair of women he didn't recognize. For some strange reason, the two women felt familiar to Zeke. Like long, lost family. There were a few members of the Sirius clan there as well; he knew them solely because they worked in Chicago.

And every single one of Zeke's own men was there - armed to the teeth.

Here to help with Randall Price, he realized.

When he'd come out of the river, rising like a liquid volcano of rainbow-electric steam and boiling fury, the lot of them had scrambled back from the river's edge, but they remained watching, vigilant and weapon-ready. The four

sovereigns and the pair of women Zeke didn't recognize remained closer to the water than the others, clearly leaders. One of the women was strawberry-blonde, the other brunette. Both were attractive and dressed in jeans and leather, ready to fight.

When Faye processed the people there - the wardens, the sovereigns, Zeke's "employees," - her fear dissipated substantially. *They're all here to help us?* her thoughts wondered. He heard them.

"They're here to help," he reassured softly.

Rather, he *meant* to say it softly. His tone was still gentle, but his voice came out deep and echoed with copious amounts of magic, as if the electricity swirling around them were actual power fueling the strength of his words.

Faye looked back up at him but made a surprised sound and clung closer to Zeke when the swirling lightning-power around him buzzed into erratic static, changing yet again. The zapping rainbow-light began to coalesce, thinning out to form a prismatic bubble that spread around he and Fathom both. Once it had, it separated, splitting right down the middle, and encased them each separately, shrinking until each bubble of light was skin-tight, making it appear as if their skin glowed.

Zeke blinked, staring at the uniquely beautiful glow around Fathom. It was stunning. But... what the hell *was* it? What had he done to her now? And.... *Wait. I know this*, he thought, brow furrowed. It looked familiar to him. The way the light ebbed and flowed throughout the aura-

Aura. "It's a ghost aura," he whispered aloud. As they had before, his words rang out with ghostly power, bewitching and potent.

They were *both* encased in brand new ghost auras, the likes of which Zeke was certain no one had ever seen. What did that mean? Was Faye... a ghost? Had he not reached her in time after all?

As he wondered this, his eyes traveled her glowing form from head to toe, marveling at the pastel rainbow-hues within

the light she shed. So of course, he immediately noticed that her wounds were *gone*. The blood had vanished, and the clothing was whole.

He knew Faye had taken care of mending the clothes herself - *that's my girl* - and the water might have washed some of the blood away. But there would have been new traces as her living heart continued to pump life-giving fluids through the wounds. And there were none.

Was she simply bled dry? Was he right - and she really was a ghost?

No, he thought. *She wouldn't be breathing*. Zeke didn't need to breathe. Hence, she wouldn't either.

"I'm not a ghost," Faye suddenly said aloud, causing Zeke's head to snap back up. Her voice sounded strange. It sounded *beautiful*, but strange. It was too powerful for the gentle tone she was using. Just like a ghost's voice would.

"Zeke," she said, her smile bewildered, her head shaking. "I'm *healed*." She gave a small laugh. "I really am."

Ezekiel Stone went completely still in the wake of the sound of that laugh. He had never heard a more beautiful thing. Not ever.

"You healed us both." Faye leaned forward to lock eyes and peer deep. "I think you healed us... down to our souls."

Zeke tried hard to process what she was saying. But it made no sense. He'd abandoned the nail in order to give her literal breath and rescue her from the water. At the very least, she should be dying from the inadvertent ghost-draining he'd set off in the Second Circle.

What had he done that would cause *this*?

The auras around them both grew stronger then, as if someone were turning up a cosmic light switch. When the light became blinding, Zeke naturally shut his eyes. When he sensed the light had faded and opened them again, he and Faye were standing on the riverwalk, feet on dry land, surrounded by wardens and sovereigns.

“You did it, Z,” said someone nearby. Both he and Faye looked over.

Thanatos was standing closer to the pair than the others, his hands on his hips. The man seemed to be slowly bleeding - and *smoking* - from some sort of wound beneath an obviously freshly donned thermal shirt and leather jacket. But his head was shaking, and his handsome face wore a shit-eating grin. “You lucky son of a bitch. You *did* it, man.” Thane laughed, slapping Zeke on the back with slightly-harder-than-necessary force.

He shook his head some more, chuckling. “I can’t believe I didn’t figure this shit out a long time ago.”

“Figure what shit out?” someone behind him asked. Zeke vaguely recognized the voice. But his head was spinning at the moment.

Thane paused, glancing back. “Don’t you get it? Randall Price screwed himself plan-wise when he tossed Faye in the river and made Zeke change course,” Thane mused. When he faced Zeke again, he was still grinning broadly. His voice was soft but bewildered when he leaned forward, clasped Zeke by the shoulder, and said, “He *gave* you the out you had been waiting for, Z. After a *century*. He fucking dropped it in your *lap*.”

“Dropped what in his lap?” asked the same voice again. Zeke now recognized the one full of questions as Antonio, one of the younger boys who worked for him. He was a good kid with a kind heart, and Zeke employed him more to watch over him than anything else.

Thane glanced back at the boy and explained, “He gave him the chance to save the woman he loves from the river.”

Comprehension washed over Zeke, spreading through him like a cosmic morphine drip.

Beside Thane, Kristopher Scaul whistled low and swore under his breath in amazement. “You beat the curse by saving Fathom - and now the river has no hold over you, Zeke. Now *you* have all the power.”

Zeke was in a weird state of half accepting what they were telling him and half just not believing it. But when he let go of Fathom and looked down at the wound in his side on dumbfounded instinct, he saw only clean skin, whole and unmarred, both in this world and in Limbo.

There was no wound to speak of.

The river has no hold over you... The nail from the S.S. Eastland could no longer snuff him out. And having no wound meant he wasn't dying. Which meant Faye was safe from his wayward ghost powers trying to kill her.

But he still didn't understand - why was *she* healed? And why was she surrounded by that aura?

"That little rat isn't going to be happy about what he did here," said Scaul, shaking his head, his grin matching Thane's.

A touch more seriously, as if she was well aware of just how dangerous the "little rat" could be, the strawberry blonde woman Zeke didn't recognize added, "No. He probably isn't."

"Which is why you're not supposed to be here," said Thane, his smile rapidly gone, his silver eyes flashing. "But you don't listen. Your boyfriend is going to raise half my dead when he finds out you're here." He turned his attention to the dark-haired woman beside her. "And yours will raise the other half."

"You literally asked for me to come," said the dark-haired woman, hands on her hips.

Thane's eyes widened. "Not *alone!* Not without your goddamn clan!"

"They're busy," said the blonde. "Dealing with some shit. And the healer doesn't travel without backup. But..." Her voice trailed off when she looked back at Zeke and Fathom. "It looks like you won't need to heal anyone after all, Angel."

That's the healer, thought Zeke. The woman with the dark hair named Angel was the famed mate of Jacob Crow, the Monsters clan's second. She was the rarity who had no doubt been summoned by Thane to heal Fathom's wounds. *Which means that woman beside her is the dragon.* His gaze slid to

the strawberry blonde. Before becoming a dragon, she'd been a Withered - the only female Withered any of them had met so far. *She's Antares Mace's girl, Annaleia.* Zeke had heard of her too. He'd also heard what the woman had gone through at the hands of Randall Price.

No wonder. No wonder she wasn't smiling at the thought of him.

"We'll escort you back," said Poppy, nodding at Siobhan. "Thane's right. The sooner, the better." Siobhan took Angel's hand and Poppy took Annaleia's.

"Ready?" Siobhan asked.

The women nodded - and just like that, all four of them vanished.

A tense beat later, Thanatos bent at the waist, bracing himself on his knees. "Oh, thank the gods," he whispered. There were still tendrils of smoke emanating from his midsection and whatever wound he bore beneath his shirt. "I seriously didn't want to find out if I could take on the chaos god's mad minion and two of the Monsters clan members in the same damned night."

Chapter Thirty-Three

“There’s still something I don’t understand.”

Faye glanced over at the ghost rider sitting beside her on the picnic blanket and waited for him to finally mention the thing she knew had been weighing on him.

They had placed the blanket in a clearing in the shadow of a marble sculpture of a man with wings. Beneath the man’s boots was a plane of water, and there was space between the water and the man, as if he were rising above it. In his arms was a child who clung to him tightly.

Faye watched as Zeke got distracted, and his gaze slid upward from her to the sculpture that shadowed them. It was approximately the hundredth time since they’d first arrived that he’d done so. Not that she could blame him. The sculpture *was* supposed to be *him, after all.*

An inscription on a plaque beneath the sculpture proved as much. In beautiful scrollwork, it read: *“August, 1915... Here lies the hero Ezekiel Stone, a man who sacrificed everything - to save everyone.”* Below the inscription was a famous quote from an equally famous Charles Dickens novel: *“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.”*

“What is it you don’t understand?” Faye asked, grinning when he suddenly looked sheepishly caught-out for staring at his own monument of honor. There wasn’t much left of the meal they’d shared, a single piece of cheese and a single cracker on a plate were all that remained aside from her can of soda. She took the slice of cheese and placed it on the cracker before offering it to him. He shook his head, and she shoved the entire thing into her mouth.

“You already know,” he said, shaking his head as Faye realized the bite of cracker and cheese was too big for her mouth. She couldn’t close her lips around it. Unfortunately, that made her laugh - and cracker crumbs went flying.

She gasped at what she’d done, feeling blood flush her cheeks in embarrassment, but that only sent more food

careening from her mouth. Which made her laugh more.

Slightly mortified, but mostly amused, Faye covered her mouth and just decided to finish laughing, salvaging what she could from the bite with a helpless chew and swallow.

Zeke grabbed the soda can from the blanket and produced a napkin from nowhere, holding them both out for her. Faye was beyond relieved to find that, rather than disgust, his expression was filled with mirth.

“Obviously, you’re going to make me say it.” He said. “Since I’m the only one who can talk at the moment.”

Faye simply nodded emphatically and used the napkin to clean her lips.

Zeke sighed. “All right. Faye, I understand what happened with me. But why...” he hesitated, obviously re-thinking how to word what he was going to say. She already knew what he wanted to ask. She already knew what was confusing him.

She took another long pull from her magically chilled soda and studied his profile from above the lip of her soda can.

The aura of white he’d donned in the river had long since dissipated, as had the glowing eyes. Now his eyes were the stark green that were so uniquely his own.

Faye had no doubts that the aura would return under the right circumstances. She knew those eyes of his could once more take on that fevered glow. He was still Ezekiel Stone - the ghost rider. It was just that a few things were different now.

The Chicago River that had seen his death so long ago no longer dictated where Zeke could and could not roam. He was free to walk the earth as he wished, which was why she’d brought him here, to the cemetery where her great-great-great-*something* grandmother had built a monument to him a century ago.

The river also no longer controlled when Zeke could assume solid form. Which was why he appeared quite solid and non-ghostly right now.

At the moment, he was resting back on the blanket, braced by one strong arm behind him, the other arm draped easily over a bent knee. He peered down at the blanket, but she knew he wasn't really seeing it. He was lost in thought, trying to figure out how to ask her about what had happened to her at the river without making it sound as if he were ungrateful for it.

"You want to know why I was healed when you were healed, and... why I was glowing," she finally said, choosing to spare him and do the work for him.

Zeke's head snapped up, his green eyes catching hers. He didn't need to confirm her words; his grateful expression said everything.

"Well, it's like this," she said as she stood up and gestured for him to do so as well. She nodded at the blanket so he would get one side and they could fold it. But Zeke simply waved his hand over it, and the blanket vanished.

She gave him a wry smile and shook her head. His ability to call anything he wanted forth from Limbo and send it back again on a ghostly whim was something she would never get used to. Limbo was a bottomless well of supplies because much of it was in essence a carbon copy of the mortal world. Hence, anything one could need or want in one world could be found in the other. Granted, what he called forth could not remain in the mortal realm longer than the length of a night, give or take a few hours. So, there were risks. For instance, donning clothing from Limbo carried the risk of suddenly appearing naked in public when the time was up.

Faye shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket and turned on her heel toward the path that would lead them both out of the cemetery. Zeke joined her, walking beside her in silence.

"The truth is... something happened to me in the Second Circle," she told him, speaking slowly because she wasn't quite sure how to say what she wanted to say, and it was far too important to get wrong. "I think I was further along than

anyone realized. Including myself.” She paused, remembering the nothingness miasma of color and white and nonexistence.

“I think... Well, I think I may have actually died,” she finally admitted, giving words to the realization at last.

Beside her, she could see Zeke’s head turn toward her. He slowed down, and she could even see the glow return to his eyes in her peripheral vision. *I was right about that*, she mused. But she didn’t meet his gaze. Instead, she kept walking so she could keep talking.

“I went somewhere, Zeke. Some place that was nowhere. I felt something that was nothing. I have no idea how to describe it, and as long as I live, I don’t think I’ll figure it out. I just know that I was in the greatest amount of peace a human can know. There was no pain, no fear, no - *nothing*. I wasn’t even aware that I was *experiencing* anything... until I... came back to life, I guess.”

Now Faye did look over at him.

Just as she’d thought, his eyes had taken on a supernatural cast, shedding illumination that resembled moonlight. It was stunning; he appeared both beautiful and terrifying. And for a beat, Fathom was back in that alley where she’d first seen him several nights ago, staring mutely at the man and the monster that would end up rocking her world.

But then she shook herself and gestured to her own eyes. “You’re going ghost,” she said with a smile.

Zeke tilted his head a little in understanding and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were back to green. Still beautiful - just not *quite* as obvious to passersby as irises that doubled as searchlights.

Faye gave him an approving smile and nod as the two continued walking.

But as they reached the gates of the cemetery, his hand on her arm stopped her short, drawing her back around.

“Faye... I...” He shook his head slightly. She could see his jaw tense, teeth clenched tightly underneath. His brow was deeply furrowed with emotion. “I swear, I never meant -”

“Zeke, please,” she said, taking his hands in hers and holding them tight. “You did absolutely nothing wrong. You had no idea anything like that would happen. You had *no* idea that your powers would react the way they did, and the moment you realized it *was* happening, you acted. Everything you did, you did right. You’re just...” She broke off and smiled, laughing softly. “You’re a hell of a lot stronger than you thought.”

He always was, she added mentally. The monument in that cemetery was proof of that.

When he didn’t respond but the tension in his form seemed to dissipate slightly, Faye slowly let go of his hands. He straightened, took a very human-like deep breath, and opened the cemetery gate for her.

“I came back,” she reiterated, continuing her story as they exited the graveyard and re-locked the gate behind them. Zeke didn’t stop to look back at the gate as she had expected him to. He’d wanted to visit for so long, but as of tonight, he no longer cared about the cemetery or the monuments within it. His attention was hard-focused on her.

“And when I did,” she went on, “I had touched something sacred. I’d been somewhere that very few ever come back from. And of those who do come back from that place? I’m pretty sure I’m the only one who was sent there by a ghost.”

Faye had thought about it all day. She’d thought about her healed wounds and the figures she’d seen in the water just before Zeke saved her. She’d thought about her strange ghost-like aura....

But most importantly, she’d thought long and hard about what she felt swirling around inside her now that hadn’t been there before. It was strong. It was waiting and ready to be tapped.

In the end, she reasoned that what had happened came down to this: Fathom Everett had been killed by a ghost who had fully possessed her - in every sense of the word - and *then*, she’d come back from the dead.

If she'd stayed dead, she would have become a ghost.

But sometimes people died and came back. And that's what she had done. She didn't stay dead, so she didn't become a ghost. She came back as something else. Something *unique*.

She needed to tell Zeke about all of it. He needed to know why even now, he couldn't read the thoughts moving through her mind. He was at full strength as a ghost, yet she was capable of blocking him out without him becoming the wiser. She let him skim her surface thoughts but kept the rest to herself. It was empowering, but she wasn't doing it to be secretive. She was doing it so that she could break the news to him carefully.

The people on the street had thinned out with the waning day, and now it was only Zeke and Fathom who chanced the lack of light and the less-traveled Chicago streets and alleys. Ironically, Faye had never felt safer.

Look up.

Faye stopped walking and looked up. Across the street, in the shadows of an alley, a glowing, willowy figure stared back at her. A woman dressed in bell bottom jeans, a tie-dye tee-shirt, and a suede leather vest with fringe, pointed silently at something. Faye followed the line of her arm to the end of the street, where the darkness of twilight turned deeper. A streetlight wasn't working; she could see its darker shape amidst the shadows. Either the bulb was burned out or it had been shattered.

"Zeke, stop." She touched his arm and came to a halt. "There's trouble ahead."

Zeke stopped walking, glancing at her. "What?"

She didn't have time to explain further. "We have to get out of here now." They needed to transport.

"And leave before the party's even started?" came a familiar and much-hated voice from somewhere in the darkness. Faye's heart rate kicked into high gear, her senses pricking. That swirling, waiting, *something* deep inside her rose up a little higher, like a beast coming to attention.

“That would be a very real shame,” said Randall Price. “Besides, one should never leave before a job is finished.”

A spray of bullets erupted in the night, the rat-a-tat-tat so very different from the way it sounded in films, yet far louder - because the guns were going off at close range, and from all around them.

Faye had exactly *zero* time to react to the assault. That was the thing about bullets.

So that new power inside her that had been just waiting - it reacted for her, throwing up a prismatic-white shield around her and Zeke just as the first trigger was pulled. At once, the bullets struck the defensive shell in a spray of crackling and thumping, striking the shield ten at a time - twenty - fifty - and each bullet was subsequently absorbed by the shield's mysterious form of magic.

Faye wasn't thinking. This was instinct. It was now a part of the new person she'd become.

Undoubtedly acting on instinct as well, Zeke reached for Faye, and she knew he intended to transport them away.

“No, Zeke.” Her words were but a whisper, yet somehow they echoed within their shared shield, louder even than the din of lead striking a magic wall. Zeke froze, his hand wrapped around Faye's wrist, his body and eyes both glowing bright white in full, brilliant ghost mode.

“Just watch,” she told him, suddenly smiling. She felt giddy inside, utterly at odds with her external situation. But she'd been wanting to show him this.

She straightened and turned as the firing stopped, the shooters obviously coming to realize that their weapons were doing no good. Up ahead of them, from beneath the broken streetlight stepped Randall Price, their bespeckled nemesis. He was looking better than he had before, both eyes clear and green, his clothing clean, his stance straight-backed and certain.

“It was my blood, wasn't it?” Faye asked, honestly not really caring.

Price tilted his head to one side like a dog trying to figure her out.

“It was my blood that made you whole again,” Faye continued. “Each time you hack and slash, your pain goes away for a little while. That’s the hell that Victor Maze has placed you in.” She paused for effect, letting her words and the fact that she’d figured him out sink in. “Isn’t it?”

Randall Price stared at her. His gaze narrowed. “So, you’ve figured out my transformations,” he said, almost conversationally. “But I’ve yet to figure out yours.” His eyes traveled over the shield that still protected her and Zeke. As he looked her over, others stepped out of the shadows around them. A dozen large men came into the dim light, revealing their hulking frames. Faye glanced at the closest ones, not wanting to take her attention from Price for too long.

But what she found upon closer inspection was a dozen men who had obviously been haphazardly and cruelly sewn together from the corpses of other humans. And... non-human animals.

Dear God, she thought, at once repulsed. *What the hell....*

Then she realized that was why they hadn’t been afraid to shoot at her from all directions. They hadn’t been concerned with striking one another. If they did hit each other, it wouldn’t matter. They were already dead. But not even truly dead. Just dug up, tragically reconstructed, and animated with chaos magic.

“You and your owner are truly something,” she said softly, shaking her head. “Every time you show up, you show up with a new, more disgusting surprise.”

Price shrugged and looked down at the ground as if slightly uncomfortable or even chagrined. However, whatever amount of shame he may have experienced passed over his features and was replaced by a smirk so rapidly, Faye wondered if she’d imagined it.

“Well... I have a surprise of my own, Mr. Price,” said Faye. She could feel a hush come over her. It moved through

her, certain and steady, and spread throughout the space inside the shield - then moved beyond it. "I want to thank you. I've always had trouble being social."

It was true. Ezekiel had been right; the world had always overwhelmed Faye. And an overwhelmed person did not easily meet new people or make good impressions.

"But thanks to what you did last night, you got that fresh infusion of psychotic evil to recharge your rotting corpse of a shell - and I was able to come out of mine." She grinned, laughing softly. "My shell, that is. Randall Price? I'd like to introduce you to a few of my new friends."

She lifted her hands palm-up, gesturing to the spaces around them.

From the same shadows through which the sewn-together *Frankenstein's Monster* golems had stepped, there was new movement. Shadows separated from shadows, shades of darkness deepened and separated from other darkness. Those separated shapes began to whisper. A hissing, eerie chorus of voices slid together, slipping and sliding throughout the street and its surrounding alleys. The whisper grew in volume and was joined by a low, rolling rumble that vibrated the cement and tarmac beneath their feet.

The divided shapes drew closer and gradually took on a lighter color, shifting from black to charcoal, to blue-gray. And then they began to glow. Each form, tall or short, male or female, emanated its own eerie, wavering light. Until a dozen figures in the illuminated wrappings of the dead stepped out of the gloom and into full view.

They were then joined by a dozen more.

The specters multiplied... two dozen... three. Each wraith, each apparition a testament to another time and place - and another atrocity.

These were not ghosts. Those were too rare, indeed.

These were *anime*, the unsettled spirits of those whose lives had been unnaturally cut short. These spirits were not cursed, they were not beholden to any rivers or roads,

buildings or woods. They were instead shades of the purest, most frightening form. These were phantoms.

And they existed for one reason only. They were *angry*.

That anger was palpable. It rolled off the phantoms in waves of needle-like static that abraded the skin and buzzed the brain. It opened up something deep inside, something Old Brain and paralyzing. *Fear*.

Faye was immune to this fury-fueled terror. But she knew it was there all the same.

One anime alone let loose on the world could cause madness in a hundred men. But ten? Twenty? What would befall humanity if a hundred livid, wrathful phantoms were suddenly given the go-ahead to mount their revenge on the living?

What of several hundred? Or a thousand?

As more and more anime filed into the street to surround them, Zeke turned a slow circle. Faye could hear his astounded whisper beside her. "*Hooly Mary mother of -*" His stupefied mutterings faded into silent bemusement. But she wasn't done.

She kept her eyes on the man wearing glasses. "I feel sorry for you, Mr. Price," she told him, her soft voice carrying with crystal-clear, magic-laden clarity. "I think you were born with a badly-wired brain. And then you were killed when a plane landed on you. Except, when *you* came back, you weren't given the chance I was given. You were taken by Victor Maze instead. And the chaos god fucked you up."

She wasn't going to mince these words. That was exactly what had happened.

"You did bad things," she said, shaking her head. All around her, the phantoms listened and watched, waiting for the slightest indication that they had permission from their leader to tear into a few minds. "And you dug that hole. And now?"

She paused, seeing Randall Price for the absolutely screwed, entirely insane undead man he was. "Well, I don't think you chose the existence you're leading. No one wants to suffer." She knew that first-hand. It was what she dealt with

every day - people who were suffering. She'd made a pledge to put an end to as much of it as possible.

"You can't see a way out of it," she said. "Can you?"

Price didn't answer. But the smirk on his face was gone. She'd gotten to him.

"I'll tell you what, Price. If you ever decide you've had enough of going blind with dead-man cataracts and a body decomposing around you but you're not quite ready to cease existing, I might be able to do something to help you."

Zeke stirred beside Faye, no doubt surprised as hell by the offer. But at the same time, she knew he was fully aware she was serious. After all, if anyone ever needed proof that Fathom Everett had a way with the dead, all they would have to do is look at what was happening around the two of them right now.

Or take a look at her boyfriend.

Price was still silent. But now he sneered - as if he knew for a fact there was no way in the nine hells that was going to happen.

So, Faye called it good. For now.

She lowered her tone and allowed more of that power moving through her to do its job, lighting fire to her eyes and carrying her next words with a potent dose of warning. "In the meantime, *I suggest you get the hell out of Chicago, Price.*" She paused a beat for effect. "*You're not wanted here.*"

The spirits in the street rushed forward, their immaterial forms blurring with supernatural speed. Almost as one, they swarmed the golems and their master. They had little effect on the golems other than to take them out of commission as henchmen. But as the first of the anime slipped right through *Price's* body, raking over his mind and soul in the process, the bespeckled man screamed.

After the third phantom rushed him, Price fell to his knees. They'd only gotten started, but Faye knew they were already unleashing a painful devastation upon the previously destroyed man. She willed them to hold back.

Price slowly looked up. One lens of his glasses was shattered. A lock of hair hung limp over his forehead. He stared at Faye long and hard through green eyes that had grown lighter - whiter. Then he spoke a single word of recall, and transported himself away.

A few seconds later, each of his golems vanished one by one.

Until Faye was alone in the street with her ghost rider boyfriend - and several hundred to a thousand anime spirits.

She turned to those closest to her and met their gazes. She slowly nodded. As one ominous, glowing mass, they nodded back.

And dissipated into the night.

Epilogue

(One week later)

Faye was a necromancer.

Zeke still wasn't certain how it had happened, but somehow the events of a week ago had given her a powerful gift and transformed her forever.

It had taken him a while to settle with the development.

For one thing, the Phantom King showed up right after the anime-Price fiasco. Hands on hips, silver eyes flashing, he'd taken one look at Fathom and then a slow, deep breath. Then he'd shaken his head.

"Son of a bitch," he'd muttered, staring at Faye as if he could read her very soul. And probably, he could. "An honest-to-gods necromancer."

Then he'd laughed, chuckling softly. "Well, you screwed your girlfriend over but good with this one, Z. I've been looking for someone who could actually babysit my realm for some time now." He gave them a rakish grin. "Expect a call. Siobhan and I are way overdue for date night."

And after the Phantom King had gone, Faye had still had to explain everything to Zeke. Like the fact that the reason she'd been healed after he had saved her from the river was because she had actually healed *herself*.

All this time, Faye had put herself in danger and broken the law to help others get a handle on their pain. And in doing so, most of the time, she'd more or less healed them. They were able to lead normal lives, get jobs again, spend time with their families, get off the couch and out of bed. They were able to *live*.

And in the end, fate had given her the ability to do the same thing: Live. She might not be able to actually heal wounds on others the way the healer could, but she could mend her own. Zeke just guessed that sometimes - maybe just *sometimes* - life was fair after all. Or at least, *second* lives were.

And apparently that iridescent white aura she'd taken on had been symbolic, more than anything. It was her connection to the ghost in him - the death in him. It was her connection to death, in general. For that was what a necromancer was, a mage with power over the dead.

Zeke had to admit that in Faye's case, it was more like the dead were her long-lost family or best friends, always looking out for her, and always willing to go to the front lines for her. The day after the Randall Price incident, in fact, she'd been purchasing a veggie dog at a hot dog stand. She'd taken a call while the man prepared her meal. An anime, visible only to Faye and Zeke, had called her attention back to the cart, where apparently the man had skimped on her onions.

Faye claimed it was no big deal, but the anime sure thought it was. Faye had to talk the phantom down. But the phantom, a forty-three-year-old suicide, was one of the many phantoms who had taken a shine to Fathom since her change. They looked up to her for what she was doing to help people like the people they'd been in life. And the irate anime was ready to shove the hot dog man's head into the hot dog water and hold it there until he drowned. And then steal all the onions.

Phantoms were pretty angry spirits. And he supposed they had good reason.

But of *course* Fathom Everett would empathize with the anime to the point that they would all become bosom companions. That was Faye.

That was *his* Faye.

Zeke smiled at that thought, pulled the gas nozzle out of his bike's tank, and screwed the tank cap back on. He set the nozzle back in its rest and looked up as Fathom exited the gas station. She had another bag full of candy. This one was quite large.

He looked at the bag, then down at the much smaller saddle bags on the bike. They were already full of medicine that they were on their way to deliver in another state. That was what they'd decided to do now - travel the country,

delivering medicine that they used magic to replicate. As long as they were the ones making it, they could always be certain that the formula was safe. Besides, the Sirius warden clan was under new leadership these days since Genevieve Rayne had gone into hiding. Faye was ready to head out.

And it went without saying that Zeke was too.

“Damn it, woman, there’s not enough room for the candy you got *last* time,” he said, never feeling happier in his entire life. “Where are you going to put all that?”

She just grinned and opened the bag. Without looking, she dug her hand in, pulling out some sort of taffy stick. “Right.... *here*,” she said, opening his jacket and shoving the taffy stick into his left inside pocket. “Aaaaand, right... *here*,” she said, pulling open the other side of his jacket and sliding a chocolate bar into the right inside pocket.

Zeke tried not to laugh, tried to maintain an irritated facade as she proceeded to pop open a pack of red licorice sticks and began eating while she looked for more places - on him, mostly - to stash the rest of what was in her bag.

But damn she was adorable.

And then she shoved her hand into her bag and froze. Her brow furrowed. Zeke’s internal alarms went off, automatically pulling all of his ghost power inward so he could release it at will.

But as he looked on, he could see that Faye wasn’t afraid. Just confused. She slowly pulled the bag down, lifting her hand out. And when she did this time, her fist was wrapped around the collar of a thick, black leather jacket.

How the hell- Zeke eyed the jacket, with its weight and quality of leather, and knew there was no way it had been sitting at the bottom of that bag by any normal means. There was magic involved here. And he had a feeling he knew *who’s* magic.

When Fathom held up the jacket with both hands by the collar and let the body of it fall, revealing the patch on its

back, Ezekiel Stone experienced a moment of sweet, pure bliss.

“It’s yours,” he said, unable to keep from grinning now. “You’re one of us, angel.”

Faye gave him wide eyes over the collar of the jacket. Then she turned it around and peered at the patch. Her eyes grew even wider.

“Put it on, Fathom.” He stepped forward, gently taking the jacket from her to turn it around behind her. As if in a dream, Faye lifted her arms as he guided her, letting the jacket slide onto her shoulders and settle into place. It was a perfect fit - and he could tell she felt amazing in it.

She *looked* amazing in it.

“It’s official,” he said, chuckling softly and swinging one long leg over the bike. He held out his hand, and she took it, climbing on behind him.

When she wrapped her arms around his waist, he placed his hand over hers and closed his eyes briefly, deeply savoring the moment. Then he looked over his shoulder to whisper close. “You’re a Monster now, my little necromancer.” She was a member of the most powerful, most notorious warden clan in the world. And when he told her so, he knew she would be able to tell he wasn’t lying. “You’re one of us, Faye. Now and Forever.”

Her arms squeezed him tighter and her head rested against his back.

Smiling, Zeke started up the bike, revved it a few times to enjoy the sound of its absolute freedom, and pulled them out of the lot and onto the highway beyond.

The End.

Be sure to follow the V-twin, sharp-canine romances of all of the infamous Monsters warden clan with the open-ended Monsters series. Book one, “The Good, the Bad, and the

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