

WRATH OF GOD

GODHUNTER: 36



AMY SUMIDA

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Wrath of God

Amy Sumida

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Series Split:

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Aria of the Gods

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Singing the Scales

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Historical Romance

Enchantress

Pronunciation Guide at the back of
the book.

Chapter One

Dragon-Sidhe pregnancies last six months, but I'd only had to spend five away from my loved ones who live in the God Realm. I'd been further along than I'd thought when I'd first learned I was pregnant and that, in addition to the time I'd spent dealing with Jehovah's duplicity, meant that I was nearly into my second month when I went to Faerie with my Dragon-Sidhe husband to spend the rest of my pregnancy safely ensconced in that realm. I would have used my Ring of Remembrance to jump back in time for quick visits to the God Realm, but Arach didn't want to risk anything happening there or on Earth that could draw me into a war.

It was a valid concern. So far, every time I'd been pregnant—including this time—I'd been involved in a major battle. I tried my best to stay out of the last one, but it had literally come to me, bypassing wards that I'd thought were impenetrable. And now, there was a distinct possibility of a second war between Heaven and Hell. Technically, Hell didn't exist at the time of the first war. Luke created Hell and became the Devil to end that war. So, I guess that makes it a civil war in Heaven, though there was nothing civil about it. Anyway, because of that, I had agreed to stay in Faerie, where things were relatively peaceful.

I'd endured five months without six of my husbands and four of my children. I love the Faerie Realm and enjoy every minute I spend with my family there, but that is only part of my unusual life. Hectic does not even begin to describe it. In Faerie, I'm the Queen of the Fire Kingdom, ruling beside my husband, King Arach. But in the God Realm, I'm the Goddess of Lions, Love, and the Moon. I'm responsible for a pride of werelions and married to the Prince of the Froekn, the Lion God of Winter and Death, the Egyptian God of the Sun, the Norse God Odin, the Angel of Death, and a star god whose soul I'd pulled from the Void and placed in a body I'd made from dark matter.

Yep, life is a bit complicated for me. But moments like this one made it all worthwhile.

I held my little girl in my arms at last, and she was everything I'd hoped for. A tuft of crimson hair atop her head, a pair of dark brown eyes with slit pupils, and golden dragon scales adorning her temples. Her dragon would resemble mine and that made me inexplicably proud, but, more importantly, it was correct. All of it—from her hair to her dragon—was the same as it was in the version of her who I had met in a different future. I had been so worried that by changing that future, I had lost her. But I hadn't. My brave girl was with us at last.

“I've been waiting so long to meet you, Samara,” I said to her as her brothers and father crowded in around us on the bed. “Well, to meet you again. Welcome back to life, baby girl.”

“Can I hold her now?” Rian asked.

“Come here, and I'll help you,” Arach said.

Rian went to sit beside his father, and I set Samara into his arms while Arach leaned over to show our son how to support his sister's head. Seeing the three of them together, with their fey-red hair in slightly different shades, Arach and Rian staring tenderly down at Samara, turned my heart into a puddle. Brevyn, Rian's twin who looked nothing like him, crawled up closer to me, and I tucked him in against my side and kissed his cheek.

“I want to go back with you, Mom,” Brevyn said.

“What do you mean? Go back where?”

Arach looked up sharply, adoration quickly turning into concern.

“To the God Realm. I can borrow Dad’s ring and then I won’t lose any time here and I could go back to the same time you do. I can travel with you.”

I looked at Arach.

“Son, there’s a war brewing in the God Realm,” Arach said. “It’s not safe for you there.”

“My sister and brothers are there,” he countered. “Aren’t they safe?”

“They’re safe in Pride Palace, but something might happen that your mother will have to deal with, and if it leads to a battle, I will need my ring so I may return and help her.”

“But then I could return here to the same time I’d left and warn you of the war before it happened. You’d have more time to prepare than if Mom mirrored you.” He smiled reassuringly at his father. “I want to visit Uncle Thor so I can meet his daughter while she’s still a baby. I think it’s important.”

Oh, there went my heart again.

“Arach,” I whispered. “They’re his family too. He deserves to meet Ariana. It’ll be a precious memory for him.”

Arach let out a long breath.

“But I wanted to go with you to visit Uncle Thor,” Rian said.

“You can go next time. My first visit should be alone,” Brevyn spoke like a grown man suddenly, and I glimpsed Ull again—the friend whose soul I’d placed inside Brevyn’s body and the very reason why Brevyn wanted to visit Thor. Ull had been Thor’s adopted son.

“Mom!” Rian looked at me.

I slid Samara out of Rian’s arms before he started jostling her too much, then said, “It’s your brother’s decision, honey. He wants to do this alone, and that’s okay. You can both do things apart, you know?”

“But I don’t want to do things apart!”

“Rian, you sound like a child,” Arach admonished. “Is that what you are?”

Rian’s expression fell, his eyes rounding. I grimaced at Arach for using Rian’s need to make his father proud against him. But parents sometimes have to resort to such dastardly measures.

Brevyn reached over and took Rian’s hand. “If I use Dad’s ring, you won’t even miss me. I’ll be back in a few seconds.”

Rian pouted.

At times like these, I remembered that my boys looked a lot older than they were, thanks to the Dragon-Sidhe maturity that had rocketed them through infancy. Normally, they behaved the age they looked, currently around twelve, but once in a while, we got something like this, more appropriate to their actual age, which was seven. Honestly, I think it was the human in them coming out.

“That’s enough arguing,” I said. “We’re welcoming your sister into the world, and I don’t want her first experience of her family to be an argument.

“Sorry, Mother,” Brevyn said instantly.

“Sorry,” Rian said shortly after. Then he realized that I’d taken his sister away. “Can I have her back now?”

“My turn!” Brevyn smirked at Rian as he held his arms out to me.

I set Samara in Brevyn’s arms, not bothering to support her or even instruct him. I suspected that he already knew how to hold a baby, and I was right. Brev slid Samara’s head over his arm, supporting her neck as if he’d held her a thousand times. Ull never had children, but he must have been around several over the years, and once you hold a baby, you never forget the technique. Granted, Brevyn didn’t remember everything about Ull yet, but it looked as if he remembered that.

“Welcome, Sister,” Brevyn said. “You and I will be great friends.”

Samara had that unfocused baby stare, but when Brevyn spoke to her, I swear her dark eyes met his blue ones, and something passed between them. I suppose it wasn't so hard to believe; he and I had communicated when he was still in my belly. Back before he and Rian had split into two bodies.

Brevyn smiled and nodded at Samara as if she'd spoken, then bent to kiss her forehead. Rian moved to sit beside his twin and peer over Brevyn's shoulder at their sister, everything calm again. That was something I could always count on with my boys—family came first. Arach and I didn't even have to teach them that; they'd been born that way.

Arach slid over and put his arm around my shoulders. “Two sons and a daughter. I never thought I could be so happy, A Thaisce. Thank you.”

“Just wait until she starts dating, then we'll see how happy you are.”

“She's a Dragon-Sidhe; she'll have a voracious sexual appetite once she matures, and I will encourage her to explore it. Just as long as she eventually marries Baidhen.”

I gaped at him.

“Don't look at me like that, A Thaisce. I know you don't approve of the idea of an arranged marriage, and I will not insist upon the union, but I will still do all in my power to get those two together and nudge them toward romance. It's the only way that we'll have more full-blooded Dragon-Sidhes.”

“First of all, I was more shocked by your cavalier attitude toward our daughter having sex than her arranged

marriage,” I whispered, angling my body to block the children. “And second, she’s not the sole hope of the Dragon-Sidhe race.”

“I know, there’s also Sinnea.”

Baidhen and Sinnea were the children of King Rowan and Queen Liatrix of Darkness, who, thanks to my serving as Faerie’s avatar when she created them, were the first Dark Dragon-Sidhe in existence. Arach and Rowan had been plotting to get our children together for a while now, but before Samara, they only had Sinnea and Rian to focus on. Now they had a new target with Samara, which put Baidhen in their crosshairs as well.

“I was talking about Violet, the human baby who was transformed by the Wild Magic.” I leaned closer to add, “And have you forgotten the whole reason Samara went back in time to fetch me?”

Arach went still, the kind of stillness that presages bad things. He didn’t have any memories of my death because this him had never experienced it, but it was horrible enough for him to know that I had died in another timeline. “Yes. You let Odin go and everything went wrong.”

“Arach,” I growled. “You betrothed Samara to Baidhen against her wishes and it led to—”

“I know what it led to,” he cut me off. “And we know better now, Vervain. We won’t make the same mistakes.”

“You and Rowan united our kingdoms against the others and tried to take over Faerie!” I hissed. “Darkfire, Arach! Dark-freaking-Fire!”

“And now, I know better. There will be no uniting of our kingdoms.”

“Arach, Rian and I died in that war.”

“That was another future when Rian didn’t have Brevyn.”

“Mom, what are you talking about?” Rian asked, his voice unsteady.

“Something that’s not going to happen anymore, honey,” I said gently. Then I glared at Arach. “Right, Arach?”

“I will never let anything bad happen to any of you children or your mother,” Arach declared.

Not exactly the answer I was looking for. So I asked him a question that I knew would throw him. “And what if one or more of the children end up attracted to the same sex?”

I was smug for about three seconds.

“Then they shall have to be bisexual,” Arach said.

“What if they’re not?!”

“Sacrifices must be made for the good of our kingdoms. I believe humans have a way of conceiving without sexual intercourse. I’m sure we can figure out a magical way to mimic the procedure.”

This is what you get for giving him a laptop, Faerie said in my mind.

There you are! It's about time you showed up to see Samara, I replied in the same way. And you know this has nothing to do with the Internet. Arach's obsessed with Dragon-Sidhe babies.

He wants to save your race. That's not a bad thing, Vervain. And Samara is beautiful, by the way. Congratulations.

Thank you. And I know it's not a bad thing. I just don't want it to unite our kingdoms and start a war.

Or force your children to marry people they don't want to.

Yes, that too.

That is the way of royalty.

Not anymore, it isn't.

Well, he's right, you know? They can have children together without marrying or uniting the kingdoms.

Only if that's what they want to do.

I have a feeling that Arach and Rowan will ensure it's what they want to do.

That's the problem, Faerie!

While I argued with the Consciousness of the Faerie Realm, Arach and the boys kept talking and their conversation finally registered with me. Or rather, Arach's words and the expression on our sons' faces did. He was explaining how two men had sex, and my sons' eyes were bulging out of their heads. They'd probably never thought of putting their penises anywhere, much less inside another person.

I smacked Arach's chest. "What are you doing?"

"Explaining different types of sexuality to them." He frowned at me. "Were you talking with Faerie?"

"Yes, and while I was distracted, you traumatized our sons!"

"There is nothing traumatic about sex." Then he frowned and adjusted it to, "There is nothing traumatic about sex *between consenting adults*. And they need to know about their options. You were the one who brought it up; I'm just answering their questions."

I groaned and flopped back against the pillows.

"Really, A Thaisce, you're a love goddess and one of your magics is Lust. You should be explaining this to them, not me."

I sat up. "You know what? I should. At least I won't horrify them with details they don't need to know yet."

“There is nothing horrifying about gay sex.”

“I’m not saying that gay sex is horrifying.”

“Well, you shouldn’t, seeing as how you enjoy—”

“Do not finish that sentence!”

“Well, what is it that you’re trying to say, Vervain?”

“I wasn’t targeting that type of intercourse. What I’m saying is that *all* types of sex contain details that children aren’t prepared to hear about. Details that can horrify them. I’d have been just as upset if you were telling them about oral sex.”

“What’s oral sex?” Rian asked.

I groaned as Arach laughed boisterously.

When he finished his chuckle-fest, Arach said, “It’s glorious, son, and you can experience it whether you prefer women or men. But be sure to give—”

“Arach!” I glared at him.

“Fine, then you explain it to them.”

“My point is that they’re too young to have that explained to them.” I took Samara back and settled her in my arms before launching into a speech that I’d been working on

in the back of my mind for a while. Oh, yes, I knew this day was coming. “Sex, all types of sex, is the most intimate thing you can do with another person. It’s an act of pleasure that can lead to the conception of children, but it can also be an expression of love.”

“You’re boring them, Vervain,” Arach said. “They know the basics already.”

“Can you let me do this without interrupting?”

“You interrupted me.”

“Because you were doing it wrong.”

“Mom,” Brevyn said crisply. Then he looked at Arach to say, “Dad.” That was all, but it got his point across.

Arach and I grimaced at each other. The last thing a parent wants is to be scolded by their child. Especially when the kid was right.

Arach waved a hand at me in a please-proceed gesture.

I started again, “All right, here’s the important bit—don’t let other people sway you into a certain type of sexuality. Listen to yourself and trust your instincts. Your body will tell you who you’re attracted to when you’re old enough to feel those things. It will come naturally and it’s not something to ever feel ashamed of, no matter who you desire. If you have questions about how to explore that desire, you can ask your father or me. But that will be *later*, when you start getting those urges. What you need to know now is that it’s easy to confuse desire with love, but they are different. Desire is

physical. It's the needs of the body, and those feelings can be very exciting. They can make you think you're in love when you're not."

"How do we know the difference?" Rian asked.

I glanced at Arach, who was staring at me tenderly.

Before I could answer, Arach said, "Love is something so wondrous and great that your body can't contain it. It feels as if it's constantly billowing out of you, trying to reach the person who has inspired it. Sexual desire can make your heart race and the fire burn hotter inside you. It can make you feel as if you need to consume your partner. Chase them until you have them beneath your claws and—"

I cleared my throat before he got carried away.

"But love ..." He looked at me and smiled. "Love makes you want to *be* consumed. It drives you to protect and cherish. To not only hunt the one you love, but also any who might harm them. It creates a need in you to build a life with your lover and grow your love together." His gaze went to Samara, then he looked back at the boys. "To see pieces of your lover in your children and know that they are the manifestation and continuation of your love. Desire is fleeting, but love is eternal. *That* is how you know the difference."

I smiled besottedly at my husband. Arach wasn't one of those romantic types who spouted poetry, but he wasn't afraid of telling anyone exactly how he felt, whether it be his opinion of their intellect or his love for me. So when he did say something romantic, it was usually of the mind-blowing variety and, even better, it was always utterly honest.

I leaned toward Arach and kissed him, just a peck before looking back at our sons to add, “The important thing to remember is that at first, it can be hard to tell the difference. You’ll learn to tell the two apart eventually, and that’s part of the fun—the journey to real love. It’s okay to make mistakes. It’s okay to think you’re in love and find out later it was only desire. And it’s okay to get your heart broken. It will heal. Never be afraid to love; your heart’s the one thing that gets bigger every time you give it away.”

“Maybe don’t give it away as much as your mother,” Arach said dryly.

Then all three of my boys, one of them a grown man, laughed their butts off at my annoyed expression.

Chapter Two

A week later, Brevyn and I made our goodbyes.

I nuzzled Samara's velvety cheek and breathed in the scent of sugared violets, her unique, Dragon-Sidhe smell. "I wish I could take her with me."

I had never liked the baby smell that humans rave about, and there was a time when I thought that maybe I wasn't meant to be a mother. But then I had Rian and Brevyn and realized that I wasn't meant to be a mother of *human* children. My god and faerie babies smelled amazing to me.

"You're already taking one of my children with you. You can't take two," Arach grumbled as he looked at Brevyn.

Brevyn had a leather bag slung over one shoulder and Arach's Ring of Remembrance on his thumb, his hand clenched into a fist to hold it there. Despite the too-large ring, he looked very mature, standing nearly as tall as me with a somber expression.

The boys were going through another growth spurt. Granted, I was only five-foot-three, so it wasn't surprising that they were approaching my height already, but still, it felt as if they were shooting into manhood, and a part of me wished they hadn't matured so fast. That sex talk we'd had was probably perfectly timed; they'd be getting those urges soon. Seven-year-olds feeling sexual urges! Ugh, that was hard to wrap my mind around. And Brevyn had my Love magic too. I hadn't considered raging hormones when I'd given that magic to him. I was just glad it was Brev and not Rian. Who knows what kind of mischief Rian would have gotten into with the power to make people fall in love with him?

“Arach, I’m not trying to take her. I can’t, even if I wanted to. And we’ll be fine,” I said. “If something bad had happened during the months I’ve been away, one of the guys would have mirrored us. But we haven’t heard from them.”

“No, they wouldn’t have mirrored because you’d be there, doing whatever it is that needs to be done.”

That was the mind-blowing part of the Rings of Remembrance. They were made by the Fey to remember their past and were meant to take a faerie into their past self to re-experience whatever they’d forgotten. When it was used like that, the wearer couldn’t change anything because they’d already lived through it. They simply watched it happen like a living movie, unable to alter anything that they’d done or said. But I’d found a loophole.

If I used the ring to travel back in time to a realm that I hadn’t been in during that time, I could move about freely. And as long as I kept returning to a realm seconds after I’d left it, it was as if I had never left. Which meant that I was in at least two places at once. All the time. And I say “at least” because there are three realms—Faerie, God, and Human. I generally don’t use the ring to jump between the God and Human realms, but it’s an option.

All that is to say that I was currently in the God Realm even while I prepared to leave Faerie. Yes, as I said, it’s a mind twister. Technically, I wouldn’t be in the God Realm until I went back, but because I was intending to, if I mirrored Pride Palace right then, I might be able to catch a glimpse of myself. This is why we try not to mirror each other when I’m away. But if there’s an emergency, one of my husbands will use the mirror magic to contact Arach or vice versa.

This meant that Arach had a point. But so did I.

“Yes, but if there was a war during those five months, *I* would have mirrored you and asked you to use your ring to come to the God Realm to help us fight.”

Arach’s stunning fey face, with its sharp Dragon-Sidhe features, squished up as he tried to work that one out. His dandelion-yellow dragon eyes narrowed and a plume of smoke trailed out of his nose. “Damn this time thing!”

“It doesn’t matter. You’ll know for certain right after we leave.” I kissed Samara goodbye and handed her to Arach. “And you aren’t the one who just gave birth to a baby who you now have to leave behind.”

Arach sighed and looked down at our daughter. “You’re right. I don’t think I could leave her so soon.”

“I don’t want to, but I’ve been away from everyone else for too long.” I kissed Samara again. “Oh, little girl, I really hate to go when you’re only a week old. But I’ll be right back and then we’ll take you to see the rest of your family. Just wait until your Grandma hears that you were born on her birthday. She’s going to be thrilled.”

“Which Grandma?” Rian asked.

“My mother in this life. Your human grandma.”

“Oh. I miss Grandma. Maybe I should go too.”

“Nice try, honey.” I kissed Rian’s cheek. “But you know the rings can only take one person apiece.”

“Be careful, Vervain,” Arach said while Rian pouted.

“I will. Now, kiss your son goodbye.”

My husband bent to hug Brevyn. “I love you, Son. Look after your mother. Make sure she doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“Yes, Father,” Brevyn said. “I’ll try my best.”

“Hey!” I glared at both of them while Rian laughed.

Dexter, my Nurial companion, and his daughter, Deidre, nosed my leg.

“At least you two have faith in me.” I crouched to hug each Nurial and rub their silky black fur, stroking their pert ears and long necks. “You two look after those two.” I pointed at Arach and Rian. “And make sure *they* don’t do anything stupid with Samara.”

The Nurials yipped in unison, lifting their fox-like snouts toward my husband.

“Hey!” Rian huffed, sounding just like me.

Arach just helped me up and pulled me into his arms, one of which held our daughter. The boys groaned as we took our time kissing goodbye.

I nuzzled my baby girl once more, then hugged Rian.
“I love you, Ri.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

“We’ll be right back,” Brevyn said.

The boys held each other’s stares—Rian’s worried and Brevyn’s reassuring—as Brev and I clasped hands and journeyed back in time. I led the trip, pulling Brevyn with me, the magic of his father’s ring aligning with mine.

Seconds later and also months earlier, we appeared in Pride Palace’s foyer, right before the central staircase of pale stone that spiraled up through all six floors, circling the gold elevator. My other husbands and children were gathered there, where they had seen me off five months ago (seconds for them).

Everyone exclaimed in delight to see Brevyn with me, and I squealed to see my children, going for all four of them at once. Since they were gathered in a little pack, it wasn’t difficult. Lesya and Vero, who were five and three respectively but looked more like seven and six thanks to their shapeshifter genes, stood behind the twins, Sebastian and Dominic, who were only two years old and looked it, but they also had their father’s midnight-black feathered wings and took up a bit more space than your average two-year-old.

The twins banished their wings when I crouched to hug them, and all four of my babies rushed into my arms, crying “Mama” or a version of it. I didn’t have enough arm-length to enclose them as I would have liked, but I made do, hugging them all together before focusing on each child individually.

By the time I stood to kiss my husbands, Brevyn had explained why he'd tagged along and was onto telling everyone about his new baby sister.

“So, Samara is as we hoped?” Odin asked, his hand still stroking my back after our kiss.

“Well, she has the same coloring, so that's a good sign.” I kissed him again. “Oh, I've missed you and your beautiful eyes.”

Odin grinned and turned his face to the light, setting the multicolored striations in his peacock-colored eyes aglow. “I've missed you too. For the entire three seconds you've been gone.”

“Yes, very funny.” I rolled my eyes. “It's been five months for me.”

“Mommy, when do we get to see Samara?” Vero asked.

“After I go back next time. Then I'll bring her over without traveling through time.”

“Okay.” His little hand slipped into mine.

“Did you get taller since I left?”

Vero laughed. “It's only been a few seconds!”

I stroked his thick, dark hair. “I know, but I swear you look bigger to me.”

“I think I’m getting bigger,” Trevor whispered in my ear. “My pants are feeling a little snug.”

“Well, keep them on for now, big boy,” I whispered back.

Trevor chuckled wickedly, then bent to speak to Vero. “Why don’t you show your brother the castle’s new arsenal?”

“Arsenal?” Brevyn perked up.

“We’ve got bigger supersoakers, foam arrows, and even a catapult for water balloons!” Vero said as he grabbed Brevyn’s hand and pulled him toward the front doors.

“A catapult?” Brevyn looked back at me. “We don’t have a catapult at Castle Aithinne.”

“Because you and your faerie friends would put more than water balloons in it,” I said.

Brevyn just grinned.

I shook my head, knowing that would be the first thing he talked to Arach about upon his return to Faerie.

“Should I text Thor?” Odin asked as we followed the kids outside.

“Sure,” I said. “Tell him if it’s a bad time, he doesn’t have to pick up Brevyn today. Brev is fine here until Thor’s

ready.”

“All right.” Odin pulled out his cell phone and started texting.

The rest of us went out to the veranda—made to look like a lowered drawbridge. It spanned a moat fed by the nearby swimming pool. Brevyn dropped his bag by a Victorian loveseat, handed me his father’s ring, then ran off with the other kids to join Zariel at the mini-castle I’d built for them. Sam and Fallon, Zariel’s parents, were already on the veranda, drinking lemonade while they watched over their daughter. Samantha’s a werewolf from Trevor’s pack and Fallon’s one of my werelions, so they were yet another tie between the Froekn and Intare, but their daughter was, thanks to my magical meddling, pure Intare, the first Intare to be born as opposed to transformed by magic.

Speaking of magic-made Intares, Austin, the first Intare I had ever made (the others had been transformed by the previous Intare Goddess), was sitting with Sam and Fallon. He stood up as I reached them, not just to hug me, which is why Fallon and Samantha got up, but because that’s what a gentleman does when a lady joins a seated group.

“Hey, guys,” I said as I hugged Fallon, then Samantha. “Austin, how are you?” I hugged him last.

“Same as when you left a minute ago.” He shook his head and grinned. “That’s gonna take some time ta git used to.”

“Not as much as it will take to get used to being a werelion.”

“I dunno.” He tipped his cowboy hat back. “I think I’m gettin’ the swing of it. That run we went on this mornin’ was amazing.”

“I’m just glad you’re not dead.”

Austin laughed. “No one’s happier ‘bout that than me. But damn, V! I went from watchin’ all this from the outside to swimmin’ in it.”

“And?” I sat down.

He grinned broadly as he resumed his seat. “And the water’s just fine.”

“Keep swimming, kitty cat,” Trevor said as he leaned against the back of my sofa and set a hand on my shoulder. “Tides change quickly in our world.”

“Da, rough vater is coming,” Kirill added in his Russian accent, sounding like a Bond villain. He plopped down on the carpet at my feet and slung an arm across my knees.

Shifters—they like to be in physical contact with their mate as much as possible. Trevor actually had to rub himself all over my body once a month to scent-mark me and keep his wolf happy. Viper, who was also a shapeshifter, was an exception. He did enjoy touching me, of course, but he wasn’t as intense about it as Trevor and Kirill. Maybe that was because he shifted into a snake or maybe the way I’d taken his soul from the Void made a difference. Viper knew with absolute certainty that we were meant to love each other and that kind of perspective doesn’t need to hold hands to feel confident.

Viper took the chair to my right and winked at me as if he knew what I was thinking. It was possible; I had made a Blood-to-Heart oath with each of my husbands except for Arach, and with those oaths came a spiffy bonus—we could speak into each other’s minds. Usually, I knew when they were there, but Viper could be sneaky. Probably another snake thing.

“Thor is on his way,” Odin said as he came outside. He went to sit beside Re, who sat to my left. “He’s beyond excited.”

“Is he bringing Raedra and Ariana with him?”

“No, he’s coming alone. I’m sorry, I didn’t know you wanted to see the baby.”

“Well, she’s technically my granddaughter. I should try to see her as much as I can.”

Odin chuckled. “You can see her when you pick up Brevyn.”

“Coo-ee!” Austin exclaimed. “Ain’t that the berries? You’re Thor’s stepmom. Aidan said you guys used to date. Is that right?”

I cleared my throat and glanced at Odin, who looked away. “Yes, I met Thor first in this life.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Austin pointed at Odin. “You were her husband in another life. Then she died, and you,”—he transferred his pointer to Azrael—“collected her soul.”

“Yes,” Az said, his focus half on our twins, who were flying above the mini-castle. “Sebastian, don’t dive-bomb your sister!” He looked over at Austin to add, “Odin asked me to take Vervain’s soul to the Viking Well of Souls so he could find her and bring her back into a new body. I had to physically touch her soul to make the transfer from my scythe to the Well—something I never do with souls—and we formed a bond from that.”

“But you didn’t meet again until years after she was reborn, right?” Samantha asked.

“Yes, we met when a Chinese goddess brought the plague to Hawaii.” He grinned at me. “It happened while I was collecting a soul. It took me a moment to recognize who she was and then I was done for.”

“That’s so romantic,” Samantha said softly.

Fallon snorted. “Romantic? He met her during a plague, over a dead body, then helped her save Trevor from Hel.”

“Hell?” Austin asked. “I thought Luke liked Trevor?”

“Not that Hell,” I explained. “Hel with one L. That’s the name of Trevor’s aunt. She rules an icy territory in the Norse Realm where the souls of those who don’t die in battle go.”

“Trevor has an aunt named Hel?” Austin’s eyes went wide.

“She’s the OG.” I winked at him.

“The what?”

“Oh, come on!” I whined. “Austin, you’re the one who’s supposed to get all my human slang.”

“What slang is that?”

“OG.” I did my rap-star pose, crossing my arms over my chest. “The original ganster.”

“Oh, that’s on the opposite end of my radio dial.”

“You don’t have to listen to rap to know what OG means.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Great Lion Goddess, I’ll brush up on my urban lingo for you.” He bent into a bow and waved his hand out.

“Good,” I said primly.

“Mama, look!” Dominic called.

All of us looked toward the sound of Dominic’s voice just in time to see him do a free fall toward the mini-castle, wings pulled in tightly.

“Dominic!” I screeched as I jumped up. I ran for the veranda stairs, but I knew I wouldn’t make it in time. It was like Rian and Brevyn all over again. In my mind, I saw my

twins—my other twins—hurtling down the side of Castle Aithinne. “Dom!”

A few feet above the play castle, Dominic swooped up, giggling. “Mommy!”

“Oh, sweet, flying babies,” I whispered as I collapsed to my knees.

“Dominic Finnian Morningstar, never do that again!” Azrael shouted at our son. “You scared all of us.”

Dominic flew over to me, eyes wide and filling with tears. He was bawling by the time I opened my arms. Dom barreled into my embrace, and I rocked him in my lap. As I stroked his thick, black hair, I looked up at Az.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Az said as he crouched beside us. “He needed to know that what he did was dangerous and wrong.” Then he started rubbing Dom’s back between his wings. “All right, it’s okay. Just don’t do it again.”

“Daddy?” Dominic looked up at Azrael with his huge, green eyes, and Az melted.

“Come here, my sweet boy.” Azrael reached for Dominic.

Dom sniffed, then leaned hesitantly toward his father.

“It’s all right, you’re not in trouble.” Azrael took our son and settled Dom over his shoulder.

But Dominic wouldn't let go of me. "Mommy."

"I'm okay, you just scared me a little." I nuzzled his face.

"Dom'nic!" Sebastian landed beside me and pointed at his brother. "Bad boy!"

Dominic started crying again, and everyone who had followed us to the edge of the veranda retreated to their seats. Yeah, I would have too. With Sebastian in the mix, it was bound to get ugly.

"Bastian!" I grabbed his pointing hand. "That's not your job. And your brother isn't a bad boy."

"Mama." Sebastian frowned at me. "Dom was naughty."

"Yes, for once it wasn't you," Azrael drawled.

Sebastian scowled at his father, then his brother. "Nuff, Dom. Let's go. Nuff cry."

I chuckled. "He's trying to rush the punishment so Dominic can return to playing with him."

Azrael grimaced. "Of course, he is." Then he leaned back and wiped Dominic's tears away. "Okay, Sebastian is right, that's enough. Go and play."

Dominic sniffed and looked at his brother.

“Nuff now,” Sebastian said. “Fly!” He spread his dark wings and grinned.

Dominic smiled and spread his wings too.

“But fly safely,” I said to them both.

“Love you, Mommy,” Dominic said as he stepped out of his father’s lap.

“I love you too, baby.”

“Bye-bye!” Sebastian screeched and shot into the air.

“Bas!” Dominic launched himself after his twin.

Azrael sighed and put an arm around me. “They’ll be the death of us someday.”

“You are Death.”

“Retired.” He snorted. “And you know what I mean.”

“Yes, those boys are going to be trouble. They already are.”

“Vervain?” Thor’s deep voice came from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder to see the Thunder God standing beside his father, Odin. “Hey.”

Azrael got up and helped me to my feet. Then we went to greet Thor.

“Thanks for coming so quickly.” I gave him a hug.

“Are you kidding? I’m thrilled that Brevyn wants to spend time with me and his sister. I traced here as soon as I could.”

“How are Rae and Ari?”

“They’re both doing well. Raedra is finally getting comfortable in Bilskinir, and we’ve settled into a nice routine.”

“Well, with the size of your home, even if you hated each other, you could make it work.”

“True, but we’re doing well. Astie is ...” He grinned. “She’s everything.”

I patted his thick bicep. “Let me just call Brevyn.”

“If he’s playing with the other kids, I can wait.” His gaze went to the mini-castle.

“No, I think he’s excited to see you. I’ll—”

“Hello, Uncle Thor.” Brevyn was suddenly beside us. “Mom told me who I am. You know, to you.”

Thor blinked. “Oh. Yes. I’m glad she did. How do you feel about it?”

“Good. I have more family now and that has to be a good thing. But Dad says you’re not my father anymore. He’s my father.”

“Yes, that’s true. But I wasn’t your birth father before either. Blood didn’t make you my son, love did.”

“So it can be the same now?”

Thor grinned. “Not the same, but similar. I’d like to take you to Ull’s home and tell you about him. About you. His things are yours now.” He looked over at me. “If that’s all right with your mother.”

“Of course. Brev knows about the house and we’ve given him his old spellbook.”

“I’m the God of Archery!” Brevyn declared.

Thor laughed, a booming sound. “You were, but you were also more than that.”

“Did I have a bow?”

“You did. It belonged to your birth father. Your *last* birth father, that is.” Thor glanced nervously at me.

“He’s old enough to understand.” I laid a hand on Brevyn’s shoulder. “And you won’t offend him or me with the truth. Tell him as much as you want.”

“Thank you, Vervain. I ...” Thor looked down at Brevyn. “I’ve missed having you in my life, Brevyn. You lit my world with happiness.”

“I did?”

“You were so funny,” I said to him. “And Thor is, well, not so much.”

“I can be funny,” Thor said defensively.

Everyone seated behind him started to cough or snicker, even Austin.

Thor swung to face them. “I can be funny!”

“Yes, Son, you can,” Odin said. “But not often. Ull helped with that.” He looked at Brevyn. “But Brevyn isn’t Ull.”

“And you shouldn’t try to be him,” I added. “You’re in a new life, Brev, just as I am. It’s good to know the old you but don’t get too caught up in him or you won’t grow to be the you who you’re meant to be this time around.”

“I can’t be him again.”

“No, you can’t. And Ull knew that when he chose this path. He wanted to be a new person. *You* wanted this. And you are incredible as you are, Brevyn. You’re becoming everything you wanted to be.”

“I know, Mom. I can feel it. But maybe I can be funny too and make Uncle Thor laugh.”

Thor leaned over to bring his face to the level of Brevyn’s. “You don’t have to be funny to make me happy. Being in my life is all you have to do.” He hugged Brevyn. “Thank you for coming to visit me.”

“You’re welcome,” Brevyn said politely. “Can you take me to meet my cousin now?”

“I’d love to.” Thor straightened and held a hand out to Brevyn.

“Bye, Mom.” Brevyn took Thor’s hand.

“Don’t forget your bag.” I motioned at the satchel.

“Got it.” He grabbed it and slung it over his shoulder. “Love you!”

“I love you too, Brev. Have fun.”

Watching Thor walk away with my son made me feel strange. If things hadn’t gone as they had, Brev could have been Thor’s child in this life, his true, biological son. I had loved Thor so much once, but he chose pain over me.

“Vervain?” Azrael laid a hand on my shoulder.

I came out of my reverie with a soft smile. Thank goodness it hadn’t worked out with Thor or I wouldn’t have Az. I wouldn’t have any of my husbands. And yes, I knew that

for a fact. A god of Time had screwed with my past once, and I had gotten to experience what my life would have been like if certain things had gone another way. None of those other lives came close to being as wonderful as the one I was meant to live.

“I’ve missed you, Angel.” I slid in against Az.

Azrael’s wings were magically tucked away, so he didn’t fold them around me, but he did wrap an arm around my waist and kiss my forehead. “I love you, Carus. I’m glad the birth went well and you’re back with us.”

“Me too. Oh, and I checked on the faerie orientation classes this time. They’re going well—”

“Hell’s bells!” Austin suddenly shouted. “What in tarnation?”

I turned with Azrael to see Austin levitating a foot above his chair.

“Vervain!” Austin cried. “How do I get down?”

“Oh, faerie farts,” I muttered.

Chapter Three

“Focus on the ground, Austin,” I said as I hurried over to the floating cowboy.

“Oh, I’m focusin’ ah’ite, but it ain’t doin’ anythang!” Austin said, his wide-eyed stare indeed on the floor of the veranda.

“This is faerie magic,” Azrael said calmly. “You have to focus on the magic first, then the result you want. Think about Air. Feel the wind inside you.”

“Air?” Austin waved his arms about like a chicken. “Are you kiddin’ me? You telling me I need to break wind to get down? Am I suddenly in Willy Wonka’s factory?”

“Uh, that was burping,” I said.

“Dude, no!” Viper exclaimed as he hastily vacated the area. “He is *not* telling you to fart. He’s saying focus on Air *magic*.”

A burst of giggles came from behind me.

I turned and shushed the children who had gathered to watch their uncle awkwardly float. Then I said to Austin, “It feels cool, like a breeze in your chest. Close your eyes and feel it.”

“Oh, for land’s sake,” Austin muttered, not realizing how appropriate that particular southern saying was. He closed

his eyes. After a few tense seconds, he popped them open. “I feel sumpin’!”

“Good, now tell it what you want,” Azrael said. “Direct the magic to bring you back down.”

“Ah’ite.” Austin closed his eyes again, but instead of coming down, he shot forward, out of the confines of the veranda and out toward open land. As he flew away, his voice drifted back to us, “Sweet fancy Moses on buttered toast!”

“Damn it!” I yanked off my dress—something I normally wouldn’t do in front of a crowd, but desperate times and all that—and shifted into my weredragon form in only my underwear.

Azrael was faster than I since he only had to summon his wings, and he took off several seconds before me. I launched into the sky after him, my leathery wings creating greater booms of sound than his feathered ones. Austin maintained a lead for several minutes, leaving a trail of hilarious southern exclamations behind him.

“Heavens to Betsy!” he declared when we finally caught up to him. “Somebody stop me!”

“*You* are doing this, Austin,” Azrael still sounded remarkably calm. “Somewhere inside you, you want to fly.”

“Well, right now, I want to walk!”

“You don’t, not really,” I said. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Do I look like I’m enjoyin’ this? I’m flyin’ off into the wild blue yonder!” Austin’s accent grew even thicker in his panic.

“Austin, calm down, this is your magic. *Your* power,” Az said. “Here, take my hand.”

Austin reached out and grabbed Azrael’s hand.

“There, I’ve got you. Now you can trust that you won’t fall.”

“Trust that I won’t fall?” Austin squished up his face at Azrael. “I’m not worried ‘bout fallin’ I’m—whoa!”

Suddenly, Austin started to descend.

“There you go,” Az went down with him. “You’ll learn to trust yourself eventually and then the magic will be easier to use.”

“Oh, thank heavens,” Austin muttered when his feet hit the ground. “I thought I was gonna have to live in the sky.” He kept going down, first to his knees, then to his hands so he could lay his cheek on the bent blades of tall grass. It wasn’t quite a kiss, but it was close.

Giggles came from behind me again. I looked over my shoulder to see my twin Angel-Faerie boys hovering there, belly-laughing at Austin so hard that they did occasional backward tumbles.

“Oh, sure, laugh it up young ‘uns,” Austin said as he stood. “I just nearly flew myself ta death, but go on and have yerself a chuckle.”

They did.

“Stop that!” I pointed at them. “Go home!” I shoed them as if they were birds.

This made Azrael and Austin join in on the laughter.

“Go on now, go!” I pointed at the palace.

“Mama!” Dominic flew into my arms.

“Damn it,” I muttered as I cuddled him. I could never resist an armful of Dominic.

Sebastian used my distraction to dive-bomb his uncle.

Austin ducked and let out another string of southern expletives starting with, “Hell’s bells,” and ending with, “That knee-baby is more trouble than a greased hog in church.”

“Sebastian, no!” Azrael shot into the air after our naughty son. “I just said, not ten minutes ago, that you weren’t to do that!”

“You told Dom no, not me!” Sebastian giggled and flew back toward the palace, shouting, “Hell’s bells! Hell’s bells! Hell’s bells!”

I looked down at Austin.

He grimaced up at me. “So, I’ll just walk back then?”

“And think about what you did wrong while you do,” I said primly, then flew after my husband and son, Dominic cradled in my arms.

Austin muttered behind me, “A rooster one day, a feather duster the next.”

Chapter Four

“How’d I get faerie magic?” Austin asked as he trudged up the veranda steps.

“We’ve been discussing that,” I said with a wave at my husbands, Samantha, Fallon, and a few of the Intare. “I transformed you while I was under the influence of a magic apple, and that must have transferred some Wild Magic to you. We just can’t figure out why the magic would stay with you when it was only temporary for me.”

“The babies got it permanently,” Viper said.

“But that was when the Wild Magic was running rampant through the world.”

“Hold on, that’s an interesting theory,” Odin said. “Conception is an act of creation. It creates life.”

“I didn’t create life.”

“No, but you recreated it. You transformed Austin with magic. Perhaps that process is similar to conception in that it puts cells in a vulnerable state. And while his cells were vulnerable, you poured magic into them.”

“And part of that magic was wild.” I nodded. “That makes sense. I gave the Wild Magic a way to dig in and make itself permanent.”

“Permanent? Oh, dem apples!” Austin exclaimed, then plopped down on the floor since there were no open chairs.

“Will their mayhem never cease?”

“That depends on how many Jerry’s minion stole,” Trevor said with a look at Az.

Jerry, aka the Christian God Jehovah, had somehow managed to sneak one of his Angels into the Golden Citadel—our palace on the Fey lands of Earth that guarded the Elemental Well and an orchard of apples full of Wild Magic—and that Angel had stolen an unknown amount of apples. One bite of a fey apple can give a person Wild Magic and, depending on who they are, it could also enhance their innate magic. Jerry had already used the stolen apples to turn nine sacred squadrons of Angels into superangels and sent them to attack the Golden Citadel. That’s a lot of bites, so we were hoping he had used up his supply.

“One problem at a time,” I said. “Austin, you’ll need to be very careful until we figure out exactly what the Wild Magic has done to you. You could have a touch of Air or full doses of all five of the elements.”

“A touch of air,” he snickered. “You sure we ain’t talking about farts again?”

The Intare, who were basically a bunch of supernatural frat boys, chuckled at that. Austin may not be as handsome as the other Intare men, but he was close, with his postcard-cowboy looks, and his personality fit right in.

“We never were.” I rolled my eyes. “I don’t think you should go to work until we know what we’re dealing with.”

“I guess I can take some emergency leave,” Austin said. “They weren’t too happy when I took those days off after

I was changed, but I reckon if I tell them I've been infected with Wild Magic, they'll—"

"No!" Azrael and I said together.

"Ah'ite, don't get your tail up. I won't tell them about the apples."

"We can't let it get out that there's a way for humans to become infected by the Wild Magic again," Azrael said. "It will cause a panic."

"True 'nuff." Austin leaned back against a column, bent a knee, and rested an arm on it. "I'll just use the old, I've got the green apple nasties."

"Maybe don't mention apples at all," I said.

"It just means I'm sick, V."

"Yeah, I got that. Still."

"How about I'm sick as a dog passing peach pits."

That earned him a round of "Ews" and grimaces.

"Either way, I've got to go home to make the call. A text ain't gonna cut it."

"I'll go with you just in case something, er, arises," Azrael offered.

“Ah’rite. Let’s get to getting’,” Austin smoothly stood up and headed inside with Az.

I sighed as I watched them go. “I’ve been home less than an hour and there’s already a problem.”

“At least the twins are taking a nap.” Samantha pointed to a pile of feathers just outside the play castle.

“A small miracle, but I’ll take it.” I shook my head. “The terrible twos are even more terrible with wings.”

A few minutes later, a male voice came from behind me. “Vervain?”

I turned to see Jesus standing in the doorway. “Jesus!” I got up and went to hug him. “You just missed your brother, but he’ll be back soon. Come and sit down. It’s good to see you.”

He grabbed my hand. “V, I know how the Man got the tracing chant for the Citadel.”

I went still. “How?”

“I found bugs in my place, one was just outside the tracing room.”

“Bugs?” Viper asked. “You have bugs in your territory? Gross, man.”

“Listening devices,” Odin explained. “And insects are an important part of an ecosystem.”

Meanwhile, I asked, “Your dad bugged you?!”

“Makes sense. Jerry couldn’t get into the Citadel but he could get into his son’s home.” Re crossed his legs, one ankle on the other knee, and leaned back, looking casually perfect in his linen suit. He had his shoulder-length hair pulled back in a ponytail that turned his highlights into golden streaks. All he needed was a straw hat and he’d look like a rich tourist in the 20s, off to explore the pyramids.

“But how did Jehovah know that Jesus was going to visit the Citadel?” Odin, dressed slightly more casually in jeans and a button-down shirt, asked.

I was pretty sure that Re had waited to see what Odin was wearing today before picking a nicer outfit. Ever since Odin had shaved his beard and revealed a chiseled jawline that made him look younger and more handsome, Re had been competing with him. Odin, of course, was oblivious to the rivalry. Or perhaps he just didn’t care. Conversely, I wouldn’t have been surprised if Re had a magic mirror in his tower bedroom that he consulted every morning.

Jesus was wearing jeans and a button-down too, but they were nothing like Odin’s. His jeans were bell-bottoms and his shirt was unbuttoned enough to show off a gold peace sign on a chain. He had his usual round, purple glasses on, but I could see his eyes squish behind the transparent lenses as he grimaced. “I told him.”

I flinched in shock. “You told your dad you were going to the Citadel? Why?”

“I wanted to rub it in his face.” Jesus pushed up his sunglasses and rubbed at his bright blue eyes. “I know, it was real uncool of me, but the Man’s been such a downer lately, especially about Az. I told him that I supported my brother, and I was proud of what he’d done, especially the way he was trying to fix the mistakes he’s made when his brain was fried on Wild Magic.”

“Oh no,” I whispered.

“I should have stopped there, but I ran my mouth. I told him that I was going to Earth to check out all the primo things Az was doing, maybe even lend a hand. It was like a protest, you know? Fight the Establishment and all that.” He looked around at my husbands. “I’m so sorry. I should have known he’d find a way to use my rebellion against Az. He was already on the edge and then I pushed him over.”

“It’s okay, J.” I rubbed his back. “You were trying to do the right thing.”

“Where are the bugs?” Trevor asked. “I’d like to show them to the God Squad and clear your name.”

“Oh, I left them there.” Jesus looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. “I thought maybe we could use them to screw with the Authority, you dig?”

“Oh, I dig.” I looked from Jesus to Trevor, who started to grin.

“I’m sure ve can zink of something,” Kirill said.

Re pulled out his phone. “I’ll text the Squad.”

I added, “And I’ll text the Devil.”

“Outta sight,” Jesus drawled.

Chapter Five

Thor returned with Brevyn but he also brought his daughter, Ariana, and Ariana's mother, Raedra with him. Rae was one of Pan's Nymphs so Pan spent some time cooing at Ariana (whose conception was kind of his fault thanks to him eating a magic apple) and answering questions about his son, Pierce (whose conception was completely his fault), and Pierce's mother, Selades, another of his Nymphs.

Ariana wasn't the only baby to arrive with the God Squad. Persephone and Hades brought their daughter, Demetera, and Horus and Hekate brought their daughter, Asteriana. All three mothers took their baby girls out to the veranda to sit with Samantha, and Brevyn went outside to play with the older kids. They'd all just left when Az and Austin returned and, right on their heels, came the Devil and the Holy Spirit, aka Luke and Holly, aka Azrael's parents.

After Holly hugged Jesus, her son with Jerry, she demanded, "Where's my new granddaughter?"

"In Faerie with her father," I said. "But I brought Brevyn with me and there are three other baby girls outside for you to coo at."

"Babies!" Holly shouted and rushed for the door.

"How is your new little one?" Luke asked as he hugged me hello. "Is she ... as you expected?"

"Yes, she has the proper coloring." I blinked. "Wow, that sounded really racist."

Luke laughed. “I know what you meant by it, and I’m relieved that she’s the same Samara.” He glanced toward the front doors. “I’d best leave Holly be with the babies. Where are we meeting?”

“The dining hall, as usual.” Az waved toward the doorway to our right, across from the tracing room.

I followed them in and as the God Squad settled at the ridiculously long dining table, I stopped beside Thor, who took the seat at the head of the table—the end nearest the door. And yes, it matters which end. That’s how long the table, and the room for that matter, was.

“How’s it going with Brev?” I asked.

“Great. He’s a brilliant kid,” Thor said with a bit of wonder. “So wise for his age.”

“Well, he has access to a lot of Ull’s memories.”

Thor went grim. “How many memories?”

I shrugged. “I’m sure he doesn’t tell me everything, and I sometimes catch him looking pretty somber, but it can’t be all of Ull’s memories. At least, I don’t think so.”

“That must be hard on him.” Thor glanced back at the door. “He’s not at all like Ull.”

“Did you expect him to be?”

Thor turned sheepish. “Maybe a little. But I suppose I’m thinking of Ull as a child, not an adult.”

“Either way, I’m sure he’s different.” I smiled gently. “That’s how it works. Even when we remember our past, we become new people. He’s so much more than Ull now, as I’m more than Sabine.”

“Yes, I see that. And I do catch glimpses of Ull in his eyes. Almost as if he’s trying to tell me he’s happy.”

“I see him too! Brev will just look at me a certain way and there’s Ull. It used to be startling, but I’ve gotten used to it.” I glanced at Odin. “I wonder if Odin sees Sabine in me?”

“Probably.” Thor’s expression softened, and he laid his hand on my arm. “I know I’ve said this before but thank you, Vervain. Thank you for bringing Ull back.”

“I love him too, Thor. It wasn’t just for you. I gave him a choice, and this was what he chose.”

“Still.” He dropped his hand. “First, Ariana and now, Brevyn wants to be a part of my life. It’s just ...” He shook his head. “I’m so damn happy, and it’s been a long time since I’ve felt joy.”

“I know, and I’m so sorry for that.”

“Don’t be. It was my fault.”

“No, things just worked out the way they were meant to.”

“That’s great,” Horus, the Egyptian God of the Sun drawled. “Now, can you tell us why you’re so sure *he’s* innocent?” He nodded at Jesus.

“I was always sure of my brother’s innocence,” Az said.

“But now we have proof,” I added as I went to sit in the empty chair between Odin and Re. “J’s home has been bugged. One of the devices is right outside his tracing room. That’s how Jerry learned the tracing chant for the Golden Citadel.”

“Bugged?” Brahma, the Hindu God of Knowledge, asked. “And we’re just supposed to take his word on that?”

“My stepson doesn’t lie,” Luke, seated between Az and Jesus, snarled.

The Devil doesn’t have a temper; he’s one of the calmest, nicest men I know. But if you attack his family, he turns into the beast most humans believe him to be. That one sentence had Brahma drawing back in his seat. And Brahma was no coward.

“Thanks for the love, Luke,” Jesus said. “But it’s all good. The truth is coming out at last. Just give them some time to process. They’ll get there.”

“You’re a good boy.” Luke, back to his normal self, patted Jesus on the shoulder, then pulled a Ziploc baggie out of his pocket and handed it to the J-man. “Here, I made you some cookies.”

“Chocolate chip?” Jesus asked eagerly.

“Yes.”

“With pot butter?”

The Devil grinned wickedly. “Oh, yes. I kept a few for myself. This batch is potent.”

“Dad!” Azrael looked at his father in horror.

“What? Did you want some? I can make another batch.”

“No, I don’t want any of your pot cookies!”

I snickered.

“What’s so special about pot butter?” Mr. T, aka Tsohaonai, the Navajo God of the Sun, asked his wife. “It’s just butter you melt in a pot, right?”

“No, my dearest,” Mrs. E, aka Estsanatlehi, the Navajo Goddess of Change, said with a grin and smoothed back her husband’s long, pin-straight, ebony hair. “It’s marijuana.”

Mr. T blinked. “Oh.” Then he looked at Luke. “Did you bring any extra?”

“Grandpa!” Teharon, the Mohawk God of Healing, gaped at Mr. T.

“Well, it’s not peyote, but weed should give a nice buzz for a few minutes.” Mr. T looked back at Luke. “If it’s strong enough.”

“Oh, it’s strong enough,” Luke said. “I grow the weed myself.”

“What?” Azrael gaped at his father. “Where?”

“In the greenhouse out back.”

“Hell weed,” Viper drawled. “Awesome.”

“Primo Mary J from the Devil’s backyard.” Jesus held a cookie to his nose and took a deep sniff. “I think you should call it Satan’s Glory. Or maybe Unholy Smokes.”

“Oh, I like that second one.” Luke did one of those rapid, yay claps. “Unholy Smokes it is.”

“I don’t believe this,” Azrael muttered. “How long have you been growing marijuana?”

“Since Christianity first became a thing. I learned it from the prophets. They were all hash smokers. It helped them deal with Jerry.” Then he looked back at Mr. T. “But I’m sorry, I didn’t bring enough for the whole class. My bad, as the kids say.”

“No problemo,” Jesus drawled as he broke his cookie in two, then broke the halves in two. Every time he broke one of the halves, it made two pieces that were the same size as the

original. He soon had a pile of cookie halves in front of him. “There, that should be enough for everyone. Who wants a cookie?”

Torrent, the God of the Internet, started to raise his hand, but his girlfriend, Artemis, the Greek Goddess of the Hunt, pulled it back down. Meanwhile, Mr. T and Pan held up their hands.

“I’ll get a plate before you get crumbs everywhere,” Kirill said as he got up and headed down to the opposite end of the hall, to the kitchen. As he went, he muttered about children and crumbs.

“Nice party trick,” Pan, aka Peter Pan, aka *the* Pan, aka the Greek God of the Wilds, said as he caught the cookie Jesus slid across the table to him.

“It comes in handy,” the J-man said. “Especially when you’re down to your last bud.”

Mr. T looked at his wife while he took a bite of the cookie.

“He’s still talking about weed,” she said.

Mr. T nodded sagely, then declared, “This is delicious, Luke!”

“Thank you.” Lucifer grinned. If you want to get on the Devil’s good side, all you have to do is praise his baked goods.

“There’s Hell weed in them?” Hades, the Greek God of the Underworld, asked as he tapped Brahma’s shoulder and waved imperiously at the pile of cookies.

Brahma rolled his dark eyes, grabbed a couple of cookie halves, then handed one to Hades. Sarasvati, the Hindu Goddess of Music and Brahma’s wife, lifted a brow at him. I thought it was in condemnation, but then he handed her his cookie, and she grinned victoriously. Brahma sighed and reached for another.

Torrent looked pleadingly at Artemis.

“Oh, all right,” Artie said.

“Sweet!”

“Literally,” Satan said.

That’s when Kirill returned with the plate. He loaded the cookies onto the plate, swept up the crumbs with his hands, dusted those onto the plate, then slid the plate toward Torrent. Torr grinned at the pile of chocolate chip cookie halves, looking like a kid on Christmas morning. Correction, a kid on Halloween.

Artemis intercepted the plate, yanking it away from Torrent. She took one cookie half and handed it to Torr as she pushed the plate toward Finn. “Take a bite first. Just a bite. Then wait a few minutes to see if you like the way it makes you feel.” She started to hand it to him but pulled it back when he reached for it. “Just a small bite.”

“Yes, all right,” Torr huffed and took the cookie. “I’m not a child. I can handle a little marijuana.”

Artemis looked unconvinced.

Finn, a swan-shifter from the Celtic Pantheon, took three halves. He winked at me with an ivy-green eye and shoved an entire piece in his mouth while he pushed the plate toward me.

“No, thank you.” I passed the plate toward Thor and tried to get us back on track, “Jesus left the listening devices where they were so that we could use them against Jerry. If we feed him false information, and he reacts, it should prove that it was Jerry who put them there.”

“That’s why we called you here,” Trevor said. “We need to come up with a plan. What can we leak to Jerry that will benefit us? If we do this right, we could score a huge win.”

“What we need to do is find out how many apples he has left,” Finn said with a slight Irish accent.

“Yes, but I don’t think the bugs in Jesus’s home will help with that,” Brahma said as he brushed crumbs off his silk tie.

“Let’s just take a moment to think about this,” Thor said. “We know that Jehovah will be planning a new attack, but we don’t know where he’ll strike.”

“Probably the Golden Citadel,” Azrael said.

“I don’t think so. He’s already tried that and failed. I think he’ll come up with another option.”

“And?” Horus prompted.

“And maybe we could compel him to attack when and where we want him to,” Odin said with a nod at his son. “We just need to come up with something that will force Jehovah to act rashly.” He looked at Az, Luke, and Jesus. “What do you think would enrage him enough to make him forget his plans and attack us wherever we happened to be?”

Jesus glanced at Azrael before saying, “The thing that harshes the Man’s mellow the most is Az getting the glory that he thinks is his.”

“Maybe we could build Azrael a monument or start a new business?” Re suggested.

“Or a church,” Kirill said.

Everyone at the table went still.

“Are you suggesting that I make a new religion?” Azrael asked.

“Vell, you do call yourself Faerie God.”

Azrael looked from Kirill to the rest of us. “I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can,” Luke said. “It’s easy. You don’t even have to do much. People have started religions based on me

without my consent or input. I mean, what's with the Latin thing? Satanists are always chanting in Latin. Why? Just because the Catholics do it? You'd think they'd want to be different. If they did their research, they'd know that Greek would be more appropriate for speaking to me. But no, it's always Latin and always so *boring*." He rolled his eyes and slumped.

"Dad, enough about the Latin."

"Sorry. I'm just trying to tell you that it's not that big a deal. Humans start new religions all the time."

"No, they don't."

"Sure, they do. Not all their new religions have gods in them but they're still religions. Or they recycle gods and do new versions of old religions."

"True. There's that science one. The one Tom Cruise joined that made him jump on couches. Total headtrip." Jesus nodded and took another bite of cookie—he'd finished two cookies already, as in four halves.

"I thought he jumped on the couch because of Katie whats-her-name?" Pan asked.

"Oooh." The J-man nodded. "You could be right. But he did join that cult too."

"You mean the one that kidnapped people and took all their money?" Pan asked.

“That doesn’t exactly narrow it down,” Luke said dryly.

“Scientology,” Azrael said with a grimace.

“Yeah, that’s it!” the J-man pointed at my husband. “See? You can do it too, Brother.”

“I’m not starting a new religion,” Azrael said. “It’s hard enough to get humans to accept me without asking them to worship me.”

“Well, you kinda did it already,” Finn said.

“I wasn’t myself!”

“All right, enough!” I held up my hands. “You don’t have to make a new religion, Az. We just need to make Jerry *think* that the humans are making a new religion based on you.”

Azrael blinked, then grinned. “You’re right. We build a church, somewhere remote so we can keep humans away from the battle.”

“Then I go home and talk about attending your church’s first service,” Jesus said. “That’s a rad plan! Dad will send a whole sacred squadron of Angels.”

“Maybe more,” I muttered, thinking about the nine squadrons he’d sent to kill Azrael.

“I think we’re ignoring an important detail.” Hades looked in my direction. He had his sunglasses on as usual and unlike Jesus’s, I couldn’t see through his, so I couldn’t be completely sure that he was staring at me. But then he made it clear by saying, “The only one who’s been able to stop the Apple Angel Gang is Vervain.”

“First of all,”—I pointed at Hades—“I love that name for them. Second, most of you were unable to get to us so we don’t know how you’d do against the Apple Angels.”

“Without apples to fortify us, we’d probably do poorly,” Mr. T said.

Mrs. E added, “But now we know it’s safe for us to take a single bite. And you’re the ones with the orchard.” She looked at Az, then me. “So we have an unlimited supply.”

“It’s *relatively* safe,” Odin said. “But there could be side effects that we don’t know about and aren’t prepared for.”

“Like me,” Austin said.

“What happened to you?” Hades asked. “I mean, beyond getting turned into a werelion?”

“Austin flew today,” Azrael said.

“Excuse me?” Brahma leaned forward. “You did what?”

“We think that because I had Wild Magic in me when I transformed him, it also transformed Austin,” I said.

“So, he’s a faerie lion?” Pan asked, then grinned broadly. “A *flying* faerie lion?”

Austin grimaced. “Lord have mercy.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Jesus said.

I answered for Austin since he was gaping at Jesus, “Yes, he is. Maybe more.”

“What does that mean?” Teharon asked. Both he and his girlfriend, Karni Mata, had passed on the cookies.

“It means that we don’t know how many of the elements will manifest in Austin,” Azrael said. “He could end up with power over plants or an ability to breathe water.”

“Or fire,” I added. Then I grinned. “A fire-breathing, flying, faerie lion. Oh, I like the sound of that.”

“It’s because of the alliteration,” Torrent said. “It makes it sound nice—a fire-breathing, flying, faerie lion. So many Fs.”

Pan snorted. “But you left off the best F-word.”

Torr frowned at Pan in confusion.

“I don’t think I want to breathe fire,” Austin said. “It sounds like a really bad case of indigestion.”

“It’s not. It’s wonderful.” I leaned onto the table to look down the length of it at him. “And you can use fire to heal yourself.”

“If he’s immune,” Azrael said. “We don’t know how it will manifest. If it does at all.”

“And isn’t that a Dragon-Sidhe thing?” Viper asked.

“Yes,” I said. “But I was the one who transformed him, so he’d get my Fire magic.”

“No, he’ll get the Wild Fire Magic,” Az argued. “And we don’t know how it will manifest, Carus.”

“How could he breathe fire and not be immune to it?” I rolled my eyes. “He’d burn himself up.”

“I’d what?!” Austin squeaked.

“You wouldn’t,” I quickly said to Austin. “And that proves my point.”

“What point?” Austin looked at Az as if he could interpret my insanity.

“That if you breathed fire, you’d be immune to it,” Azrael said. “And I concede her point. The magic wouldn’t destroy you like that.”

“If for no other reason than it would mean destroying itself,” I added.

“Great, so I’ve got self-centered magic taking over my body,” Austin grumbled.

“No, you don’t,” Az said. “It has a sense of self-preservation, but whatever manifests, you will be in control of it. You may have to learn how to take the reins, but you will be able to.”

“Like riding a horse?”

“A wild horse.”

Austin grinned. “I can do that.”

“Yay!” Horus exclaimed in mock enthusiasm. “*Now* can we get back to the small matter of a war with Heaven?”

“Settle down, Horus,” Thor said. “We’re getting there. There’s no rush.”

“Azrael!” The Archangel Michael came running into the room, white wings rustling behind him.

“Mike? What’s happened?” Azrael asked.

“Jerry has lost his fucking mind!”

Chapter Six

“What did the Man do now?” Jesus asked.

Michael paused, blinked at Jesus and Luke, and said, “Oh, hey, J-man. Hello, Luke.” Then he went right back to being furious, “He’s ordered the Avenging Angels to stop punishing the evil-doers!”

“What?!” Azrael surged to his feet and grabbed Mike by his significant biceps. “But if the blood of the wicked doesn’t flow, evil will spread through Shehaquim. My territory will blacken and die!”

“I know, dude! Don’t forget who’s been running Shehaquim while you’ve been off playing faerie. Yours truly.” Mike thumb-pointed at himself. “And Shehaquim isn’t just your territory, it’s where a lot of Angels live, even some *Archangels*, including me at the moment. Jerry is fucking bonkers! This won’t just hurt you, it will hurt some of his strongest warriors.”

“Strong warriors who he can’t rely upon because of their connection to me,” Az said grimly. “He didn’t call upon any Angel in Shehaquim to attack the Golden Citadel because he knew they wouldn’t. Or if they did, they’d have found a way to warn me first. You would have absolutely warned me, and he knows that. So now he’s punishing you and hurting me in one fell swoop.”

“Fuck, you’re right,” Michael muttered. “He’s making an example of us—a warning to the other Angels.”

“I’m sorry that our friendship is costing you.” Azrael lifted his hand to Michael’s shoulder.

“Shut the fuck up,” Mike huffed. “There’s nothing Jerry could do to make me regret our friendship.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re a good man, Michael,” Luke said.

“Why is he a good man, but I’m a good *boy*?” Jesus asked.

Luke patted Jesus’s cheek. “Because I’ve known you since you were in diapers. You’ll always be a boy to me.”

Austin shook his head slowly as he stared at Jesus Christ and the Devil. “I feel like I’m losin’ my vertical hold.”

“Jerry is an idiot for alienating us, especially the Archs,” Michael said. “This is bad enough to send us to the other side.”

Lucifer spread his arms out and declared dramatically, “Come to the dark side!”

“They have cookies!” Pan piped up.

Mike frowned at Pan.

“If Jerry has more apples, he can make any Angel incredibly powerful,” Re said. “More powerful than you, Michael.”

“He has more of those things?” Michael asked in horror.

“Maybe,” Az said. “We don’t know.”

“He must, if he’s brave enough to punish Archangels,” I said.

“You never know with Jerry, he’s so fucking delusional,” Mike grumbled, his gaze going to the plate of cookies.

“Brother, it’s your territory,” Jesus said to Az as he passed Mike a cookie.

Azrael turned toward Jesus and intercepted the cookie. “Yes, but I don’t control the Avenging Angels.”

Mike spread his hands at Az in the universal *what-the-hell* gesture.

“Pot cookies from Hell,” Az whispered to him.

Mike’s eyes widened, then he snatched the cookie out of Azrael’s hand. Az’s expression turned beleaguered.

“You may not control the Angels, but you control *the land*, you dig?” Jesus gave Az a pointed look.

“Dig the land?” Viper whispered to Kirill.

“It’s hippie slang for, ‘do you understand?’” Kirill whispered back.

Meanwhile, Az said, “I don’t control that part of my territory. The dark land is there because of human belief.”

“Yeah, but you control the rest of the land,” I said, jumping on Jesus’s train of thought. “Can’t you block off that corner and stop the taint from spreading? Ward it or create a chasm or something?”

Azrael and Michael looked at each other.

“You’d have to sever the land completely,” Mike said, cookie crumbs falling from his lips.

“It might work,” Az said.

“It might not.”

“It’s better than doing nothing.”

“True.”

“Have the Avenging Angels already ceased working?”

“Yeah. I came here as soon as I found out.”

“All right, let’s go.” Azrael headed toward the tracing room.

“Azrael,” Thor called after him.

Both Angels paused and turned around.

“Don’t forget that you have more than Angels available to assist you. You have us and the Wild Magic.”

“Thank you, Thor,” Az said. “I’m counting on your help in the war to come, but, hopefully, I can deal with this matter on my own.”

“Should I just chill here?” Jesus asked.

“Oh, sorry, Brother,” Az said. “Yes, stay here and brainstorm with the Squad. I’ll be back soon.”

“Right on. Don’t let the Man get you down, Brother!”

“Azrael, you must protect Eden,” Lucifer said grimly.

“I know, Dad. I will.”

Azrael and Michael hurried away, wings twitching—one pair midnight-black and the other white as snow.

“Eden?” Austin asked. “As in the Garden?”

“Yes, it’s in Azrael’s territory,” I said. “Shehaquim is the Third Heaven. It holds Eden and within the garden are the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge.” Then I blinked and exclaimed, “Holy hamburgers, the Tree of Life!”

“Yes,” Luke said. “That’s why it’s integral that Azrael protects Eden. Without the Tree of Life, souls can’t come forth from the Void to fall into the Guff. Or float up into the Guff, rather.”

“The Guff?” Austin asked.

“The Treasury of Souls in the Seventh Heaven,” I said to him, then looked back at Luke. “The Tree of Life is connected to the Guff and therefore, to Araboth.”

“Yeah, Dad’s mind is fried with hate. He hasn’t thought it through,” Jesus went grim as well. “All the Heavens are connected.” He wove his fingers together, then drew them apart. “If evil spreads through Shehaquim, it will taint the Tree of Life and the souls upon it.” He drew one of his hands up, wagging the fingers. “When those souls float up to the Guff, they’ll infect the souls there, waiting to be born.” He exploded his fingers outward. “And poof! Heaven turns evil.”

“Heaven turns evil with a poof?” Pan whispered to Horus.

Horus smacked Pan.

Luke rubbed at his perfect jaw. “Jerry really has lost his mind. This one action will destroy the Heavens.”

“And those poor souls,” Jesus said. “If Az can’t stop the spread, I’m gonna be totally bummed out.”

“The souls wouldn’t be born though, right?” Torrent asked. “If they go evil, they won’t be born?”

“Not without Gabriel and Lailah working their juju,” Jesus said. “And I don’t think either of them would help an evil soul be born.”

“Lailah wouldn’t, but Gabriel might,” Luke said. “Don’t forget, he was the one who abducted Vervain after killing all those merfolk.”

“Fucking Gabriel,” I muttered.

“Not cool.” Jesus shook his head, then flipped his long hair back, over his shoulders. “That Angel’s got issues. Whole subscriptions full.”

“Yes, I would have liked to have tortured that little powder puff, but getting Jerry to make a blood vow that none of his Angels would ever seek to harm a human or a merperson again was worth it.”

“That’s right!” I exclaimed. “I forgot about that vow. Doesn’t that mean he can’t bring the war to Earth?”

Luke winced. “Technically, if they’re seeking to hurt gods and faeries, they’re not breaking the vow, even if humans get hurt in the process.”

“Damn.”

“Maybe Jerry has found another way around his vow,” Hades said.

“What do you mean?” Horus narrowed his bi-colored eyes—one gold and one silver—at Hades.

“If Gabriel is a staunch Jerry supporter, and he’s also the Angel who pulls the souls from the Guff, tainting the souls could be a part of Jerry’s plan. He may want Gabriel to put those evil souls into humans. It would cause chaos on Earth.”

“And he’s just going to sacrifice all of Heaven to do it?” Pan asked.

We all looked at Jesus.

Jesus squished up his face, emphasizing his hooked nose. “I don’t know. This thing with Azrael becoming the Faerie God has really messed with his mind. He just might be crazy enough to destroy it all for vengeance.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” the Devil said.

“I think it may be time for you to pick up the mantle of Godhunter again, Vervain,” Thor said.

“I never set it down.”

“Wait one bloomin’ second.” Austin stood up. “Are you talkin’ ‘bout killin’ God? *The* God?”

Jesus removed his John Lennon glasses and leveled his brilliant blue stare on Austin. “Yes.”

Chapter Seven

“You can’t kill God!” Austin screeched.

“Austin, he’s not the God you think he is,” I said gently. “He didn’t create the world and humans. He is not your father; he’s an Atlantean. And you saw what he did. Jerry got those Angels amped up on apples and sent them after us. He’s not a good guy.”

“Still, he’s God.”

“And he’s my dad, but his wrath is legendary,” Jesus said. “Literally biblical, you dig? We can’t allow him to take his fury out upon the Earth again.”

“Again?” I asked. “Did the flood really happen?”

“An area of the Middle East, mainly Mesopotamia, was flooded,” Re said. “The rest of us wouldn’t allow Jehovah to hurt our people. We surrounded the region in a ward and held back the water.”

“Damn,” I whispered. “What a dick.” Then I grinned at Re. “Also, well done on the rest of you for protecting humans.”

Re winked at me.

“Now you know my struggle,” Jesus said. “It’s hard to meditate on love and joy when your dad is such a downer.”

Austin slowly sank back into his seat. “We’re killing God.”

“A god,” I said. “We’re killing *a* god.”

“We’re going to try,” Odin amended. “For the good of the world, we must.”

“I’m having some conflicting emotions,” Lucifer murmured.

Jesus laid a hand on Luke’s shoulder. “I get it. Just feel through it. You gotta accept the pain before you can let it go.”

“I’m sorry.” Luke laid his hand over Jesus’s. “I know you’re conflicted as well. But your father was my friend a long time ago and despite all he’s done, I still remember that friendship. And,”—he paused to grin—“it’s been fun to mess with him over the years.”

“Luke, to end the last war, he forced you to become the Devil and Mom to become his—”

“Don’t you dare say a bad word about your mother!”

“I would never,” Jesus said gently. “But my father made it a condition of your truce that she go back to him and conceive me. Both sides were suffering great losses, but he would have continued the war out of spite. I was born from that negativity, and I’ve spent my entire life trying to overcome it. The weed, the meditating, the free love, all of *this*.” He waved a hand at himself. “It’s all to raise my vibrations and separate myself from him bad juju. But there comes a time when peace fails and flowers wilt. I can’t

meditate this away. I must take a stand against my father at last.”

A tear slipped down Luke’s cheek. “You should have been my son.”

“That would have been ...” Jesus swallowed roughly, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “But it is what it is, and if we want things to change, *we* must change first.”

“I don’t want you to change, Jesus. You are too good for this.”

“Luke, my father nearly destroyed our pantheon the last time you two went to war. Now, Az is threatening his power, the only thing he holds dear. Azrael, your son. The son he wanted me to be—powerful, deadly, and feared. An Angel who could rule the world if he so desired. He blames me for softening our religion and stopping the blood sacrifices. I am a thorn in his side while Azrael is your pride and joy. My father envies you. Just as you say I should have been yours, so he believes that Azrael should have been his. And since he is not, he is yet another barb of indignity in my father’s side. Jehovah will not stop until Azrael is dead. He isn’t after you anymore, Luke. He’s after your son.”

Lucifer blinked his diamond eyes slowly, the shine in them matching the sparkles in his white feathered wings—one of the few physical features that differentiated him from Azrael. But those sparkles looked menacing all of a sudden, sharper. Diamonds made to cut, not adorn. The Devil lifted his deadly wings, narrowed his ferocious eyes, and said, “Jehovah must die.”

“It von’t be easy,” Kirill said. “He never leaves Heaven.”

“He’ll leave if he turns Heaven into Hell,” Torrent said.

“The point is to avoid that,” Teharon said.

“Hell!” I exclaimed. “There’s an entrance to Hell in Shehaquim.”

“Yes, but it’s a sealed entrance,” Lucifer said. “There’s a magical boundary there. And even if evil did seep into Hell, it would probably enhance my power, not taint it.”

I grimaced. “Good point.”

“Who wants coffee?” Viper asked brightly.

We all looked at him.

“What? Cookies need coffee.”

“Viper, how many cookies have you eaten?” I asked.

He shifted his snake eyes toward the ceiling.

“Viper?”

“A few.” He lifted his hand as if to count on his fingers but ended up wagging them and staring at the motion as if it were the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen.

Jesus chuckled. “Enjoy your trip, man.”

I sighed and got up. “I’ll get the coffee.”

In the kitchen, I headed straight for our industrial-sized coffee pot which was usually full of coffee. It had just enough to fill a carafe, but we had a rule that whoever emptied it had to refill it. So I had to get a fresh pot going before I gathered all the mugs and coffee stuff. I needed two trays for everything; one just for the mugs. But I was able to stack the one with the carafe on top of the one with the mugs and carry them both.

“Oh, sweet moonlight,” Trevor muttered as he came into the kitchen. “Minn Elska, you don’t have the coordination for that. Let me help you.” He took both trays from me.

“Thank you.”

“But first ...” Trevor set the trays on the counter.

“What are you doing?”

He grinned lopsidedly as he swept me up and set me on the counter beside the trays. “You’re just too damn beautiful.”

Then his mouth was on mine, soft but insistent, his tongue slipping past my opening lips. Teasing, tangling, tempting, the Wolf Prince claimed his mate as if he had all the time in the world. I couldn’t resist all that werewolf magnetism. Instead of protesting our location, I wrapped my arms and legs around him and pulled him closer.

Easing out of our kiss, Trevor said, “I just need a taste to keep me going until tonight.”

I thought that meant we'd be doing more kissing, but then Trevor's hands slid up the hem of my dress and pulled at my panties. I still didn't stop him. In fact, I lifted my hips to help him, and he drew the silk down my legs. With a wicked grin, he slipped my panties into his jeans pocket and went to his knees. Spreading my legs wide, Trevor pulled me closer to the edge of the counter and ducked his head under my dress.

I gasped as Trevor's tongue found me, lapping me open. Watching his head bob beneath my dress was amusing but not nearly as satisfying as seeing his face, so I hiked up my skirt and settled it around my hips. Trevor grinned as he shifted his honey-eyed stare up to mine, his tongue moving faster. I leaned back against the upper cabinets, my torso bent awkwardly, but I didn't care. Not with that strong tongue working me. I just pushed his hair back to get a better view.

Dear gods, those eyes. Amber, softly glowing, and tilted slightly like a wolf's. Framed by dark lashes. Staring up at me from between my thighs. I shivered, nearly cresting from his gaze alone. Then the spicy scent of wolf musk rose from Trevor, and he added a thick finger to his task. He shook his head, rubbing that prime spot with his lips as his hair slid against my thighs.

"Oh, fuck," I whispered. "Honey-Eyes, you need to get up here and finish this."

He chuckled against my flesh and pumped his finger faster.

The muscles in my legs tightened, squeezing Trevor as if afraid he'd stop, and I clenched my teeth to keep from shrieking. My body went into spasm, and I had to grip the counter to keep from falling. Trevor just kept going, sucking

and licking until I had crested and was trying to come down. Trying but failing because of his unrelenting attention.

“Stop!” I hissed. “It’s too much!”

Trevor withdrew, licking his lips, and stood up. With a deeply satisfied grin, he helped me sit up, then kissed me again. “I think that should hold me over.”

“You naughty wolf,” I whispered.

He nipped at my lips. “You seemed to enjoy it.”

“I absolutely did, but now I have to go out there and face our friends with no panties and a wet nether region.”

“I think that makes you the naughty one, not me.” He helped me down, then picked up the trays.

“You make me naughty.”

“Good.” He kissed my cheek and went to the kitchen’s swinging door, turning at the last moment to back out and wink at me.

I smoothed my dress and hair before following.

“You all right, Vervain?” Torrent asked as I resumed my seat. “You look a bit flushed.”

“Just the heat from the coffee,” I said as Trevor smirked. “I had to start a fresh pot.”

“Uh-huh.” Re narrowed his eyes at Trevor. “Are you sure that’s all you started in there?”

Before either Trevor or I could respond, Azrael’s voice came from the foyer, “Vervain!”

I ran out of the dining hall and directly into the foyer. Everyone else followed me, but we all pulled up short when we saw the doorway of the tracing room. A dragon head was poking through it on a long, sinuous neck, green scales glinting in the chandelier light.

Recovering a second later, I hurried over to the dragon. “Salem?”

“Hi, V!” Salem, the Dragon of Shehaquim—a pure dragon, not a Dragon-Sidhe or a shapeshifter—grinned at me, showing off his impressive teeth. “Uh, Az told me I should stay with you guys for a while, but I can’t fit through your tracing wall.”

“He’s half in the Aether,” Azrael said as he ducked under Salem’s neck and joined me. “We need you to widen the room temporarily.”

“Especially the tracing wall,” Salem said.

“Oh!” I rushed forward, summoning my territory magic as I went.

The land responded instantly, pushing magic up into Pride Palace and sending it where I directed it. First, I widened the doorway so I could get a good look at the tracing wall on

the opposite end of the small room. It was all dragon. Once I got a view, if not precisely a good look, I enlarged the room by pushing the side wall out into the foyer. I took it right up to the front doors. The entry would look unbalanced but that wasn't a big deal. Then I quickly backed out of the dragon's way.

“Phew!” Salem popped through the tracing wall, out of the new larger doorway (with a door much too small for it hanging open), and stopped in the two-story high space before the main stairs. “That felt weird. I don't think I like leaving my butt hanging in the Aether.”

“It wasn't just hanging there, it was pure energy,” I said. “Half of you was physical and half wasn't.”

“That explains the butt tingles.” He grinned. Then he saw Luke. “Hey, Lucifer!”

“Hello, Salem.”

“What's going on in here?” Samantha asked as she came inside with the other mothers, including Holly.

They all stopped short when they saw Salem.

“Hello, Salem,” Holly said. “Lovely to see you.”

“Hello, Mrs. Morningstar. Nice to see you too.”

“Oh, stop. You know you can call me Holly.”

“Yeah, nice to see you. It's been a while. But what are you doing here, Salem?” Hekate asked as she bounced her

daughter on her hip.

Baby Astie was in a dress that matched her mother's—black lace with spider web details. At least Katie hadn't painted Astie's nails black yet. She had threatened to do it the last time I'd seen them but the expression on Horus's face told me she'd be in for a fight.

“Oh, babies!” Salem declared and lowered his face to sniff Astie. “So many babies!”

Asteriana giggled and patted Salem's nose.

Raedra, however, who'd never met Salem, backed away with Ariana held close.

“Focus, Salem,” Holly said.

“Oh! I have to stay here while Azrael makes sure that evil doesn't seep into Heaven.”

All the mothers looked at Azrael, but it was his mother who demanded, “What's Jerry done now?”

The J-man snickered.

“Dad will fill you in,” Az said. Then he looked at me to ask, “Carus, could you make a guest room for Salem?”

“Oh, I can sleep outside,” Salem said. “Just don't let it rain on me.”

“No problem.” I waved toward the front doors, then preceded him outside. “I’ll make you a bed out here.”

“Salem!” the twins shouted as soon as we stepped outside. They came whizzing over to circle his head like a couple of crazy bats.

“Hey, kids.” Salem nosed them hello. “We’re having a slumber party!”

The other children ran over, shouting Salem’s name. They’d all met the dragon before, but Brevyn knew him best since Salem had visited Faerie a few times to go flying with us.

“Salem, why are you here?” Brevyn asked after the hellos had been made.

Salem glanced at me, and after I shook my head subtly, he said, “Home renovations.”

“What are home renovations?” Lesya asked.

“It’s like when I change things around the palace,” I explained. “Salem doesn’t have territory magic so he has to hire someone to change his home for him and that takes time. He’s going to stay with us during that time.”

“Yay!” the children shouted.

Then came the demands to play and take them flying and breathe fire. On and on. You’d think they didn’t have a dragon for a mother.

“Can I take them flying?” Salem asked me.

“Only if you carry them in your talons. I don’t want them on your back. They could fall off.”

“Sure thing, V,” he said. To the children, he added, “Okay, two at a time.”

Another round of yays was shouted as I strode over to a meadow beside the play castle. I crouched to lay my hand on a rock, closed my eyes, and summoned my territory magic once more. With a rush of energy and an image in my mind, I changed the rock into a massive, pillowy mattress large enough for a dragon to curl up on. Then I went back inside to find everyone else still in the foyer.

“What’s going on?” Persephone whispered to me.

“Jerry has commanded the Avenging Angels in Shehaquim to stop torturing wicked humans,” I said.

Hekate asked, “Isn’t that a good thing? Live humans shouldn’t be in the God Realm, much less tortured.”

“It’s part of the myths,” Holly said. “When a territory is tied to a religion with such strong beliefs, it must adhere to them or things can go wrong.” She shifted her worried look to Az.

“Like what?” Sephy asked as she absently grabbed Deme’s little hand before she summoned Astie’s toy away from her.

Azrael shrugged. “We’ve never veered from the myths before. But it’s all right; I think I’ve averted the crisis. I was able to sever the dark land and encase it in a ward.”

“What about Salem’s house?” I asked.

“His cave is just outside of the ward. I shifted it closer to the Gates to Hell, but that’s the best I could do without totally rearranging Shehaquim.”

“We want to give it a week, maybe more, and make sure the ward holds,” Michael said.

“Because if the ward falls and something goes wrong, Salem’s cave will be hit first,” I concluded.

“Exactly,” Azrael said. “The Angels should have enough time to evacuate, but Salem won’t.”

“I hope he brought his valuables with him. I know how much he loves his treasures.”

“There’s a trunk in the tracing room. I’ll move it into one of the downstairs guest rooms for him.” Az headed back into the tracing room.

“And we’d better get back to the meeting,” I said to everyone else.

“We can finish up on the veranda,” Thor said. “Then the ladies won’t be left out.”

“Or our husbands could take the children,” Hekate said.

“I’d be happy to, my love.” Horus took Astie and settled her in the crook of one arm. Instantly, his expression softened.

“You’d have to drag some chairs over.” Samantha, who was leaning in the doorway, waved toward the right side of the veranda. “Just leave the babies with me. Salem’s got the older kids occupied, so I don’t have to divide my attention.”

“Thanks, Sam. I’ll update you later,” I said.

“No problem.”

“I’ll put Astie in her bassinet,” Hekate said as she took Astie from Horus. “She’s ready for a nap anyway, but if she gives you any trouble, just shout.”

“She’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

“I think I’ll stay with Samantha and help with the babies,” Raedra said.

“Do you want me to lay the blanket out for Ari?” Thor asked.

After a nod from Rae, Thor headed outside with Hekate. As Raedra followed with Ariana, a squeal came from the sky. Through the open doorway, I caught a glimpse of Salem doing a flip.

“It might be quieter inside,” I said.

“Oh, she’ll be fine.” Rae waved at the sleeping baby. “She’s a good sleeper. Go on, don’t worry about us.”

“Thanks, Sam.” Persephone handed Demetera to Samantha.

“My pleasure.” Sam smiled blissfully as she cradled the baby. “I miss this.”

“You’re welcome to her whenever you want,” Sephy offered, and by the look on her face, she was only half joking.

Our slightly larger group headed into the dining hall.

“Since Heaven is copacetic for now, I think we should set our plan into motion,” Jesus said as we settled around the dining table.

“No, we need to get the location prepared first,” Thor said.

“We need to *find* a location first,” I amended his suggestion. “Then we need to purchase the property and *then* prepare it for war.”

“Build a church that’s actually a fortress,” Hades said with a nod.

“And booby-trap the hell out of the church grounds,” Torrent added with a wink at the Devil.

“Booby trap the hell out of the church grounds.” Luke chuckled. “I like that.”

“I think I may have a place,” Karni Mata, the Hindu Goddess of Rats and Teharon’s girlfriend, said. Her full-black stare settled on Teharon (at least, I think it did). “The property in Wyoming.”

“Are you sure?” Teharon asked. “It will be destroyed.”

“It’s perfect for a battle. The land is mostly flat and there are no structures on it. If the plants or trees are damaged, they’ll grow back.”

“Trees take years to grow back,” Austin said.

Karni cocked her head at him.

“Right. Years is nothin’ ta y’all.”

“You’ll get used to it,” I said. “You know, since you’re part of that y’all now.”

Austin shook his head as if he couldn’t fathom it.

“That’s generous of you, Karni-Mata,” Thor said. “But we need to purchase this land in the name of a church. We can’t have any ties to us or Jerry might suspect something.”

“Good point,” I said. “So we have to set up the church first.”

“I can take care of that,” Torrent said. “And I can change Karni Mata’s deed to look like it belongs to the church too. I just need the property’s address and the name you want for the church.”

“There you are.” Karni waved from Torr to Thor. “It’s settled.”

“Thank you.” Az looked around the table. “Thank you all.”

“We’re a team,” Torrent said, his lime-green eyes flashing with Internet magic (which emphasized his dilated pupils). “No thanks necessary. Just pass the cookies, please.”

Chapter Eight

“The Church of Eternal Light is officially registered and legal,” Torrent said a few minutes later. “And it’s just purchased a property in Wyoming.”

“Great. Now we need to get out there and set up our defenses,” Thor said.

“We’ll need to hire builders,” I said.

“Not necessarily,” Az said. “I can use the elements and you have nearly a hundred men at your disposal.”

“I don’t think any of them are architects.”

“I can oversee things,” Torrent said. “We need construction workers, not architects, and those are much easier to train.”

“You know how to build a fortress that looks like a church?” I asked.

“No, but I have access to the knowledge of Earth, and I’m sure someone does. I’ll just need a few hours to scan everything on construction and architecture, then I should be good.”

“You really are Neo.” Artemis smirked at him.

“No, I’m the Matrix,” Torrent shot back.

“The Matrix is the Internet,” Artie argued. “You rule the Matrix. Therefore, you’re Neo, able to download knowledge in seconds.”

“Damn it, I’ll have to get a new T-shirt.” Torrent grimaced. “‘God of the Matrix’ just doesn’t have the same ring as ‘I am the Matrix.’”

“You could get a shirt that says, ‘Original Neo,’” I suggested.

“Oh! I like that!”

“Wonderful,” Horus drawled. “Now that you’ve got your funny T-shirt worked out, maybe you could get started?”

“Sure thing!” Torrent’s eyes started moving as if he were rapidly reading something in the air before him.

“Not even you can bring that guy down,” Pan slapped Horus’s shoulder and laughed at his sour expression.

“Give me time,” Horus said.

“He was made by one of the most evil gods I’ve ever met,” I said. “A man who tortured my mind in the Internet. If Iktomi couldn’t break him, you don’t stand a chance.”

Horus went still, then inclined his head to me. Even he wouldn’t make light of what Iktomi had done. But then he frowned at Pan and asked, “Who is Neo?”

Pan shook his head at his best friend. “What is *wrong* with you?”

Horus looked at Hekate.

She shook her head as well. “I can’t even look at you right now.”

Horus looked baffled.

“Why don’t you all stay for dinner?” I suggested. “It’s been a while since we’ve gotten together just to socialize.”

“Oh! Can we make margaritas?” Persephone asked.

“Let me guess, alcohol doesn’t affect god babies?” Austin asked.

Persephone looked horrified. “We’re not going to give them to the babies. Is that what humans do?”

Austin blinked. “Uh, no, uh.”

“Human mothers don’t drink alcohol if they decide to breastfeed,” I saved the sputtering Austin. “The alcohol can transfer from mother to baby through the milk.”

“Oh.” Persephone considered this. “Then, no, alcohol doesn’t affect god babies. But I’m not breastfeeding anymore anyway.”

In a voice suited for the Underworld, Hades declared, “Not that my wife’s breasts are any of your concern.”

Austin cleared his throat nervously. “No, of course not. That’s not what I—”

Hades started laughing. “I’m just messing with you. Relax, flying faerie lion.”

Austin grimaced at me as if it were all my fault.

“I’m actually not sure about god babies,” I said to him. “Alcohol certainly doesn’t affect grown gods. Unless you drink Durat wine, that is.”

“Durat wine?” Austin asked.

“It’s from the Egyptian Underworld,” Horus answered. “My cousin grows the best grapes there.”

“Uh-huh.” Austin stared at Horus.

“But if you really want to get silly, my Hellbrew is a better choice,” Luke added.

“He doesn’t want to get that silly,” I said to Luke.

“But you do look as if you could use a glass of Durat wine,” Trevor said to Austin.

“I wouldn’t say no.” Austin grinned. “Though I have to admit, I’m more of a beer guy than a wine lover.”

“I’ll bring some Hellbrew the next time I visit,” Satan promised.

“Thank you, Sir.”

Lucifer chuckled. “You don’t have to Sir me.”

“Oh, he does. He’s from Texas and you’re his elder,” I said. “You’re his elder by *a lot*.”

“And you terrify me,” Austin said baldly.

“Me?” Luke gaped at Austin. “I’m the most un-terrifying person I know.”

Holly snorted.

Luke took Holly’s hand. “Sweetheart, please tell that me I’ve never scared you.”

She laughed brightly and it lit her fragile beauty, turning it into something more robust. “Of course not. But I know you love me.”

“I’m a very nice person!”

“Yes, dear, you are. But that in itself can be terrifying for those who expect you to be otherwise.”

Satan sighed dramatically. “This is absurd.”

“Dad, you’re the Devil,” Azrael said. “You rule Hell, command the Demon Horde, and accept evil acts as sacrifices. You’re one of the most powerful and scariest gods in existence. The fact that you don’t swear and bake cookies only makes you creepier.”

“Oh, pish-posh.” The Devil rolled his diamond eyes and said to Austin, “I’m a kitten. There’s no reason for you to fear me.” He paused, then added, “Unless you betray or hurt any of my loved ones. Then there would be nowhere you could hide from my wrath.”

Austin visibly gulped.

“I brought home a case of Durat wine from the last shipment I ordered for Moonshine; I think we have a few bottles left.” Trevor got up and headed toward the kitchen, patting Austin on the back as he passed behind him. “I’ll check on the food sitch while I’m at it.”

“And yes, Sephy, we can make margaritas,” I said.

“Then we’re definitely staying,” Hekate said to Horus.

Horus tried to look beleaguered but his lips twitched. “As you like, my love.”

“We could watch *The Matrix*,” Viper said. “It’s been a while since we used the theater.”

“*The Matrix*?” Horus asked.

Pan and Hekate both rolled their eyes as Viper snickered.

“I should let the Pride know,” I said. “They’ll probably want to grill something.”

“Zey vould grill ice cream if zey could,” Kirill said as he stood up. “I’ll tell zem.”

“Thanks, babe.”

“Maybe we should move this outside now,” Thor said with a look at Torrent.

“Oh, we won’t bother him.” Artemis waved his concern away. “But let’s go outside anyway. I want to watch the dragon. It’s not every day that I get to see a dragon flying children around like Puff.”

“Like Puff?” Horus asked Hekate.

“Oh, that’s going too far, Horus!” Hekate stormed out.

“What did I say?” Horus looked around at the snickering God Squad.

“Puff’s a magic dragon, dude,” Viper smacked Horus on the back. “Even I know that.”

“To be fair, it’s a children’s story, and Horus hasn’t been a father very long,” I said.

“A children’s story?” Horus asked. Then he looked Viper up and down. “Well, that explains why you know it.”

“Oh, slam!” Pan exclaimed while Viper made a face.

Horus walked out, looking dignified until he made it to the door, then he put on speed and called out, “Hekate, sweetheart, I was only kidding. I know all about the magic dragon.”

Chuckling, the rest of us headed out to the veranda. As we entered the foyer, Thor pulled me aside.

“May Brevyn stay the night with me?” he asked.

“Of course. I thought that was the plan?”

“I wasn’t sure. We weren’t clear about how long a visit it would be.”

“Well, he can stay for as long as both of you want him to. I won’t need to send him back to Faerie until it’s time for the battle.”

“He’d be safe here.”

“Oh, no, it’s not that.” I brushed my hand through the air dismissively. “I promised Arach that I’d give him the chance to be a part of any battle here. So, I’ll have to send Brevyn back with Arach’s ring so Arach can use it.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of the rings.” Thor shook his head. “I don’t know how you keep track of time.”

I shrugged. “I used to write it all down on a calendar but now, I just return to each realm a minute after I left it last and figure it out when I get there. It’s when I don’t use my ring that I get confused.”

We stepped out onto the veranda. Some of the men were standing, leaning against the columns, but everyone else had found a seat, and they were all watching Salem fly across the clear blue sky, his front talons full of shrieking children.

“It looks like a scene from a horror movie,” I said as I stepped up beside Re and his column.

“It rather does.” He shifted straight, slid his arm around me, and drew me in against his side. “Who knew that a dragon would make such a good babysitter?”

I grinned when I spotted the twins and Brevyn, in his borrowed red dragon body, flying around Salem. “It makes perfect sense when the babies are gods and faeries.”

“Very true.”

I put my arm around Re’s waist. On the muscular scale—starting at Benedict Cumberbatch and ending with Dwayne Johnson—most of my husbands were closer to the Rock’s end, hovering around the Henry Cavill point. Azrael and Kirill were right at Henry; Az was the *Superman* version and Kirill, *The Witcher*. Odin and Viper were at Dwayne, with Viper dipping a little toward Jason Momoa, and Trevor was a very fit, young Brad Pitt à la *Troy*.

Only two of my husbands were on the slimmer side—Arach and Re. They may not be as bulky as the others, but they still had mouthwatering bodies, both at a Ryan point on the muscle scale. Arach had that graceful Sidhe physique, just a little more muscular because he was a Dragon-Sidhe, putting him around Ryan Reynolds, while Re was a solid Ryan Gosling. And sometimes, snuggling a Gosling was just what I needed. I nestled closer and sighed.

“Dagnabbit!” Austin exclaimed as he flew past us.

I chuckled, then shouted, “Just stop thinking happy thoughts.”

“Is that a Peter Pan reference?” Austin called back.

“Yup.”

“Then get your butt up here, Tinkerbell! I need you to take this fairy dust back.”

“Sorry, no takebacksies. But you’ll be fine. Just fly it out with the kids and Salem.”

“Fly it out? *Fly it out?!?*”

“Look, in the sky,” Aidan, one of my werelions, said as he pointed at Austin. “It’s a bird.”

“It’s a plane,” Lucius, another lion, called, right on cue.

Then Fallon came in for the finish, “No, it’s Superlion!”

“Not funny!” Austin settled into a hover to glare at his fellow Intare. Then he looked down at himself. “I’ve stopped!”

“Good, now come back here,” I said.

“Oh, no. No more flying. I just want to get my feet back on the ground.” As he said the words, he began to descend. With a sigh, he landed and said, “Why’d it have to be flying? I’d have been happier breathing fire.”

Then his hands caught fire, and he started to scream like a little girl.

I ran forward, all joking aside, and grabbed one of Austin’s flailing wrists. “Austin!”

“I’m on fire! I’m on fire!”

“Stop, drop, and roll!” one of the werelions called out.

“Too far, man,” another said.

“Austin!” I managed to grab his other wrist. “Look at me.”

Austin caught his breath and met my stare.

“I’ve got you.” I leaned down and breathed in the fire, taking its energy while quenching the flames.

“Oh, thank God,” Austin whispered.

Then his hands caught fire again.

“Jesus is right! God is an asshole!” Austin screamed.

“Whoa, man. I said he was a downer, not an asshole,” Jesus said. “I mean, he’s that too, but still, get the quote right.” He looked at Hades, sitting beside him, and added, “People misquote me a lot.”

“I completely understand,” Hades drawled.

Austin gaped at them.

“Focus!” I shook Austin by the wrists, then leaned down and sucked the flames away again.

“Focus how?”

“Think about what you want.”

“I want my body to stop burning!”

“Good. Focus on that.”

“For land’s sake, Vervain. What do you think I’ve been thinkin’ ‘bout?”

“Fire.”

“Have not.”

“Have too. First, you said you wanted to breathe fire, then you screamed that you were on fire. You need to focus on a lack of fire instead. You’re just adding fuel to it by thinking about it.”

“You want me to think about not burning when I’m burning?!”

“Yes. That’s the key to magic. You focus on what you want to manifest, not what you already have.”

Austin blinked. “Huh.” Then he looked down at his hands. “It’s gone.”

“Don’t think about it.” I let go warily.

He grimaced at me. “I said *breathe* fire, I never mentioned my hands.”

“What did I just say?!”

“Not to think ‘bout it,” he muttered.

“And what are you doing?”

“*Talkin’* ‘bout it.”

I rolled my eyes. “If you’re going to be a rebellious student, you’ll never learn.”

“Are you even qualified to teach me? Maybe I should go to Faerie.”

I considered that, then said, “I’m just as qualified as any faerie, more so because I wasn’t born with active Fey magic. And I can’t send you to Faerie right now because you never showed up during the five months I was pregnant.”

“Because you hadn’t come back yet.”

“I did come back; here I am.”

“Now. But not when you were in Faerie.”

“Yes, while I was in Faerie.” I patted his arm. “You’ll catch on eventually. It’s all connected. If you were meant to go to Faerie to learn how to control your magic, I would have sent you. I didn’t, so you need to stay here.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’re making the decision now. You can decide to send me now.”

“But then it would change what I’ve already experienced, and that causes problems.”

“Ugh!” Austin threw his flame-less hands into the air, then stomped away muttering, “Damn crazy Yankee gods.”

Chapter Nine

After flying all afternoon, the twins went to bed without a problem. Then I tucked in Vero and, finally, Lesya. Their fathers joined me, each with their children, ending with Lesya and Kirill. It also happened to be Kirill's night with me.

My husbands and I functioned on a scheduled rotation that had recently been adjusted. We alternated days, or nights rather, when each of them got to spend a night alone with me. Then, at the end of every month, I spent an entire week with one of them away from Pride Palace. The pregnancy had put a pause on all that, but now I was back and ready to spend the night with my black lion.

“Do you want to go to our cave or stay here?” I asked Kirill as we headed down the tower stairs to the master bedroom.

“You've been gone so long, we want to share tonight, then return to schedule tomorrow,” he said.

“All of you tonight?” I lifted my brows as I stepped out into the master suite.

“Unless you're too tired.” Trevor licked his lips, reminding me of our unfinished business.

They were all there, waiting for us—Trevor, Odin, Azrael, Re, and Viper. With Kirill, that made five. Five lovers to pleasure. And to pleasure me. Isn't life grand?

“I'm not tired at all.” I started to strip.

Eager growls and appreciative murmurs greeted my bare skin, and the men began to hurry out of their clothes as well. Once we were naked, I kind of fell forward, and they caught me, hands and lips caressing me as they carried me to the enormous four-poster bed on its stone platform. Trevor leaned down, his midnight hair tickling my face as he kissed me, and when he eased back, his honey eyes were softly glowing.

The mattress had been stripped down to the bottom sheet, but they'd left the pillows. They laid me down, making sure to set my head upon one of those pillows, then closed in around me. The men didn't so much pounce as flow forward over me like the tide. Powerful hands kneaded, stroked, and rubbed me everywhere, sending wave after wave of delightful sensations shivering through me even as I relaxed into their love.

My legs were eased apart, and someone settled between them, but my focus was on Re, who was busy at my left breast, sucking on my nipple as he worked my flesh with his golden-brown hand—emphasis on the gold. Re's skin shimmered in the low lights, looking as if he were dusted in metallic powder. But beneath that shine was desert-dark skin, tempering the gleam, turning bright gold into something more antique. More precious. I ran my hand through his walnut hair, bringing the highlights out to shine as well.

Out of all my lovers, Re was the most divine in appearance—in all aspects of the word. Making love to him was often surreal for me. Not only was he breathtakingly handsome, but his golden skin also made him look as if he were truly born in the heavens, formed out of the most precious materials. A gold god made to rule the world. But I was his world now and most of the time, Re focused his divinity on me. His divinity and his substantial knowledge of sexual techniques. The way he moved his tongue and sucked

at my nipple created sensations nearly as magnificent as what Kirill was conjuring between my legs.

Kirill had his hip-length, raven hair bound in a braid, but that thick rope slid over my thigh and calf as he flicked his tongue over my sex and teased me with his fingers. He looked up and caught my stare with his deep-ocean eyes. So intense. So beautiful. Especially when they stared at me like that, as if he weren't merely giving me pleasure but was worshipping me. An adoring acolyte eager to give his goddess whatever she craved from him. I reached down and stroked his cheek so he'd know that I adored him just as obsessively. He nuzzled my hand and continued his worship.

The ecstasy was already reaching an explosive point. I cried out and rolled my head on the pillow, turning toward Odin. He had risen to his knees and held his thick shaft like an offering. I licked my lips as I brought my gaze down from the stern angles of his Viking face, to the solid bulges of his pecs, to his washboard abs, and at last, his cock. It blushed pink at the plum tip and started to weep in need.

I groaned as I stretched my neck toward it.

“Just relax and open your mouth,” Odin said as he leaned over and brought his cock to me.

I closed my eyes in delight as that hard flesh slid over my tongue, forcing my jaw even wider. It tasted just like he smelled—of mountain air and sunshine, a clean, masculine flavor that made my mouth water. With one hand propped on the headboard, Odin began to pump his hips, working into me gently, feeling his way forward until I was comfortable taking all of him. Then his free hand cupped my face, and he sped up.

As I moaned around Odin, Kirill's wet finger slid down from my sex to that other place, circled it, then plunged inside. My hips began to work without conscious thought, pumping up and down between Kirill's mouth and hand. The Lion God growled against my flesh, sending zings up my spine, and my whole body tensed as I came, screaming around Odin's cock.

"Oh, fuck," Viper groaned.

That's when I felt my husbands in another way, all of them connected to my mind and therefore my pleasure, joined through the Blood-to-Heart oaths that bound us. They shuddered around me, hard, male bodies jerking and clenching through a female orgasm. It sent several of them over, including Odin, whose hips locked up as he came into my mouth. I drank him down even as I moaned through the aftershocks of bliss, body twitching as if touched by a live wire.

And that was just the beginning.

As soon as we recovered from that first release, I was lifted so Azrael could slide beneath me. He must have lubricated himself while I was busy with the others because when his shaft pressed at my backside, it did so slickly, and he easily slipped past that tight ring of muscle, delving carefully, then more confidently as I opened to him. Knowing this was a delicate process, the others held back and waited for us to get comfortable.

"Oh, sweet Angel cock!" I cried.

"I've got her," Azrael grunted and clasped my waist. "She's ready."

Az bent his knees, bringing them up between my legs to spread them wider and lift me, angling my hips so that my sex was presented Kirill, who had risen to his knees. The Lion God grunted, his broad hands coasting over my belly before he took his cock in hand and guided it to my sex. Holding my gaze, he entered me—an even slicker entrance than Azrael’s. Azrael went still beneath me to make it easier on Kirill, and then I was blissfully full, physically merged with two of my husbands.

Kirill grabbed my hips, and I gripped his forearms. An unspoken signal passed between the men, and they began to pump in unison, both of them entering me, then pulling out with the same rhythm. Their steady thrusting allowed the other men to move closer. Odin and Trevor flanked us, lying on their sides to bend their heads over my breasts. As they sucked at me and stroked themselves, Re took my left leg and spread kisses up and down my thigh. His shaft hit my calf as he worked himself rapidly, yet another layer of delight.

With that overload of sensation, my mind spiraled into crackling, nipple-tightening pleasure, into a place full of magical eyes and strong hands. A world of silken hair in a multitude of colors and eager fingers caressing my flesh. A realm where lust reigned without limits. There, every desire was honored.

“I love you,” Azrael whispered into my ear.

I screamed his name as I came again, ass and pussy clenching around pounding cocks. Not only did my pleasure hit them this time but also my love. Emotion zinged down those magical lines and detonated their desire, sending them all into savage release. Kirill and Azrael filled me while the others covered me in hot, liquid ribbons. Then we collapsed together in a heap.

“Damn it,” Azrael growled against my neck. “I wanted to pound your tight ass for at least another half an hour before I filled it.”

I gasped, aftershocks and naughty words sending me shooting back into arousal.

Trevor groaned and then grunted as my lust hit him. “Thanks, Az. That did the trick. Now move aside, that ass is mine.”

Chapter Ten

The next day, I went downstairs with my husbands and kids to find Torrent waiting for us at the dining room table with Artemis.

“You two went home last night, right?” I asked.

The sound of running kids came from behind me and then little voices, crying Salem’s name.

“And they’re off!” Trevor declared with a wave at the front door.

I frowned over my shoulder, hoping that Salem was awake and finished with his breakfast. The night before, I’d told him about the farm we had on the east side of the property and the animals I’d made with territory magic. They were real and yet not. Real enough to eat and nourish you, but not real enough to feel fear or pain, even when a dragon selected one of them for breakfast. They were a completely different breed from the antelope I stocked the grasslands with. Those were meant for hunting—cats need to hunt or they get too frisky. That being said, I didn’t want Salem hunting them. It was one thing to be hunted by a pride of lions, as they might be on Earth, but if a dragon swooped down from the sky and started picking them off, they might drop dead of heart attacks or get so frightened that life became a nightmare for them. Real or not, I didn’t want them living in constant fear. Which is why I directed Salem to the farm.

But I didn’t want the kids to see him eating. Dragons don’t have table manners.

“Damn, I didn’t consider what the care and feeding of a dragon would be,” I muttered.

“You of all people should have known,” Artemis said, then sipped her coffee.

“And yes, we went home last night,” Torrent added. “But we came back this morning so we could get started on the church.”

“You’re ready?” Re asked.

“Yep.”

“Damn, that was fast.”

“I told you that I only needed a few hours.”

I walked past them, going into the kitchen while they started to discuss the construction plans. After getting a cup of tea, I sat down beside Odin and finally noticed what Torrent had brought with him.

“Are those blueprints?” I asked.

“He designed them last night,” Artemis said with a grin at her boyfriend. “This guy can do anything.”

Torrent smiled the grin of the besotted at her. “Thanks.”

“It’s just the truth. I mean, look at these plans.” She waved at the blueprints. “They make my head spin.”

“I have to agree.” I shook my head at the intricate drawing. “Magic is so much easier.”

“Well, magic helped create these,” Torrent said. “And your elemental magic will help us build.” He glanced at the doorway, where several Intare were walking in. “Magic and manpower.”

“We’re soldiers, not carpenters,” Aidan said. “I think the guy you want is Jesus.”

I chuckled. “Nice try. You’re all going to help. Torrent will supervise and teach you how to use the tools.”

“Don’t humans take years to learn this stuff?” Aaron, our Fabio lookalike, asked.

“Well, it’s a trade, so I imagine they do,” Odin said. “But if humans can do it, so can you.”

“Sure, if you give us a few years.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll show you what to do,” Torrent said. “It’s not that difficult.”

“And it doesn’t have to last forever, just until the end of the war,” Viper said.

“But it has to be strong enough to withstand a sacred squadron of Angels amped up on Wild Magic,” Azrael said.

“I’m guessing he’ll send more than he did last time,” I said. “Which means at least ten squadrons.”

“Ten squadrons?!” Aidan asked. “That’s like ... that’s a lot of fucking Angels!”

“One hundred twenty.”

“What?!”

“Relax, Aidan. We have almost that many Intare and then there’s the Squad and the Demons. We’ll outnumber them.”

“And the structure will be strong enough to withstand them.” Torrent tapped the blueprints. “With Azrael’s Earth magic, he can unearth rocks for the walls. We’ll cover those with steel, then wood planks. On the outside, it will look like a small town church but it will be able to take extreme amounts of damage, including fire.”

“Uh, wood burns, Torr,” I said.

“Yeah, the outer walls will burn, but the inner won’t. And you can draw energy from the flames and even direct them toward the Angels. Trust me, V. I’ve got it all planned out.”

“And what about land?” Kirill asked. “What traps will we lay?”

“I’m not sure about those yet. Since they can fly, building spike pits and such seems like a waste of effort.”

“They’ll probably land to engage us, but you’re right. It might be better to set up projectiles instead of traps,” I said, then grinned. “We need catapults.”

“Now that you mention it, maybe the fortress isn’t such a good idea,” Odin said.

“What?” Torrent’s face fell.

“For Angels, we’ll be like fish in a barrel.”

“But the barrel will be indestructible,” Torr argued. “And it will have a lid.”

“Still, it might be better to use the church as bait. While they attack it, we surround and attack them,” Odin said.

“Maybe instead of a fortress, we make a bomb,” I mused.

Everyone looked at me.

“Well, if we’re building things like the humans do, we could destroy things like them too.”

“No, it’s a good idea,” Odin said. “I’m just shocked that we didn’t think of it sooner.”

“Well, it probably won’t kill the Angels or even hit all of them,” I said. “We’ll still have to fight.”

“Yes, but it would be a good start,” Trevor said. “Even if we only incapacitate half their group, it will give us a chance to deal with the other half, then kill the injured ones. And you never know, it could end up beheading a few of them.”

Azrael hung his head. “I hate the thought of killing Angels. They’ll just be following orders.”

“I’m sorry, Az, but it’s war. If we don’t kill them, they’ll kill us,” I said.

He looked up at me. “I think we’ve always been headed toward this. I just hope I don’t have to fight my friends.”

“I may be able to help with that,” Michael said from the doorway.

“Mike? Has the ward fallen?” Azrael got up.

“No, but there are some Angels who might.” Michael strode over to Azrael. “I met with the Archangels last night and only three of them walked out. The rest are furious and on the verge of changing sides.”

“Will that make them Demons?” Viper asked.

“No, human belief did that,” Az said. “Just as I’m an Angel despite being the son of Lucifer, they can go against Jerry without becoming Demons.”

“And they might,” Mike said. “If you talk to them.”

“When?”

“Right now. They’re waiting for you in Shehaquim.”

Az looked at the rest of us.

“Do you want us to join you?” Odin asked.

Mike held up a hand. “I don’t think that will help. At least not you men, but maybe Vervain should come. She’s the Faerie Goddess after all. I think they’ll want to talk to her too.”

“What about Austin?” I asked. “I don’t want to leave him here without someone who can help him with the elements.”

“He’ll be fine for now,” Odin said. “Go.”

“All right. Text us if there’s an emergency.”

Michael, Azrael, and I went to the new, dragon-sized tracing room and traced to Shehaquim, the Third Heaven.

Chapter Eleven

I'd met a few of the Archangels before but not all of them. I'd always thought there were a lot of Archangels, at least a few squadrons worth. I was wrong.

I guess I should have known when we arrived and Mike said they were gathered in Azrael's living room. Azrael's palace in Shehaquim was huge but the living room could fit thirty people at most and it was far from capacity.

"This is all the Archangels?" I whispered to Az.

"Most. Gabriel is obviously missing, and a few more were too loyal to Jerry, but the rest of them are here and so are the Avenging Angels." He nodded toward a group in one corner. "They're not Archangels, but I understand why Mike invited them."

"Az!" Thaddeus, the Antichrist, exclaimed as he strode over to hug my husband. "We heard you're having some trouble with the Big J."

"Thanks for coming." Az moved over to hug the other two Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Samuel and Ira, while I hugged Thad. "It's good to see you guys."

"We wouldn't miss a fight with Jerry," Sam, the Rider War, said.

"Not for all the tea in China," Ira, the Rider Famine, said with a smirk.

“The other Sam is here too,” Samuel whispered, then looked pointedly over his shoulder.

Samael, ruler of the Fifth Heaven, stood beside Raphael, one of the few Angels I knew, near a sideboard where drinks had been served. Raphael nodded at us and when Samael noticed where his attention had gone, he looked over as well. His pale-green, snake eyes were so bright against his dark skin that I could see them from across the room.

The myths say that Samael was the serpent who seduced Eve, but the truth is that he was one of Jerry’s staunchest supporters, even though he married Lilith, a Demon. He used to be so loyal to Jerry, doing whatever horrible thing he was commanded to do without question, that he earned a name for himself—the Wrath of God. But Samael had been slowly transitioning to our side and had recently turned his back on Jerry altogether. So, neither Azrael nor I were surprised to see him there.

“I’m glad he’s here,” Azrael said. “I wasn’t sure he’d come since this doesn’t involve his territory.”

“It involves all of our territories,” a male Angel said as he stepped over to shake Azrael’s hand. “How are you, Az?”

“I’m well, thank you, Zach.” He motioned to me. “This is my wife, Vervain. Carus, this is Zachariel, he governs the Second Heaven with Raphael.”

“Nice to meet you.” I shook his hand. “So, all the territory rulers are here?”

“Yes, even Cassiel.”

“Cass is here?” Azrael’s eyes widened as he glanced around the room, then settled his stare on a blond Angel with a gentle face.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“He governs Araboth,” Ira said.

“The Seventh Heaven?” I asked. “That’s where Jerry lives. I thought he rules there?”

“Jerry technically rules all the Heavens,” Michael said. “We only ‘govern’ our territories.”

“Ah, okay. And he’s not a Jerry-supporter?”

“He’s always been sort of neutral,” Azrael said, his stare still on Cassiel. “But I’m hoping he’s finally ready to take a side.”

“This is just a meeting,” Mike reminded us. “No one’s taken a side yet. So, I recommend that you don’t say anything you wouldn’t be okay with Jerry hearing.”

“Got it.” Azrael looked around again. “Did you contact Abaddon?”

“He’s still MIA.”

“Abaddon,” I whispered. It had been a long time since I’d thought about him, and I felt horrible about that. “The poor

guy. I hope he's gotten over the locusts."

"The locusts were true monsters," Mike said. "Killing them was merciful."

"Yes, you and I know that, but he was their commander in a way. Sending soldiers to their deaths is never easy, and he didn't just send them into a war with the odds against them, he ordered them to stay in a city we destroyed. That's a heavy weight to bear."

"I get it, but it's been years. He should have surfaced by now."

"I wouldn't," Az said. "I'd use it as an excuse to stay away from all of this bullshit forever. Jerry basically abandoned him, sending him to Earth to guard a pit of monsters who were never meant to be released. It was akin to banishment. So, why come back after he disobeyed orders and released them? Jerry would only punish him."

"But we wouldn't. He could contact one of us."

"Or he could start a fresh life," I said. "And I hope he did. I hope he's somewhere beautiful and that he's found someone to love. My magic found him worthy of love. He deserves it."

"Doesn't everyone deserve to be loved?" Mike asked.

"Nope."

He blinked in shock. “Seriously? You’re a love goddess.”

“And that’s how I know that not everyone is worthy. I want love for everyone, but being worthy of it is something else entirely.”

Mike snorted. “Fair enough.”

“I’d better get started,” Azrael said as he stepped forward, into the center of the room. “Brothers,”—he paused and nodded to the sole female in the group—“And Sister, thank you for coming. Jehovah has gone too far this time. He’s threatening all of Heaven and Earth by commanding the Avengers to stop.”

“Avengers,” I snickered under my breath.

Michael grinned at me. “Where’s Thor when you need him?”

“We would have refused,” an Avenging Angel said. “But he threatened to cut off our wings.”

Azrael held up a hand toward their group. “This is not on your shoulders. We all understand how hard it is to go against Jehovah. And, as I’m sure you know, I’ve segregated the dark lands. Hopefully, that will protect us from the taint.”

“Aren’t they safe in Azrael’s territory?” I whispered to Mike. “How would Jerry get to them to cut off their wings?”

“As I said, he technically rules all the Heavens. He can come here any time he wishes.”

“I had no idea Azrael’s territory was so vulnerable.”

“Only because our pantheon is divided. It wouldn’t be an issue if Jerry weren’t such an asshole.”

“So, Jerry could invade at any time?”

“He could, but with the entrance to Hell here, it wouldn’t be wise.” Michael smirked. “Luke could be here with the entire Horde in minutes.”

“Luke,” I whispered, something tickling the back of my mind.

“Yeah, he’d never stand by while Jerry attacked his son.”

“No, he wouldn’t. And he’s already proved that he can get to Jerry at any time.” I blinked. “That’s it! Luke has a way into Araboth.”

“Yes, we could take the fight right to Jerry if we have to, but that should be a last resort.”

“Why? The Horde did so well when they rescued me from Araboth.”

“The Host didn’t have magic fey apples back then.”

“Right.” I grimaced. “Sorry, I forgot.”

Sam snorted. “How could you forget about those apples?”

“I have a lot on my mind.

“No shit.”

“What’s your plan, Azrael?” Cassiel asked, regaining my attention.

Azrael stared at Cassiel a moment, then said, “There is no plan yet. We can come up with one together if you decide to join us.”

“So, you won’t be leading this army?”

“I wouldn’t dream of commanding any of you. We can work together or you may take your chances with Jehovah. But I think you know that he won’t appreciate your loyalty, merely use it to his own benefit.”

“I can attest to that,” Samael said. “All of you know how loyal I’ve been to Jehovah, but he has never shown me loyalty in return. I refuse to serve him any longer. He’s proven to me that he is all that Lucifer claims and cares nothing for any of us. Not even his own son, I’d wager.”

The Angels murmured among themselves.

“I want to hear from the Godhunter,” one of them said.

I stepped up beside Azrael. “What do you want to know?”

“Do you intend to kill Jehovah?”

The room went quiet.

“You mean, me, personally?” I asked, trying to buy some time to form an answer that I was okay with Jerry hearing. I didn’t want to tip our hand.

The Angel nodded.

“I have no intentions of killing him.” Before the Angel could scoff, I added, “But I will defend myself and my family against all attacks. And this is an attack. Jehovah is striking against us once more, and he doesn’t care what it will cost his pantheon. All of you know that Lucifer will stand with Azrael, and the Horde of Hell will stand with Lucifer. With this one action, Jehovah has started a new war between Heaven and Hell.”

The muttering began again.

“And I *intend* to finish it.”

The muttering stopped and every Angel in the room stared at me. Then they began to clap. It wasn’t one of those movie claps that start slowly. No, this was a sudden blast of applause, like an epiphany or revelation.

When the applause ended, Raphael said, “Good. We’ve spent too long whining about Jehovah in the shadows. It’s time to step into the light and take action.” He looked around the room. “We need to sever our ties with God.”

Chapter Twelve

“We can’t sever our ties with Jehovah,” Cassiel said. “He is our source of power. The prayers of humans flow through him into us. Without them, we will diminish.”

“My father receives more than just prayers,” Azrael said. “Lucifer has a constant flow of energy from humans that he funnels directly into Hell, purifying it for all the residents to use. And he doesn’t enslave his people.”

“So you want us to betray our vows to Jehovah and give Lucifer our allegiance?”

“It’s an option,” I said. “Wouldn’t you rather be bound to a man who is fair and, above all, sane? A man who will freely share energy with you instead of holding it over your heads?”

The Angels looked at each other.

“This is a big step,” Azrael said. “Think about it. If you’d like to meet with my father, I can arrange it.”

“I don’t want to live in Hell,” one of the Archangels I didn’t recognize said.

“You don’t have to.” Azrael waved a hand at the room pointedly. “I don’t.”

“Would we have to torture souls?” one of the Avenging Angels asked.

“No, the Ice Blocks take care of the torture. At the most, you might be asked to monitor them.”

The Avengers exchanged hopeful glances.

“For that alone, I’d give my allegiance to Lucifer,” one of them said. “I’m so tired of hurting people, even if they’re bad people.”

Everyone else in the room went silent and stared at the Avenging Angels in sympathy. They really had gotten the worst end of the Angel stick.

When I’d first visited Shehaquim, Azrael told me the dark corner of his territory contained a necessary evil, but even knowing that the humans who were tortured there were evil themselves, I couldn’t stomach it. It was bad enough to know about it, but I couldn’t imagine being one of the Angels who had to conduct the torture every day for centuries. Even my inner dragon cringed at the thought. It was a miracle these men weren’t insane.

“I’m so sorry,” Azrael said. “You were in my territory, and I turned a blind eye to your suffering because I thought your job was essential. I should have found a way to stop this a long time ago.”

“We don’t hold you responsible, Azrael,” one of them said. “You weren’t the one who ordered us to do those terrible deeds.”

“Still, I should have at least spoken with you, checked on you. I was so wrapped up in my duties that I never thought of yours.”

“And we never thought of yours either, Azrael,” another Avenging Angel, a man nearly as large as Odin, said. “Don’t waste your energy on regret. You’re helping us now, and we appreciate that.”

“I don’t need to think about it,” another of them said. “If your father can break my tie to Jehovah, I’ll give my vow to him today.”

The other Avengers nodded in agreement.

“I can make that happen.” Az looked around the room. “And I recommend that any of you who decide to do the same contact me immediately. You’ll be safer once you’re bound to my father.”

The Archangels exchanged heavy looks.

“I’ll do it,” Michael said. “I should have done it ages ago.”

“We’re in as well,” Thaddeus said with a nod at Ira and Samuel. “We’ve been leaning toward the Devil’s side for a while now. Might as well make it official.”

“Why bother?” Cassiel asked. “Jehovah’s hold on you is weak at best; your stories have taken on their own power, giving you strength greater than most Archs. And as for the rest of us, Jehovah can’t kill us through our connection to him. All he can do is cut us off from his power.”

“He’s right,” Zachariel said. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know if I want to go from one master to another. I’ll fight

beside you against Jehovah, but I will not give your father my allegiance, Azrael. If that's a requirement, I will remain neutral in this war."

Every angelic eye focused on Az.

"It is *not* a requirement," Azrael said. "It's an option that I recommend for your protection. If you don't want to make that decision now or you'd rather not break your vows at all, I understand. We will not turn away any Angel who wants to fight beside us for freedom."

"I will think about it." Cassiel walked out.

"A bit of drama queen, that one," Mike whispered to me.

"I don't need to think about it," Zachariel said. "I will join your rebellion. Jehovah is acting rashly and irrationally. He must be stopped before he destroys the Heavens."

Raphael grunted. "I agree. I'm with you."

The other Archangels were split; some said they would think more about it while others sided with us. Those who were undecided left. The ones who remained gathered closer to Azrael.

"Now, we can speak more freely," Michael said as he looked around the pared-down crowd. "We need to spread the word through the Heavens and recruit as many Angels to our side as possible. Maybe we can shift the balance without Jerry noticing."

“We’ve got the governors of nearly every Heaven in this room,” Samael said. “Only Cassiel and Sachiël are missing.”

Rafael snorted. “Sachiël isn’t missing, he’s dead.”

Samael shrugged and glanced at Azrael.

Az had killed Sachiël for torturing me. Of course, the torture had been at Gabriel’s command, and even Gabriel was only passing on Jerry’s orders. Not that either Angel was against torturing me. And not that I was the least bit upset about Sachiël’s death. For that matter, neither was Azrael.

“Jerry never assigned a new ruler for Zebul after I killed Sachiël?” Azrael asked.

Raphael shrugged. “With the University there, it doesn’t really require a governor, it has the headmaster.”

“Weren’t you going to school there?” Michael asked Az. “You should know this.”

“I was attending the University, but I never thought to check on who was governing the territory.”

“What about a ward?” I asked. “Wouldn’t the previous ward have vanished with Sachiël’s death?”

“It’s not as if we’re worried about the University being attacked,” Zachariël said. “The only army who might invade it would be the Horde of Hell, and we all know that Lucifer has

paths into many, if not all, of the Heavens. A ward wouldn't keep him out."

A memory of a sparkling road flashed in my mind—the Diamond Path connecting Hell to Zebul. The roads to Hell are paved with many interesting things. Granted, diamonds were the best of the bunch, but that particular path was reserved for Hell's Royal Family.

"Why don't you handle the Angels of Zebul?" Michael suggested to Az. "I'll speak with the Angels here. They're already primed to switch sides."

"All right, but first, let's get you and the other defectors to my father."

Chapter Thirteen

As I mentioned earlier, there are many paths to Hell, all paved with interesting things. I would have far preferred to take the Diamond Path, but we were in Shehaquim and there was an entrance to Hell just across the territory from Azrael's palace. So, I found myself on the Bone Path with the Avengers and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Yep, this is my life.

To either side of the road of crushed bone, the land was deep crimson, soaked in the blood that erupted constantly from the Blood Volcano, located several miles away. Straying from the path could have dire consequences—for your shoes. But all the members of our party had wings, and we had the Prince of Hell with us. The sky should be safe.

“Stay close,” Azrael called to the others as he launched himself off the Bone Path and into the burnt orange sky.

Although several Archangels had agreed to join our side, only the Horsemen, Michael, and the Avengers had decided to give their allegiance to Lucifer. Samael was done with Jerry, but that didn't mean he was ready to bow his head to another god. Frankly, I didn't blame him. He'd been burned once and his only other option was the Devil.

So, there were seventeen of us who leapt into the air after Azrael. I'm sure I looked a bit out of place among all those Angels with my leathery dragon wings, but I felt completely at ease in the environment. The environment, not the temperature. Hell is freakin' cold, and I had to jack up my body heat to stay comfortable. Luckily, thanks to my Fire magic, I could do that.

“What are those trees made of?” Gaviel, one of the Avenging Angels, pointed at a clump of trees on the ground.

I had learned the names of the Avengers on the flight across Shehaquim, though I doubted I’d remember all twelve. Funny how no one thought to introduce me before that. Or introduce them to me, rather. All the Angels seemed to know me; if not by my reputation as the Godhunter, then by my association with Azrael.

“They’re bones.” Michael waggled his eyebrows at Gaviel. “This part of Hell is made entirely of bones, sinew, flesh, and blood. Even the sand is ground up bones.”

“Of course, it is,” Gaviel muttered with a wary look around the ominous sky.

“Once we get past the Mountains of Madness, it will get prettier,” I said.

“The Mountains of Madness?” Cafhael, another Avenger, asked.

“Haven’t you guys heard about Hell?” Raphael asked them.

“We haven’t had much time for gossip.”

Raphael grimaced. “Right. Sorry.”

“Those are the Ice Blocks.” Azrael waved his hand toward the enormous ice structures we were passing over,

sounding like a tour guide. “Human souls are imprisoned in cells of ice where they’re tortured by their greatest fears. In about half a mile, we’ll reach a valley bordered by mountains. We call them the Mountains of Madness because they whisper your fears to you and can drive you insane. They shouldn’t bother us up here, but if they do, simply pay them no mind.”

“You guys like working with fear here, eh?” Gaviel asked.

“The Ice Blocks are necessary. They’re my father’s way of satisfying the myths while protecting his people. They take care of the torture so the Demons don’t have to. And the Mountains of Madness protect the residential region beyond, sort of like a guard dog.”

We passed over the looming prisons of ice silently, the cold rising off them making everyone but Az and me shiver. Azrael, with his new Wild Magic, could raise his internal temperature using Fire, as I did. Although, I think some of the Angels shivered for reasons other than the cold. I knew better than to look down into the ice cells—each panel, even those atop the prisons, gave a glimpse into someone’s nightmare. So I didn’t look, but a few of the Avengers did.

“Wow, that’s ... well, I didn’t know clowns could look like that,” Cafhael said.

“Oh, a lot of humans are afraid of clowns,” I said. “There are many horror movies featuring them.”

“Aren’t they supposed to be entertainment for children?” Bohel, another Avenger, asked.

“Yeah, but they can be scary for them too, with all that wild hair and makeup,” I said. “And they’re loud. Kids get scared, then they take that fear into adulthood with them.”

“I can’t look away.”

“That’s the end of them,” Azrael said as we left the blocks behind.

“Great, now we just have to face our fears,” Gaviel muttered.

“Not face them, *listen* to them,” Michael corrected. “It will be like someone speaking your innermost doubts and insecurities to you. But knowing that should help you ignore them. And that’s only if they’re able to reach us up here. I don’t recall it ever being an issue for me.”

“It’s no big deal,” Ira called to Gaviel. “Just tell the voices to fuck off.”

“Says Famine.”

“Hey, I can get scared.”

“I don’t want to know what a Rider fears,” Bohel said. “Just keep it to yourself, Ira.”

“As if your anxieties aren’t going to be worse?” Ira shot back. “I don’t have a lot to worry about, but you guys just got released from the shittiest duty in all the Heavens. I should be telling you not to share.”

“Good point.”

“Shittiest duty?” Thad asked. “Does that make it dootie duty?”

Sam and Ira groaned.

“Well, we did disembowel people,” Bohel said.

“Gross!” Thad wrinkled his face at the Avenger. “TMI, dude!”

“What’s TMI?” Bohel whispered to Ira.

“Too much information. It’s a human saying.”

“We’re here.” Azrael started to descend.

“What?” I looked down.

Sure enough, while the men had gone on and on about fear, we had passed over the mountains, averting their magic altogether. As we came in for a landing, the gargoyles perched atop the Devil’s Gothic mansion shrieked greetings at us, their leathery wings rustling. I gave them a little roar back, and they bounced in delight, as they always did. I love bouncing gargoyles. However, the bats hanging from the black eaves weren’t thrilled by all the ruckus and took flight in a dark swarm, heading for the Demon suburbs. I wove around them and ended up a foot away from one of the mansion’s creepy, stained-glass windows. Jerking back, I grimaced at the depiction of Salome, who smiled beatifically as she held John

the Baptist's severed head aloft. And that was one of the tamer windows.

We landed, and Bohel said, "Well, that was anticlimactic."

"You're welcome." Ira grinned, the movement making his gaunt face look even more emaciated.

"Distraction works every time." Thaddeus strode up the creaking wood steps and knocked on the Devil's door. "Open up, Satan, the Antichrist is on your doorstep!"

As we joined Thad, the sound of footsteps came from inside the house and then the door was thrown open, the scent of cinnamon and sugar wafting out.

"My boys!" Lucifer opened his arms, his hands dusted with flour. He wore an apron that read; *Can you smell what the Devil is cooking?*

"Hey, Luke." Thaddeus hugged him, then moved aside for Ira and Sam to have a turn.

The Devil left flour hand prints on their backs.

"You're using the apron I gave you!" Sam said. "I wasn't sure you'd get the Rock reference."

Luke frowned. "What does it have to do with rocks?"

"Not rocks, *the* Rock, Dad," Az said. "He's an actor, but he used to be a wrestler and one of his most popular lines

was, ‘Can you smell what the Rock is cooking?’”

“Oh.” Lucifer frowned. “Oh! You mean Dwayne Johnson, the man in all those action movies?”

“Yes, Dad.” Azrael chuckled. “But never mind that. I’ve brought you some Angels who want to switch sides.”

“You boys are finally joining us?” Lucifer asked the Horsemen.

“Yep. And so are all of them.” The Antichrist jerked his thumb back at the Avengers.

“All of you?” Lucifer widened his eyes at them. “Aren’t you the Angels who torture humans in Shehaquim?”

“Yes, Sir,” Gaviel said. “Your son said that you wouldn’t require us to torture anyone.”

Lucifer’s expression softened. “No. I don’t force my people to do anything.” He stepped back and waved us inside, toward the dining room. “Come on in, all of you. I was just making cinnamon rolls. We can have a nice cup of tea while we wait for them to finish baking.”

The Avenging Angels exchanged wide-eyed looks, then stepped inside the warm, brightly decorated home, nodding at the Devil respectfully as he lured them into his dining room to ply them with tea and sweets. Oh, how nefarious. Bwahahaha.

The rest of us chuckled and followed them to the table, but Michael rushed ahead to swoop past Luke and make a beeline for the kitchen.

“Michael, don’t you open that oven!” Satan shouted after the Archangel. “They’ve got another four minutes at least!”

Chapter Fourteen

“So what do we have to do?” Bohel asked.

“Nothing too dramatic,” the Devil said. “I’ll conduct a rite in which you’ll drink my blood and vow your eternal loyalty to me. Oh, and did you happen to bring a goat to sacrifice?”

The whole table went silent.

“Dad!” the Angel of Death whined.

“Really, Luke. It isn’t nice to tease people like that,” the Holy Spirit chided.

Lucifer burst out laughing. “Sorry, boys. I couldn’t resist. You were just so serious.”

“Damn it, Luke! You even had me going,” Thad said.

“Nice one!” Sam held his fist out toward Lucifer.

The Devil delicately fist-bumped War.

“Dad, this isn’t the time for jokes,” Azrael said.

“No, of course not.” Lucifer went serious. “And to answer your question, Bohel, it’s just a quick vow to break your connection with Jerry and establish one with me. Then you’ll be able to partake in the energy I distribute among my people. You might even get a little boost.” He winked.

Ira lifted a brow. “How much energy do you get from humans?”

Lucifer sighed. “Humans find it easier to believe in evil than good. Then there are the,”—he lowered his voice to whisper—“sacrifices. The evil acts and the more direct offerings.”

“He gets a lot of power,” Azrael said dryly. “And he’s not stingy about sharing it.”

“What am I gonna do with it all?” Luke shrugged, then swiped some frosting from his cinnamon roll and licked it. After a sound of delight, he said, “I just need enough to protect Hell and my family. And keeping the Demons strong helps me do that.”

“Well, you might wanna think about keeping a little more for yourself, just for the time being,” I said. “You may need it.”

“I have more than enough juice to kick that idiot right in his poopy pants, Vervain.”

I made a face. “Gross, Luke.”

“You’re the one I got that term from.”

“Yes, but calling someone *a* poopy pants is very different from saying you’re going to kick them *in* their poopy pants.”

“Which could lead to poop shoes,” Sam said.

“Can we stop talking about poop at the dining table?” Holly asked.

“Sorry, Holly,” I said.

“Look, changing sides doesn’t have to be a big deal,” Luke said to the Angels. “All I need is your willingness.”

“Won’t it be difficult to break Jerry’s hold on them?” I asked.

Luke snorted. “Hardly.”

“I don’t know, Luke. My ties with my Intare are really strong.”

“You love your lions, Vervain. Jerry doesn’t care one lick for his people, and he barely gives them any energy. Both of those things weaken the bonds. Trust me, it will be easy and neither they nor he will feel anything.”

“I’m willing,” the Antichrist said.

The rest of them gave their consent as well.

“Do you vow to be loyal to me as your new god?” Lucifer asked.

“Yes,” they intoned together.

“You have to say it.” Luke waved a finger at them.

The Angels looked at each other, then made their vows in unison, “I vow to be loyal to you as my new god.”

“Wonderful!” Lucifer clapped his hands, rubbed them together briskly, and stood up. Then he went around the table, tapping each Angel on the head, “Duck, duck, duck, duck, goose!”

Azrael groaned and shook his head. His father continued to do his duck/goose routine, leaving stunned Angels in his wake, then he sat down and regarded them gravely.

“Thank you for your trust, gentlemen,” Lucifer said. “I vow to never abuse that trust. As long as you remain loyal to me, I shall remain loyal to you. Welcome to the Horde.”

“Whoa,” Ira whispered.

“I feel good!” Samuel declared, then let out a whoop. “Damn, Luke, you do have a lot of juice.”

Gaviel started crying, silent tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Darling.” Holly shook her husband’s arm and nodded toward the weeping Angel.

“Oh!” Luke jumped up and went to lay his hand on Gaviel’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Gaviel. If you want to return

to Jerry, I can withdraw—”

“No!” Gaviel jumped up and hugged Luke. “Thank you. I can’t remember the last time I felt like this.” He stood back to add, “The heaviness is gone from my chest. I can feel your power but also this ...”

“Love,” Thad said simply.

“Yes,” Gaviel whispered. Then, in a stronger voice, “You truly care about your people.”

“Of course, I do.” Lucifer squeezed Gaviel’s shoulder. “You’re family now.”

Gaviel sniffed, straightened his shoulders, then knelt. “You have my fealty until the end of time, Lucifer Morningstar.”

“No, no, no.” Luke helped him up. “I don’t need you to kneel to me. We are in this together now, Gaviel. I support you, and you support me. That is how things are supposed to be between a god and his demigods. It’s a relationship that was intended to work with human belief. A way for all of us to receive energy from them while they only had to focus on a few gods. Greater focus meant greater energy. It was never supposed to be about ruling each other. But the myths changed us, some of us more than others, and we became this divided pantheon. Jerry created ranks in the Host by distributing power unevenly, pitting you Angels against each other to vie for his favor. But I try my best to hold to the original bargain and share what I receive both freely and equally. You’ll never have to fight for my favor. You have it simply because you stand with me.”

“Then I will stand with you until I can stand no longer, Lucifer.”

“That’s enough for me.” Lucifer grinned and looked at the others. “And thank you all for siding with us. I know it’s not a small thing to leave the Host.”

“I don’t even want to return to Heaven,” Bohel said.

“You can live here,” Holly said. “Luke will build you a house in the Durbs.”

“The Durbs?”

“The Demon suburbs,” Sam said with a grin. “Ain’t that fucking awesome?”

“Language, Samuel,” Lucifer chided.

“Sorry.” War lowered his gaze.

The other Avenging Angels just stared at the Devil as if they’d never seen him before while I tried to hold back my laughter. The myths say that the Morningstar was the most beautiful of God’s Angels, but what they don’t say is what made him so beautiful. I mean, yes, Luke’s gorgeous on the outside, but so are a lot of Angels. The real beauty of the Morningstar lay in his soul. If Lucifer had won the first war, Heaven would truly be paradise.

Come to think of it, Earth may have been a better place too. Instead, Luke had been forced into the role of a villain, his goodness hobbled. But maybe that had worked out the way it

was meant to. If Lucifer had ruled Heaven, he would have been consumed by his role and spent most of his time trying to help humanity. As it was, he found ways to ignore his role as Satan and focused on his family. And by family, I also mean the Demons. Well, Demons and a few Angels.

Chapter Fifteen

After our cinnamon rolls and coffee, Azrael and I went home, leaving the freshly converted Angels with Satan. Austin didn't have any episodes while we were gone, and Salem had tuckered out the kids. They were sleeping in a pile inside the play castle, feathered wings spread over them like blankets. It was so adorable that I took a picture. If only the God Realm had Instagram.

While we were gone, my other husbands, Torrent, Artemis, and some of the Intare had hashed out a plan for the church-bomb (oh, that sounds awful) and luring the Host to it. An Intare crew was already at the site with Torrent and Artemis, laying out the foundation.

“Where’s Trevor? Did he go with Torr?” I asked my men.

“No, he went to secure Moonshine and close it temporarily,” Odin said. “He’s afraid Jerry will target it.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

Then the man himself came striding into the dining hall. “Minn Elska, I need you to see something.”

“What is it?” I stood up. “Is Moonshine all right?”

“It’s fine. This is something else.”

“Should we all go?” Odin asked.

“I can only take one person, and I think it should be Vervain.” He held his hand out to me. “Come on.”

I took his hand.

“Hold on.” Odin stood up. “What—”

“Sorry, Odin, but we need to go now or someone might step into the spot I secured. We’ll fill you in when we get back.” Trevor pulled me out of the dining hall and into the tracing room.

He didn’t stop there but went straight to the wall and slapped his hand on the stone. In seconds, the magic of the Aether pulled us in, and we zipped through its energy, coming out in a shower of blue sparks. I was instantly assaulted by the sound of weeping and voices crying out in another language.

“Is that Italian?” I whispered, peering around the dark crevice Trevor had traced us into. “Where are we?”

“Shh, we’re behind the statue of St. Longinus in St. Peter’s Basilica.”

“So that *is* Italian they’re speaking.” Then I blinked. “They made Longinus a saint? Isn’t that the guy who speared Jesus?”

“Yes. I think it was supposed to be merciful.” He went invisible, but I could still feel his hand in mine.

“It sounds like there’s a crowd out there. Are you sure we should go invisible?”

“The crowd is why we have to cloak ourselves. I don’t want anyone to see us come out from behind this statue.”

“Oh. Right. Hold on, why did you tell Odin you were worried about losing this spot? No one’s gonna come back here.”

“Because I didn’t want to waste time answering his questions. Like I’m doing with you right now.”

“Rude,” I muttered and went invisible.

Trevor pulled me around the side of Longinus’s plinth. A short stone railing barricaded the nook the statue stood in; Trevor and I vaulted over it. Well, he vaulted; I sort of rolled. As I was rolling, I looked up at the immense statue to the extended hand that was, of course, holding a spear. A saint? Really? I thought the Catholic Church had higher standards.

“Whoa, what’s that big thing with the columns over there?” I asked Trevor.

“The Papal Altar.”

“Wow.” I stumbled as he pulled me toward the left, my gaze focused above me on the gold-painted designs of the arched and domed ceilings. And yes, there were several types of ceilings in that single cathedral. Oh, and the domes weren’t your average domes either, they had windows ringing them to bring in the light. “The Catholics don’t do plain, do they?”

“This is their main church, Minn Elska. Or one of them at least.”

“Right, but ... *damn.*”

“That’s probably inappropriate,” he snickered.

“All the better.” I lowered my stare from the ceiling murals to the carved columns that bordered nooks holding statues of people I assumed were saints. I hoped they had done things more worthy of sainthood than ol’ Pokey-Poke back there. “I’ve never seen so many statues in one place. And how many corridors are there? It’s like a maze of marble.”

“Vervain, come on!”

And that’s when I finally took a good look at the people.

“What’s going on?” I whispered as we edged our way along the side of the throng, nudging people gently out of our way.

Despite the push from invisible forces, no one panicked or even noticed that they were being moved by something that wasn’t there. They were too focused on whatever was ahead of them, too busy crying, clutching each other, and praying.

“You’ll see,” Trevor said.

“For heaven’s sake, even the columns are carved with cherubs. It’s as if they were afraid of leaving even an inch unadorned.”

“Vervain!” Trevor hissed.

“I’m coming!” I hissed back. Then we passed a corridor that was cordoned off with huge panels of fabric. “Why’s that corridor blocked off?”

“I swear, you’re like a five-year-old. I should have brought Odin.”

“This is my first time here; I’m allowed to be curious.”

“Well, Ms. Curious, that section is off-limits because they’re still repairing the damage done by Wild Magic.”

“Oh.” I deflated.

We turned left again and pushed our way to the front of the crowd. There, within an alcove of dusty-rose marble, was the Pieta statue by Michelangelo—the one of Mary holding the body of Jesus. It was backlit so that it appeared to glow and a crescent, mullioned window brought even more light in from higher up the wall. A white cross was set into the wall just below the window. You couldn’t get more Catholic than that.

“Huh. I thought it would be bigger,” I said.

Trevor pulled me over the low railing—the only thing holding back the wailing crowd—and up to the base of the significant plinth. A narrow ledge low on the plinth held a simple pair of candlesticks (really simple considering all the gaudiness around them) and a crucifix, but all of that faded away when I saw the blood.

“Holy bleeding statues!” I hissed. “That’s not a hoax; the statue is actually crying blood. I can see it flowing.”

“Yes,” Trevor said. “Be careful, it’s pooling on the floor.”

Sure enough, Mary (I don’t think she was a virgin at the time of Jesus’s death, so I’m gonna leave that bit out) was weeping so much blood that it had run down her chest to cover Jesus’s stomach, then drip over the side, following the deep folds of her robe in a runnel before sliding down the plinth to puddle on the floor.

“It’s a macabre fountain,” I whispered.

“It’s a miracle,” Trevor whispered back.

“A miracle. Oh, no. This is Jerry’s doing.”

“I believe so. Can you sense anything?”

“Sense anything? Like what?”

“Like Wild Magic.”

“Babe, Jerry doesn’t need Wild Magic to do this. This is his shtick. This is the power humans gave him. Useless miracles. Freakin’ parlor tricks.”

“What about that dragon nose of yours? Do you smell anything?”

I took a deep whiff, not expecting much. “It smells like real blood. Other than that, I don’t ... hold on. I smell apples. Damn it, you’re right. He used an apple.”

“I thought I smelled it, but I wanted to be sure. Your nose is better than mine.”

“Why would Jerry need an apple for this?”

“Maybe he isn’t as strong as we think.”

“Honestly, I didn’t think he was all that powerful.”

“Whatever the case, this confirms that he still has some apples left.”

I grunted, then asked, “How did you learn about this?”

“Ty told me while I was checking on Moonshine. Come on, let’s go home. We need to tell the others.”

We traced back to Pride Palace right from the Chapel of the Pieta and found everyone waiting for us on the veranda.

I walked out and announced, “We’ve got a problem.”

“Another one?” Viper asked.

“Technically it’s the same problem but a new twist,” Trevor said. “Jerry is performing miracles.”

Re blinked slowly. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You heard me. Jerry is performing miracles. Shit like blood-weeping Madonna statues.”

“The singer?” Viper asked.

“No, the religious icon. The human woman who the myths say gave birth to Jesus,” Trevor said.

“I thought that woman’s name was Mary?”

I snorted a laugh.

“Madonna is from Italian words for my lady—ma donna. It’s a title, not a name,” Kirill said. “Like Tima.”

“Is that it?” I asked. “Huh, I had no idea.”

“Vell, you’re a vitch. It’s not your area of expertise.”

“She’s a what?” Viper asked, his snake eyes twinkling.

“A vitch.”

“A what?”

“I vill hurt you, snake man.”

“Don’t tease Kirill’s accent,” I said to Viper. “I find it incredibly sexy.”

“Then you must find Dracula sexy.”

“I do not have a Transylvanian accent,” Kirill said.

“Oh yeah? Say ‘I want to suck your blood.’”

“Nyet.”

“I rest my case.”

“Is different. My W’s sound like Vs but Transylvanian accent is other way around.”

“Is it though?” Viper smirked.

“Da.”

“Show me.”

“I cannot do it. Is too strange.”

“Could we get back to the miracles, please?” Odin asked with a beleaguered expression.

“It’s not just miracles,” Trevor said. “He’s also been attacking gatherings of fey supporters.”

I looked over at Trevor in surprise. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“I didn’t want to discuss all of this in the Basilica.”

“St. Peter’s Basilica?” Odin asked. “It was the Pieta that was weeping?”

“Crying so much damn blood that it pooled on the floor,” I said with a nod. “And we got up close; she really was crying. It wasn’t a trick.”

“But we both smelled apple,” Trevor added. “Jerry must have some left.”

“Why would he need Wild Magic to make a statue cry blood?” Odin asked. “Isn’t that something he can do?”

I pointed at Odin. “That’s what I said. And making marble bleed isn’t something elemental magic can do.”

“But the apple could have magnified his magic,” Re said.

“He must be weaker than we thought,” Azrael murmured.

“That’s what I said,” Trevor pointed at Az, mimicking me. “And it’s not the only thing Jerry’s done. There have been many other acts of God all over the world.”

“Acts of God?” I asked.

“Lightning, sudden fires, even a fucking swarm of bugs.” Trevor fell heavily onto a couch. “He’s basically launched a divine smear campaign.”

“What do you mean?” Re asked. “Who is he smearing?”

“Aren’t you listening? Faeries.” Trevor waved his hand at Azrael. “One in particular. He’s reminding humans that he exists and that all who worship other gods—or faeries—will feel his wrath.”

“That’s brilliant.” I sat down next to Trevor.

The men glared at me.

“Well, it is. He’s denouncing us and increasing his power without revealing himself.”

“I doubt he came up with the plan,” Azrael said. “It was probably Gabriel.”

“Fucking Gabriel,” Kirill muttered.

“Do we call another God Squad meeting?” I asked.

“No, we can just text everyone,” Odin said. “There’s nothing we can do about the miracles. We need to stick to our original plan.”

“I could make a public announcement,” Azrael suggested.

“Saying what?” Odin shot back. “That there is no God? That these miracles and attacks are perpetrated by faeries?”

Azrael grimaced.

“Yes, exactly. That won’t win you any points with the humans. Or with the Fey, for that matter. All we can do is warn the fey communities on Earth. Maybe they can ward their homes and businesses.”

“He’s not hitting the Fey,” Trevor said. “He’s only smiting humans who support the Fey.”

“Smiting,” I scoffed. “But that’s pretty smart too. He’s not directly attacking faeries so they don’t have a reason to retaliate.”

“Yes, but *we* are faeries,” Azrael said. Then he blinked. “It’s still strange to say that.”

Odin grunted pensively. “Yes, you two are Fey, but he hasn’t given you enough of a reason to bring the entire Fey race into this war.”

“*I* am the reason,” Azrael said. “I can rally the faeries of Earth.”

“You only command the faeries posted at the Golden Citadel,” I countered. “You can’t expect the civilian faeries to fight for you when they haven’t been attacked.”

“It doesn’t matter. We have the Intare and the Horde of Hell and, hopefully, there will be more defectors from the Host.”

“That’s not the point,” Trevor said. “Jerry has found a way to weaken your position on Earth without directly involving our greatest ally.”

“But weakening my position is weakening the Fey’s position. I guard the Elemental Well.”

“And the High King expects you to do your job, especially after you nearly took over the world,” I said. “He’s not going to care about weeping Madonnas or swarms of bugs attacking humans. We have to handle this ourselves. Besides, who would we even fight? He hasn’t sent any Angels. We’d have to battle off the bugs and lightning.”

“And that might give credence to the miracles,” Odin said. “If we defend the pro-Fey humans, it will look as if faeries are going to war against God. And that would be proof that there is a God.”

“Shit,” Azrael muttered. “But eventually, this will hurt the Fey. Humans will turn against all of us.”

“And *then* we will have a reason to rally the Fey,” I said. “But not yet.”

“I say we let Jerry perform his miracles and mess with the humans,” Odin said. “We need to focus on the end game.”

“And this will keep Jerry distracted while we build our battlefield,” Re said.

“I miss Samara,” I said suddenly.

Azrael took my hand. “But she doesn’t miss you.”

“What a horrible thing to say!”

Azrael snorted a laugh. “You know what I mean. You are with her right now. She is safe and loved.”

“Right now, she’s still in my belly.”

“So, she’s as close to you as she can get,” Trevor said.

“But *I* miss *her*. Am I supposed to ignore my pain because the people I love don’t feel it? Is that what being a mother is about?”

“No,” Odin said. “Your pain is valid, and if we could ease it for you, we would. But we can’t. So we’re trying to comfort you with the knowledge that Samara is well. You know we would never discount your unhappiness, Vervain.”

“I do know that.” I sighed. “I’m sorry. And it’s not unhappiness just ... an ache. I miss my baby.”

“And *that* is what being a mother is about,” Re said. “Love. You love her so much already. But right now, you need to be here with the other people you love. We need you too.”

“Okay.” I held up my hands in surrender. “I’m done with my pity party.”

“Let’s go outside and relax for a bit,” Viper said. “You have other children to lay some love on. Focus on them and you’ll feel better.”

“You’re right.” I stood up. “I’ve been missing them for months and now, here I am, with them but missing Samara.”

“It’s understandable,” Odin said as we headed outside. “You don’t miss Arach or Rian yet, do you?”

“Uh.” I winced. “No.”

“Because you’ve spent the last five months with them. Samara was just born. Although you were technically with her, you weren’t holding her in your arms for all those months.”

“You’re right. I miss her because I barely had any time with her before I came back here.”

“And you came back here as soon as you could because you missed us, right?”

“Yes.” I grinned and took his hand. “Five months is too long to be away from you.”

“That’s why we decided to share last night.” Trevor leaned in and kissed my cheek. “We figured you’d been missing all of us.”

“I love you guys.” I leaned over to kiss his cheek. “Thank you for putting up with me.”

“We love you too,” Odin said as Viper shot to his feet and went running toward the pool.

“I love you too, Viper!” I called after him. Then I saw why he was running. “What the frankfurter?”

Streams of water were spinning up from the pool, twisting into dazzling designs. The children stood to one side of the spectacle with Samantha, Salem, and Austin. At first, they only gawked at the water but then, as the rest of us ran over, they started to cheer.

“What is this, Vegas?” Re asked as we joined them.

“I don’t know how to stop it,” Austin said, his wide eyes on the water.

“You’re doing this?” Trevor asked.

“Of course, he’s doing this,” Azrael said as he hurried to Austin. “You need to focus. Just like you did with Air and Fire. Focus on the result you want.”

“Not just that,” I said. “Feel the element, Austin. Feel the rush of Water inside you. Connect with it. Acknowledge its aspects; the coolness of it, how it gives life, its power. Then let it know what you want.”

“Leave him alone, Mom!” Lesya cried. “This is a-mazing!”

I looked at her joyous face, then at Austin's worried one. "You know what? Lesya's right. You're not hurting anything or putting anyone in peril. Why not let this run its course?"

Austin blinked and looked at me. "Let it go?"

Salem started singing the *Frozen* song and the kids soon joined in.

I chuckled, then nodded. "Yeah, let it go. Or maybe work with it. Why don't you try to make a different pattern?"

"Huh." Austin's shoulders relaxed. "Yeah, I s'pose it ain't hurtin' anythang."

The water condensed into a single line, the line formed a loop at the top, then the loop started to twirl.

"Is that a lasso?" Viper asked.

"Yup," Austin said proudly.

"Really, dude? You can do whatever you want and you make a lasso? Damn cowboys."

"Fine. How about this?"

The lasso snapped at Viper like a whip, drenching him.

The children and Salem burst into laughter.

Sputtering and wiping at his face, Viper said, “Not cool, dude!”

“Now, *that* is control,” Azrael said with a look at me. “You may have stumbled onto the best way to teach him, Carus. Instead of being afraid of the elements, he needs to embrace them and allow them to show him what they can do.”

A splash came from the pool. I looked over to see Lesya in her underwear coming to the surface.

“Lift me up, Uncle Austin!” Lesya cried.

“Uh.” Austin looked at me.

“Go ahead. I trust you,” I said.

“But can I trust myself?”

“I think that’s the point, Cowboy Cop.” I winked at him.

Austin nodded and held out his hand. As he lifted it, Lesya rose on a fountain of water. My daughter giggled and splashed the water with her little fists.

“Look at me!” Lesya shouted. “I’m a flying lion too!”

“Can I go next, Uncle Austin?” Zariel asked.

“You can go now,” Austin said, suddenly confident. “Get in the pool, honey. Let’s see how many of you I can lift at once.”

“Me too!” Vero cried.

Soon, Austin had the three kids bouncing on waterspouts with my twin sons flying above them, zipping in and out of the spray.

“Not bad, Austin,” Azrael said with a grin.

Suddenly, the spouts collapsed, and the kids went tumbling into the pool. I rushed for the side, but they came up laughing.

“That was so fun!” Zariel screeched as she paddled for the shallow end.

“Again!” Vero cried.

“Uncle Austin needs to rest now,” I said. “Maybe he can play with you later. Now, all of you, out of the pool. If you want to keep swimming, we need to get you in your swimsuits.”

The children made sounds of disappointment but they obeyed. Kirill herded them off to the palace to change.

As soon as they were out of earshot, I asked Austin, “How do you feel?”

“Fine.” Austin shrugged. “It kind of slipped its leash at the end there. But otherwise, I feel good about it.”

“No, I mean physically.”

“Oh. Yeah, I’m good. Worn slap out, but good.”

“Sit down.” I led him to a lounge, then sat on one across from him. “Once you get used to the magic, it won’t tire you. What you’re feeling is your body’s reaction to having magic flowing through it.”

“I thought I *was* magic now?”

“As an Intare, your magic stems from me. Yes, it’s yours once you accept it, and yes, you do control it, but it’s not as strong as holding the source. You’re a demigod instead of a god.”

“Huh. Ah’ite.”

“I’ll get him some water,” Re said.

“I’d prefer a beer,” Austin said.

“You need water.”

“I’ve had plenty of water.”

“Fine. I’ll see if there are any beers in the fridge.”

“And a sandwich?” Austin asked hopefully.

Re grimaced as he walked away. “You’ll get whatever leftovers I find. I’m not making you a sandwich.”

“Thank you,” Austin called after him. Then he grinned at me. “I think I’m getting the hang of this.”

“Of manipulating Re?” Trevor asked. “That’s easy. Just tell him he’s pretty.”

“Ha-ha.” Austin rolled his eyes. “No, the elements. I think I can wrassle them now.”

I looked around warily.

“What?”

“No, nothing. It’s just that a statement like that is usually followed by trouble.”

“No trouble here.” Austin grinned.

Wringing out his wet T-shirt and displaying one of the finest chests in existence, Viper said, “He’s done Air, Fire, and now, Water. That leaves Earth.”

“But this earth belongs to Vervain,” Odin mused.

“Dirt is dirt,” I said. “He should be able to manipulate it and the things growing within it.”

“Plus, he has ties to Vervain,” Kirill said. “Her territory should allow it.”

“I don’t know.” Odin looked off toward the grasslands. “A god shouldn’t be able to manipulate another god’s territory.”

“He’s a demigod, and she’s his goddess,” Trevor said. “I think that makes a difference.”

A snore interrupted us. We looked over to find Austin asleep, sprawled across the pool lounge.

I chuckled. “Should we take him inside?”

“Probably,” Az said. “He could get into mischief out here.”

“I’ll watch over him,” Salem offered.

I jumped. “Oh, wow. I forgot you were there, Salem. You were so quiet.”

“I’m a ninja dragon.” He grinned, showing off his many sharp teeth.

“All right, let us know if he goes elemental again.”

“You got it, V!”

“Thanks, Salem. Bring him to the veranda if you get bored out here.”

“Will do.”

So we left the ninja dragon to guard the fire-breathing, flying, water-wielding, faerie lion and went inside Pride Palace to stop the Sun God’s beer quest.

Chapter Sixteen

The next few days went by without incident. The construction crew made good headway on the church/bomb since nothing had to be structurally sound and Azrael helped them with Wild Magic. All I had was Fire, so there wasn't much I could do, but I did check in with them every day in case that changed. The walls and roof were up already, and Torrent was working on the explosives. The property had a lot of trees around the building site, which we were going to use as vantage points and cover for the catapults. We were going to launch magic-suppressing nets at the Angels. Hopefully, they'd work on Wild Magic. Those of us who could fly would simultaneously attack from the air.

With our plans unfolding, I was feeling less anxious, and Trevor had convinced me to take a break from the kids and have a little "us time" in the butterfly garden.

I laid back on the perfect grass, every blade a bright green and pliant, and sighed. Nothing was in that garden that I didn't approve of, and that included bugs. So I could lie on the ground without worrying about something crawling on me. Well, without worrying about yucky insects crawling on me. The butterflies were welcome and so was Trevor.

He leaned over me, his honey-eyes going from bright gold in the sunlight to deep amber in the shadows. Dark hair fell around his handsome face in loose waves. I swept some of it back as I cupped his cheek and pulled him down for a kiss. The Werewolf Prince let out a low growl as his hand wandered up my side to my breast. Within seconds, he had it free of its confinement and was playing with my nipple, licking and nibbling at it. A few minutes later, he was settling himself between my thighs.

I helped Trevor with his pants as we continued to kiss, desire rising along with my inner wolf—that piece of Trevor that he had given me long ago. It was mine now and female, but it still remembered him, loved him, and needed to reunite with him. It practically howled when he broke off our kiss to suck at my breast again. My fingers dug into his hair and pulled him closer as I arched into his mouth, but Trevor quickly moved on, heading for lower parts. My panties were torn away, replaced by his eager fingers and then his face.

“Trevor!” I screamed as he set his tongue to me.

There’s nothing like a werewolf licking you down there. He may not have been as skillful as Re, but Trevor made up for that with exuberance. He lapped, nibbled, sucked, licked, and even shook his face against me, taking me on a roller coaster ride of ecstasy. Feasting as if starved. Consuming me as if he couldn’t get enough. My legs were spread wide, my head tossing side to side, and both breasts out when I heard Re’s voice. Almost as if my thoughts had summoned him.

“They must be out here,” the Sun God said.

Trevor lifted his head to snarl, “Go away!”

“But Thor is here. He wanted to—oh!”

I turned my head to see Re spinning around and shoving a gaping Thor away from us. Trevor shifted in seconds, and I knew by the sound of his snarl that Wolf—his inner wolf who had a personality all of his own—had taken charge. And Wolf was even more of an alpha than Trevor. He launched himself over Re’s head at Thor.

“Son of a gun,” I muttered as I jumped up and ran after him, absently tucking my breasts away. “Wolf, no! Stop!”

Wolf had Thor on the ground before I could reach him, his clawed hand at the Thunder God’s throat. Before Wolf could do any damage, a blast of light sent him tumbling away, furry ass over snarling head. I ran between Thor and Wolf as Re—the blaster—helped Thor up and shoved him back inside the palace. The smell of burnt fur assaulted my nose.

“Stop!” I shouted at Wolf as he got to his feet, his glowing eyes locked on Thor. “It was an accident. Trevor, rein him in!”

Wolf bared his teeth at me. “*My mate!*”

“Yes, Thor knows that. Re brought him out here by mistake. Simmer down, Wolf. No one’s trying to take me away.”

“Mine,” he growled.

“Yeah, we got that.” I relaxed a little when I heard the suite door shut. “Damn it, Wolf. You can’t attack people like that.”

Wolf shook his furry head and muttered, “I don’t like him seeing you.”

“He—” I cut myself off since I was about to say that Thor had already seen all the goods. Reminding Wolf of that wouldn’t help. Instead, I amended it to, “Thor wasn’t trying to see me naked. It was an accident.”

“Yes.” He grimaced, making his wolf face look even more vicious despite his growing calmer. “Very well.”

“Can Trevor come back now?”

Wolf growled as he shifted back into his man form. He was still there, lurking within those wolf eyes, but after a pointed look from me, the gleam faded and Trevor returned.

“Sorry about that,” Trevor said. “Are you all right, Minn Elska?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Thor will think twice about following Re anywhere in the future, but I’m fine.”

“Everyone should think twice about following Re.” He gave me a lopsided grin.

I snorted a laugh. “Come on, you need some new clothes, and I need new panties.”

“What was Re thinking, bringing Thor into the garden?” Trevor grumbled as we headed inside. “He knows this is one of the places we go to be alone.”

“Well, we didn’t tell any of them that we were going off for a little afternoon delight. Next time, maybe we should.”

“Or we need to put a lock on the garden door.”

“I can do that.” I grinned at him. “In fact, that’s a really good idea.”

Together, we said, “Kids.”

“Oh, shoot!” I hurried into my dressing room. “Thor probably brought Brevyn back. I hope nothing’s happened.”

“What could have happened?”

I looked over my shoulder to grimace at him. “You never know with Brev.”

Chapter Seventeen

“I’m so sorry,” Thor said as soon as Trevor and I stepped into the dining hall.

“No, I’m sorry,” Re said. “I was the one who took you out there.”

“It’s fine. No harm done. Well, besides a little singed wolf fur,” I said as I looked around the room. “Where’s Brevyn?”

“He’s outside.”

“Is he okay? Why did you bring him back?”

“He’s fine, Vervain,” Thor said. “Please, sit down.”

I finally looked at Thor. He was red-cheeked and stiff-backed.

“Thor, it’s really fine. I don’t care that you saw us.”

Thor cleared his throat. “I do. That is *not* something I wanted to witness.”

I sank into a chair. “Right. Then I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“Let’s just move past the apologies.” Thor waved his hand. “Vervain, may I speak with you alone?”

I lifted my brows, glanced at my husbands, then said, “Of course. Uh, I’m sure there’s a room down here that we can use. It will be more private than the dining hall.”

I got up, and Thor followed me out to the corridor, then down it. I opened the door of the first room we came to, but it was the guest room where we’d put Salem’s trunk. That wouldn’t have been a problem but since it was a bedroom, there was also a bed in it, and I didn’t want to make Thor any more uncomfortable than he already was.

“Uh, let’s try another. Maybe one across the hall. Those have windows.” I took us to the next door on the left, which was a bit of a walk since it was past the dining hall and the kitchen. “Here we go. Much nicer.”

I waved Thor into a bright room done in Moroccan décor, with low sofas, brass tables, and multicolored lanterns hanging from the gilded ceiling. The curtains were pulled back to let in the afternoon light, the gold thread in their fabric glinting. I closed the door and went to the sofa set within the window nook, bordered by elaborately carved wood panels done in Moroccan designs.

“This reminds me of your house in Hawaii,” Thor said.

“Yeah, just nicer.” I grinned and waved toward the spot beside me.

Thor joined me on the sofa, resting an arm on a cylindrical pillow. “What kind of magic does Brevyn have?”

The question threw me a little. “Um, I thought you knew that he has Borrowing magic?”

“I do know about that. It’s how he can transform into a dragon, correct?”

“That’s right. Did he go dragon on you?”

“No.” He cleared his throat and stretched his shoulders. “Is that the only magic he has?”

“No, of course not. I had to give him god magic ...” I trailed off as I saw Thor’s face tense. “Oh, no. Has he done something wrong?”

“What magic does he have, Vervain?”

“I gave him my Love magic, but he’s never used it. At least, I don’t think he has. Damn, I should probably teach him how to use it properly.”

“I believe he’s learning on his own.” He met my stare, then looked away.

“What happened?”

“I’ve been, uh, feeling more romantic toward Raedra lately.”

“Romantic? Oh, shit. Did you sleep with her? Did Brevyn whammy you two into having sex?”

“No, it’s not Lust. Although, desire is what made me realize something was wrong.”

“You didn’t desire Raedra before?”

“I did. Of course, I did,” He glanced at me. “She’s very beautiful. But we’ve become partners in raising our child. There wasn’t any romance there. I wouldn’t allow myself to think of her like that. It felt wrong. I didn’t want to pressure her or ruin what we were building together.”

“Right. But that’s changed lately?”

“Yes.” He met my stare and held it. “I can’t stop thinking about her. Can’t stop looking. Touching. And she gives me the same looks.”

“And you’re sure it’s Brevyn?”

“It began shortly after Brevyn arrived.”

“That does seem suspicious.”

“Vervain, do you think I would suddenly start a romance with a woman while Brevyn was visiting for the first time?”

“No.” I grimaced. “No, that’s not like you. You would be focused on him.”

“And I have been.” He smiled softly. “It’s been wonderful having Brevyn at Bilskinir. And taking him to Norway to show him his old home was ... it was almost like having Ull back.”

“You took him out there? How did that go?”

“He loved it.” Thor shrugged. “Of course, he did. He built that house. Everything about it was specifically chosen by him.”

“In another life.” I laid my hand over his. “He’s a different person now.”

“Yes and no. He remembered the house. He thanked me for maintaining it for him.”

“So, it went well.”

“Yes, but despite all of that, despite my excitement that was centered around Brevyn, my feelings for Raedra started to grow. Vervain, I’m in love with her. I love her and it’s happened in a few days. That is *not* how my heart works.”

“I see,” I whispered. “So, you’re in love but you can’t enjoy it because you don’t think it’s real.”

“Exactly. You saw my future love. Was it Raedra?”

“When did I do that?”

“When you healed my heart,” he said as if it were obvious.

“Uh, no. I didn’t see anything. I just healed your heartache and left a blessing to protect and guide you toward love.”

“Oh.” He blinked. “I had a glimpse of a woman, but I can’t remember what she looked like anymore. Which is ridiculous. She’s the woman I’m supposed to be with, her face should be unforgettable. But it was so fast, gone in an instant.”

“But you will know her when you meet. You’ll remember then.”

“I will?” Thor asked, his stare gone intense.

“I mean, I think so.” I grimaced. “With the Love magic, I just go with my instincts, and right now, they’re telling me that you’ll know.”

“Then it can’t be Rae.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t recognize her.”

“But the first time you met, you were both under Pan’s spell. Maybe you did recognize her, but you were too distracted.”

“True, but what about after? Shouldn’t I have felt something?”

“I don’t know. I hold Love, but it’s still mysterious to me. I haven’t learned all of its secrets. Love can act strangely and fate shifts. I know that better than most. The man I gave that glimpse of love to is gone. You’re someone new now. Perhaps the woman you were destined for has changed too. Or

maybe there is no one woman for you, and Love simply gave you a possibility to look forward to. I didn't direct the magic to do that, so I can't be certain of what you were shown."

"She felt like the one; that much I remember. And if I'm truly destined for someone, that shouldn't change, no matter how much I change."

I shrugged. "Should you cast aside love because another may be coming?"

"Yes. I don't want to waste my time."

"Thor, love is never a waste of time. And although a lover might not be meant to stay with you forever, they could still be meant to stay for a little while. And that little while could change you in ways that are necessary for you to love the one you will end up with."

Thor frowned. "Perhaps. But this isn't real, Vervain. I didn't fall in love with Raedra. Brevyn enchanted us."

I sighed. "I can't imagine him doing that."

"It has to be him. I didn't feel this way mere days ago. Look, Vervain, if I fell in love with Rae naturally, then I'd be more inclined to give this a chance, despite how badly things could go. But I'm certain that I haven't. This isn't real."

"All right. Stay here. I'm going to fetch Brevyn, and we'll get to the bottom of this."

Thor clasped my hand. “I don’t want to make him feel bad. It will ruin our first visit.”

“Thor, there’s a good chance that he already knows.”

“What do you mean?”

“His premonitions. Brev probably saw this coming. It may be why he did what he did. He may know more than either of us who you are destined for.”

Thor let go of my hand.

“I’ll be right back.” I smiled reassuringly and headed out the door.

As soon as I was in the corridor, my smile turned into a grimace. I was going to beat my son’s butt red if he was testing his Love magic on Thor.

Chapter Eighteen

I didn't take Brevyn directly back to Thor. It's harder to admit something in the presence of your victim. Instead, I took him into the bedroom where Salem's trunk was stowed.

"Did you use your Love magic on Uncle Thor and Aunty Raedra?" I asked him.

"Yes," Brevyn said.

Even knowing how honest Brevyn was, I was a little thrown by his instant, unashamed confirmation. "Why?"

"Because he will never find his true love if he doesn't get over you."

"I healed him of that, Brev. He's past it."

"No, you didn't, and no, he isn't."

"Excuse me?"

"I felt it in him, Mom. He still loves you and that love is holding him back from finding the woman who will make him happy. Aunty Rae can get him past it."

"But I felt it too. I felt his heart mend when I healed him." Even as I said the words, I remembered walking in on Thor, passed out in front of his TV with a sex video of him and me playing. There had also been pictures of us. A lot of them. But that had been before he knew about Ari. In fact, it was the day I told him about her, and I hadn't thought much

about it since then. I guess I'd assumed the baby had helped him through his slump. It had never occurred to me that his heart wasn't healed.

"Mom,"—Brevyn took my hand—"I don't think you truly, deep down, wanted Uncle Thor to get over you. Your magic healed him only partially. You just took the worst of it from him."

"What?" I whispered as I sank onto the bed. "No, I want Thor to be happy."

"I know you do, but you loved him, and you're a love goddess. I don't think that kind of love just disappears. It affected what you did without you knowing."

I shook my head. "You're awfully wise about something you haven't experienced yet."

"I have experienced it. Not in this life, but whatever I felt before was strong enough that it's stayed with me. I remember it now; I've loved someone. More than one woman, but one especially. And she's waiting for me. I can feel it."

I couldn't help it, I started to cry.

"Mom!" Brevyn hugged me. "I'm sorry. Don't cry."

"I'm not sad, baby." I hugged him back. "I'm happy for you. And for her. I should have let her visit more often, but I was afraid of her being too large a part of your childhood. I didn't think it would be good for your relationship."

“Too large a part? She’s . . . we’ve met?”

Oh, how strange it was to have this conversation with a young boy, especially when that boy was my son. But my son had lived a very long life before this one. A life full of adventure, laughter, and a lot of love. He had an ancient soul in his pre-teen body. The poor thing. Puberty was hard enough as it was.

“This can’t be good for you.” I brushed his hair back. “To remember so much of another life so soon. I was a grown woman before I had to remember, and I wanted you to have time to grow up before you had to deal with such feelings.”

“It’s okay, Mom.” Brev smiled. “I like knowing. It’s kinda comforting.” He got up on the bed beside me. “Who is she?” Then he blinked, his gaze going distant, and said, “Kaitlin. Her name is Kaitlin.”

“Yes.”

“She has brown eyes and brown hair.” He looked at me. “I think that’s why I didn’t remember her visits to Faerie. My memories of her blended with you. But she doesn’t look like you.”

“No.”

“Is she human?”

“Yes, but Thor gave her an Apple of Immortality. She has a century before she’ll start aging.”

“She became immortal for me?”

“Temporarily immortal, but yes. Ull offered her an apple before he died, but she refused. She only ate the one Thor gave her so she could be with you again. Have enough time for you to catch up to her kind of thing.”

“So she won’t eat another apple,” he said softly. “Maybe I shouldn’t meet her at all. I don’t know if I want that kind of love in my life, only to lose it.”

“Brevyn, people change.” I put my arm around his shoulders. “I didn’t want to live forever either at first. Or at least, I wasn’t sure about it. I used to tell Thor the same things that Kaitlin told Ull; that people aren’t meant to live forever. Life and death are a precious cycle. Ull even agreed with her after he died. That’s why you chose to come back as a new person, so that you could have a fresh start. You felt as if your life had become stagnant. But now you’re remembering that life, and I don’t think you’d do that if you didn’t want to remember. I think you’ve changed your mind again. Or maybe adjusted it a bit. Now, you want a new life with pieces of the old one. Because having immortality isn’t for everyone, but it works for some of us. I realized that after I became the Goddess of Love. I saw the benefits and how wonderful it can be. And if we can change our minds, Kaitlin can too.”

“But if she doesn’t, I’ll lose her.”

“Do you remember what I told you about love?”

“Yes, of course, it was just a few days ago.”

I snorted a laugh. “Then what did I say?”

“To never be afraid to love. My heart is the one thing that gets bigger the more of it I give away.”

“Yes.”

“But I already love her, and I think it’s the kind of love that you and Dad have. Would you choose to be with Dad if you knew he’d die in eighty years?”

I froze.

“Mom?”

Would I? Would I choose to love Arach or any of my husbands, knowing that they’d die, and I’d have to live on without them? Odin had died once, and it had nearly destroyed me, even with all the love I had. I carried on for the others but I don’t think I ever would have been truly happy again. Thankfully, I’d found a way to bring him back. But once Kaitlin was dead—if she chose that—there would be no bringing her back.

“Mom?” Brevyn asked again.

“I want to tell you that I would,” I whispered. Then I cleared my throat and tried again in a stronger voice, “I want to tell you that I’d be strong enough and that having him in my life for however long I’d get him would be worth any pain I might suffer at the end. And my mind says that’s true.”

“But?”

“But I don’t know, Brev. You’re right, that kind of love is different. You should never be afraid to fall in love, but you’ve already done that and now you’re having the doubts we all have when our hearts are in danger. You need to remember that the future isn’t certain, not for any of us, even those of us who are immortal. Your father could die of something other than old age. Any of my husbands could. And that makes it risky to love them as I do. But I have no choice.” I blinked as the epiphany hit, then said it again, “I have no choice in loving them. My heart chose for me. And there’s your answer. If you truly love Kaitlin the way I love your father, you will not be able to stay away from her. Your heart will reunite you whether your mind wants it or not. And if you chose not to take the risk and you’re able to stay away, it was not as great a love as you thought.”

Brevyn let out a long breath. “Thanks, Mom. That’s a huge relief.”

“It is?”

“Sure. If I can’t stay away from her, I’ll know it’s the kind of love worth risking pain over, and if I can, well, then I can look forward to finding someone immortal to love.”

“Have you tried to see your future with Kaitlin?”

“It’s all a blank.”

I sighed. “Then maybe there is no future there. But don’t write her off yet, Son. You’re young and, as I said, the future is uncertain. The Fates, Faerie, and Alaric have all tried to tell me otherwise, and they’ve all been wrong. I changed my destiny and if you don’t like yours, you can change it too.”

Brevyn grinned. “And I’ll be able to see it coming.”

“Yeah, I guess having visions isn’t all that bad.”

“It’s not, Mom. I wish you’d stop worrying about me.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen. Even if you were a human kid without any magic, I’d worry about you. That’s my job.”

“But with my visions, I can tell you if something bad is going to happen. So, you don’t have to worry.”

I laughed. “You got me there, kid. Although, I don’t think we can rely that heavily on your visions.”

“I guess not.”

“So are you going to give Kaitlin a chance?”

“I’m going to live my life and see where it takes me. If my heart leads me to her, then I’ll go.”

“I think that’s a good plan. Love isn’t something you should try to avoid.”

“And that’s why I helped Uncle Thor fall in love. He was avoiding it.”

Oh, damn. I’d completely forgotten about Thor. He was probably wondering where we were.

“You helped him or you forced him?” I asked gently.

“Helped. It wasn’t hard. Raedra looks so much like you that he was already feeling stuff for her.”

“Stuff.” I laughed, trying to ignore the fact that my son had noticed a man’s interest in me to the point where he recognized his affection for a woman with similar features. “Baby, you shouldn’t mess with people’s hearts like that.”

“I thought our magic was meant to make people happy? Aren’t we supposed to help them fall in love if they’re having a hard time?”

“Baby, your magic is yours to use as you see fit. If you want to help someone fall in love because you know it’s what’s best for them, that’s great. But unless you’re using it as a weapon, you should ask for permission first.”

“Did you ask for permission before you healed Uncle Thor?”

I tried to remember. “Uh, I don’t think so. But I knew it was what he wanted, and healing someone is different than forcing someone to fall in love. Love is powerful, Brevyn. That’s the very reason why it can be used as a weapon. Love can bring people to their knees. It can make them cast aside kingdoms or kill themselves. It shouldn’t be tampered with lightly.”

“I just wanted to help him.”

“I know, and I’m glad that you want Thor to be happy. But you should have told me that he was still hurting. Then I could have simply finished the healing.”

“I don’t know if you can, Mom.”

“I can if I focus on healing him completely. The point is, this wasn’t your decision to make.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You were trying to do the right thing, and that’s what matters. And this is partially my fault. I should have started teaching you about the Love magic sooner. And there’s more to it than Love. You have Lust, War, and Victory as well. When we get back to Faerie, we can talk more about them, maybe I can come up with some training exercises.”

“I’d like that.”

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do now. I’m going to tell Thor about your good intentions, you’re going to remove the enchantment from him and Raedra, and until you’re fully trained, you’re going to check with me before you use your Love magic. Deal?”

“Deal. But, Mom, are you going to tell Uncle Thor that he wasn’t completely healed?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you should. It will help him feel less alone.”

“Alone?”

“In love. To know that you didn’t want to let go either will comfort him.”

“For the love of fire, Brev. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that you’re only seven.”

“I’m very mature for my age.” He grinned.

“You little brat!” I shoved him off the bed.

He laughed as he caught himself and stood up. Then he lifted his chin and dramatically declared, “I am the Prince of Fire and King of Alfheim.”

Instead of laughing at his antics, I went serious once more. “Yes, you are. And you’re going to be very powerful one day, Brevyn. You need to be careful with that power. It’s a double-edged sword; you can hurt as much as you help.”

“I know, Mom. I’ll be careful.”

I grinned brightly. “You’re going to be an incredible man. Maybe you’re meant to love more than one woman. I’m glad you’re not closing yourself off from others because of Kaitlin. She’ll be there when and if you’re ever ready to be with her, but you should have childhood romances too. That’s how your heart learns.”

“Mom, I know. I’ve already had my first kiss.” He grinned and, for a second, I saw Arach in him.

Arach, not Ull. It was refreshing but also confusing. Technically, Brevyn didn't have any Fey essence in him, it all went to Rian when their souls split. Maybe this was a case of nurture over nature, and he'd simply learned to mimic Arach because Arach had raised him. Or maybe I'd been looking at the twins all wrong. Their souls had been torn apart in the womb, forcing their body to divide as well; that's how my son became twins. But the original fetus had been formed of Arach and me—a new life with our combined DNA. So when my son split in two, he couldn't have separated his DNA into Arach's and mine. It was all him.

Rian and Brevyn should have been born as identical twins but their souls and magic altered them. I think that's why I've always thought of Rian as Arach's son and Brevyn as mine. We say that Arach's their biological father, but it's a polite lie. Or at least, I've always thought it was. Maybe it wasn't. Could Brevyn be Arach's biological son without being Fey? I was starting to think he could. Why not? Souls and Fey essences are separate from physical forms. It makes sense that one could have aspects that the other doesn't. Brevyn truly was Arach's son, he just didn't have his father's essence.

It all seemed simple now. I can't believe I hadn't seen it sooner. It was so obvious. Of course, Brevyn was Arach's son. I mean, he didn't have my soul, did he? I gave him Ull's soul. Essences and souls aren't what ties us to our families—blood and love do that. Arach's blood ran through the veins of both our boys. I couldn't wait to tell him.

Then Brevyn's words registered.

“Wait. What? You've *kissed* someone?” I demanded.

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Gráinne.”

“The Phooka pup?”

Brev rolled his eyes. “She’s not a pup anymore, Mom.”

“No, I guess not. She’s about, what, ten?”

“And mature for her age.” He grinned broader.

“Brevyn, are you sure you only kissed her?”

“Of course, I didn’t just kiss her.”

My heart started palpitations.

Then he added, “I held her hand too.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “I can’t believe you kissed someone and didn’t tell me.”

“You’re not supposed to tell your mother about your first kiss.”

“Why not?”

“You’re just not.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, all right. A Phooka, eh? Not a bad choice.”

“She’s pretty and really funny and she can faster than me. I like her.”

And there they were, the building blocks of attraction—looks, humor, and power. Leave it to a kid to make it simple.

“Well, it sounds as if you’re getting those urges we talked about—the ones I thought you didn’t have yet.”

Brevyn shrugged. “I don’t think I’m ready for sex. Honestly, it sounds a little gross to me.”

“Oh, thank goodness. Promise me that you’ll talk to me about it when you do think you’re ready.”

“I don’t know, Mom. I think I’ll be okay. Rian’s the one who’s going to need help.”

I burst into laughter. “Well, if you do have questions, you can ask me. And you can tell me anything, Brev.”

“Okay, Mom.”

“Now, please, for the love of fire, be a child for a few more years.”

“Can’t. I’m already a young man.”

I snorted a laugh. “Well, young man, you need to work on your subtlety. Thor figured out that you enchanted him.”

“Be subtle. Got it. I love you, Mom.” He kissed my cheek, then started to turn toward the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Back outside.”

“Uh, no. You need to apologize to Uncle Thor and remove your magic.”

His face fell.

“This is what it means to be a young man. You have to face your mistakes.” I got up, put my arm around his shoulders, and led him out of the room.

“I think I wanna go back to being a little boy.”

Chapter Nineteen

I had to keep reminding myself that Brevyn was more mature than his years, in both body and mind, but it was hard to do when confronted by his burgeoning sexuality. His first kiss! That was an epic moment in a person's life, and he had it at age seven. That felt a little young to me. But at least all he was interested in was kissing and holding hands. It had probably been a peck on the lips. At least that's what I hoped. With the knowledge of his past life, Brevyn could be showing little Gráinne things that she wasn't ready for. But no, this was Brevyn. He was a kind boy. He wouldn't ... oh, but hormones made even the kindest person do stupid things.

"Mom?" Brevyn pulled me from my thoughts.

We were standing before the door of the room I'd left Thor in. "Oh. Right." I opened the door and motioned Brevyn inside.

Thor was still on the sofa, staring out the window. He stood up when he saw us and met us halfway across the room.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Thor," Brevyn said. "I was trying to help you. I thought Aunty Rae and you would make a good couple."

Thor sighed. "I appreciate that you want to help me, but I'd prefer to fall in love on my own."

"Yeah, that's what Mom said." Brevyn glanced at me, then held out his hand. "I can remove it."

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.” Thor took Brevyn’s hand.

All I saw was a glow between their palms, but as it faded, Thor’s shoulders relaxed. He let out another sigh as he released Brevyn’s hand.

“Didn’t you like being in love with Aunty Rae?” Brevyn asked.

“Sometimes love complicates a relationship. Rae and I are better as friends. Being in love with her was too stressful for me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Thor hugged Brev and ruffled his hair. “Just, please, never do that to me again.”

“Okay. I promise. I’ll remove the magic from Aunty Rae when I see her later.”

“All right. We’ll leave in a little while. I need to speak with your mother first.”

“I’ll be outside.” Brevyn looked at me pointedly, then left.

I closed the door behind him. “Thor, I owe you an apology.”

“Don’t be silly. You couldn’t have known what Brevyn would do.”

“No, not about Brevyn. Let’s sit down.” I went to the sofa again, and he joined me.

“You’re starting to worry me, Vervain.” Thor scowled, his forehead wrinkling around a little chip of stone embedded there.

That chip was the oddest thing and barely noticeable unless you were up close, but it also made Thor more real. Less perfect. I had loved that piece of rock once. I had loved him.

I still did.

Shit, Brevyn was right.

“So, it turns out that when I healed your heartbreak, I didn’t heal you completely.”

“You didn’t?” Thor thought about that. “No, you didn’t. You couldn’t have.”

“I couldn’t have?”

“I mean, uh, because I still have feelings.” Thor looked away and cleared his throat. “For you.”

“You’re not alone,” I whispered.

Thor’s gaze shot back to me.

“Don’t read anything more into those words than what they are.” I held up my hands. “I don’t want to be with you, but I will always love you, Thor. And I guess that’s why I wasn’t able to heal you completely. I didn’t really want to. And that’s why Brevyn made you fall in love. He thought it would help you get over me.”

Thor leaned back and stared at me long enough to make me uncomfortable. Well, *more* uncomfortable. Then he said, “Thank you for saying that.”

“You’re welcome?” I squished my face at him.

He laughed his booming laugh, then hugged me. “It’s nice to know that you didn’t move on and leave me alone in my pain.”

Brevyn’s words came back to taunt me. Damn, that kid was impressive. And he was right; he probably wouldn’t need any advice from me. It might be the opposite.

Thor was still smiling when he sat back. “If Brevyn saw that I wasn’t over you, why didn’t he just finish the healing you started?”

“I don’t think he can. I think I have to do it since I was the one who started it. Either that or he thought a new love would be better for you.”

“I’ve been with a lot of women since we broke up, Vervain.”

“Yes, but Brevyn doesn’t know that. And, not to pour salt in the wound, but how many of those women have you

loved?”

He grunted.

“I think it’s time we both got past this, don’t you?” I held out my hand.

Thor scowled as he looked at my palm. “I don’t think it was you.”

“What?”

“I don’t think it was your fault that my heart wasn’t completely healed. Or at least, not entirely.”

“What do you mean?” I dropped my hand.

“I don’t think I wanted to be healed.”

“And now?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Thor—”

“Vervain, this is all I have left of you.”

“No, it’s not.” I took his hand. “I’m still here. I’m still a part of your life. And healing your pain doesn’t take any of the love away, it just makes it easier to bear.”

“Are you sure?”

I smiled at his worried expression. “I’m healed but I still feel it.”

He stared at me for a few seconds, then nodded. “All right. Do it.”

And finally, after all those years, Thor and I were put to rest.

Chapter Twenty

Thor left with Brevyn, looking much better than when he'd arrived. I saw them off, then headed to the dining hall, grimacing as I went.

I loved Thor, I did, but, honestly, I was annoyed. It had been a rough road to get to a place where we were okay with each other. A rough, *long* road. I was tired of dealing with him. It would have been so much easier if I could have ended things and walked away from him entirely. Oh.

“Damn, he’s right about Rae. He shouldn’t start anything with her,” I muttered.

If Thor began a romance with Raedra, it would most likely end and then he’d be stuck in another awkward relationship with a woman he had loved but couldn’t escape. Except that it would be even worse with Rae since they had a child together. He’d made the right choice. Besides, love shouldn’t be forced. I would have felt the same way if I’d been him. There had been a time when the knowledge that I was destined to love my husbands had pissed me off. I felt as if we didn’t have a choice. But destiny doesn’t work like that; it’s not an enchantment.

I found Torrent and Artemis in the dining hall with my husbands. “Hey, how’s the construction going?”

“The construction is done, and we’ve just finished the bombs. The largest is in the church but there are others spread around the clearing in case the Angels land.”

“Which means it’s time for me to pay a visit to my brother,” Azrael said. “I need to personally invite him to the

grand opening of my first church.”

“Do they call it a grand opening when it’s a church?”
Trevor asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Just curious.”

“Wait,” Torrent said suddenly. “I’m getting a troubling news report.”

“You’re *getting* it?” Viper asked.

“Shush!” Re smacked him.

We all waited in silence while Torrent’s stare remained distant. Finally, he blinked and focused on us.

“Under orders from the Pope, the Vatican City Police and Swiss Guards have been rousting faeries from their homes and businesses in Rome and ordering them to leave Italy,” Torrent said. “So far, the faeries have gone peacefully, but the Italian citizens are gathering alongside the army, and they are becoming hostile. Many faeries have gone to the Embassy to regroup, and a mob is forming outside the gates.”

“We have an agreement with Italy,” Azrael said. “They can’t do that.”

“The local police aren’t involved.”

“But they’re not stopping the Pope’s little army?”

“No. This is religious and political. Many Italians are Catholic, especially in Rome. My guess is that the policemen are refusing to go up against what is essentially a Catholic militia carrying out orders they believe come from God.”

“In a way, they do,” I muttered. “This is Jerry’s doing.”

“Why aren’t the faeries simply tracing away?” Odin asked. “Why go to the Embassy?”

“Many of them have gone to Earth to make new lives for themselves,” I said. “They’re not going to want to leave all they’ve built that easily. They’ll retreat until they can unite, then they’ll defend themselves. At least, that’s what I’d do.”

“So, Jerry has finally angered faeries,” Kirill said.

“All the faeries know is that humans are pushing them out. They’re angry at humans, not Jerry.”

“And if those faeries fight the Italians, it could have dire consequences,” Azrael said. “It may look as if we oppose Catholicism. Damn it! This was never about religion; it was about transitioning faeries into human society.”

“You called yourself the Faerie God,” Viper said.

“Yes, back when I was mad with magic,” Az huffed. “If I could get rid of the title now, I would.”

“The point is, you wanted to be worshiped. There’s no way around the religious aspect.”

“Maybe not, but Azrael’s right,” Odin said. “We need to stop the brewing battle without looking as if we’re trying to oppose the Catholic Church.”

“Tricky,” Re murmured.

“Yes. If this is part of Jerry’s plan, and I’d be surprised if it isn’t, it’s brilliant.”

“I need to get to Italy.” Azrael got up and started heading for the door.

“But what are you going to do?” I hurried after him.

He took my hand. “*We* are going to remind the humans of how powerful we are. They can’t win a war against us.”

“Is it a good idea to come out swinging?”

“I will try the carrot first, Carus. But if that doesn’t work, it will be the stick.”

“What about us?” Torrent asked.

“Continue to monitor things from here,” I called over my shoulder as Az and I headed toward the tracing room. “If you see anything we need to know about, text me.”

“You got it, V!”

Then Azrael and I traced to the Fey Embassy in Rome.

Chapter Twenty-One

“It’s a good thing that we had all the Embassies warded,” I said as we walked out of the Roman Embassy’s tracing room.

“After the attack on the Golden Citadel, it would have been foolish not to,” Az said. “But I didn’t expect the ward to be used against humans.”

A group of faeries was rushing down the wood-paneled hallway, but they spotted us and pulled up short.

“Queen Vervain?” one of them asked.

I have to admit, it was nice to be recognized before Azrael for once. At least, on Earth. Of course, he hadn’t shifted into his Faerie God form yet so that was probably why.

“Yes,” I said. “And this is Azrael, my husband. We’re here to speak with the humans.”

“You mean the wild mob outside?” a male Water-Sidhe with slicked back, teal hair asked. “I don’t think they’ll listen to you.”

“I’m sure I can find a way to get their attention,” Az said. “Is there a balcony I can use to address the mob?”

“Yes, there’s one off the meeting room,” the one who had recognized me, a female Dryad, said. “Follow me, I’ll take you there.” As we walked, she gave us a more detailed report on the situation. “Faeries have been arriving on foot all day

but now that the front gates are locked, they've started tracing in. We've got at least a hundred here and that number is still growing."

"They could trace anywhere on Earth or even back to Faerie. Why come here?" Az asked.

"Once we stake our claim on a place, we don't abandon it easily."

I gave Az an I-told-you-so look.

"No one engages the humans unless I give the go-ahead," Azrael said.

The Dryad looked at me.

"You agreed to follow the laws of the land when you came here. Azrael has a truce in place with the human governments. If you break that truce, you'll be breaking your word and that will get you sent back to Faerie."

"I'll try to convince the others to stand down, but I'm not sure if they will. Emotions are running high and most of us see this as self-defense."

"I understand. Just do your best."

A few minutes later, she led us into the meeting room. Azrael flipped on the light, revealing a large, rectangular space with a long table in its center. The walls were hung with photographs of faeries and there was even one of Azrael in his Faerie God form.

The Dryad motioned across the room. “That balcony overlooks the courtyard and the square outside the front gates. The humans should be able to hear you from it. Whether they’ll listen remains to be seen.”

With a shimmer of magic, Azrael shifted into his Faerie God form, then said, “Ask the faeries to at least give me enough time to speak with the humans before they act.”

The Dryad’s dark eyes went wide and she nodded. “Good luck.”

Azrael and I hurried to the pair of French doors across the room. The sound of raised voices rose in volume the closer we got. I didn’t think the glass was doing much to muffle the sound, but when we opened the doors and stepped out onto the iron railing, it felt as if we were blasted by the roar. I thought Az would have to set something on fire or strike a lamppost with lightning to get their attention, but the Faerie God is hard to ignore, especially in daylight.

The spread of Azrael’s golden antlers alone drew the eye but then there were his magnificent wings, the black feathers now sprinkled with golden fairy dust. They rose behind him to sparkle in the light. And even though the crowd was a good twenty feet below us and twice as much away, I was certain they could see the way his green eyes glowed with the power of every element. Azrael’s hands gripped the railing and the sound of his claws clicking against the iron was audible in the sudden silence. A breeze blew back his waist-length hair as if even the wind adored him.

The Faerie God shook his head as he started speaking in Italian.

I knew it was necessary for him to speak in their language and wasn't all that surprised. As the Angel of Death, Azrael knew most of the languages of Earth. That being said, I was annoyed that I couldn't understand what he was saying. Not that it mattered. It soon became apparent that Az was chastising them. A couple of humans shouted at him, but after he answered them, they went quiet. The crowd began to shuffle like naughty children, then went very still. After only a few minutes, the Faerie God ended his speech and glared at the humans. I expected more questions or shouting, but there were none; the crowd simply dispersed.

As they left, a military force replaced them and approached the Embassy.

A man at the head of the group addressed Azrael in Italian. Az responded in a monotone, then motioned toward the Embassy gates. I looked down at the gathering of faeries in the courtyard, a force half the size of the group in the square but ten times more powerful. The guns the soldiers carried wouldn't help them. In fact, they could be used against them with the right application of Fire. So, no, the Fey weren't intimidated, quite the opposite.

A group of faeries went to the gates and opened one panel. All five of them stuck their hands across the ward and waited. The humans just stared at them, but then their leader and four others stepped forward and took the faeries' hands. The humans were drawn across the ward and escorted inside the Embassy.

"Brave men," I said as the Faerie God turned away from the railing. "What did you say to them?"

"To the Commander of the Swiss Guard or the mob?" Az asked, reassuring me that he was still in control despite the

form he took.

“Both.” I grinned at him.

“I told the crowd that miracles are just magic, and they and their Pope were being deceived. That according to their religious texts, the god they worshiped was a loving one and wouldn’t want to cause a war that he knew his people could never win.”

“Oh, that’s good. Nice way to remind them that we’re stronger without outright saying that we’ll kick their butts if they don’t simmer down.”

“They asked about the way God was showing his displeasure with the Fey, and I said again, that it wasn’t their god but someone trying to manipulate them. Tricks that I hinted were orchestrated by other humans who hate faeries.”

“Oh! That’s good too.”

“Thank you.” He took my hand and kissed it. “I told them there was no reason for their god to be jealous of the Fey, that we were not demanding worship from them or that they stop worshiping him. I said that every human is free to practice any religion they wish.”

“That must be what shut them up.”

“That and the arrival of the Swiss Guard.”

“Right. So what did you say to their leader?”

“He wanted to speak privately with me. I told him he could enter with four of his soldiers and promised him that no harm would come to them while they’re in the Embassy.”

“I like that you added the ‘while in the Embassy’ part.”

“Well, I can’t take responsibility for what happens to them after they leave.”

A knock came at the door, then a faerie opened it and ushered in the humans. The leader entered first, walking straight to Azrael while his men came in behind him and separated into two groups to flank the door. The faerie smirked at the soldiers, nodded at me, then closed the door.

After a quick exchange in Italian and a handshake, Azrael asked the leader, “Do you know English? My wife doesn’t speak Italian.”

“Yes, I know English. I am from Switzerland originally and speak five languages.”

“The Swiss Guard is really Swiss?” I asked.

He just stared at me.

I cleared my throat. “Sorry, I don’t know much about the Catholic Church or its ... soldiers.”

He nodded crisply.

“Colonel Keusch, this is my wife, Vervain,” Az waved a hand toward me. “Carus, this is Colonel Christof Keusch,

Commander of the Swiss Guard.”

“Nice to meet you, Colonel Keusch.” I extended my hand.

The Colonel took my hand and bowed over it. “A pleasure to meet you as well.”

“Shall we sit down?” Azrael motioned toward the table, then took one of the chairs at the head. The chairs all had narrow backs, made for people with wings.

I took the other seat at the head of the table while the Colonel sat to our right, back rigid, though I don’t think that had anything to do with the seat.

“The Fey need to leave Italy,” the Colonel said immediately. “By order of the Pope.”

“The Pope does not rule Italy,” Azrael said.

“No, but he rules the hearts of the Italians, and they don’t want you here.”

“The people I just spoke to seemed okay with our presence.” Az grinned. “I think it’s the Pope who doesn’t want us here, and he, as I said, does not govern Italy.”

“I don’t know what you said to them, but they are only a handful of the population.”

“Then I will have to address all of Italy and the entire world if necessary.” The Faerie God rustled his wings, making

the soldiers flinch. “You have been deceived, Colonel. You and every other human who has witnessed a miracle in the last week. Someone is using illusions to start a religious war. Such a war is unnecessary since we don’t oppose your religions and it is also unwise since your side will lose.”

The Colonel stiffened.

“I don’t mean to be antagonistic,” Az went on. “My goal is for the Fey to live peacefully with humans. But if you attack us, I will lead the fight against you. And you will die.”

The skin around the Colonel’s eyes twitched.

“Colonel, do you really think the President of Italy approves of your behavior today?” I asked.

The Colonel stretched his neck.

“I don’t think he does,” I went on without his answer. “He’s dealing with a police force who will not act against you, but they are not a part of the Italian Armed Forces. If he has to, he will send an army to fight you.”

“I don’t believe that,” the Colonel said.

“Oh, he will,” Azrael said. “Because he knows that if he doesn’t, he will have to answer to me.”

“Then why did you step in today? If you’re so sure that the President will support you, why not let him handle this?”

“I’m trying to save you—you, all your soldiers, and the humans of Rome.”

“Pardon?”

“Do you know that no faerie has left Italy today?” Azrael lifted a brow. “They have all come here to unite against you. Because that’s what people do when they are treated unjustly—they find others to band together with and fight back.”

“We have not treated—”

Azrael held up a hand and cut him off, “Before they are allowed to come to Earth, we require every faerie to make a vow to obey the laws of the land they settle in and live peacefully among you. But today you have threatened that peace by not upholding your end of the agreement. You took their homes and businesses, breaking your own laws as well as our truce, and thus giving them the right to break their vows. They are prepared to defend themselves and take back what they’ve built by force. Now, how long do you think your soldiers will last against an army of faeries?” Azrael leaned toward the Colonel. “Be honest, Colonel. Your people wouldn’t survive five minutes. A single faerie, you might be able to subdue, but not hundreds.”

The Colonel paled.

“I came here because I knew that your President wouldn’t be able to stop my people from defending their property.”

“It is our land!”

“You aren’t even Italian,” I said to him. “You are as much an immigrant as the Fey are.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Yes, it is. The only difference is that our people are stronger than yours. Yet, unlike human conquerors in history, we are not trying to oppress you.”

“If you weren’t trying to oppress us, you’d leave.”

“That’s not true,” the Faerie God said. “The President made an agreement with me, and my people came here expecting to be treated fairly and to treat your people fairly in return. You have broken that agreement today, leaving us well within our rights to attack you. If we wanted to oppress you, we would take Italy for ourselves and make you our slaves. Or just kill you all.”

Several of the men gasped, the Colonel included.

Then the Colonel rallied and said, “You could try.”

“If we did, we’d succeed,” Azrael said simply. “Can you not simply be thankful that we are not interested in taking Italy or any other country on Earth? We just want to share it with you. And we did not come here with nothing to offer in return. The Fey have brought gifts with them—plants to offer medical advancement, ancient wisdom, and magic.”

The Colonel took a deep breath and let it out. “I would have been content with sharing the world with you if the

Virgin Mother hadn't started to weep blood. Magic is the Devil's work."

I bit my lip.

Azrael was able to keep a straight face as he said, "As I said, that is a trick."

"That sounds like something the Devil would say."

I couldn't hold it back that time; I snorted a laugh. At least I didn't blurt the words that came to mind, that the Devil would say it because it's the truth. That would not have gone over well. As it was, the Colonel glared at me.

"I'm sorry, Colonel Keusch, but you truly are being tricked," I said. "We are not devils trying to deceive you. Why would we bother? As my husband has been telling you, if we wanted to, we could take the entire world. A war with us would mean the extermination of the human race." I let that sink in a second before saying, "But that's not what we want. We want peace. We want to help humanity advance. Is that something you think the Devil would say? And do you think the Devil would try to work things out peacefully or would he take the opportunity to promote violence?"

The Colonel's face twitched. "I don't know. But it is not up to me. This is a matter for the Pope."

"The Pope only has control of Vatican City." Azrael's expression hardened as he added, "And he has that control because I have allowed it. Tell him I said that or I will enter his bedchambers tonight and tell him myself."

The Colonel shot to his feet. “Was that a threat?”

“Haven’t you been listening?” The Faerie God’s eyes began to glow so brightly that I had to look away. “Everything I’ve said is a threat. I’ve tried to be kind about it, but you are obstinate, so I shall be clear instead. Come at my people again, hurt them in any way, and I shall destroy Vatican City and your Pope with it.”

The humans all gasped, their eyes going round.

“You can’t do that,” the Colonel said.

“You are still repairing the damage the Wild Magic did to the Basilica,” I said. “That was just the magic acting on its own. Imagine what will happen with the Faerie God directing it. All that history, all that beauty, gone in seconds.”

Azrael stood up, and the soldiers pulled their guns.

“Go ahead,” the Faerie God said to them. “Take a shot and see what bullets do to faeries. Prove the truth of my words.”

What he was implying was *nearly* the truth. Most Fey could recover from a bullet wound but if it hit them through the heart and they were not a Fire faerie, they would die. Or, if you damaged them enough, they might die anyway. But I wasn’t about to make that clarification.

The men holstered their guns.

“No?” the Faerie God taunted. “Not a single one of you is brave enough to shoot me? Then how can you hope to stand against my armies?”

A gun went off, a bullet pinged, then hit the wall.

I flinched, my stare swinging toward the Colonel, who was the only man still holding a gun. As I stared at him—I wasn’t worried about Az—a bunch of faeries ran into the room.

“Stand down.” Azrael held his hand toward the faeries. “I asked him to fire his weapon.”

The faeries stared at Az as if he’d lost his mind.

The Faerie God pulled open his button-down shirt and revealed his unblemished chest to the wide-eyed Colonel (and wide-eyed faeries). Az wasn’t just a faerie, he was also a god, and bullets don’t hurt gods. The Colonel should have known better; there were videos of Azrael all over the Internet being shot at with missiles. Freakin’ missiles! A bullet was nothing.

“Are we good now, Colonel?” Az asked.

The Colonel nodded crisply and holstered his gun.

“Please, escort the Colonel and his men out of the Embassy,” Azrael said to the faeries as he closed his shirt. “And let everyone know that they can return to their homes.”

“Yes, Sire,” one of the faeries said with a smirk at the humans. “This way, gentlemen.”

The soldiers filed out, not even daring a side look at us as they passed.

After the door closed behind them, I let out a sigh of relief, then grinned at my husband. “Is it wrong that I found that incredibly sexy?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

The faeries of Italy went back to their homes and businesses, many speaking to Azrael and me first. They wanted to thank Az and also ask us about what was happening. So, we were there for a while. Before we went home, I checked with Torrent to make sure that Azrael and I didn't have to quell other uprisings. Torr texted back that everything was fine but there was something we needed to see. I didn't like the sound of that.

Azrael shifted back into his Angel body, and we traced to Pride Palace. The larger tracing room startled me at first, but then I remembered Salem. We'd have to be more vigilant with the children until I could put the room back to normal. I didn't want them accidentally tracing somewhere. I considered enlarging the door to fit the new doorway, but it would have been far too large for the foyer.

"Maybe you should check in with Michael and see how Shehaquim is doing," I suggested as Az and I headed into the dining hall.

"You're right; I haven't heard from him and that's worrying," Azrael said.

It was dinnertime so there were more people in the dining room than I expected. Many of the Intare sat at the table with my husbands, children, Torrent, and Artemis.

"The guys made barbecue chicken. It's in the kitchen," Trevor said when he saw us.

"Thanks, babe." I kept walking past him, straight to the kitchen.

“No one wants to know how it went?” Azrael asked.

“We saw it,” Torrent said. “Several reporters caught the whole thing and streamed it online.”

“Did they also catch the meeting I had with the Commander of the Swiss Guard?”

“No, but we saw him enter the Embassy,” Odin said. “How did that conversation go?”

“Azrael was incredible,” I called over my shoulder before going into the kitchen.

I fixed some plates for Azrael and me, then carried them back to him. The kids were gone already, off to the Common Room to watch a movie before bed. All but the twins, who were asleep on the rug before the fireplace, in the sitting area directly behind Azrael. I set a plate before Az and sat down beside him. There were drinks on the table, and he had poured a glass of punch for me while I was getting the food. When you're a parent, fruit punch is mandatory. Party punch is even better, but then you have to make a separate pitcher for the children.

Azrael was in the middle of outlining his badass speech to the Commander.

“Hold on, you told him the miracles were illusions?” Odin asked. “I thought we were going to stay out of it?”

“That went out the window when a mob attacked the Fey Embassy,” I said. “Az had to think on his feet, and I

support what he said. It's the truth after all. Partially. They are being tricked, we just didn't tell them it was their god who was doing the deceiving."

"They just needed to be reminded that we're not hurting them but if they hurt us, that will change," Azrael said.

"Hopefully, the rest of the world will see the footage and be reminded as well," Artemis said.

"I think I should make that announcement we decided against," Az said. "Now that we've gone down this road, there's no point in doing it half-ass."

"I think maybe wait on it," Torr said. "The faeries are helping you." He pushed a laptop across the table to Az.

Azrael turned it around and angled it for both of us to see. The screen had a paused video on display. From the rectangular shape of the video, I assumed it was taken on a cell phone. Az clicked it and the view panned up from a crowd of humans to the sky above them.

"Yes!" a voice shouted. "Check this out, people! This is why we support the Fey. They're freakin' awesome!"

Lightning hit an invisible barrier over the heads of the humans, crackling along it to form an outline of a dome. The shot panned down to show a lone faerie in the middle of the humans, his hands uplifted and stare focused on the shield he was creating. His blond hair lifted on a breeze and his butterfly wings pressed together behind him, half blocked by the crowd. At last, the lightning storm stopped, dispersing into nothing in seconds. As the faerie released his Air magic and dropped his hands, the humans cheered.

“Sir?” the man holding the cell phone stepped up to the faerie. “*Would you like to say anything to the rest of the world?*”

The faerie stepped out of the crowd and spread his beautiful wings. The humans sighed and stared reverently, a few reaching out as if they might touch him. I couldn’t fault them for it. The faerie’s wings were patterned with turquoise and purple, iridescent in the sunlight, and absolutely stunning.

“To my fellow faeries,” he started. *“I don’t know who is attacking the humans who support us or why, but it’s time that we support them in return. Not all of them have welcomed us to this world, but many have. Many have been more than welcoming, and I will not abandon them when they are being harmed merely because someone doesn’t want us to get along. We cannot let this injustice grow. Not if we want to make a home here. These people are our friends and neighbors now. Defend them with honor.”*

The humans applauded.

When the applause died down, the faerie continued, *“To the humans who support us, thank you. But I urge you to suspend your meetings until this danger has passed. If you cannot, then ask one of your local faeries to attend as a guard. Do not meet unprotected. And lastly, to whoever is doing this, be you human, faerie, or other,”*—he leaned in toward the camera—*“you will not hurt or intimidate these people any longer. You are nothing but a coward and a bully. Such behavior will not be tolerated. Be warned, we are coming for you.”*

Then the Air-Sidhe shot into the sky.

“Awesome exit,” I said. “Great parting line.”

“Yes, very dramatic,” Kirill drawled. “But is zis a good or bad zing?”

“Only time will tell,” Azrael said. “Personally, I’m glad that the Fey are showing some compassion for the humans. That man is right, it’s time for them to show their support and gratitude to those who have welcomed them here.”

“Maybe you could respond to this instead of reminding humans that we can kick their asses,” I suggested.

“You mean, applaud the heroic action of this faerie instead of denouncing the villainous actions of that human mob.”

“Yes. Positive reinforcement instead of negative.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Odin said. “It will inspire more faeries to help humans and also counter the negativity that Jerry is trying to spread.”

“What about the church?” Trevor asked.

“I’ll go visit my brother first,” Azrael said. “Then I’ll record a message to send to the news stations.”

“Maybe do that in reverse order,” Re suggested. “Then while you’re gone, we can send out the video.”

“Yes, all right.” Azrael looked at Torrent. “Can you be my cameraman?”

Torrent’s lime-green eyes lit up. Literally. “I’ve always wanted to make movies!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

After we ate dinner, Azrael shifted into his Faerie God form, and Torrent recorded his message using a professional camera (made with territory magic under Torrent's guidance) and a lot of film production lingo. In his speech, Az praised the faerie who had protected the humans and urged more faeries to follow his lead, then he denounced whoever was attacking humans, vowing to find the culprit and deal with them himself. I liked that little taunt geared at Jerry. Hopefully, he'd hear it just before he eavesdropped on Az inviting Jesus to his first church service. Jerry was going to blow a blood vessel.

"All right, now for my third performance of the day," Azrael said as he headed to the tracing room.

"Tell Jesus I said hi," I called after him.

"Will do."

"I'll get the video sent out to all the news stations," Torrent said. He blinked. "Okay, it's done."

I chuckled. "You just sent the message out to the hundreds of news stations we have on our PR list?"

"Yes. With a list, I can send emails to everyone on it at once."

"Good work, Torr." I smacked his shoulder. "You two gonna stick around for dessert?"

Torrent looked at Artemis.

“I’ve got to feed my dogs,” Artemis said. “But thanks for dinner.”

“Anytime. Text if you come across any more relevant videos online.”

“Sure thing, V!” Torr took his girlfriend’s hand and strolled to the tracing room with her.

I veered off from them to go out onto the veranda and plop my butt on a Victorian chair. “Ugh! Why didn’t I make more comfortable furniture?” I moved to the couch. “I need something soft enough to fall asleep on.”

“Long day?” Samantha, who was outside in her usual chair, asked with a grin.

“It feels as if my entire life has been a long day.” I slid down into a slump as Trevor and Kirill flanked me on the couch. “Where’s Fallon?”

“Inside with the kids.” She waved a hand toward the right. “I’m having a well-deserved cocktail.”

I straightened. “After dinner cocktails?”

“What kind of cocktail?” Trevor asked.

“Sangria.” Sam waved at a pitcher on the coffee table. “Help yourself.”

“I’ll get some glasses.” Odin, who had yet to sit down, turned around and started back inside.

“And maybe make another pitcher of sangria while you’re in there,” I called after him.

“Good thinking.” Sam saluted me with her wineglass.

I sighed back into a slump. “Why does Jerry have to be such a dick?”

Before anyone could answer, someone shouted Azrael’s name inside the palace.

“What fresh hell is this?” I whined.

“Sounds like Michael,” Trevor said as he stood up. “We’re outside.”

Mike came running out to us, panting and wingless. “Where’s Az?”

Two other Angels came out with him; Cassiel and Zachariel. They looked as shell-shocked as Mike.

“Az went to visit his brother,” I said as I got up. “Is that blood on your shirt?”

Mike absently looked down at his stained T-shirt. It was one of his favorites—a Hang Loose shirt with a hand making a shaka. I’d bought it in Hawaii for him. Now the

shaka sign, the symbol of aloha, was bloody. A bloody shaka. Was that an omen?

“He took them,” Cassiel whispered.

“Who?” Viper asked as he got up and waved the Angels toward the chairs. “Sit down. You guys look as if you’re going to fall over.”

“Who was taken?” Re helped Michael to a seat while Cassiel and Zachariel found their own.

“The other Archangels.” Mike looked at Re with wide, blue eyes. “We’ve been trying to persuade the Angels to switch sides, and most of the Archangels have been helping.” He waved a limp hand at Cassiel and Zachariel.

“They’ve got Raph,” Zachariel said brokenly. “That bastard is going to kill him.”

“We don’t know that,” Cassiel said as he laid a hand on Zachariel’s knee.

“Hold on, what exactly happened?” I asked.

“Jerry sent a bunch of applefied Angels to apprehend us,” Cassiel, the calmest of the three, said. “We were the only ones who were able to reach a tracing room.”

“Where would Jerry put them?” Trevor asked.

“I have no idea,” Mike said. “They didn’t kill anyone.” He looked at Zachariel. “So we don’t know that’s what Jerry

will do. But he might torture them.”

Zachariel started sobbing.

“What about Samael? And the Horsemen?” I asked.

“They got Samael, but the horsemen have been in Hell,” Mike said. “They should be safe.”

“They got Samael?” Odin asked, surprise lacing his tone.

I hadn’t even noticed that he had returned without the glasses or sangria. He probably heard Mike on his way to the kitchen and doubled back.

“They were incredibly strong and fast,” Cassiel said. “And they weren’t just any Angels. Jehovah sent the Dominions after us.”

“Those are the ones in charge of the lower Angels, right?” I asked.

“Yes, and they’re nearly as powerful as we are. With apple magic, they became ...” Cassiel shook his head. “I’ve never seen their like. Not even Jehovah has shown such strength.”

“I thought you guys weren’t breaking your vows to him?” Viper asked.

“We didn’t,” Zachariel said.

“But we’ve been working against him,” Cassiel added grimly. “We may not have broken our vows, but we betrayed him.”

“Fuck him!” Zachariel snarled. Then he looked at me. “Godhunter, how do we get them back?”

I gaped at him before I said, “I don’t know. You know more about the Heavens than I do. Where do you think Jerry took them?”

“Could be anywhere,” Cassiel said. “Somewhere warded, most definitely.” He lifted his chin. “I think the only way to free them is to fight. When do we go to war?”

“Soon, I think,” Odin said. “Azrael is, even now, setting the lure. Don’t worry, Jehovah won’t have the time to hurt your friends. He’ll be too busy with us.”

Zachariel’s expression went vicious. “Just tell me what you need me to do.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Azrael returned a few minutes later with the news that the lie had been planted. The Church of Eternal Light would be opening its doors in three days, on Sunday.

“That’ll really burn Jerry’s butt,” Azrael said, then frowned at our expressions. “What’s happened?”

“Michael, Cassiel, and Zachariel are here,” I said. “They’re resting in some guest rooms.”

“Why?”

“Jerry sent some Apple Angels after the Archangels to round them up and imprison them. The three of them were the only ones who got away. Not counting the Horsemen, who are still in Hell, thank goodness.”

“What?!” Azrael’s eyes flashed diamond-white and the magical tattoo on his cheek began to glow pale blue. “Where did he take them?”

“Michael doesn’t know,” Odin said. “They could be anywhere in the Seven Heavens.”

“Wherever they are, we’ll find them.” He pulled out his phone. “It’s time my father stepped in.”

“Hold on.” I grabbed his hand. “If your father invades the Heavens, he’ll have to search for those Angels. Jerry will have plenty of time to grab them and use them as leverage. And either way, he’ll have the advantage of the home field.”

“She’s right,” Re said. “We’ve been planning this trap for a reason; it gives us the upper hand. And we’ll need it against those apple-enhanced Angels.”

“We can have the Demons eat apples too,” Azrael said. “They’ll be just as powerful then.”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that you’ll have to fight the Dominions before you can even look for the Archangels,” Trevor said. “Jerry could kill them before you find them.”

“Dominions?! The fucking Dominions are involved?”

“Yup.”

“We need to draw him out of Heaven,” Kirill said. “Jerry, not just his Angels.”

“But we don’t know if he’ll come to the church or just send the Host,” Azrael said. “We could win on Earth but give him the same opportunity to kill the Archangels. Even more of one since we won’t be in Heaven to stop him.”

“So we split our forces,” I said. “Text Luke and ask him to come over for a strategy meeting. If he could sneak some Demons into the Seventh Heaven and search it while we’re fighting Jerry’s Apple Gang on Earth, maybe he can secretly find the imprisoned Archangels. Then, once they’re safe, Luke can attack Jerry.”

Azrael nodded. “All right.” Then he suddenly shouted, “Fuck!”

Off to the left, the darkness was lit by the startled breath of a dragon. The fireball was followed by a, “Huh? What?”

“It’s all right, Salem. Go back to sleep,” I shouted.

A dragon murmur was all I got in response. The poor guy was even more tuckered out than the children.

Kirill laid a hand on Az’s shoulder. “Ve vill free zem.”

“And kill that motherfucker once and for all,” Azrael added.

“Da.”

Viper started giggling. “Motherfucker.”

“Why is that funny?” Azrael asked.

“Because he really did f—”

“Do *not* finish that sentence,” Azrael cut him off.

I shook my head at Viper.

“You really need to learn comedic timing,” Trevor said. Then he scowled. “Scratch that. You just need to learn how to not be an ass.”

“Damn, tough crowd,” Viper muttered.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The next day, we started harvesting apples from the grove surrounding the Elemental Well. Azrael went to the Golden Citadel to oversee things while I contacted the God Squad and updated everyone. Morpheus was especially upset because he'd been dating the sole female Archangel, Saraqael. After reassuring him that we'd free her, I made my last text. It was to Thor, and after I updated him, I asked him to bring Brevyn back. It was time for me to send for Arach.

Thor brought Brev over an hour or so later. They found us outside, at the training yard to the right of the palace. The Intare were practicing maneuvers with our Angel allies, including three of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the Avenging Angels. The Angels were teaching my lions how to fight them from the ground.

“Vervain,” Thor called as he approached with Brevyn.

“Hey.” I waved them back toward the house where it was quieter and hurried to join them. “Hi, honey.” I bent over to hug my son. “Did you have a good time?”

“Yes,” Brevyn said.

I waited for more, but that was it.

“Okay.” I straightened and looked at Thor. “How are things with you?”

Thor nodded. “Better. Brevyn removed the Love magic from Raedra and things have gone back to normal.”

“Good.”

“I’m sorry, Uncle Thor,” Brevyn said.

“It’s all right. You don’t have to keep apologizing.”
Thor ruffled Brevyn’s dark hair.

Brevyn nodded, then set his blue stare on me. “I can’t go home right now, Mother.”

I blinked. “Why not?”

“I need to be here.”

“Brev, I promised your father that he could come to any war I participated in.”

“I know. He will have to be disappointed this time.”

“Uh, now there’s something you don’t see every day—
lions fighting Angels. I think I’ll take a closer look.” Thor
speed-walked toward the training yard.

“Let’s sit down.” I waved Brevyn toward a stone bench
that stood alongside the palace moat and after we got settled, I
asked, “Brevyn, what did you see?”

“I can’t tell you.”

Well, that was new. “Why not?”

“I’m afraid it would change the outcome.”

“But you want me to break my promise to your father?”

“It’s the only way. Please, trust me, Mom. I need to be here.”

“I don’t like this, Brev. I promised to keep you out of harm’s way and the only reason you would need to be here is if you expected to be a part of this war.”

He remained silent.

“No, you’re going home.” I stood up.

“Mother!” Brevyn’s voice was suddenly deeper and resonant with power.

I sat down, gaping at him.

He was panting, obviously upset. “I have to stay. If I don’t ...” His eyes teared up.

“Okay, okay.” I pulled him into a hug. “You can stay. Your father will be furious with me, but I’ll deal with it.”

“Thank you.” He crumpled into my arms.

“Just tell me that you’re going to be okay.”

Brevyn looked up at me. “I will. Remember that.”

A sliver of fear sliced through me. “Brevyn.”

He straightened out of my embrace. “I’ll be fine, Mom. I promise. Please, trust me.”

“I do, kid. I trust you more than most people. I just don’t like you being involved in this. You shouldn’t have this weight on your shoulders.”

“I was given a gift for a reason, and I think it’s to help you. To help everyone I love.”

“You’re a child, Brevyn, no matter how old your soul is. We should be protecting you, not the other way around.”

“I’m more than a child. Don’t discount me because of my youth.”

I shook my head. His vocabulary came from being raised in Faerie but it still felt strange to hear him speak like that. “I would never discount you, honey. You were a hero before you were even born. You’re a twin because of your heroism. And you have magic inside you that we still don’t fully understand. You can do anything you set your mind to. But you still have a lot to learn in this life. A lot to experience. I want you to have the freedom to be a child.”

“I do have that.” He smiled, banishing the gloom from his face. “I’ve had a great childhood, and I love my life, Mom. Helping you doesn’t change or hurt that. It makes me feel strong and gives me a chance to hone my magic.”

“You’re not actually going to fight, are you?”

“Mom, I really can’t tell you anything this time. Just have some faith in me.”

“All right.” I sighed and looked over to where Thor stood. “Do you want to go home with Thor?”

“No, I need to be here with you.”

“Well, at least there’s that.” I put my arm around his shoulders.

“Uh, Mom, what is Aidan doing?”

I squinted in Aidan’s direction. Unlike most of the other Intare, he was in his man form, leaping into the air over and over. Above him flew Michael, his wings almost blinding, they were so white. The Archangel had his thumbs in his ears, his fingers wagging, and was blowing raspberries at my lion.

“He’s just another cat trying to catch a taunting bird,” I said. “Give him a moment. Birds are always too confident. It’s hard for them to comprehend that you don’t need wings to fly.”

“I don’t know. This is Aidan after all.”

Aidan leapt but shifted as he did, extending his jump and his reach abruptly. Michael’s hands lowered and his expression went shocked, then furious as Aidan barreled into him. Angel and lion went tumbling to the ground, and Aidan’s jaw wound up around the Archangel’s neck.

I smirked. “That’s my boy.”

“Whoa!” Brevyn stood up and started to applaud.
“Well done, Aidan!”

Aidan pushed off the Angel, shifted back to man, and bowed in our direction. Just as he was straightening, Michael knocked into him from behind and took him back to the ground.

“And that’s why you wait until you are safe at home or your opponent is dead before you gloat,” I said to Brevyn.
“And double-check that they’re dead. With gods and faeries, you can never be too safe.”

“Yes, Mother.”

This was my life. It was normally a damn good one, but then there were moments like this one, when I had to teach my children to double-check the people they killed.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The next day, I was walking down the hallway, away from the library on the second floor of Pride Palace, when I heard a low growl. I looked over my shoulder to see a dark shape emerge from the shadows, indigo eyes flashing within it.

“Kirill?” I scowled at him, baffled.

He huffed and nipped at the air.

“Oh, you wanna play?” I grinned and started to strip. “All right. I could use a little playtime.”

I left my clothes and shoes in a pile and shifted into my lioness form. Kirill bared his teeth in a grin, then jumped for me. I jumped too, toward the stairs. Taking several steps at a time, I leapt to the landing, then the first floor. Men flung themselves out of my way as I ran for the front doors.

Fallon, who’d been on his way outside, held the door open for us. “Have fun!”

“Mommy!” I heard Lesya shout. “Daddy!”

But this wasn’t family time. I roared at my daughter, telling her in my lion way to stay put, and kept running. Sweet-smelling grass, taller than me, swept against my face, and beneath my feet, my territory thrummed with magic. Through the pads of my paws, I could feel the potential brewing. Bubbling in excitement. This land was mine because I’d claimed the magic of the Goddess who had previously possessed it, but I had another tie to it—my Fey blood. The

Fey had helped the Gods build the God Realm, and the magic recognized that part of me.

The long stalks of grass began to sway out of my way, making my passage easier. With that epiphany, new aspects of my territory magic started to reveal themselves to me. I could do more than alter the scenery; I could literally bend it to my will.

Behind me, I heard Kirill's surprised grunt. Despite his shock, he was gaining on me. I veered left and put on speed, the way opening before me. I didn't actually want to win the race, but I didn't want Kirill to catch me before I got to our waterfall either.

Just a little further. The scent of water moistened my nostrils, and they widened for me to breathe deeply. A green smell added to it—moss and thick-leafed plants. No animals. The beasts of my territory knew to stay away from this place; it was marked by royalty.

I burst out of the corridor of tall grass and into the meadow that fronted our waterfall. A crescent of wildflowers and short, green grass led up to the pebbled shore, and a few moss-covered boulders outlined the small pond. From a great distance above us, a swath of water twice as wide as my lioness was long rushed down the side of the mountain. The sound was both stimulating and soothing, that roar of falling water filling my ears and telling me I was close to our secret spot.

Speeding around the shoreline, I headed for the cliff face. Spray coated my fur and wet my nose, making my whiskers twitch. Sunlight formed rainbows in the mist, giving the scene a touch of fantasy. I stretched out my claws for better purchase as the pebbles turned into rocks, then the rocks

became boulders that formed a low wall. I rounded the wall and the cave behind the waterfall came into sight.

Just then, my husband hit me from behind, taking me past the sheet of water to land on the wet stone behind it. We rolled, tussling and nipping at each other. Heart racing, I tried to free myself, but Kirill closed his strong jaws around the back of my neck and held me down. Instinctively, I lifted my tail.

Ever since he'd become the Lion God, Kirill had grown more aggressive. The change had been creeping upon him before then, but becoming his own power source tipped the scales. Although we both technically belonged to other pantheons, we had created a new one together and strengthened the Pride. And although Kirill had started as my Ganza (a sort of right-hand man) and still liked to call me Tima (my Intare title that means "heart") we were now equals.

I don't know why we'd been able to create a new pantheon. After we'd done it, I began to wonder how it had been possible and the only answer I could come up with was that Kirill had been a part of my pantheon when he became a god in his own right. We had the proper bonds in place, and when the Intare had made vows to him as their god, those bonds intensified. Plus, there was the fact that we'd both been human once, and human belief is what creates pantheons. It's what creates gods.

This new power made Kirill more dominant, especially in his lion form, and the fact that I was previously the dominant one in our relationship magnified his instincts. He needed to prove himself. I knew this, and I knew it was an animal thing. So I let him. I went still, and he slowly released my throat. Setting his paws to either side of me, Kirill reared up and mounted me. A few thrusts and it was over—lions believe in quantity versus quality and mate in quick bursts all

day long. Kirill and I wouldn't do that; this was just an appetizer to satisfy our beasts. Once his lion was sated, Kirill pulled out, and we shifted into our main bodies.

With the edge taken off his lust and his need for dominance satisfied, Kirill went calm. He helped me to my feet with a soft smile and pulled me into a tender embrace. A lion embrace—one involving some sweet nuzzling, neck nibbles, and full frontal contact. Due to the shapeshifting, Kirill's hair was loose and swung in a heavy cape around us to weave with mine.

“I love you, Lion Goddess,” Kirill's deep voice had even more bass in the hollow closeness of the cave.

“I love you too, Lion God.”

Kirill grinned, and the pale sunlight that filtered through the waterfall illuminated him briefly. But then he was drawing away to light the lanterns we kept there. I went past him, to the mattress, and shook out the blankets, then tossed them aside. The soft glow of little flames soon illuminated our love nest, and I looked around with a feeling of deep contentment. We'd added things over the years—a trunk of extra clothes, a table and chairs, a chess set, a small sound system, and jugs of water. I thought about putting on some music, but the sound of the waterfall was so beautiful that I decided against it.

“My turn.” I waved at the mattress.

Kirill grinned wickedly as he wound his hair into a rope. He laid down on the bed, tossing his hair out of the way, and settled his head on the pillow. “I am at your mercy, Tima.”

I laughed as I straddled him. “Mercy, eh? I don’t know about that.”

I bent over to kiss him at last, my hair falling around us. Kirill reached up to gather handfuls of it and use them to pull me closer, maneuvering my head to suit him. The first touch of his tongue sent lightning bolts of pleasure down my spine to ignite a fire below. I groaned and rubbed against his hard body, splitting myself on his sex. This in turn caused Kirill to groan and lift his hips to increase that beautiful pressure.

Swinging my hair back, I sat up and, holding his deep-ocean stare, undulated over him, drawing out the pleasure. Kirill’s lips parted, his groans becoming growls, and his hands went to my hips. I took them and lifted them to my breasts instead, then grinned when his whole body jerked in response.

Holding him down with my thighs I asked, “My turn, remember?”

“Mine barely lasted a minute,” he protested as he kneaded my breasts and rubbed my nipples.

“Not my fault.” I rolled my hips.

“You’re trying to kill me.” Kirill tossed his head on the pillow as if in pain. “Put me inside you.”

“Nope.”

I leaned forward and kissed him, taking my time to enjoy every nuance of our lips and tongues meeting. Of the way his heart pounded beneath my hands and his hands moved

down my sides to grip my ass. I ground against Kirill, spreading my desire over his length, revving us up until we were both trembling in need.

“Vervain,” Kirill groaned.

“Not yet.” I pushed his hands away and crawled up his body.

Kirill’s eyes widened as I straddled his face, then a grin spread over his lips. “As my Tima desires.”

His hands went to my ass and his mouth opened as I lowered myself onto him. Those amazing eyes, like deep-ocean water, stared up at me as his strong tongue began to weave its magic, lapping and flicking. Then he sucked at me, pulling my sensitive flesh into his mouth.

Whole body shaking, I threw my head back and screamed.

Kirill growled against my flesh, his hands sliding to my thighs to pull me down. My legs gave out, and I dropped onto his chest. I became nothing more than a sack of shaking nerve endings, singing the song he played on me. Screaming, twitching, coming in what felt like an endless loop, I climaxed atop the Lion God, not caring one bit what I looked like.

After I came down from my orgasm, Kirill’s hands slid up my back and he sat up. Supporting my weight while he moved forward, he rolled us into a reversed position, with me on the bottom. My legs fell open limply, and he lifted his head to grin at me with wet lips.

“My turn,” Kirill said, voice rough with desire.

Cock in hand, the Lion God moved into place. As wet as I was, he entered in one motion, then paused as we both groaned through the pleasure. That wealth of hair fell over me as Kirill began to thrust, sending the straight, ebony lengths into undulating waves. The slap of that silken mass became another layer of pleasure, but the feeling of him moving inside me overpowered everything else. That slick fullness. The way his tip hit spots inside me that sent electric jolts straight to my nipples. How his pelvis tapped my most sensitive spot with every thrust. My hands went to his broad shoulders, then trailed down his chest to trace the lines of his muscles. Sometimes, I couldn't believe I got to touch all of that. Kirill threw back his head, pressing into my hands as he drove his flesh into mine. My fingertips found his nipples and swirled around them before giving them both a gentle pinch.

Kirill bent forward to say, “I needed zis. I needed to be alone with you. Feel all of your attention on me.”

“I needed you too. There's nothing like this.”

“Just you and me.”

“God and Goddess of Lions.”

“Bodies joined.”

“And hearts.”

Kirill slowed his pace to lean down and kiss me. “You make me so happy, Vervain. More happy zan I ever zought I could be.”

“I’m happy too.” I lifted my hips. “But I’d be happier if you sped up a little.”

Kirill laughed but the sound turned wicked quickly, and his hips were soon slapping against my inner thighs with a rapid tempo. The pleasure spiraled upward and since we were so far from the palace, I let the Lust magic rise as well. A red glow suffused my skin, seeping from me into Kirill. It filled his body, driving his hips into even more powerful movements, then flowed back into me, magnified by his desire—a circle of pleasure that increased with each revolution.

Over and over, Lust spun through us until it burst from our bodies like an explosion, sending us into orgasm simultaneously and shooting into the stone walls. The thick rock would hopefully stop it from spreading to the animals outside. If not, well, they’d have a fun night.

As Kirill and I collapsed onto the mattress, red sparkles rained down around us, each imparting a zip of ecstasy when they hit our skin. We twitched together, then looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“It’s good to be a love goddess,” I said.

“You mean *lust* goddess.” Kirill pulled me into his arms. “Ready for round three?”

“Absolutely.” Then I frowned. “Hold on, are you seriously counting that three-pump, lion sex as round one?”

Kirill growled and pounced.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Kirill and I raced back to Pride Palace in our lion forms since night was falling and our beasts were faster. We put on even more speed when we scented cooking meat. Bursting from the tall grass, we found the front lawn alight with strings of lanterns. Under those lanterns, several Intare stood at our barbecue grills. Everyone was outside, drinking and socializing while they waited for the meat to cook. That included our Angel guests, the God Squad, the Devil, the Holy Spirit, and some Demons.

Everyone likes a party before battle.

Kirill and I went upstairs to get dressed before joining the festivities. On our way outside, Michael stopped me.

“Az said that I should talk to you about the tracing chant,” Michael said.

“What about it?” I asked.

“I’d like to give it to Cassiel and Zachariel so they can retreat here on their own if they have to.”

I considered that. I didn’t like to hand out the tracing chant to people outside the family, but these Angels were fighting on our side. They hadn’t made vows to Lucifer, but could I blame them for that? Jerry had failed them; how could they turn around and trust Luke? And sure, they could flee the battle to somewhere on Earth, but then the Host could still hunt them. They needed a warded territory in the God Realm to be safe. I looked at Kirill, and he nodded.

“All right, you can give it to them,” I said.

“Thank you, V. They’re both good men. Cass can be stuffy, but it’s from centuries of governing the Seventh Heaven with Jerry breathing down his neck.”

“If you trust them, so do I.”

We went outside and split up after leaving the veranda. Mike went toward the Angels while Kirill and I headed for the Demons. Luke, Holly, and Azrael stood in their group, bottles of Hellbrew in their hands.

“Hey.” Azrael slid his arm around me and kissed my cheek. “You two have a nice time?”

“Always.” I glanced at the Demons and spotted one I knew. “Hey, Cid. How’s it hanging?”

“It’s rock hard and ready for a good fight,” Cid said.

“You get an erection before battle?” Azrael asked.

“Don’t you?”

“No.”

“I get pretty excited,” Gello said. Gello, whose father was Samael.

“Oh, Gello, I’m so sorry about your father,” I said. “Are you all right?”

Her expression hardened. “I’m fine. We’re going to get him back. There’s no other option.”

“If I have to tear apart the Heavens to find them, I will,” Lucifer vowed as he laid a hand on her shoulder.

“What about your mom?” I asked Gello.

“She’s at home preparing for the battle. She wasn’t up for a party.”

“No, of course not. I completely understand.”

“I imagine you do,” Gello murmured. Then, in a stronger voice, “Jerry has really fucked up this time. He’s angered both Heaven and Hell. He won’t live to see the sun set tomorrow.”

Several Demons murmured their agreement.

“We must be smart and careful about this,” Luke said. “Jerry has people we care about. Family. If everything goes well tomorrow, they won’t be put at risk. But if it goes poorly, we will have to act fast.”

“We all know our roles,” Cid said. “You go after Jerry while the rest of us search for the imprisoned Angels.”

“And you will stick to those plans, no matter what happens between Jerry and me,” the Devil said.

The Demons exchanged worried looks.

“You’re sending the entire Horde after the Archangels?” I asked.

“Yes, we talked about this, Vervain. They are my priority.”

“But I didn’t realize that you wouldn’t be bringing any Demons to the fight.”

“I’m fighting,” Gello said. “I can’t go running around Heaven and not hurt anything. Not in this state.”

“But no other Demons?” I asked.

“We’ll be fine,” Luke said.

Cid grimaced. “I’m with V on this, Boss. I think you should have more of us with you.”

“I will be with him,” Azrael said.

The Demons looked at each other and nodded.

“What was that?” Satan squeaked furiously as he pointed at his Demons. “You think my son is stronger than me?”

No one spoke.

Except for Cid. “Uh, yeah, Boss. He is.”

Luke’s eyes widened and his cheeks turned red.

“Honey, he’s right. Az has Wild Magic now. He’s very powerful,” Holly said gently.

“He’s not the Devil!” Luke stamped his foot and smoke rose around him. “I am! He doesn’t funnel the world’s evil through his territory. I do!”

“Um, Satan, could you reel it in a bit?” I waved at the ground. “You’re singing the grass.”

“Oh, darn it,” Lucifer muttered as he waved his hands at his feet, dispersing the smoke. “Sorry about that, Vervain.”

“It’s all right. And I don’t think Azrael is stronger than you. You have millions of humans backing you with their belief and evil acts.”

“Thank you.” Satan straightened and smoothed the lapels of his suit.

“You beat me before,” Az said. “With my own weapon, no less.”

“No, I didn’t. That was Vervain.”

“You took a potentially fatal blow just to get the scythe to Vervain,” Az said. “She may have wielded it in the end, but the victory was yours.”

“Az,” Satan whispered.

“You saved us all, Dad. Me, Vervain, our unborn children, and the whole world. The Devil saved the world.”

“If only the humans knew who you really are,” I said.

“Oh, goodness, no!” Lucifer said in a horrified tone. “Then all that lovely energy would stop flowing to me. No, I don’t mind being the villain. It’s a sort of sweet irony that Jerry put me in this role, believing that he was hurting me, and ended up giving me the better end of the deal.”

“It takes a really good man to play the part of a villain without letting it infect him,” I said.

“Okay, okay.” Luke waved us off. “I don’t need any more ego-stroking.”

“Are you sure?” Cid asked. “Cause I could tell a few more stories.”

“No!” Lucifer practically shrieked.

Cid smirked.

“What stories?” Azrael asked.

“Nothing. There are *no* stories.” The Devil gave his right-hand Demon a stern look.

Cid smirked harder. “Nope, no stories.”

“We could tell you some stories about Azrael,” Samuel said as he stepped over with the other Horsemen. “Tales that would lift a few brows.”

“No, you could not,” Azrael said in the same tone his father had used with Cid.

“Wild stories?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Thad said. “Your boy was a damn lunatic.”

I looked at Azrael.

“I was young once, just like everyone,” Azrael said.

“There was that Day of the Dead festival in Cancún,” Ira said. “You guys remember how we hijacked that parade float?”

“Oh, yeah!” Sam said. “And Azrael shifted into his Death form, thinking that he’d blend in, but he didn’t.”

“Because Mexicans know Death better than most,” Ira said. “They all started to kneel as he passed by. Totally ruined the party vibe.”

“Buzzkill!” Thad chortled as he slapped Azrael’s back.

“Stop now or I will kill you and tell everyone you died of natural causes,” Az said dryly.

“That’s a Southern saying—I’ll kill ya and tell everyone you died,” Austin slurred as he stumbled past.

Azrael glanced at Austin, shook his head, then refocused his glare on Thad.

“He was so disappointed,” Thad said to me. “Poor guy just traced away in a huff.”

A muscle in Azrael’s cheek twitched.

I knew that Az has always loved humans, and he took his role as Death very seriously. But he’d always felt alone, unable to interact with humans in any way other than their death experience. He could offer them comfort too, but that was done while he was invisible and wasn’t much of an interaction. *I* knew all that, but it appeared that his closest friends didn’t.

“If you want a good story, you should ask Thor about the rock in his head,” I said.

“What?” Thad’s eyes lit up. “Thor has a rock in his head?”

“His forehead.” I nodded. “It’s just a little sliver of stone, but he hates talking about it.”

“Challenge accepted!” Sam declared and pointed in Thor’s direction. “Horsemen, we ride!”

Three of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse rushed off toward the God of Lightning, leaving the last Rider sighing in relief.

“Thank you,” Az whispered to me.

“I feel a little bad about throwing Thor under the bus. Or under the horse, rather.”

“You sacrificed him for me.” Azrael grinned.

“Of course. No question about it; you’re more important.”

“I love you.” He pulled me in tighter and kissed my forehead. Then he looked at Cid, “Now, what did my father do?”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I really did feel bad about siccing three of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse on Thor. It felt a bit like throwing a friend to a pack of zombies while Az and I escaped. So I went over to apologize after Thor had chased them off. As luck would have it, I caught him alone.

“Hey, sorry about that,” I said. “I threw you to the wolves.”

“Oh, that was you?” Thor widened his eyes. “Why?”

“To save Azrael. They were telling some stories that made him sad, but he didn’t want to tell them they were making him sad, so he didn’t say anything.”

“So you diverted their attention to me?”

“Yes. It was all I could think of on the spot.”

Thor chuckled. “It’s fine, Vervain. I can handle myself.”

I blinked and straightened. “Something’s different about you.”

“Whatever you did this time worked. I feel even better than when you first healed me.”

“Good. I hope it sticks.”

“I think it will. You knew what to avoid this time, and I don’t think you want me pining for you anymore.”

“You were pining?” I lifted my brows. “I can’t imagine that.”

He laughed again. “You know I was. But it was more than that; it was bitterness. I had found you first in this life. I could have had you, but I screwed up. Then I had to watch you build a life with my father.”

“Yeah, that’s ... it’s kinda gross actually.”

Thor’s laughter became the booming variety. When it faded, he said, “It’s not gross for gods. Just upsetting for the one who loses the girl.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. They’re my feelings but you tried to make them better. And as soon as you discovered that you hadn’t been quite so successful, you fixed it.”

“Yes, all because of my son who used to be your son.”

“Isn’t life strange?”

“Often in a good way.” I hugged him. “I’m sorry that Brevyn put the whammy on you instead of just telling me.”

“I don’t know,” Thor said as he stepped back. “I think it was good to get a glimpse of what I could have again.”

I smiled and shook my head. “Brevyn has a knack for doing the right thing even when it seems to be wrong.”

“Sounds like Ull.” Thor grinned and stared off toward where the kids were gathered at a pop-up picnic table, eating hot dogs. “So, I see that you decided to listen to Brevyn and not sent him back to Faerie. What about Arach?”

“I’ll have to deal with him later. Brevyn said it was important that he be here.”

“That can’t be good.”

“I know, but he looked so distraught when I said no. His face, Thor.” I shook my head. “Brevyn only gets that upset when someone’s life hangs in the balance. And he promised me he would be okay.”

“But what could his being here do? He’s not going to the battle.”

“He said he couldn’t tell me, but the more I think about it, the more I’m convinced that it’s Arach who’s in danger. If Brevyn stays, Arach can’t come.”

“Ah.” Thor nodded. “Now, that makes sense.”

“Either way, I’ve learned to listen to Brev when he has a premonition.”

“I think that’s wise.”

Then a whooping came from my left, and I turned to see a bunch of Intare go running by, naked. For a second, it looked like the sort of antics you'd expect at a frat house, which is often the case at Pride Palace, but then the men shifted, becoming a group of lions who dashed off into the dark.

I sighed. "I hope we have room in the freezer."

Thor looked baffled. "For what?"

"Whatever they kill."

"Ah. An evening hunt."

Then a howl rent the night, and everyone turned to see Fenrir, Wolf God of the Vikings and Father of the Froekn, come striding down the veranda steps with several members of his pack, including Trevor's younger brothers, Ty and Unnúlfr.

The enormous man came to a stop in the classic superhero pose—legs spread, hands on hips, and chin lifted. As if his size and that pose weren't intimidating enough, he also had a vicious-looking scar running down his face. "Did you think you were going to war without us?"

A chorus of "Grandpa!" came from the children.

"Hello, little ones!" Fenrir called to them, then returned to staring down the rest of us.

“Dad?” Trevor left the kid’s table to go to his father.
“What are you doing here?”

“We go to war with the Christians tomorrow, my boy.”
Fenrir slapped his son on the shoulder. “So tonight, we feast!”

More Froekn poured out of the palace, and the Intare
roared in greeting.

“I think you’ll have plenty of room in your freezer,”
Thor said dryly.

“I’d better go say hello.” I wound through the crowd
and up to my father-in-law. “Hey, Dad.”

“Little Frami!” Fenrir scooped me up.
“Congratulations on the birth of another pup.”

“Not all my kids are Froekn, Dad.” I kissed his cheek.

He set me down. “Froekn, Intare, Dragon-Sidhe,
whatever, they’re all pups to me.”

“Dad, you shouldn’t be here. This isn’t your fight,”
Trevor said.

Fenrir narrowed his eyes at Trevor, “VeúlfR, do not
ever say that shit to me again. Your fight is our fight,
especially when it’s with Christians.” He looked around at the
Froekn, held out his arms, and shouted, “It’s tradition!”

The Froekn howled in response.

Then Fenrir leaned in to say, “We need some action. It’s been too long since we’ve had a good hunt.”

Unfortunately, Fenrir didn’t mean the kind of hunting my Intare did. The Froekn used to be assassins for the Gods until I became one of them and changed things.

“Fine, but you’ll all have to eat some apple,” Trevor said.

“Is that some of the modern jargon you kids throw around these days?”

“No, he means that you’ll have to take a bite of a fey apple,” I said. “Jerry’s Angels will all be empowered by the magic apples he stole from the Golden Citadel, so we’ll need to do the same to match his strength.”

“I’m down!” Ty said.

Ty—short for TryggulfR—looked so much like Trevor, except with a slightly wider face and blue eyes, that it was like seeing two Trevors standing there.

“You’re talking about the apples with Wild Magic?” Fenrir asked.

“Yes,” Azrael said as he joined us. “The Wild Magic will temporarily enhance your magic.”

“We’ll be megawolves,” Ty said to his father.

“I already am the Megawolf,” Fenrir said.

“Then imagine how strong you’ll be after taking a bite of an apple,” Azrael said.

“You sound like a drug dealer,” Trevor said to Az. To his father, he said, “Dad, are you sure you want to do this?”

“It’s only temporary, right?”

“Yes, but it reacts differently with everyone.”

“It will be fine, Son. I can handle a fucking apple.”

Trevor grimaced, then glared at the grinning Ty. “Don’t think I don’t know it was you who told Dad.”

“Of course, it was me,” Ty said brightly. “As if I was going to let you keep us out of an epic battle.”

“With the fucking Christians,” Unnúlfr—blond, beautiful, and a bit of a dick—added.

“*You* should have told me,” Fenrir said to Trevor. “No more of this ‘it’s not the Froekn’s fight’ bullshit. If you go to war, we will be beside you.”

“Thank you, Dad.” Trevor hugged his father.

While they hugged, I hugged Emma, Fenrir’s human wife. Emma, like Kaitlin, had eaten an Apple of Immortality—not to be confused with the Wild Magic apples—but she was

still technically human, without any god magic. Which meant that she came to the parties, but not the wars. Immortal didn't mean invulnerable.

“Hey, Emma. How are you?” I asked.

“Wonderful. Though, I'm a little nervous about another war.” She shot a look at her husband. “He thinks he's invincible.”

“Werewolves.” I shrugged.

“Congratulations on the birth of your baby. How is she?”

“She's perfect. I miss her.”

“Is she a redhead?”

“Yep. I think we got her right.” I chuckled. “Such a strange thing to say. But she's the last of them.”

“You don't want any more children?”

“Oh, no. We'll probably have more, but Samara's the last that I met in that other future.”

“So any that come now are bonus babies.” She winked at me.

“I haven't thought of it like that.” I grinned. “Bonus babies. It will be nice to have a child without being worried

about them being the right child.”

“I imagine there are enough things to worry about without adding that to the list.”

“Absolutely.” My gaze strayed to Brevyn, who had wandered up with his siblings to say hello to their grandfather.

It was horrible to think this, but I was hoping Brevyn had insisted on staying because he’s seen a premonition of his father dying in this war. I didn’t like the thought of Arach dying, but if it was him, it would mean that Brevyn was safe. Both of them were. And it made sense. The last time we’d fought Apple Angels, Arach had been downed in his dragon form. He’d flown off to fight alone, confident in his strength, and I had to bring him back from the edge of death with the Great Magic of Healing. Normally, Arach was right to be confident, but Wild Magic changes everything.

I looked at Fenrir, another confident man. Honestly, I was a little relieved that he was there. With most of the Horde of Hell going to search Heaven, we could use the extra soldiers. But Trevor and I had spoken about inviting the Froekn and decided against it. Bringing them in on this made it more than an inter-pantheon war. Although I suppose it could be argued that when you go against Az, you go against his family, and through his connection to Trevor and me, the Froekn are his family. Regardless, there would be no denying Fenrir now.

The wolves were going to war.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I woke up the next morning with a heavy ache in my chest. I felt horrible about deceiving Arach and going to war without him. But that wasn't all. Something else nipped at my emotions, and I couldn't figure out what it was. War was never a good thing, but this particular war had been a long time coming. I hoped that we'd end it today and change the face of Heaven—all of them.

“Heaven,” I whispered.

“What's that?” Viper mumbled.

All of my husbands had slept with me the night before, in all meanings of the word. It was another thing we tried to do before battle. I think, in the back of our minds, we knew that we could lose one or more of us, and we didn't want to miss the chance to be together one last time. Morbid, but that's war for you.

“Heaven,” I said again. “I'm just wondering who will rule it if we kill Jerry.”

“The Archangels,” Azrael said as he climbed over the other men and out of bed. “As they've always done. Jerry is little more than a figurehead.”

“A figurehead who dispenses power.”

“Only when he feels like it.” Azrael disappeared into the bathroom.

I got up and slipped into a robe before heading to the kitchenette. After I set the coffee and tea to brewing, I went out onto the balcony to watch the sunrise. As the sun rose, the grasslands became a sea of deep orange, then gold, sweeping back toward the mountains that hemmed in my territory. Light glinted off the lake to the left and shone on the Viking longship moored there, its sails down even though there was nowhere for it to go. Kinda sad for a ship. But I suppose it was the opposite. That dragonship would never see war and the only blood spilled on it would be accidental. All it knew was happiness—the joy of a large family who loved each other. And that was probably the best a ship like that could hope for.

Unless it was like the Froekn and, by its very nature, longed for the hunt.

“What are you thinking about, Starlight?” Viper asked as he settled in against my back, his skin still warm from bed. He wrapped his arms around me and laid his chin on my shoulder.

“War, of course. War and ships.”

“Ships?” He laughed. “I’m pretty sure that Wyoming is landlocked.”

“I was just thinking about my longship and how it would never go to war.”

“Lucky ship.”

“Yes, unless it wants to fight. Longships are made for battle. Do you think, somewhere in its wooden beams, it longs to feel the blood of my enemies?”

“Da fuck?” Viper pulled back and straightened. “It’s a ship, Vervain.”

“Sorry. I guess I’m having dark thoughts this morning.”

“That’s to be expected.” Azrael came outside with two steaming mugs. He handed one to me.

“You didn’t bring me anything?” Viper asked.

Az just gave him a look.

“You can share mine,” I offered.

He peered into my mug and grimaced. “Tea?”

“Yep,” Az answered for me.

Viper sighed and headed inside, muttering, “Damn tea snobs.”

“What about Jesus?” I suddenly asked Az.

“What about him?”

“He’s not a fighter, and he won’t have a piece of apple to eat. Does he have a plan for when the battle begins?”

“Actually, I took him a piece of apple when I went to invite him to church. And the plan is for him to stay out of the battle but be ready in case anyone needs to be healed. If he feels that his life is in danger, he’ll trace here.”

“Oh, okay. That’s a good plan.”

“He’s bringing the Gravel by today before the church service. Then we’ll trace over together.”

That part, I knew already. We couldn’t risk the Gravel being destroyed by Jerry, and Jesus couldn’t ward his home from his father, not when that home was in Jerry’s Heaven. So, the Holy Grail was coming to stay in Pride Palace for a little while.

“Have the apples been sent to Hell?”

“Yes, Carus, stop worrying. Dad and a few Demons will meet us at the site, invisible until the battle starts. Meanwhile, Cid and the rest of the Horde will sneak into Heaven through one of Dad’s paths and search for the Archangels.”

“The Froekn will meet us there too,” Trevor said as he stepped outside with Viper.

“You warned them to take only a bite and keep the rest of their slice in case they need it?” I asked.

“Yes, Minn Elska.” He prowled over and leaned against the railing beside me, his muscles clenching and releasing in hypnotic ways. All he had on were a pair of boxer

shorts. “Everyone is as prepared as possible. Have you decided if you’ll be eating some apple?”

“I didn’t realize that was up for debate,” Odin said as he joined us. “Vervain, you are the only one of us who has access to the Nine Great Magics. You decimated nine sacred squadrons of Angels amped up on magic apples. You could end the battle before it even begins—you alone.”

“I know, but accessing the Great Nine drains the Wild Magic rapidly. I’d have to keep taking bites of apple to use it.”

“So, don’t use it,” Trevor said. “You kicked their asses without it, didn’t you?”

“I used Lunacy to make them turn on each other. Technically, they kicked their own asses.”

“Vervain,” Odin said sternly. “Take a whole apple and keep taking bites if you need to. You should use every advantage you have.”

“Odin, the Trinity Star refused to shine that day. I fought it as well as destiny when I used the Great Nine Magics.”

“That wasn’t the first time you altered destiny,” Viper said.

“No, that’s not my point. I learned something during that battle, something I believe my star has been trying to teach me for a long time.” I stroked my sparkling stripe of starlight hair, remembering other lessons my star had taught me. “Great power should not be used unless absolutely

necessary. It's a last resort. And I mean when all is lost sort of thing."

"I still don't see the problem," Trevor said. "Just don't use the Great Nine unless we reach that all-is-lost point."

"That's easier said than done." I glanced at Viper.

"Are you afraid of becoming her again?" Viper asked.

The men went still. They all knew who *she* was. The wicked version of me—Dark Star.

"Fuck no," Re said as he came outside. "You are not risking that."

I held up a hand to calm them. "I won't. I just ... I feel as if taking a bite of apple may be overkill, even if I don't use the Great Nine."

"Who gives a shit?" Re asked. "Overkill away, La-la. We're going up against the Heavenly Host."

I chuckled. "Yeah, you're right. Honestly, I was very confident by the end of my last apple adventure. I don't know why I'm worried this time."

Odin narrowed his stunning, peacock-colored eyes at me. "Have you spoken to Brevyn about it?"

"No. He's insisting on staying here for a reason that he can't speak of. That means he's already seen this battle and

there's nothing he can divulge. So there's no sense in asking him."

"Then you should proceed with confidence," Odin said. "If Brevyn isn't worried, then we shouldn't be either."

I made a face. Yes, I believed in my son and his visions, but visions can be tricky and are rarely straightforward. Brevyn probably hadn't seen the battle as Odin implied but rather had to interpret imagery relating to the battle. As good as Brev was getting at interpreting his visions, he could still make a mistake. But I didn't want to ruin Odin's confidence right before we went to war so I kept that to myself.

Instead, I said, "Let's get ready for church." Then I grimaced. "And I hope I never have to say those words again."

Chapter Thirty

The Church of Eternal Light looked legit. It had a sign and everything. People were strolling up to the doors, looking very human. They weren't. We couldn't use Angels as our "human congregation" because they'd be recognized, and we couldn't use Demons for the same reason, so some of my lions and a few Froekn women had agreed to play the part. They had even driven to the church and parked in a little dirt parking lot to one side.

Azrael stood on the church steps, greeting everyone, and I stood beside him, playing my part as well. Just beyond the open doors, a massive bomb waited. The plan was that we'd all enter the church, go invisible, then immediately trace out to the woods to wait for the attack. No, we couldn't be absolutely sure that Jerry would attack us, but I don't think Brevyn would have been so adamant about staying if nothing was going to happen. Once the attack began, Luke would text Cid the go-ahead to enter the Heavens.

Even though Jesus had traced over with us, he walked up to the church from out of the woods as if he hadn't.

"Brother!" Azrael exclaimed. "Thank you for coming."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Jesus said, then hugged Azrael. He moved on to hug me and whisper, "Dad is already gathering the Host."

I smiled at him as if he'd said something sweet. "I'm glad you're with us, J-man."

"Always, V." He winked at me from behind his John Lennon glasses.

“Nice suit.” I looked over his Victorian ensemble, complete with cravat and top hat. It gave his round glasses a completely different look. “It goes with your glasses.”

“Thank you. I bought it in 1846 when it was the most primo threads a man could wear.”

“Of course, you did. With your hair loose like that, you look a bit like Gary Oldman in *Dracula*.”

“Thank you! He was outtasight in that movie.”

Jesus moved on, and our faux-parishioners filed in behind him. My other husbands weren't a part of the show since the humans didn't know about them so it wouldn't make sense for them to be there. They were already in position, hidden in the trees with the rest of the Froekn, my Intare, Luke, his small Demon team, and the few Angels we had on our side. And just to clarify, the number of Demons was small, not their size. It wasn't as if Satan had shown up with a bunch of mini-Demons. But how cool would it be if there were Demons the size of pixies?

Once the congregation was inside, Azrael and I followed them, then closed the doors behind us. The Froekn and Intare were already tracing away since there wasn't a lot of room in the church, most of it was taken up by the bomb. I edged around the shiny metal monstrosity toward Torrent, who stood at the back, where the pulpit should have been.

Torr typed on a control panel in the device, then the remote in his hand. “We're good to go. Literally—let's get out of here.”

“One second.” Azrael went to the MP3 player we had hooked up to some speakers and started the recording we’d made of people singing Wiccan music about the elements.

Az turned it as high as it would go and set it on a loop, then motioned at us. We traced out to the woods, leaving the bomb and an unset ward around it, to lure in the Host. Then we waited.

It wasn’t long, maybe fifteen minutes, and then the clearing filled with Angels. They may like to fight from the sky, but they emerged from the Aether on the ground. That part wasn’t surprising. It was the fact that they were arrogant enough to appear right in front of the church that shocked me. But with the Wild Magic rushing through me, I felt pretty arrogant myself. I could understand why they were so cocky. They believed themselves to be invincible.

I couldn’t wait to prove them wrong.

“Now!” Azrael said, his voice coming from beside me but also through the communication device in my ear.

Those of us who had laid the ward sent our magic forward, setting it into place to seal the Angels inside with the bomb. Apple-enhanced Angels had broken through Azrael’s ward before, which is why several of us cast this one. It didn’t have to last very long, just through the blast, and there weren’t as many Angels as there had been last time. Jerry had only sent a few squadrons, around thirty-six Angels, but that made sense. With them amped up on apples, they should have been more than enough to kill a couple of unprepared gods, singing with humans and basking in their worship.

“Torrent!” Azrael said.

“No, not yet,” Torrent said through the comm unit. “Look. They’re going inside.”

We had assumed the Host would set the church on fire to drive us out, but Torrent was right, the Angels drew their shining swords, blessed with the power of Jehovah, and strode toward the church doors. Feathered wings in a multitude of colors spread aggressively and even from a distance, I could see their eyes glowing with magic.

“Fire in the hole!” Torrent cried.

Seconds later, just as the Angels were about to enter the church, it exploded. Shrapnel flew and fire billowed like dragon’s breath, sending the Angels blasting backward. Even though the ward had contained the sound of the explosion as well as the shrapnel, the woods went eerily silent. Not because of the horrifying gore of Angel pieces but rather the lack of it. The bomb hadn’t worked. Well, not entirely. The Angels had been blown into the ward with enough force and smacked with enough debris to render them unconscious, but they weren’t dead. They weren’t even damaged.

Bullets don’t hurt gods but if a bomb is big enough, it could. We had thought this bomb was big enough, but we’d forgotten that the Wild Magic makes gods even more resilient. I know, I know; I had thought the Commander of the Swiss Guard foolish for forgetting that even missiles couldn’t hurt Azrael. But Az was a special case; I didn’t expect these Angels to be just as hard to kill.

“Damn,” I muttered. “They’re practically invincible.”

“No, they aren’t. We may not have killed them, but they can still be killed. Lower the ward.” As the ward fell, Az shouted, “Take their heads!”

Gods and demigods popped into visibility and rushed for the comatose Angels. Just as we reached them, a great roaring came from above us, and more Angels revealed themselves—so many squadrons that I couldn’t count. Blessed steel was already in their hands and with holy fury, they dove for us.

We had all taken our bites of apple before tracing over so, I didn’t have to protect our people this time—the Wild Magic would. But, as we’d just seen, it would also protect the Angels. Maybe they wouldn’t be invulnerable, but killing them would still be difficult. The last time I’d fought some Apple Angels, normal fey magic had done nothing to them.

This time would be different. The second wave may have surprised us, but we were prepared for anything. Our people pivoted to direct their attacks upward instead, shooting fire, lightning, blasts of sunlight, and glowing streams of magic that I couldn’t name. It was as if another bomb had gone off. The smell of burning feathers saturated my nose as Angels began to fall from the sky.

Shocked, the Angels fell back, or up, rather. More and more of our people poured out from the treeline while others launched attacks from the branches. Lions, bulked up beyond belief, leapt into the air, soaring impossibly high. Their jaws closed on wings and necks, and when they came back to earth, they brought their enemies with them. One of them breathed fire as he roared—something that even I can’t do.

And my lions weren’t the only ones pulling Angels from the sky. Magic-suppressing nets were thrown via

catapults, and, thankfully, they worked. Angels fell wrapped in glowing cords, their wings struggling to break free.

Then I stepped forward. As I walked, the fizzing rush of Wild Magic responded to me and began to lift me off the ground. It was like walking up stairs except that there were no stairs, only air. My hair whipped back, the starlight stripe shining as if lit from within, and all of my magic seemed to be laid out before me like a buffet. I chose Lunacy again. Sometimes it's best to go with a sure thing.

Except that it wasn't such a sure thing after all. Nothing happened.

I paused on an invisible step.

“Did you think we came completely unprepared for you, harlot?” a voice rang out.

I looked toward the sound. Several yards before me was what appeared to be a teenage boy with wings, hovering in midair. His bright, youthful face wore a sneer, and his golden-brown curls sparked with magic—stolen magic.

“Gabriel!” I hissed.

“So we meet again,” Gabriel said, his sneer turning into a smirk.

“Seriously? That's the line you're going with?” I rolled my eyes. “How sad.”

“You can’t touch us with your insanity this time,” Gabriel, my Angel nemesis, declared even as the battle raged below us. “Jehovah himself has laid a protection on our minds.”

“Yeah?” I mentally ran through my options. Angels handled fire pretty well, and I didn’t want to get my Love magic anywhere near this asshole, but there were other elements and one of them went well with my Moon Magic. “I don’t give a shit about your mind, Gabriel. In fact, I’d prefer you to have all of your senses when I kill you.”

I called upon Water, not to summon the element but to alter the balance of it inside the Archangel. I didn’t have to switch magics because lunacy is achieved by controlling the balance of water inside someone’s body. All I had to do was change my goal.

Gabriel’s eyes widened as he peed his pretty white pants. No, that wasn’t my intention, just a bonus. I pulled the water out of him in a matter of seconds, through every available orifice and his pores. Instead of unbalancing Gabriel’s water and hurting him mentally, I took every drop he had, dehydrating the bastard like a piece of beef jerky.

A mummified Gabriel screeched and launched himself at me, feathers falling with every beat of his wings. I jerked back, not out of fear but in shock that he could still move in that state. His sword lifted and it might have even found its target—I was that shocked—but before it could fall, a bolt of lightning hit it. The electricity ran down the steel and into Gabriel’s arm. Without water to conduct it, it didn’t go far, but it didn’t have to. Gabriel’s dried-up arm caught fire like kindling. His shrieks instantly turned into whimpers as the rest of him went up in a blaze. He fell from the sky like a meteor.

As Gabriel hit the ground, the Angels who'd been knocked unconscious by the bomb rose into the sky, nearly in unison, looking like a bunch of dust bunnies stirred up by a giant broom. They screeched in anger as their leader fell, mere minutes into the fight. But Gabriel wasn't dead yet.

I looked down, watching Gabriel's body plummet. Thor stood below me, waiting with his Viking sword. He brought it down on Gabriel's burning neck, and the whimpering abruptly stopped. Then he looked up at me and nodded.

I grinned back.

Several yards away, Azrael, in his Faerie God form, shot into the sky and shouted, "You have thirty seconds to surrender!"

The Host looked at each other, then at Az. I saw the answer on their faces even before they began to fly. At him. Once again, Azrael was their main target. Azrael, the only one who couldn't take a bite of magic apple for fear of losing himself to the Faerie God. But then again, he was already full of Wild Magic.

Wind blasted out of Az, sending the Angels tumbling. As they righted themselves in midair, three men appeared beside my husband in the sky, each riding a terrifying steed. They were Angels, but they had their wings put away; they didn't need them when they rode. Nor did their stallions need wings to fly.

One of the men was beautiful in a spine-chilling way, his green eyes even brighter than usual, casting a glow that lit the crown upon his head. He rode a white horse, as white as

bleached bone, and carried a crimson bow. And I don't mean the sort you put on Christmas presents.

The next man had the sleek build of a Greek warrior and was more classically handsome, with thick, brown, movie-star hair and a jaw that could sharpen steel. He held a longsword, already drawn, and his mount was the color of fresh blood.

The last rider was attractive too, but he looked a bit like a supermodel from the eighties—heroin chic is what they used to call it. His beauty was dampened by overly sharp cheekbones, sunken eyes, and an emaciated body. His white hair appeared all the brighter against his tan skin, and the glow from his caustic yellow eyes seemed menacing. He held a pair of scales like Lady Justice, and his horse was as black as the bleakest hour of the night.

Behind the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, a group of Demons rose on leathery wings, claws extended and horns glinting glossy black. Ragged teeth were bared and cloven hooves sparked on the air as if it were stone. Demons were horrifying at night but in full sunlight, with Wild Magic riding them, they brought terror to another level. The nightmare defying day, brash enough to reveal all of its horrors. With them were a few Archangels and the Avengers. And leading them all was Lucifer in his Devil form.

Satan shot forward to hover beside his son and shouted his battle cry, “Morningstar!”

“Morningstar!” the Demons and Angels took up the cry.

And that was when the real fight began.

Describing a battle is difficult. How do I convey the cacophony of clanging steel or the rolling roar of battle cries and screams of pain? How can I accurately describe the way blood fell in swaths and globs of gore splattered the growling shapeshifters below? How they prowled in circles and leapt into the air, waiting for their enemies to make a mistake. What words could instill the same emotions that rose in me while I watched two of the greatest god armies clash before me? The anxiousness and eagerness. The thrill and delight. Because even with god and apple magic making everyone hard to kill, Hell was winning.

And I didn't have to lift a finger.

“Cease!” a voice called out, so powerful that the very air vibrated.

The armies lurched back from each other, wings and hooves beating the air, and every eye focused on a spot above us.

There, in a frame of clouds that shone from within, was Jehovah, God of Judaism, Islam, and all forms of Christianity. Robes of shimmering white encased him and his head was wreathed in a circle of light, setting his golden-brown hair to shining. A beard trailed down his thick chest and his eyes glowed so brightly that he appeared blind. And he wasn't alone. One of Jerry's arms was wrapped around my son, binding his arms to his sides.

“Brevyn!” I shrieked and launched myself toward that kidnapping motherfucker.

A ball of lightning hit me square in the chest and sent me tumbling backward, off my air steps. Instinctively, I summoned my wings and righted myself.

“Do not try that again, Godhunter,” Jerry said. “One more move at me or my Angels, and I will sever your son’s head from his body.”

I went still, magic alone keeping me aloft as fear burned my veins. In Jerry’s right hand was a blade of blessed steel.

“Father!” someone shouted from below.

There, still in his Victorian suit, stood Jesus. Even enhanced with a bite of faerie apple, his magic wasn’t made for a battle. It was like a rabbit bounding into a den of wolves.

“Leave now!” Jerry said to his son. “Go home, Jesus!”

“Father, don’t do this. Please! You don’t have to be this person. We are a family. One pantheon. Let’s forgive each other and unite once and—”

Jerry flicked a finger and another ball of lightning shot out, rocketing down to hit Jesus Christ in the chest. Several of us shouted in alarm as the J-man flew backward, leaving a smoke trail. He hit a tree, crumpled to the ground, and didn’t get up.

“Brother!” Azrael shrieked and dove for Jesus.

“He’s your son, you horrid man!” Lucifer shouted from the maw of his crimson face.

“He betrayed me. Now, hand over the other traitors, or I will kill the Godhunter’s son,” Jerry said calmly.

“What traitors?” Lucifer asked as he rose to face Jerry on his level, his leathery wings pounding the air.

“No closer, Lucifer!” Jerry pointed his knife at the Devil. “I want the Angels who broke their vows to me and allied with you. Hand them over, and I will give you this child.”

Luke looked at me. I looked at Brevyn. Brevyn winked.

My jaw fell open, and I remembered what Brev had said to me. How I had to remember that he would be okay. He had promised me he would, and I had to trust him.

I met Luke’s gaze and shook my head.

Luke lifted his brows in shock, and I winked at him. He gave me a long blink, then looked at the Avenging Angels and Archangels who had given him their vows. They stared back solemnly, used to being betrayed.

Lifting his pointed chin, the Devil met Jerry’s stare. “They are my people now, my family, and I don’t barter with family, even to save my own grandson. What you do to Brevyn is on your shoulders, Jehovah. But you will not have these Angels. You’ll have to go through me first.”

“You fool!” Jerry hissed. “I have eaten of the fey fruit. I have power that surpasses yours now, Lucifer.”

“I have eaten as well,” Luke said. “And my power has always been greater than yours. Hurt even one hair on Brevyn’s head, and I won’t just kill you, I’ll cut you into little pieces while you’re still alive, bake you into pies, then feed them to you.”

Jerry roared and lifted his hand toward Brevyn’s throat. My heart stopped. Screams, roars, and shouts filled the air as my husbands and I raced toward the Christian God. We wouldn’t make it; I knew that. Most of us couldn’t even reach him. I cursed myself for being a horrible mother and a fool. I was the adult; I was the one who should have known better. Brevyn may have the power of vision, but visions can be fickle, and I had let him convince me that we could rely on his. I should have sent him home. I should have ...

Brevyn started to glow. With a beatific look on his face, he lifted a hand, and Jerry’s hand went jerking back, the knife flying out of his grip. As Jehovah gaped at him, my son rose out of his grasp, arms extended. He waved a hand toward the ground, and Jesus came to, gasping. Azrael and Jesus stared up at Brevyn with wide eyes—we all did.

“What the actual fuck is happening right now?!” Jerry screeched.

“He’s taken your magic,” I said. “Holy hamburgers, Brevyn’s borrowed Jerry’s magic!”

Borrowing wasn’t theft. It didn’t leave Jerry helpless, but he was shocked enough that he didn’t react. He just stared at my boy as Brev held out his arms to the Heavenly Host.

“I release you from your vows,” Brevyn declared in a voice much deeper and more resonant than his own. “You owe Jehovah no loyalty and he cannot control you any longer. Your will is once more your own.”

I had no idea what Brev was talking about. As far as I knew, the Angels had free will. Otherwise, the Archangels wouldn't have tried to convince them to defect. So, what the hell was going on? Or what the heaven?

The Host looked at Brevyn, each other, then Jerry. One by one, they sheathed their enchanted swords and traced away. Only then did Jerry react. He shouted and stretched a hand toward the Angels as if he could physically reconnect their bonds. But with the breaking of those ties, something happened to the Angels. You could see it immediately. A release of tension and awareness in their eyes. There was more between them than the usual bond a god had with his demigods. Jerry had been manipulating his Angels in more ways than we knew. But Brevyn had known.

And now the Host knew it as well.

The entire army vanished in mere minutes, leaving Jerry sputtering and furious in his cloud-wreath. He lifted his gaze to my son and held out his hand, filling it with light. Before I could scream a warning, Brevyn gaily waved at me as he traced away. I nearly fell out of the sky in relief.

As soon as Brev was gone, everyone focused on Jerry. Even Jesus stood up and glared at his father. Lucifer didn't even bother with a battle cry, he just shot forward, his barbed tail lashing and his razor teeth bared. Seconds before he reached Jerry, the God of the Christians traced away.

Satan pulled up short, shook his fists in the air, and shouted, “Fudge muffins!”

Chapter Thirty-One

Lucifer instantly texted Cid to get everyone out of Heaven. Cid texted back that they hadn't found the Archangels yet.

"I should have gone with them," Lucifer said as he texted Cid.

"You sent nearly the entire Horde," Gello said.

"And you needed to be here," Azrael added. "But now we've got to get to Jerry before he hurts the Archangels."

"Brevyn has his magic now, he can get us all into the Seventh Heaven," I suggested, even as part of me was wondering how the fuck my son had ended up with Jerry.

"We don't need Brevyn for that," Lucifer said as he shifted into his angelic form. He lifted his voice so that our entire army could hear him, "I made Heaven and it's time I took it back!"

Our soldiers roared, howled, and cheered.

"Hold on to each other, everyone," Satan said. "We're going in hot!"

"I'm coming too!" Jesus said as he grabbed Azrael's shoulder.

Luke nodded approvingly as the rest of us clasped hands or shoulders, forming a connection that ended and

began with the Devil. I'd done mass traces before but never on this scale. Of course, everyone would be using their own energy to trace, Luke would only be pulling us through the wards of Heaven, and he was hopped up on apple, but still, if this worked, I'd be impressed.

“Now!” Luke shouted.

A burst of blue sparks encircled our group as the Aether opened a hole the size of a football field. We were sucked in, becoming pure energy that shot through that realm of potential. The Devil's magic pulled us along, taking us through Jerry's wards as if they didn't exist. In just a few seconds, we appeared on a sandy plane, standing before a pair of enormous gates constructed from a pearlescent white metal. Beyond them, ethereal structures loomed, gold trellises and balconies shining against their white stone. The gates swung open for Lucifer, and he led us into the city, then through the golden streets. Angels scurried about, carrying bulging satchels. They bowed when they saw Lucifer, none of them looking surprised to see us.

“I hold no grudge against any of you!” Luke shouted. “I'm here to claim Heaven and dispatch Jehovah. After I do, you will be welcome to remain. There is no need for an exodus.”

The Angels stopped and stared, then dropped their belongings and saluted Lucifer.

“We're with you, Lucifer,” one of them said.

The rest stamped their feet once on the gold stones, creating a thunderous sound that I took for a positive response.

“Do any of you know where the Archangels are being held?” Azrael asked.

Worried glances were exchanged and heads shook.

“It doesn’t matter.” The Devil grinned wickedly. “Heaven will reveal its secrets to me.”

With that, Satan crouched, his white wings sparkling in the ineffable light of Heaven, and laid his palms on the gold cobblestones. I don’t know if the Wild Magic aided Luke, but the territory instantly bowed to its master.

The ground trembled, then roiled, buildings moving and streets rearranging themselves until a new path formed on our right. At the end of it stood a building. It looked just like the other buildings—walls of white stone, with a colonnade front, and wide steps leading to its front door.

“There they are,” Luke said as he stood.

A roaring rumble came from somewhere to our right, then a mass of Demons came swarming over the rooftops—screeching, growling, and whooping victoriously. Most of them landed behind our group, wherever they could find space, but Cid flew straight to the Devil and touched down right beside him.

“Nicely done, Boss!” Cid exclaimed. “We felt that shit two blocks away.”

“Where are the other teams?” Luke asked.

“Still searching the other heavens. You never responded to my text, so I wasn’t sure what you wanted us to do.”

“Summon them here. I’ve found the Archangels.” He waved toward the building.

“Yes!” Cid whooped. He pulled a cell phone out of a bag he had slung across his chest and typed on it with an awkwardly angled, clawed finger. Then he shouted back at the rest of his team, “The Boss found them!”

The Demons cheered.

Satan clasped Cid’s shoulder, his hand pale against the two-day-old-bruise color of the Demon’s mottled skin. “Let’s free our friends.”

The Devil started down the new street he’d made, our army of Angels, Demons, and shapeshifters trailing after him. As we strode over the gold stones, more Angels joined us, falling in line where they could. The street widened as if sensing our need for space until we stood before the building with a mass of people extending behind us as far as I could see.

My husbands, Jesus, Cid, Fenrir, Morpheus, Gello, Lilith, the Angels who had fought on our side, and I went with Luke up the steps. The rest of the gathering waited in the street. As we approached, the white door opened.

I exchanged a smirk with Azrael and whispered, “Daddy’s home.”

As we stepped inside, the building changed shape, reorganizing around us. Luke kept striding forward as if it were completely normal for the walls to move. But then, this was the man who had literally written the book on territory magic. He was the one who taught me how to manipulate my territory. Maybe his masterful control had nothing to do with Wild Magic. The grass of the Pride lands had bowed out of my way. If I could do that without an apple boost, Lucifer could do far more.

I expected the stone to grate and the wood to groan, but there was no sound to the transition. Everything moved smoothly, flowing into new formations as if the whole building were nothing but sand. Or clay. Clay was probably a more appropriate reference when in Heaven.

Getting a big *Inception* vibe, I had to quote Leo's character in the film, "Our dreams feel real when we're in them."

Cid chuckled. "This ain't a dream, but it's damn impressive, isn't it? I've only seen Luke do this once, back when he built Hell."

"Impressive doesn't begin to describe it."

Up ahead, a portion of the floor lifted. As if there were a freight elevator there, a huge box of shining silver bars rose beneath that rectangle of stone until it was level with the rest of the floor. Within the cage were the missing Archangels.

"Sam!" Lilith cried and rushed forward.

Gello ran after her mother as Samael separated himself from the group of Archangels and went to the bars, carefully

extending an arm through them. I was betting the metal was enchanted to suppress magic.

“Lili!” Samael grabbed his wife’s hand. “You’re here.” His stare went to Lucifer, and he smirked. “Hail, Satan.”

The Devil giggled as he flicked a finger at the cage. There had been no door but with his motion, several bars vanished. The Archangels came pouring out—Samael straight into the arms of his wife and daughter.

“Sara!” Morpheus darted around Lucifer and ran for the lone female in the group.

“Morpheus!” Saraqael met the Dream God halfway and wrapped her arms around him. Their wings came forward to cocoon the couple, Morph’s black feathers merging with Sara’s white.

“We felt the bond between us and Jehovah break,” Samael said as he stepped up to Luke with his family. “Was that you?”

“I wish I could say it was, but no.” Luke grinned as he shook his head. “You’re not going to believe this, but it was my grandson, Brevyn who set you free. He has the magic of Borrowing, and he used it to borrow Jerry’s magic, then used Jerry’s magic to free all of you.”

“Where is he?” one of the Archangels asked. “I’d like to thank this borrowing kid.”

“He’s home, safe,” I said. Then I looked at Luke. “At least, I hope he’s safe. I still don’t know how Jerry got him out

of Pride Palace.”

“Could he have broken your ward?”

“I don’t think so. Territory wards are far stronger than those set on Earth.” I paused as I thought about Torrent’s ability to unmake magic, even the magic of a god’s ward on his territory. Then I shook my head. “No, if the ward had gone down, the lions I left behind to guard the children would have sensed it and texted me.”

“They didn’t text you about Brevyn being taken,” Luke said gently. “Maybe they’re—”

“Nyet,” Kirill cut him off. “Vervain and I would have felt zeir deaths. Zey live.”

“Then it must be a traitor,” Cid said as he glanced around our group.

“It can only be one of two people,” Kirill went grim. “Michael gave tracing chant to Cassiel and Zachariel.”

Every eye turned toward Cassiel. I have to admit, I instantly assumed it was him too. He had governed the Seventh Heaven, and he’d been so calm when Mike brought him and Zach to Pride Palace. The other two had been distraught over the Archangels getting taken, but not Cassiel. It had to be him.

“It wasn’t me!” Cassiel exclaimed. “I would never—”

“It was me.” Zachariel stepped forward.

“No,” Raphael whispered. Then, louder, “No fucking way! You would never betray us. You’d never betray *me*.”

“I’m so sorry,” Zachariel said miserably. “I don’t know why I did it. It almost felt as if I were standing outside myself, watching helplessly. Not actually in control.”

Cid snorted. “Sure.”

Lucifer waved Cid down, then asked Zachariel, “When did you start feeling this way? Tell us exactly what happened.”

“It was during the battle. I suddenly had this urge to go back to Pride Palace.”

“Damn it! This is my fault,” Michael said. “I’m the one who asked Vervain for permission to give them the tracing chant.”

“This isn’t your fault, Michael,” Satan said. “And I don’t think it’s Zachariel’s either.”

“What?” Zachariel looked up from his slump.

“What happened next?” Luke asked him.

“I traced to Pride Palace. As soon as I stepped out of the tracing room, my magic started to call to the children. Honestly, I didn’t direct it; the magic acted on its own. I didn’t know what was happening, but I think I would have taken any of the children, whoever came to me first. But I didn’t have to call them, Brevyn was waiting for me.”

“Of course, he was,” I whispered, a shiver going down my spine.

“Brevyn took my hand without me having to enchant him. Then I traced him here, to Jerry. It wasn’t until I returned to the battle that I realized what I’d done. I’m so sorry. I’ll accept any punishment you see fit.”

“You will not be punished, Zachariel,” Lucifer said to him. To the rest of us, he added, “When Brevyn released the Angels from their vows, it took mere seconds for them to abandon Jerry. That doesn’t make sense. Those Angels had served him for centuries. Even without a vow binding them, a few of them should have remained loyal or at least given it some thought. But they didn’t; they left him. I believe that Jehovah was using his bond with the Host to control them. He was forcing them to fight today and the sudden release of that control—mid-battle, right in the thick of it—made them realize how much they’d been manipulated.”

“I noticed that too,” I said. “Their loyalties immediately shifted.”

“I felt the release of our bond, but I didn’t feel any return of control,” Raphael said.

“You weren’t at the battle, being manipulated at the moment of that release,” Luke said.

“And you’re an Archangel,” Azrael added. “You have more magic and willpower than the others. It takes a lot to counter someone’s free will and the stronger their will, the harder it is. I’ll bet that’s why Jerry didn’t attack me before he got his hands on the magic apples. He only had enough power

to control a few lower-level Angels at a time. But with the Wild Magic aiding him, he was able to send nine sacred squadrons after us, and even more today. Today, he had enough power to overcome an Archangel's will. Just one, but still."

"So, I really didn't do it?" Zachariel asked.

"Search your heart, then answer truthfully. Do you believe yourself capable of such deception?" Lucifer asked gently.

"He's not," Raphael said.

Zachariel frowned, considering it. "I am capable."

We all went still.

"No, you're not!" Raphael grabbed Zachariel's arm. "I know you. I've governed a territory with you for centuries. You're a good man, Zach."

"I am also capable of doing anything to protect the people I love." Zachariel laid his hand over Raphael's. "But only for that reason. I would never leave a battlefield to abduct a child, then hand him over to someone who would hurt him. Never. My very magic rebels at the thought. I am the Angel of Children, their protector."

Raphael's expression softened. "And that's why Jerry chose you. He needed your magic to steal one of Vervain's children without anyone noticing."

“Is he dead?” Saraqael asked. “Did you kill Jehovah?”

“No,” Lucifer said as he looked at Jesus. “But I’m afraid that I must.”

Jesus nodded. “I understand. And I won’t try to stop you.”

“Thank you. You should go back to Pride Palace. I’ll fetch you when—”

“No,” Jesus cut him off. “I want to be there for him at the end. That, at least, I owe him.”

The Devil closed his eyes and bowed his head, almost as if he was praying, but it was only to compose himself before he laid a hand on Jesus’s shoulder. “You are what your father could have been. The best of him.” Then he turned and strode out of the building.

We followed Luke outside, where our army and the Angels of the Seventh Heaven waited. They cheered when they saw the freed Archangels, but Lucifer held up his hand for silence. The quiet started at the front and rolled back.

“Give me some space,” Lucifer said.

Those in front moved to the side, clearing a small area on the gold road. Luke knelt there and laid his palms on the stones. Once more, Heaven trembled, but the road didn’t bulge nor did the buildings move. Nothing but those gentle tremors.

We waited in silence, every eye upon Satan, but no miracles happened. Jerry didn't pop up out of the ground and the city remained as it was. Finally, Luke stood up, sighed, and stared at the cloudless sky.

"Father?" Azrael stepped up beside him.

"I've taken control of the Heavens and cast my ward over all of them," Luke said.

"All of them?"

"All of them, including yours, Son." Luke turned to look at Azrael. "Every Angel and Demon will be allowed through, but Jehovah will not. The Host and Horde are safe here."

The Angels and Demons cheered at first, but then they saw Luke's grim face and the cheering subsided into a tense silence.

I was the first to come to the conclusion, or at least the first to say it aloud, "He's not here. Jerry's escaped, hasn't he?"

"Yes. I've searched every Heaven, and he is not in any of them. He has eluded us once more."

"You almost sound relieved," Az whispered.

"I am a little, but I also know that now, we must hunt him."

“We will find him,” Samael said grimly. “*I will find him.*”

I didn't know what that meant, but Lucifer seemed to. He nodded as if it were assured.

“But not today,” Azrael said. “Jerry is still empowered by Wild Magic. When it wears off, we'll be able to kill him more easily.”

“If he hasn't taken apples with him,” Trevor said.

“He may have, but he won't know when we're going to strike, and I doubt he'll want to waste whatever he has left to keep himself constantly enhanced.”

“True,” Lucifer said. Then he raised his voice to address the crowd, “The battle is over for today, my brothers and sisters. It's time to celebrate your freedom!”

The Angels cheered again, but this time they were joined by the Froekn, Intare, and Demons. The wolves and lions may not be citizens of Heaven or Hell, but they were always down for a good party.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Angels and Demons ran off to get ready for the festivities, and I had to go home too. I had family waiting. Azrael offered to help fetch the children, but I thought he should stay and help his father. So, I traced to Pride Palace with Trevor and Kirill.

We found the kids in the Common Room with Samantha and several of my lions who had been given the task of guarding the children while the rest of us were at war. When we entered the room, the men ran over to us and started apologizing.

“Stop!” I held up a hand. “You didn’t fail. Did they, Brevyn?” I looked at Brevyn, who was sitting before one of the many TVs with Vero.

Both of the boys had controllers in their hands and a video game was on the screen. Spyro, I think. No, that other one that Spyro’s in, the one you have to put the figures on an activation platform to use them as your avatar. How can I know so much about a game and not know its name?

“No, they didn’t.” Brevyn got up and came over to hug me. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you.”

“It’s okay, honey.” I hugged him back. “But you need to explain to your uncles why they didn’t fail me.”

“I knew that Zachariel was coming for one of us,” Brevyn said. “If I hadn’t gone with him, he would have used his magic to lure Vero away.” He looked at Vero, then at me. “I couldn’t let that happen. It had to be me. Only I could save

myself and free the Angels. And the Angels needed to be freed.”

“I knew you went with Zachariel on purpose.”

“I did, and I told them this already, Mom.” He waved a hand at the somber lions. “They don’t think it matters.”

“It doesn’t,” Jake said. “You assigned us the task of protecting your children, and we failed you. I’m so sorry, Tima.” He went to his knees. “I’m sorry, Kirill and Trevor. Please, forgive me.”

The six other lions did the same.

“Get up,” I waved at them. “We’re family, not just gods and demigods. You don’t kneel to us, not even when you’re apologizing.”

“She’s right. Get up, Brothers,” Kirill said, then went forward to help them up.

They stood up, but still looked grim.

“A child was meant to be taken today, there was nothing any of you could have done to prevent it,” I said. “Brevyn made sure that it was him and because of that, an entire pantheon is free and many lives have been saved.”

“But he’s just a kid. We should have protected him,” Jake said.

“To quote Tolkien, ‘Even the smallest person can change the course of the future.’ Brevyn has changed it many times and I’m sure he’ll change it many more. He is not and has never been *just* a kid.”

Brevyn beamed at me.

“If you had succeeded at your task, the Host would still be under Jerry’s control, and, honestly, I don’t know what else might have happened.” I glanced at Brev, but he looked away, his smile fading. “I think I might have died trying to save Vero.”

Everyone looked at Brevyn.

“Brev?” Trevor asked, his voice gone tense.

Brevyn bit his lip, then nodded.

A weight fell away from me then. It’s easier for me to know that I might have been the one who died instead of one of my children or husbands. Although, if Brevyn hadn’t interfered, Vero might have died too. Fuck, that would have destroyed our family. Me *and* one of the kids? No, they wouldn’t have recovered from that.

“Brev,” I whispered and pulled him into a hug. “I hate that you had to bear this knowledge alone. But I’m also really proud of you.”

Brevyn’s smile returned, but it was softer this time. “Thank you, Mom.”

“Your father will be proud too. Hopefully, that will cool his temper.”

Brev winced. “Do we have to tell him?”

“Oh, yes. Absolutely.”

Brevyn grimaced.

Trevor leaned down to whisper to Brevyn, “Thank you for saving them.”

“I’d do anything for my family, Uncle Trevor. You don’t have to thank me.”

“Yes, I do.” He hugged Brevyn. “You saved my life today too.”

“Is everything okay now?” Lesya asked. She stood just behind her lion guardians with Vero, Zariel, and Samantha, their games forgotten and their expressions worried.

“Yes, everything’s okay now,” I said. “In fact, we’re all going to a party in Heaven.”

“Yay!” The children shouted and woke up the twins, who were sleeping on a couch nearby.

Sebastian started to wail, but Dominic just rubbed his eyes, crawled off the couch, and walked over to me with his cute baby waddle.

Dom lifted his arms and said, “Up, Mommy.”

I chuckled and bent to pick him up. “You have wings, Dominic.” As he settled his head on my shoulder, I added, “But I guess you’re too tired to use them, huh?”

“I’ll get Sebastian,” Trevor went to the crying toddler. “All right now, enough of that. You’re fine.” He picked him up, and Sebastian instantly stopped crying to sniff and stare at Trevor. “I want Daddy.”

“We’re going to see him right now,” Trevor said.

“Are you sure it’s safe to take them to Heaven?” Samantha, holding her daughter’s hand, asked.

As Kirill took our daughter’s hand, he said, “Da, Luke warded it against Jerry.”

“*Luke* did?”

“Lucifer built all the Heavens,” Trevor said. “He’s let Jerry have them as part of their truce. But the truce is over, so he’s decided to take them back.”

“Whoa,” Sam whispered.

“Yes, it’s been an eventful day,” I said.

“So, uh,” she looked at the kids, then back at me. “You didn’t get him?”

“Not yet. In fact, I think I’d better change the tracing chant again. I’ll do it on our way out, then I can tell everyone at the party.”

“Why don’t you just do what Luke did and ward the territory against Jerry specifically?” Trevor asked. “I think we can trust Zachariel now.”

“I’ll set a ward against Jerry for now, then change the chant later. Whether we can trust him or not is irrelevant; he’s not family.”

“I agree,” Kirill said. “Only family should have chant.”

“Okay, that’s settled. Now, let’s go. There are a lot of Angels who’d like to thank Brevyn for their freedom, and heroes should always be thanked.”

“Thank you, Brev,” Vero said solemnly.

“I’ve got your back, Brother,” Brevyn said.

Then they hugged while my heart melted.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Cases of Hellbrew had been fetched from Hell, and all of Heaven got liquored up. The Cherubim chugged brew straight from the bottle, but the more refined Dominions sipped it from wineglasses. Even the Seraphim, the six-winged Angels doomed to fly around Jerry's throne, singing "Holy, holy, holy," whenever he was on it (but who always sang "Holly, Holly, Holly," instead) joined us. When Luke informed them that they'd never have to do that nonsense again, they began singing *his* praises instead of his wife's.

All the Angels sang Brevyn's praises, lining up to thank him personally for their freedom. And my little boy took it all like a grown man, so composed and with a kind word for each of them. He was a born king, and someday, Alfheim, the Norse territory that he inherited from my mother, would be lucky to have him as its ruler. Maybe I'd take Brevyn for another visit there soon. His people should get to know him as he grew up. They deserved to see what I did; that their king was also a hero. Or maybe, in this case, I should call him a savior.

After Brevyn received the Host's gratitude and all the children had eaten their fill of heavenly desserts, we climbed the sparkling white stairs to the Throne of God—a great, big, golden monstrosity. No one sat on the throne, not even Lucifer. Instead, we sprawled on the marble floor before it, around the glass panel that covered the Guf. My children were fascinated by the tiny faces of the souls swimming in the shimmering mist and the branches of the Tree of Life that could be glimpsed just beyond. They laid on the glass and waved at the souls, pressing their faces against the panel to leave nose and lip prints behind. I can't imagine what those poor souls thought. Hopefully, they were as entertained as the rest of us.

Luke disappeared with Jesus for a while, taking him behind the throne and into Jerry's home to have a private conversation. When they returned, Jesus looked different. More somber. Less like the J-man. I assumed their talk was about his father's unavoidable demise.

"Who's going to take the souls out of the Guf now that Gabriel's dead?" I asked Lucifer as he settled on the floor between Azrael and Holly.

Luke looked at Jesus for an answer.

"Lailah can do it," Jesus said. "I'm sure she'll do a better job than Gabriel."

"That reminds me, thanks for the assist, Thor," I called over to him.

Thor was sitting on the edge of the platform, his feet on the steps, with Pan and Horus beside him, all three of them staring out at Heaven. He turned to look at me over his shoulder. "Anytime, Vervain. It was my pleasure to give that,"—he glanced at the kids, then continued, "that jerk what he deserved."

"Isn't anyone worried about what Jerry might get up to before we catch him?" Persephone asked.

She hadn't been at the fight, but Hades had gone to fetch her and baby Deme once the party started. Horus had done the same with Katie and Astie, who were both sprawled beside Persephone on a baby blanket, and Luke had fetched Holly from Hell when he'd gone for the Hellbrew.

“He’ll be running scared,” Luke said. “He won’t have the time to do anything.”

“Sweet Jesus,” Austin said again. He’d been standing before the throne for nearly half an hour, just staring at it and saying those words.

“Austin, sit down,” I said.

He swung his head to look at me, eyes wide. “Are you nuts? I’m not sitting on God’s holy throne!”

“Not *there*.” I laughed. “Come and sit with us. Enjoy the view.” I waved at the city. “Or go party it up with the Angels. You’re in Heaven and you’re not dead. Go have some fun.”

“Yes, do anything other than what you’re currently doing,” Re drawled. “You’re getting annoying.”

“This is *God’s throne!*” Austin pointed at it. “And those are human souls!” He swung his finger toward the Guf. “My awe is valid.”

“Humans.” Re rolled his golden eyes.

“I think you should sit on the throne,” Jesus said as he got up.

“What?!” Austin gaped at him.

“Someone has to,” Jesus said with a shrug. “Avoiding it is a total cop-out. We’re acting as if it has power, but it

doesn't. It's just a dumb chair. My father didn't even make it, Luke did. We need to protest its authority and what better way to do that than for an ex-human to cop a squat? Go ahead, Austin, give it a try."

"Sweet Jesus," Austin whispered again.

Jesus chuckled and went to usher Austin forward. "Not always."

"No." Luke stood up. "It is just a chair, but it is also a symbol of the power of Heaven. Don't make light of it."

Jesus sighed. "It's a symbol of the Man's authority, and he ain't in control anymore."

"No, *you* are. Take your throne, Jesus."

"What?" Azrael gaped at Lucifer. "Dad, I thought you were going to rule Heaven?"

"Me?" Lucifer laughed. "I never wanted to rule Heaven. Granted, I never wanted to rule Hell either, but I've come to love it. Hell is my home. This,"—he waved a hand toward Heaven—"is not. No, this is Jesus's birthright. He is the King of Heaven, and he cares enough about his people to do right by them."

"I told you already," Jesus said, "I don't have the power to rule Heaven."

"You have your father's connection to the humans. They see you, your mother, and your father as one. When he

dies, the energy will go straight to you. Trust me.”

“Says the Devil.” Jesus smirked.

“The Devil is always right.” Luke laid a hand on Jesus’s shoulder. “That’s what makes me so very evil. Bwahahaha.”

Holly snorted. “He’s not always right, but in this instance, he is. Go on, sit down, Son.”

“No. I won’t claim the throne until my father is gone.”

“Fine, but don’t go giving it away either.” Luke patted Jesus on the shoulder, then went back to sitting beside Holly.

As Luke sat down, Holly got up. She went to her son and hugged him. “You will make a magnificent king.”

“I’m not king material, Mom,” Jesus whispered.

“Yes, you are. King of Kings, remember?”

Jesus made a face.

Holly abruptly went stern. “Jesus, it’s time for you to grow up. No more lazing about, smoking hashish, and meditating. Gods don’t need to meditate.”

“It’s pot, Mom, not hash. And it barely does anything to me.”

“Then why do it?”

“I like the smell.”

“Darling, it’s called skunk weed for a reason; it stinks.”

Jesus chuckled. “Good, maybe it will keep the Angels from bothering me.”

“Jesus Hadranus Christ!” Holly said in her mom voice.

“Hadranus?” I whispered to Luke.

“It was her father’s name,” he whispered back. “He didn’t make it out of Atlantis and she loved him very much.”

“I’m so sorry.” Then I processed what he said. “You mean, the humans got it right when they came up with Jesus H. Christ?”

“Oh, yes. It’s one of those things they learned but then forgot, then remembered, but couldn’t remember how they learned it, to begin with.”

“Uh-huh.”

Meanwhile, Jesus Hadranus Christ hunched before his mother like a teenage boy whose stash of Playboys had just been found. “Mom,” he whined. “Let me do it my way.”

“Very well,” Holly finally gave in, then stood on her tiptoes to kiss Jesus’s cheek. “I love you. I know you’ll make the right choice.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Jesus pulled her into another hug. “I love you too.”

“Sweet Jesus,” Austin muttered again, then plopped down on the floor beside the Throne of Heaven.

Chapter Thirty-Four

I woke up the next morning to roaring. Not the lion variety but that of a man. Or a god, rather.

After pulling something on, I raced downstairs with Re, Viper, and Odin. The other men stayed behind to handle the children. The four of us came out of the elevator to find Jesus standing in the foyer, hands clenched into fists and face tight with rage. Salem peeked his head in through the front doorway, then quickly withdrew.

“Jesus!” I ran up to him and grabbed his forearms. “Hey! What’s happened?”

“The Grayel is gone!” Jesus said.

“What?”

“It’s gone, Vervain. It has to be my father. He must have gotten the tracing chant from Zachariel and came here on his own.”

“No, I warded the territory from him when I went to fetch the kids last night.”

“Then he must have done it during or right after the battle.”

“How could he get that massive machine out of here without anyone noticing?”

“It’s not a massive machine,” Odin said.

“Uh, yes, it is. The chalice is just the receptacle for what the Grayel produces, and the Grayel is a big machine,” I said. “I should know, I’ve drunk from the chalice.”

“And I saw Jesus bring—” Odin started to say.

“The Grayel can be condensed into a case,” Jesus cut him off. “The chalice is set into the case for transport. Both are required for the immortality elixir to be brewed and both are missing!”

“What’s going on?” Azrael came out of the elevator with my other husbands and children.

Meanwhile, Intare were descending the stairs, rubbing at their eyes and yawning. They gathered around us, several plopping down on the stairs to watch the drama.

“He’s taken the Grayel, Az,” Jesus said. “My father has stolen the Grayel.”

“Son a bi—” Az looked at our twins, both in his arms, and altered the trajectory of his curse. “... bitcoin.”

“Someone mention bitcoins?” Torrent asked as he came out of the tracing room with Artemis. “I can totally hook you up.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked Torr.

Torr’s face went grim. “There’s something you need to see.”

“Whatever it is can wait,” Jesus said. “My father has the Grayel.”

“That’s the thing that makes the immortality juice, right?” Torrent asked.

“Yes, it’s that thing,” Jesus huffed.

“What happened to your whole hippie vibe?” Artemis asked.

“I don’t have time for a vibe! The Supreme Dick of the Universe has stolen my cup!”

“Brother,” Azrael said gently, then looked pointedly at the children.

“Oh, darn. I’m sorry, kids. Don’t listen to Uncle J right now.”

“Why are you so angry, Uncle Jesus?” Lesya asked.

“Because my daddy stole something very important from me.”

“Daddies don’t steal,” Lesya said, her hand firmly held by her father.

“Come with me, children,” Kirill said before Jesus could answer. “Time for breakfast. Mommy vill help Uncle J sort zis out.”

As Kirill headed for the dining room, Azrael set Sebastian and Dominic down, and they waddled after the group, too sleepy to fly.

“She’s right,” Jesus said softly. “Fathers don’t steal from their children. Not the good ones at least. This needs to end.”

“I could try to cast a locating spell,” I suggested.

“If you’d just let me show you what I saw this morning, you wouldn’t need to do that,” Torrent said.

I spun toward Torr. “What did you see?”

“Do you know where my father is?” Jesus asked at the same time.

“Yes.” Torrent lifted the laptop he was carrying, opened it, and brought up a video. “This happened in London this morning.”

A reporter. Microphone in hand, stood before a pair of familiar black gates as she said, “Buckingham Palace, one of the few historical buildings in the world that escaped alteration by faerie magic, was taken by force today. The man who seized the palace claims to be the legendary King Arthur of Camelot.”

“You have my attention,” I murmured.

“Thankfully, most of the Royal Family was gathered at Balmoral Castle at the time of the invasion, mourning the passing of our beloved Queen Elizabeth II.”

“Damn, I forgot she died,” one of the lions on the stairs said.

The reporter went on, “King Charles was in residence, but was escorted to safety by members of his King’s Guard. It’s not yet known how the self-proclaimed King Arthur got into the palace or what exactly happened with the rest of the King’s Guard, but we’re told there were no fatalities. This man, who some have speculated is a faerie, is now in command of the King’s Guard. He has managed to shift the loyalties of our most stalwart soldiers and has recruited even more since the—” a trumpet blast interrupted her. “Oh! Here he comes!”

The camera panned away from the reporter to the gates and then zoomed in beyond them to the main doors of Buckingham Palace’s East Front. The doors were open and a group of guards, dressed in their official uniforms, came marching out, rifles over their shoulders and tall hats in place. In the center of them walked a man in a suit with a longsword strapped to his waist. I couldn’t see his features from that distance, but he had short hair and was clean-shaven. As the camera zoomed in on him, Jesus gasped.

“Holy shit, that’s my dad.” Jesus leaned in. “And the Grayel!”

Sure enough, Jerry carried a large, gold case. Not a briefcase or a suitcase but something in between, like a case you might transport an expensive bottle of liquor in. Or a holy chalice.

Jerry, who I wouldn't have recognized without his long hair and beard, looked damn good. He had a nice face. Classically handsome. Strong jawline. And his smile was brilliant as he stepped up to the gates.

Microphones on rods, whatever they call them, were extended over the gate toward Jerry, and every camera focused on him. Reporters began to shout questions.

“Where are the Police?” I asked.

“The King's Guard cleared the area in front of the palace and has kept everyone but the Press out,” Torrent said. “Police included.”

“What in the world?” I whispered. “How did they manage that?”

“They aimed rifles at them. Most British police officers don't carry guns. By the time they called in the firearms unit, Jerry had a ward in place.”

Jerry held up a hand, and the reporters went silent.

“You have doubts,” Jehovah said. “I have come to quell them. I am King Arthur Pendragon, Ruler of the Realm. Long ago, I promised to return to Britain when you needed me most. That day has come. My kingdom has been overrun with faeries. I know these creatures well. They were once my friends, but they betrayed me, and I promise you, they will betray you too.”

“Oh, fuck,” Trevor said.

“This can’t be happening,” Azrael muttered.

“I have come to lead an army against these usurpers. In particular, against the man who claims to be their god. I swear to you, the Fey have no gods. They are immoral beings without respect for anything sacred and no religion at all.” He held up his hand as reporters started shouting again. “I have brought with me an item to prove my claims.”

Jerry set the case on the ground and pressed a button on the top. The sides opened like a flower and amid the thick, gold petals, on a base of red velvet, sat the chalice. He picked it up and held it aloft.

“This is the holy grail, that which I tasked my knights to find many years ago. It has the power to heal all ills and grant immortality. I offer a sip from the grail to anyone who will join my army and fight the Fey. Join me, and you will live forever.”

“How do we know there isn’t poison in that cup?” someone shouted.

Jerry very calmly set the chalice back in its case, folded it all up, then drew his sword. The blade caught the light and gleamed, silencing the crowd. It was only blessed steel, but it would doubtless be mistaken for Excalibur. With a deft movement, he stabbed one of the guards in the chest.

The reporters gasped and cried out, but none of the guards reacted. Well, the one he stabbed shrieked and collapsed, but his friends did nothing. Jerry pulled his sword free and gestured at the guard. After a few ragged breaths, the man was able to get to his feet. He pulled open his jacket and the shirt beneath, displaying a cut in his chest that healed as

we watched. Finally, the guard wiped away the blood to reveal unblemished skin.

“That’s how he got them on his side,” Azrael said. “He hurt them, then healed them. Fuck me.”

“I am not a faerie!” Jerry shouted. “And I am not a god.”

“That’s new,” Odin muttered.

“I am your true King, alive because of this sacred treasure, and I will share this sacred gift with all who give me their allegiance!”

Torrent clicked off the video. “I think you get the idea.”

“He’s making a new army,” Trevor said.

“King Arthur?” I shook my head. “Damn, that’s brilliant. The fucking Returned King come to save England as promised. A legend come to life. What a perfect cover for a god.”

“And with the holy grail no less,” Azrael said. “They’ll be lining up for him in droves.”

“Oh, they are,” Torrent said. “If we don’t do something soon, he’ll have an army to rival the Host by nightfall.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Jesus asked.

“Call the God Squad,” I said.

“And the Devil,” Az added.

Chapter Thirty-Five

“Should I do another press release?” Azrael asked everyone fifteen minutes later.

The God Squad, Luke, and Holly had traced over as soon as we texted. Luke brought the Archangels and a few Demons with him—Lilith, Gello, and Cid. We sat at one of the large tables in Pride Palace’s library. With the kids eating in the dining room, I thought the library would be a better choice. I kind of liked it better as a meeting place; it was more comfortable. The only downside was that it was on the second floor, and the kitchen was on the first. So we had to cart up drinks and snacks.

“I think this needs a more straightforward approach,” Hades said. “Go to Buckingham Palace and confront him.”

“Confront Jerry? If I go there, I’m going to kill him,” Azrael said.

“No, I mean confront him in front of the reporters. Call him a liar and a fraud, tell the world that he’s a faerie and the chalice is a relic he stole from the Faerie Realm.”

“You want me to call Jerry a faerie?”

“I like the idea,” I said. “We can’t tell the world who he really is, that would be bad for multiple reasons, not the least of which would be outing the Gods without their permission. But we can call him a big fat liar; that’s the truth.”

“You could say that the story of King Arthur was based on faeries who helped an Irish king back before the Fey

withdrew,” Odin suggested. “Say that this king knew of the holy grail and tried to steal it from the Fey, but never succeeded. It has always been in Fey hands, which proves that Jerry’s a faerie.”

“Oh, I like that!” Persephone straightened from checking on Deme, who was playing with a toy on a blanket between her parents’ chairs.

“If we go now, he won’t have enough soldiers to fight us,” Jesus said. “He might come out and try to argue with you, but that’s it. And what can he say? His only defense would be to call you a liar in return.”

“I don’t know.” Azrael scowled in thought. “Honestly, I’m surprised he’s come up with such a brilliant plan on his own.”

“He’s off the sauce,” Luke said. “Angel liquor has been clouding his mind for centuries. Without it, he’s a brilliant tactician.”

Viper perked up. “The Angels have liquor?”

Luke leaned toward him to whisper, “It’s not as good as Hellbrew.”

“Jerry may be clear-headed, but he didn’t think this one through,” Samael said. “Even with immortality, those humans are no match for us. We’ll slice through his army like butter.”

“That could be what he wants,” Jesus said. “All those reporters will record the Faerie God slaughtering humans while my father doubtless escapes. He’ll use it to rally even

more humans to his side until he turns the world against my brother.”

“So, I go, call him out on his lies, and refuse to fight,” Azrael said.

“And if he attacks?” I ask.

“I trace away.” Azrael shrugged.

“You trace away?” Odin asked. “You want to go alone?”

“I think it’s best.”

“Hardly,” Samael scoffed. “You will go and face *the reporters* alone. Try to draw out Jehovah. If he does leave the palace, we’ll trace inside and search it for the Grayel.”

“He’ll probably take the Grayel with him,” Jesus said. “He’s not going to leave it sitting unattended in the palace, and he won’t trust anyone to guard it.”

“So, we use the distraction in another way,” Pan said. “We sneak up on Jerry, cloaked in invisibility, and take the case right out of his hands.”

“He’ll be surrounded by guards,” Trevor said.

“Then we don’t go invisible.” Horus looked at Pan and grinned.

“Costumes?” Pan asked excitedly.

“Uniforms,” Horus corrected.

“You don’t think the members of the King’s Guard will notice that you’re not one of them?” Hekate asked as she rocked Astie.

I watched her for a moment, jealous that I didn’t have my baby to rock. My arms ached to hold my daughter. My boobs ached too, for that matter. Breastfeeding is hard on a woman, especially when she doesn’t have a baby to feed.

“They’ll be just as distracted as Jerry,” Samael said. “We trace in behind them and grab the case before they have time to get a good look at us.”

“Only one or two at most can go,” Thor said. “Any more and they’ll notice our arrival.”

“That’s if Jerry goes out to confront Az,” Viper said. “If he stays inside, we can send more.”

“We’ll need men with slim physiques,” Luke said. “Most of you are too bulky and that will attract attention.”

“I’m the right size,” Jesus said.

“But you’re not a fighter,” Luke said gently.

“If it’s just a snatch-and-grab, I won’t have to fight.”

“We’re overly complicating this,” I said. “Azrael goes to speak to the reporters and at the same time, we *all* invade Buckingham Palace. We’ll stop Jerry before he has a chance to step outside, then we can grab him and the case, and he won’t be able to refute what Azrael says. It’ll look as if he’s hiding inside, too scared to confront the Faerie God.”

“And the guards?” Thor asked.

“Morpheus can put them to sleep; no one has to die.”

“No one but Jerry,” Cid said. “We *are* killing him this time, right?”

“Yes,” Lucifer said.

“Shouldn’t we kill the humans too?” Ira asked.

Everyone looked at him in horror.

“Well, they’ve all drank from the Grayel,” Ira said. “They’re like gods but without magic. We can’t let them live, can we?”

We looked at each other.

“What right do we have to kill them?” I asked.

“None,” Jesus said. “Nor do we have to. They are not immortal.”

We all swiveled our stares to Jesus.

“Say what?” Viper asked.

“The Grayel is mine. Pieces of it are from Atlantis, but I built it with the power of myth and belief assisting me. Human belief empowers it, and they believe the Grayel is the cup that I used at the Last Supper, the same cup that caught my blood when the Establishment crucified me.”

“The Establishment?” Viper asked.

“I believe he means the Romans,” Odin said.

“Is it the cup that caught your blood?” I asked.

“No, I was never crucified.” Jesus made a face. “As if I’d let them do that nasty shit to me. They came for me, and I traced away, but they didn’t want everyone to know I beat feet, so they put some other criminal up on a cross.” He shook his head. “Poor guy.”

“I’ve heard you talk as if it happened to you,” Odin said. “I thought perhaps you allowed it so that you could appear to rise from the dead later.”

“I like to honor the myth; a little ohhh-mahge to my roots.” Jesus shrugged. “But no, there’s not enough weed in the whole world to get me high enough to agree to crucifixion. Not happening.”

“So, your followers just made up those stories about you coming back to life?” Pan asked.

“First off, they were my friends, not my followers. Second, it’s totally on me.” J grimaced. “I went to hang with them after escaping the Romans—I really needed to smoke a bowl, you know?—and they thought I’d come back from the dead.” He made the sound of an explosion and flicked his hands out from his temples. “Blew their minds. I couldn’t bring myself to tell them the truth. So I gave them a partial truth; I told them I was the son of God and he brought me back. I thought that would make Dad happy, but no-o-o-o, he got all butt-hurt that they started worshiping me. As if I even wanted to be worshiped.”

“He’s such a dick,” Cid said. “His son nearly gets strung up by humans but he’s not mad about that; he’s upset because they started worshiping him.”

Horus rubbed at his temples and asked, “Can we get back to how the humans who drank from the Grayel aren’t immortal?”

“Oh, sorry, man. Totally got off track there. Uh, the Grayel. Yeah. The cup *is* magic. But that magic is attuned to me. Calibrated to Christ.” Jesus grinned. “Only I can wield it properly, you dig? Dad can use it, of course. Anyone who knows how it works can. But you won’t get true immortality out of it.”

“But that guy he stabbed, healed,” I said.

“Yeah, and he’ll keep healing like that for a few days, maybe a week at most. Then the power will fade away,”—Jesus waggled his fingers as he lifted them—“and he will become mortal again. The Man knows this.” Jesus looked at Lucifer.

“Which means he’s planning to act soon,” Luke concluded. “He’ll want his army as strong as possible, so he’ll attack us before the week is out.”

“How?” Azrael asked. “He’d have to draw me out of the God Realm.”

“You mean like we did to him?” Horus drawled.

“He could attack an embassy,” I said. “It doesn’t have to be the one in Texas. There’s a Fey embassy in London. Pretty close to Buckingham Palace actually.”

“We need to strike now,” Trevor said. “How many should we take with us?”

“I like Vervain’s plan,” Samael said. “We should all go.”

“Should I bring the Intare?” I asked.

“No,” Trevor said. “And I’m not calling my dad either. It’ll be easier to sneak through the palace with a smaller group.”

“Do we really have to sneak?” Luke asked.

“If we don’t, Jerry could trace away before we find him,” Azrael said.

“All right, just those of us in this room then.”

“Let me fetch some apples first.” Az stood up and shifted into his Faerie God form. “I don’t want to take any chances.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Hekate offered to open a path through the Aether for us to trace en masse but since our mass wasn't army-large and such an arrival might draw attention, we opted against it. It turned out not to matter since our tracing wall was currently wide enough to accommodate all of us at once. Plus, Horus wanted Hekate to stay at Pride Palace with Asteriana. Katie agreed to that since we didn't need her, but Persephone surprised me by asking Hekate to watch Demetera so she could join us. Hades wasn't thrilled, but he knew better than to suggest that Sephy stay behind.

“Where are we tracing to?” Pan asked as he accepted an apple slice from Azrael.

“I think we should go here—the White Drawing Room.” Torrent held up his phone and showed us an image of a room full of gilded furniture. Its ceiling alone was stunning, every inch covered in corbels and moldings that created multiple tiers.

“It looks more like a gold room to me,” I said. “Even the walls are gilded.”

“And the rug is red,” Gello said.

“I didn't name it.” Torrent rolled his eyes. “Take it up with the new King.”

“Do you mean Charles or Arthur?” Luke drawled.

Torr snorted a laugh. “King Charles. Arthur is about to get evicted.”

“Why that room?” Trevor cut in.

“It’s near the Throne Room, with only the Picture Gallery between them.”

“And my father can never resist a throne,” Jesus said. “He’ll be there.”

“All right, everyone, get a good look at the picture and eat your apples,” Thor said, sounding a little like a kindergarten teacher. “We’ll trace there cloaked and then head to the Throne Room.”

“While I speak to the reporters,” Azrael said.

Everyone but Az took a bite of apple and pocketed the rest of their slice. I did as well, but I did it as I headed outside to kiss my kids goodbye. Brevyn was waiting for me on the veranda.

“Oh, damn it!” I said when I saw him. “I should have mirrored your father and asked if he wanted to come with us.”

“No, it’s better this way,” Brevyn said and kissed my cheek. “Love you.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What do you know?”

“It’s fine, Mom.”

“Do you have your ring?” I asked. I had put the ring on a chain for him after we’d returned to Pride Palace the night before. Just in case.

“Yes, I have my ring.” He tapped his chest. “Do you have your emerald?”

“My emerald?” My hand went to my neck, where my emerald pendant hung. “I do. Why do you ask?”

“I was just trying to make a witty comeback.” He stepped back so that the flying and running mob of children could get to me.

Brevyn ran off before I finished kissing the other kids goodbye, and I didn’t have time to chase him down and demand that he tell me whatever he knew. If I needed to know, he would have said something. The fact that he was keeping quiet was actually reassuring. It meant things would go well for us.

“You guys okay with them?” I asked Samantha and Fallon, who were sitting on the veranda/drawbridge with Hekate, the babies, and a few of the Intare. “With the new chant I set in place last night and the ward tuned against Jerry, you should be safe here.”

“We’re fine, Mom,” Samantha mimicked Brevyn. “Just go save the world. Again.”

I snorted a laugh. “All right. Thanks for watching them.” I went inside and found everyone waiting in and around the tracing room. “Did Az leave?”

“Da,” Kirill said. “Ve go now.”

With Kirill’s words, the group started to move. I brought up the rear with my husbands but then we spread out along the tracing wall. As soon as we touched our palms to the wall, the Aether pulled us into its pure energy, sent us zipping to our destination, and spat us out into the White Drawing Room that was neither white nor used for drawing.

“Is everyone here?” Thor whispered as he looked around.

“I think so.” I mentally counted heads.

“Form a line, grab the shoulders of the person in front of you, and we’ll head out.”

We got in line, then went invisible. I saw the door open and then we were marching silently out of the room, past the Queen’s writing desk, a grand fireplace, and a folding screen that seemed to have no purpose other than to form a barrier between the door and the back of a couch. Above me, crystal chandeliers glittered in sunlight that streamed through the windows.

The Picture Gallery Torrent had mentioned wasn’t what I’d been expecting. I’d thought it would be rectangular and narrow, a second-floor, balcony type of deal that overlooked the throne room, similar to the galleries I’d seen in the palaces of Faerie. It was where the musicians usually sat and played their music. But this wasn’t a gallery like the sort found in medieval castles. No, this was a place where art was displayed. You’d think that as an artist, I would have expected that. It was right there in the title—*Picture* Gallery. In my defense, paintings were usually hung in the musician’s gallery too, and I’d just spent five months in Faerie.

The *Picture* Gallery was rectangular but wider even than the spacious drawing room and with an arched ceiling made of glass. The walls were covered in pale pink damask paper and paintings of various sizes hung from long wires hooked to the moldings that ran along the top of the walls. Royals did not do anything so gauche as hanging paintings on nails. Put a hole in a palace wall? God forbid. And God save the Queen. Er, I mean King. Then again, England's current King had recently been saved *from* God. They might have to come up with a new slogan.

Back to the room. Side tables and long, white couches with gold feet sat along the two longest walls, below the paintings, some of the couches with coffee tables set before them. Oddly enough, the coffee tables weren't centered in front of the couches, nor were the many area rugs centered beneath the couches. Instead, they were laid uniformly down the length of the room with at least six feet between them to show off the parquet floor. This meant that some of the coffee tables sat on rugs and others didn't. It instantly drove me crazy. But at least it was empty, not a single soldier in sight.

Thor, in the lead with Torrent, stopped suddenly. Since I was at the back, I didn't get to see the Throne Room or the reason why Thor doubled back.

"What's going on?" I whispered.

Thor dropped his invisibility. "He's not there. No one is. We may have to split up to search."

The rest of us became visible too.

"There's no need for that. We've found you."

We spun to see Jerry appear several feet away from us. As soon as he appeared, other gods dropped their invisibility glamours, but none of them were with our group. My jaw fell open as we were surrounded by large monkeys, bears, and people with feathered wings. I make the feathered wings distinction because these winged peopled weren't Angels; they were Suparnas, falcon-shifters. Which meant that the animals were shapeshifters too; the monkeys were Vanaras, and the bears were Rikshas. All of them were demigods who belonged to the Hindu Pantheon.

And they stood with the King Arthur impersonator. I was so shocked that I couldn't process what was happening. I just stood there, gaping at the Hindu demigods, trying to come up with *Wizard of Oz* jokes. I knew I'd need them if I was going to fight those monkeys. Even though they didn't have wings, they could fly. Flying monkey jokes were imperative.

"Hanuman?" Brahma stepped toward the King of the Vanaras. "What are you doing here?"

"Jehovah made us an offer—help him in exchange for power and a chance to get back at the Godhunter," Hanuman said.

"We've waited years for this," Hanuman's mother, Anjana sneered the words at me.

Hanuman was not in his monkey form but the way his snowy hair, so bright against his tan skin, swept down into sideburns looked a little simian to me. His hair was so fluffy, more like fur. Anjana, standing beside her son, had the same color hair, if not the same fluff to it, but her skin was pale. They looked quite striking together.

The Monkey King had once kidnapped the girlfriend of a friend of mine and when several of my husbands went to rescue her, he imprisoned them too. Oh, and he was also enslaving Nagas (snake-shifters) at the time. It's a long story, so I'll skip to the end; we kicked his ass. His ass and the asses of all his allies—the Vanaras, Rikshas, and Suparnas. I'd personally killed the Mother of the Suparnas, her two sons, and the King of the Rikshas. If only I'd killed Hanuman and his mother too. But they had surrendered, and we'd been merciful.

“We gave you a beat down then, and we'll do it again,” I said.

Anjana laughed scathingly. “You had a much larger army with you then, Godhunter, and we didn't have faerie magic. Now both of those things have changed.”

“Took a bite of a stolen apple, did you?” Sarasvati asked. “Well, so did we, bitch.”

“Don't you fucking speak to my mother like that!” Hanuman roared at Sarasvati.

“Don't speak to my wife like that!” Brahma, whose main weapon was his voice, roared even louder than the monkey-man and struck more than his eardrums.

The sonic waves emitting from Brahma's mouth sent Hanuman crashing backward into his monkey soldiers, who scattered, screeching and whooping, some of them even jumping into the air. Hanuman got to his feet seconds after he went down, but was far from unscathed; blood flowed from his ears, eyes, and nose. Hanuman was obviously appalled, but Brahma had still been able to hurt him. Interesting. Maybe the Wild Magic worked differently on the Monkey King. Or

maybe it worked better on Brahma. Whatever the case, Hanuman wasn't deterred; he just grinned and wiped his nose on his sleeve, leaving a crimson stripe on the white fabric.

Who wears white to a battle?

The Vanaras, Suparnas, and Rikshas all tensed, but Hanuman held up a hand to hold his army back. "Guess we're even in power now, Brahma."

"We were never even, you upstart, and we never will be, no matter how many apples you eat. I am your superior in every way. A fact that I just proved by winning first blood."

"You've always been jealous of me, Brahma. That's why you cursed me into forgetting my magic."

"No, I cursed you because you were too fucking full of yourself and had no respect for those of us who came before you."

"Enough!" Jerry shouted.

Everyone went quiet and focused on him.

"You should have brought more gods with you, Lucifer," Jerry said as he sauntered toward the Devil. "Did you really think I'd announce myself like that with only humans to back me?"

"You've gone too far, Dad," Jesus said before Luke could answer. "You'll soon have the entire Faerie Realm coming after you."

“It won’t matter. By then, I’ll be safe in my new territory.” Jerry grinned viciously as he looked at me. “The Intare Lands.”

“What the ...?” I gaped at him.

“You weren’t strong enough to hold Heaven,” Lucifer said. “What makes you think you can take my daughter’s territory?”

“It will be ripe for the taking after I kill her.” Jerry launched himself at me, his whole body going supernova with his enhanced Light.

I wasn’t expecting an attack just yet, and it was so fast that I didn’t have time to dodge. Jerry got me right in the jaw with his glowing fist and sent me arching up and backward, right into a wall. I went into a fetal position instinctively, and I think that was what saved my skull from getting pulverized. That and the Wild Magic coursing through me. Because I didn’t just hit the wall; I went through it, then sailed across the White Drawing Room and through *another* wall.

Without the Wild Magic, I’m certain my back would have broken along with most of the bones in my arms and legs. As it was, the only bone that broke was my jaw, but I’d gone through two walls, one of them an exterior wall, and it still fucking hurt. Pain punched through me, so searing that it blinded and winded me. I landed in the gardens amid the rubble, hitting the grass, then skidding a few feet.

I couldn’t move; all I could do was gasp for breath. Everything hurt. Even though most of my bones felt intact, I suspected that I had internal injuries. With so much pain

clouding my mind, I couldn't concentrate enough to reach for the Great Magics. I just lay there and listened to the battle, the sounds wonky in my ears.

After a few minutes—or maybe seconds, I'm not sure—my mind started to work again. I realized that taking me out had been a strategic move. Lucifer and I had been the strongest gods in that room, and Jerry knew what I could do when high on apple. So he'd eliminated me from the equation as soon as he could. And damn had he packed a punch. He may have been cut off from Heaven, but he wasn't cut off from his power and whatever power he had was magnified by Wild Magic.

I couldn't even twitch for a few minutes more. I had to stay there, immobile, while I listened to the roars, howls, and shouts of battle, my immortality working its hardest to fix me. Great booms vibrated through the ground, and I caught glimpses of magical flares out of the corner of my eye. Above me, the sky boiled and frothed, clouds collecting into a mass of gray that quickly turned black. It wasn't just Thor, Hanuman was also a sky god. Although, if I remembered correctly, he mainly controlled the wind. Yeah, there were a lot of jokes there, but I was in too much pain to come up with any.

Finally, with my focus returned, I bypassed the will of my Trinity Star and reached for the Nine Great Magics. In particular, the magic of Healing. Brilliant energy washed through me, so powerful that it felt as if I could see it light up my insides. My jaw and organs mended in a moment, and, pain-free, I gasped as I sat up. It felt like coming back from the dead.

The problem was, every second that I was connected to the Great Nine meant pushing against the will of my star. And that took *a lot* of Wild Magic. And the healing I needed took *a*

lot of the Great Magic of Healing. The apple's power burnt out seconds after my gasp.

It was a good thing Azrael had insisted on everyone taking extra slices of apple with them.

“Oh, you evil motherfucker,” I muttered as I stood up, so angry that I was beyond cute cursing. “You're after my territory, eh?”

Jerry would have to kill me before he could step foot in my territory, but even then, he'd have to fight Kirill and the Intare before he could claim it. Them and all of our allies. Jerry must have known that, so he was either overly confident because of his new friends or it was a diversion of some kind. I was betting on the former.

I reached into my pocket for my backup apple slice. “What the hell?” I shoved my hand into another pocket. I patted my battle vest. “Fuck!” I spun, searching the lawn, but the apple wasn't there. I must have lost it on my way through Buckingham Palace's walls. And I had just used up my Wild Magic. “Fuck!”

Despite my lack of apple, I headed for the palace, but before I could make it two feet, the fight came to me. An entire wall blew outward—stone, wood, and metal flying like shrapnel—and I dove for the ground. As debris pelted the grass around me, I peered up, past the shield of my arm, and saw Angels bursting out of the building like doves from a magician's box. Below them tumbled my husbands and friends, followed by our enemies.

Holy fuck, we were losing!

The Devil himself was being driven back by the sheer numbers of Jerry's army. And they weren't giving anyone time to trace away. My people were firing magic at the Hindu gods even as they stumbled to their feet. Re, Horus, Teharon, Huitzilopochtli, and Viper used the heat of the Sun, or star in Viper's case. Stars are really just suns after all. They sent streams of heat blasting at the tide of monkeys, bears, and winged people. That heat was strong enough to vaporize, and after the damage Brahma had dealt Hanuman, it should have been enough. But their attacks hit invisible barriers, possibly wind, but I wasn't sure. With Wild Magic pumping through them, the Hindu shifters were capable of anything.

There were no rules when Wild Magic was involved. I assumed that it only enhanced what a god had, but the magic hadn't been used enough for that to be a certainty. Gods could potentially gain elemental power or even blend it with their magic. Whatever the case, launching heat at the Hindus didn't seem to work. Even the Angels were having a problem landing a hit.

And we had three of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse with us.

Ira was faring better than the others, but famine didn't do much to a god. The apple made him strong enough to weaken them briefly, emaciating monkeys to mere bones and bears to floppy sacks of fur, but then they'd fill out and recover seconds later. Samuel's power was centered around making men fight, and that was kinda done already, so he was down to using his sword. Then there was Thad, who technically had the power to conquer any enemy, but that wasn't working out so well for him.

Eztli, Blue's wife, was the Goddess of the Blood Moon. Where I had power over water, she had power over blood—the perfect magic for a vampire. Using it, she fared a

bit better than her husband and was able to summon blood forth from the eyes, ears, and noses of our enemies, but that only slowed them a little. And as far as Pan, his magic didn't seem to have any effect at all.

We had a lot of fire users in our group, myself included, but Hades controlled a fire that came from the deepest part of the Greek Underworld. And that seemed to make a small difference. He actually managed to burn his targets, bringing the dark flames up from beneath their feet to bypass their shields. Plumes of smoke rose from the shrieking bodies of his targets in a very satisfying way. But again, they didn't stay down for long. Their blackened skin would go red, then pink, before healing entirely. Meanwhile, Thor reached for the sky and brought down bolt after bolt of lightning. Unfortunately, he was having the same problem as the sun gods—the lightning glanced off of whatever that barrier was.

Morpheus, who fought in the sky beside his girlfriend, Saraqael, was weaving dreams, sending them out to confuse and distract, but Jerry's army was quickly growing wise to his tricks. Then there was Persephone, who used the outdoors to her advantage. She summoned vines from the soil that were large enough for giants to climb and wound them around her opponents. She managed to hold a few of them still long enough for others to behead them.

Those in our group who used physical weapons did the most damage. Gods like Artemis with her bow, Torrent with my Wolverine gloves, and Finn with his sword. Torr especially did well. He had trained with the Intare but his greatest advantage was his absorption of videos he found online. Torrent had become an expert in every style of hand-to-hand combat and used them all seamlessly so that he flowed over the battlefield, twirling, jumping, and striking like a character out of a video game. The shapeshifters like Trevor, Odin, and Kirill did all right too. They were able to push past the barriers and land some blows. But that meant getting up close and

personal with the enemy and giving them a chance to strike back.

The only upside was that our group was just as hard to hurt as theirs. That would have evened things out if our numbers matched. But the Hindu shapeshifters had that advantage, and I knew that they'd press it into a win. We had to retreat.

“Retreat!” I shouted. “Everyone, trace!”

But as I mentioned earlier, our enemies kept everyone engaged and unable to trace. Everyone but me, and there was no way I'd leave without them.

Then King Arthur landed in front of me.

Jerry didn't have wings, but, as was the case with me when I was high on apple, he didn't need them to fly. He grinned viciously as he grabbed my throat and lifted me off the ground.

“I'm going to kill you now, Godhunter,” Jerry said. “You and all your husbands and then all your friends. When you're dead, your territory will be open for a god to claim.” He leaned in while I strangled. “But with Lucifer dead, I could regain Heaven. Decisions, decisions.”

I reached for the Trinity Star, but it didn't even spark, not so much as a twinkle. I started to summon my dragon, but with Jerry's tight hold on my throat and his super-strength, shifting could lead to my decapitation. Out of desperation, I called on Love, and the butterflies surged forward.

Jerry just laughed in my face. “Pathetic. Your whore tricks won’t work on me.”

It had been a long time since I’d felt so powerless. I was the Queen of the Fire Kingdom, the Goddess of the Intare, and the fucking Godhunter! I had a star formed of magic trinities inside my chest. I had nearly ruled the world once. And yet this drunkard god was going to defeat me with a bite of apple grown in my husband’s orchard? No, this couldn’t be possible.

“Vervain!” I heard several men shout.

There were roars and howls, but I knew none of them would reach me in time. I felt the bones in my neck snap as my feet kicked open air. Being short sucks sometimes. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hanuman grow to the size of a parade float and start snatching Angels out of the sky. Holy shit. This was it. The end of me. The end of all of us. Jerry was going to win.

No, wait. I had one last trick up my sleeve. A power I hadn’t used in a long time. One I’d nearly forgotten about even though the tool I used with it hung around my neck. And Brevyn had reminded me of it. Oh, that little rascal!

My hand was already wrapped around Jerry’s wrist so it took only a second for me to connect with his magic. My son hadn’t received his Borrowing magic by chance; it was inherited from me. Borrowing was a new magic, one that had evolved from my ability to claim the magic inside gods. God magic came from human belief, making it more ours than theirs. But most humans can’t hold god magic; it would kill their mortal bodies. As a human and a goddess, I could hold *and* wield it. That being said, I had three magics inside me already and couldn’t take anymore without risking a deadly

burnout. But the emerald I wore—a gift from Odin—helped me get around that. It could temporarily hold god magic.

With mental fingers, I grabbed the bright mass of magic inside Jerry, the burning ball of creation that took the shape of a cross in my mind. I gripped it tightly, then pulled. Jerry didn't notice the draw at first. He was too high on apple and the victory he was so close to achieving.

Then his grip weakened enough for me to gasp a breath through my damaged throat.

I pulled harder, using every ounce of my mental strength. Swirling lights of blue, green, yellow, and red encased the cross. The Wild Magic. Sure, why not? I'd take that too. I tried to readjust my grip to include it, but it just slipped away. Okay, never mind, I guess I couldn't take that. Even though I was Fey, it wasn't mine to claim. It was wild and free, rooting in whoever accepted it first. It would stay in Jerry until it burned itself out. Oh, well. I'd have to satisfy myself with his Light.

Jerry dropped me.

It wouldn't have been a problem except that I still had a broken neck. I fell to the ground as he dropped to his knees, my head lolling painfully. If I could have screamed, I would have.

“You bitch,” he whispered. “What are you doing to me?”

I summoned my fire. Not to harm him but rather heal me. As it surged up my throat, my bones mended and clicked back into place, the fire working faster than my immortality.

As soon as my neck was healed, I rolled to my knees and grabbed Jehovah's jaw, increasing the strength of our connection.

Finally able to speak, I growled, "I'm taking it all back, asshole! Every fucking prayer and ounce of praise ever given to you. Everything you don't deserve."

"No!" He shoved me away with a blast of air, sending me sliding far enough back to give him a chance to gain his feet and stumble away. "It doesn't matter," he hissed. "You will still lose. Look around you, Godhunter. The Devil is on his knees!"

My gaze followed Jerry's and sure enough, there was Luke, on his knees, fighting off a mountain of bears, his wings bent beneath their weight. Just as I'd feared, the sheer numbers of Jerry's forces would win in the end.

"Father, please!" Jesus shouted. He'd been overpowered by Suparnas, but instead of killing him, they were dragging him toward the palace.

Jerry ignored his son.

"Trace, Vervain!" Odin, in dragon form, roared. Then he angled his head to bite a flying monkey and tear it off his back.

Six more took its place.

"The fuck I will." I shifted into my weredragon body—claws, wings, scales, and horns sprouting from me in seconds while I grew in bulk and height. I tossed back my mane of

hair, the starlight stripe sparking, and crouched into a battle stance. At my throat, the emerald winked at Jerry as if taunting him.

“Trace home and get help!” Trevor shouted at me.

Damn. I hadn't thought of that. Duh.

But just as I prepared to trace and Jerry started to run toward me, a circle of darkness opened behind me and all Hell broke loose. Literally. The darkness spat out the Horde of Hell and at the head of the Demon Army flew two dragons—one fully beast and the other a faerie king. On the beast's back rode the Goddess of the Crossroads, but not for long. Hekate leapt off Salem and stood beside the pathway she had opened, her hands lifted to hold it open.

The Hindu shapeshifters froze when they saw the Demons, the entire Horde enhanced with apple and frothing for the fight. But keeping your opponents engaged meant that you were equally occupied, and they weren't able to trace. Fire burst from dragon mouths and the hands of Demons while leathery wings beat the air, but their claws, teeth, and horns did the most damage.

With roars of delight, Hell came to Earth, and with it, hot on its heels as it were, came Heaven. Angels shot out after the Demons, blessed steel shining with holy light and justice. And behind them came my lions. Together, the Angels, Demons, and Intare descended on the Hindu shapeshifters, turning the tide of battle in a heartbeat. Cries of mercy suddenly filled the air, but they quickly turned into gurgling screams. The blood of gods turned the royal gardens red. Yes, even the roses.

Where was Alice when you needed her?

“Vervain!” Arach roared.

“Here!” I shifted into a full dragon, the chain of my emerald magically growing with me, and grinned at my husband. “Damn, baby, am I glad to see you.”

The blood-red dragon scowled at me. “We need to talk, Wife.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just hold on a second while I kill this motherfucker.” I turned to bite off Jerry’s head but ended up roaring in fury.

Jehovah was gone. Again.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Hanuman, his mother, and his allies were dead. I hoped that some of the Suparnas, Vanaras, and Rikshas had refused Hanuman's call and stayed out of the battle. If they hadn't, we had just wiped out three races of demigods. But I didn't think about it too long. Frankly, I had other things to worry about.

"What the fuck?" Azrael exclaimed as he landed on the gory grass in his Faerie God form. His wings lifted higher so they wouldn't get messy. "The King's Guard is outside the gates, acting as if they're protecting the palace while trying to ignore the horrendous sounds coming from back here."

"Yeah, thanks for coming to help out," Viper said.

"I had to handle the reporters. I came as soon as I could."

I thought about it. Time is odd during a battle. What feels like hours can be mere minutes and vice versa. It probably hadn't been that long. "It's all right, Az. Hekate brought the Horde, the Host, and the dragons."

I grinned at my husband and Salem, then shifted into my weredragon body. I would have gone back to human but that would have meant getting naked. At least this way, my naughty bits were covered in scales.

"How did you know we needed you?" Horus asked his wife."

"Brevyn," Hekate said. "He told me to go to Shehaquim and summon the Angels and Demons, then wait

for his father to appear. Arach traced in and said I needed to open a path to the gardens of Buckingham Palace.” She glanced at Salem, then added, “Salem decided to tag along.”

“It’s been ages since I’ve been to a war,” Salem said. “Thanks for having me.”

“Anytime, buddy,” I said with a grin.

“You should have mirrored me sooner, Vervain,” Arach snarled.

“Oh, it’s Vervain, not A Thaisce, eh? I must really be in trouble.”

Smoke seeped out of Arach’s left nostril.

I held up my hands defensively. “Brevyn told me that he had to be here. And he was right. He saved us. All of us.”

Arach narrowed his great dragon eyes at me. “We’ll speak more about this later.”

“Yeah, all right,” I grumbled.

“Where is Jehovah? I need to see his body.” Samael came striding through the carnage with his wife and daughter flanking him. All three of them looked terrifying.

“About that ...” I winced.

“You had him, Vervain!” Samael pointed at me. “I saw you with him.”

“I did. Then they appeared, and I got distracted.” I waved a clawed hand at the Demons.

“Enough of this. Jehovah dies today!” Samael shimmered, a haze forming over his body.

Gello and Lilith backed away, both of them grinning viciously as they watched the Angel. The shape within the haze condensed, then grew, Samael’s body writhing and lengthening. Out of the dispersing fog, a new form rose, that of a giant snake. But this was no ordinary snake. In addition to being monstrous, most of the scales on its body had eyes embedded in them. Yes, eyes. The eyes were pale green with slit pupils, just like Samael’s eyes in his Angel form, but their lids were thick, covered in tiny scales, and had no lashes. Thank goodness; I think lashes would have been a tad much. Samael reared up, the eyes on his belly closing before they came in contact with the ground.

“Fuck, yeah!” Viper whooped. “Another snake god!”

“What’s with the eyes?” Pan whispered.

“I don’t know, but they’re fucking creepy,” Horus whispered back.

“Where are you, you bastard?” Samael’s voice came out of the fanged mouth. Those creepy eyes opened wide and started to glow. “He’s still here!”

Samael slithered over corpses and debris, into the palace.

“Get him, Daddy!” Gello shouted gleefully and chased after Samael.

The rest of us looked at each other. Arach shifted into his weredragon form, and Odin went werewolf, then we all ran after the giant snake. All but Salem, who was too large to fit in the palace, even with walls missing.

“Uh, I’ll just wait here,” Salem called after us.

Samael shot through Buckingham Palace, across the quad, then through the East Front. When he burst out of the grand doors, the crowd of reporters screamed even as their cameramen focused on him. On him and Jerry.

Jerry waited in the courtyard before the palace, surrounded by his human soldiers. The King’s Guard aimed their rifles at Samael. The rest of us surged out around him, completely unconcerned. Bullets couldn’t hurt us. But guns weren’t the real weapons Jerry was using.

It was the Press.

The reporters rallied and every microphone there pointed in our direction, doubtless streaming live all over the world. Azrael waved a hand toward them, and the cameras sparked, then smoked. Equipment fell to the ground, useless, but the damage had been done. The first images of Angels and Demons had been recorded by humans.

“Hold!” Azrael shot into the sky between our forces.

Samael came to a stop and hissed up at my husband.

“Give me five minutes,” Az said to Samael. Then, to Jerry, “Stand down, Impostor. Surrender, and we will be merciful.”

“Not happening. You’ll have to fight these men to get to me, Azrael. And even though you’ve wrecked their cameras, there are witnesses here. They will see your wicked acts.”

“No, they won’t. Because I will not hurt these humans.” Azrael lifted his hand, and the rifles flew away from the guards.

The guards flinched and cried out, but then rallied and pulled their swords.

“He has deceived you,” Azrael said to them. “The healing he has given you is temporary. You are not immortal. Now please, stand aside. This is not your fight.”

The guards lifted their swords.

Azrael shook his head as he brought his hands together. When he drew them apart, the humans rolled away like tumbleweeds, their swords clattering out of their hands. The damn reporters took out notepads and started scribbling.

“This is a truly desperate act. Have you run out of backup plans already?” Azrael landed before Jerry. Then he whispered, “Surrender, Jehovah. Your son should not have to witness your death.”

“I am God Almighty!” Jerry roared. “I do not surrender.”

“God Almighty?” A new Angel landed before Jerry—buff, blond, and handsome. “You’re pathetic.”

Jerry jerked back. “Abaddon?”

Abaddon, the Destroyer, Angel of the Abyss, drew his sword and pointed it at Jerry’s throat. “Oh, you remember me. That’s nice. I thought you’d forgotten all about me after tossing me to Earth to guard a pit of locusts.”

“I never forgot about you. I sent you there because I believed that you were the only one who could—”

“Nope!” Abaddon cut him off. “I’m not falling for your lies, Jehovah. I saw you on television, spouting nonsense about being King Arthur. I was going to stay out of it, but then I saw Azrael. I watched him stand up to you, and I knew I couldn’t let him face you alone.”

“Abaddon, I—”

“No!” Abaddon roared, his voice shimmering through the air with power. “I killed them. Did you even know? I sent them to their death because it was kinder than forcing them back into the Abyss.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“The locusts!”

“The locusts?” Jerry stared at Abaddon in bafflement. “So what?”

“So what? So what?!” Abaddon jabbed his sword into Jerry’s chest, just deep enough to make him bleed. “They were my wards. My soldiers. They knew nothing but darkness and hatred.”

Jerry lifted his chin even as blood soaked his shirt. “I didn’t create the locusts or the Abyss.”

“No, but you allowed them to exist. You could have destroyed them and put them out of their misery before they truly suffered. But instead, you locked them in the Abyss and sent me to guard them. You stole my life!”

“Not just yours, Brother,” Samael said as he slithered up beside Abaddon.

Abaddon didn’t even blink at Samael’s appearance. “He’s hurt us all.”

“Yes, he has. And it’s time for him to see all the pain he has caused. Let me show him, Abaddon.”

Abaddon stared at Samael for a long moment, then dropped his sword and stood back.

Samael instantly reared up, over Jerry. “You have betrayed your people over and over again, Jehovah. I have borne witness to it all and now, you shall see it as I have. The unfiltered truth.”

Samael's eyes began to glow. As they did, so did Jerry's. As he stared blankly ahead, his arms went limp, his body twitched, and his jaw fell open. The twitching turned to shudders, then Jerry gasped. Finally, he screamed.

"Father!" Jesus ran for Jerry, but Luke grabbed him and held him back.

"This is justice," Luke said somberly. "He must face everything he's done. Samael will show it to him truthfully; it's impossible for his eyes to lie."

Jesus slumped in the Devil's arms.

But then Jerry shot to his feet with a great roar and flung his arms out. The light in his eyes went out as his hands filled with fire. "Enough!"

Jerry raised his hands as he set his furious stare on Samael. But before he could launch his elemental attack, the giant snake shot forward and struck. Fangs bit deep, a massive jaw closed, and a snap was followed by a horrible sucking sound. Samael spat out Jerry's head. Jerry's body crumpled to the ground as his head rolled over to Abaddon and came to a stop facing upward, eyes rounded and lips slack.

The crowd of reporters finally started to flee in a screaming, panicked swarm. As they did, several Angels took to the sky and flew after them.

"They're not going to hurt the humans are they?" I asked Cid, who stood nearby.

“Probably not.” Cid, in his Demon form, grimaced, looking diabolical.

“He’s dead,” Jesus whispered and went to stand before his father’s head. “He’s really dead.”

“Yes,” Abaddon said. “He’s dead at last. Maybe now I can get some sleep.”

“Brother.” Azrael landed beside Jesus and put an arm around his shoulders. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Jesus stepped away from Az. “His hatred and evil heart have led him to this end.” He looked from Abaddon to Samael, who had crumpled into a coil, every one of his eyes weeping. “I’ve always known there was only one person who could kill my father. Not me, nor Lucifer, but you, Samael, the Wrath of God. You’ve always been his greatest weakness, the monster he created to embody sin.”

“Don’t call my father a monster!” Gello snarled.

“Easy now, Demon-lady; I meant it as a compliment. Humans believe—as my father did—that they created monsters to embody evil. But the truth is that monsters represent the parts of people that they’re too scared to embrace. The wildness and ferocity. Things that would get them cast out of their tribes. Things that make them different. Being a monster means staying true to yourself. It takes bravery and conviction, so much of both that many of us would fall short and give up. All gods are a bit monstrous, but not all of us are true monsters, you dig? True monsters are the very best of us.”

I smiled even as a tear slid down my cheek. The J-man was speaking my language. I'm a sucker for monsters. Probably because I am one.

Jesus went to Samael and laid a hand on his serpent head. "You are free now, my friend. You have freed us all. Be at peace."

A gentle glow flowed from Jesus to Samael, sinking past the scales and eyes. With a dry rustle, the snake shifted, becoming a winged man, huddled in a crouch. But then, Samael stood up, his black wings curling around his body to cover his lower half, and the pale green script on his cheek sparked.

Jesus stepped back, a look of peace on his face.

In a booming voice, Samael declared, "I am the Wrath of God no longer!"

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Lucifer sent Jesus to Heaven with the Archangels and Jehovah's body while the rest of us started cleaning the palace, trying to set it as much back to rights as we could. A lot of artwork couldn't be saved and the plaster would have to be redone, but our apple-enhanced magic made quick work of putting things into orderly piles and repairing as much of the structure as was possible without masons and carpenters. We were almost done when a group of Angels strode up to Azrael.

“We've brought the reporters back,” one of the Angels said. “We were able to convince them that this was a battle between faeries and you were protecting them and trying to save them from the King Arthur impostor. Will you speak with them?”

“Yes, of course.” Azrael, still in his Faerie God form, started off with them.

“I'm going with you.” I fell into step beside him.

“That's not necessary, Carus.” Az lifted my clawed hand and kissed its golden scales. “I'll just tell them that we're all faeries. The Angels are Air-Sidhe and the Demons are from the Earth Kingdom. After the incident with the Filipino Gods in Texas, they'll be relieved that they aren't more monsters.”

“And I need to speak with you, Vervain,” Arach said.

My Fey husband had used his dragon form to help with the clean-up, but now he was in his weredragon body, one similar to mine but with red scales instead of gold. Azrael widened his eyes at Arach—this wasn't a form he took often and it was a striking look. But Arach didn't even glance at Az,

his furious, yellow, dragon eyes were locked on me and his long tail whipped around his legs as if searching for a victim. Yeah, he was pissed.

“Fine,” I said to Arach. To Az, I added, “Be sure to tell them that the impostor is dead.”

“I will.”

Arach didn't say anything. He just grabbed my hand and dragged me into the Picture Gallery, then into another room near the end of the hall. I glanced around the room as Arach closed the door. A bed dressed in white silk stood to my left with a teester above its padded headboard, pale blue silk trailing from it. A couch sat at the end of the bed and to the right of it, a dressing table was set in front of the window.

“Go figure you'd find a bedroom here.” I rolled my eyes as I turned around.

Arach had just finished locking the door. I didn't expect him to be suddenly in front of me, much less tackle me onto the bed. I lay on the silk, staring up at his bared teeth in shock as his hands went to my wrists and pushed them down beside my head.

“Banish your wings,” he said.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I growled.

“Put them away, Vervain!”

“Fine!” My wings vanished, allowing Arach to press my hands into the bed.

“You promised me!” he roared. “You swore to me that you would summon me if you went to war.”

“Arach, I—”

He snapped his teeth at me.

Holy shit!

“For fire’s sake, will you calm down? I already told you why—”

“You broke your promise!”

“I’m sorry!”

“Show me,” his voice dropped into a growl. “Show me now, Vervain. Now!”

What the fudge brownies was this?

“Show you?” I asked. “What do you—” His cock slid free of its scaled covering, hardening as it moved over the shield that guarded my sex. “Oh.”

You’d think scales would be a detriment to sex, but if you touched them in the right way, stroking instead of stabbing, they conveyed sensation deliciously. That one caress of his shaft set me to trembling.

A low rumble rolled up Arach's throat.

I didn't try to explain why I hadn't mirrored him. I'd already given him a brief explanation, and Arach's rational mind knew that I wasn't to blame. He probably even thought that I'd done the right thing. But his dragon still had to be appeased. The beast didn't understand things like extenuating circumstances. All it knew was that its mate had done it wrong, and it wanted an apology—a sexual one. Words just wouldn't cut it with this dragon.

The human side of me instantly thought of oral sex or riding Arach until his eyes rolled back in his head, but the dragon in me knew what he needed. Dragons don't apologize to their mates by taking control of sex, they apologize by going against their nature and submitting.

So I spread my legs and curled my tail between them, pressing the point into the seam of my sex-shield to open it and bare the pink flesh beyond.

Arach sucked in a deep breath as he closed his eyes. His whole body shook, tail lashing behind him and claws digging into the pristine silk of the bedding. Oh well, in light of all the damage we'd done to the palace, the bedding was the least of it. With rocking hips, Arach rubbed his cock against the flesh I'd bared, slicking himself as he drew more desire from me. Then, with a rolling, animalistic maneuver, he bent his head, met my stare, and slammed his cock into me.

I held myself still as my husband went wild above me, thrusting so powerfully that the bed shook, creaked, and slammed into the wall. Silk shredded to either side of my head as Arach's deadly claws sank past the bedding, into the mattress, pinning me in place. I bent my knees and lifted my

legs out to the sides as much as I could, opening myself to him.

Arach snarled and swung his head, his swooping horns slicing the air. He was grunting and growling, lost to his beast, but my yielding position helped, and he didn't set the bed aflame, as I feared he might. He did, however, bring the tapered tip of his tail to my mouth to press it through my lips. It slid over my tongue and pulled back. The width of my thumb and covered in slick scales, that tail tip slid in and out, mimicking the movement of Arach's hips. I obligingly sucked at it and that seemed to calm him further.

Watching me avidly, breath ragged and teeth bared, Arach nearly choked me with his tail, but I just kept still. Honestly, I was into it. He looked amazing—the Dragon King gone savage—and even my dragon didn't mind when he went alpha like this. Okay, she loved it. Not the submitting part but the display of strength, aggression, and lust. Plus, it felt as amazing as Arach looked. His cock pulsed inside me, hot and thick, its tip more spear-shaped in this form. Almost a fleshy barb, its rim clung to the walls of my sex in the best way possible, so that every movement of Arach's hips, be it forward or back, sent ecstasy rippling through me.

As Arach bent over me, his tongue flicked out, its tip tapering to a point, and he flicked that tapered end over my breast, right where my nipple lay beneath the scales. I shrieked around his tail. That hard length slipped out of my mouth as his cock slid out of my sex, and Arach roughly flipped me over. I scrambled onto my hands and knees, quickly getting into position. He grunted in approval, grabbed my ass, shoved it open, and slammed into my sex from behind. I had just gotten a firm hold of the bedding when the wet tip of his tail pressed against that other place.

I gave another cry of delight as it slid in, then I pressed back to take more of him. Arach snarled something I couldn't make out, grabbed my hips, and started a slower but deeper thrusting. His claws clicked on my scales, sending zings of pleasure through me, and he blew a stream of fire up my back that added another layer of erotic deliciousness. I wanted to lift my head and look back at him, but this was supposed to be an apology. So I lowered my face to the mattress, lifting my rear a little more.

“You will never do that again!” Arach snarled. “You endangered yourself and therefore me and therefore the entire Fire Kingdom.”

“I know, I'm sorry,” I mumbled into the bedding, even though I wasn't. This wasn't the time for reasonable explanations.

He grabbed one of my horns and pulled my head back, bringing me up onto my hands. “Look at me!”

I turned my head to look at him. Is it wrong that seeing him furious—his glossy hips pounding against mine, his muscles bulging beneath the scales, and his tail sliding into me in time with his cock—nearly sent me into orgasm? A happy plume of smoke drifted out of my mouth as I sighed. Even the way his wings beat the air was sexy.

Arach's gaze softened infinitesimally when he saw that. “Are you enjoying this? Do you like my cock and tail inside you at the same time?”

“Of course, I do.” I grinned at him. “And yeah, I'm enjoying this. You're smokin' hot, babe.”

A snorted laugh escaped Arach before he could control himself. “This is not about your pleasure. It’s about atonement.”

“You’re the one who wanted sex as an apology. It’s not my fault that there’s no way for me to not enjoy sex with you.”

His stern expression cracked again. “I want you to enjoy it, just not so damn much.”

“That’s why I had my head down, but then you went and pulled on my horn.”

“By the flame,” Arach growled and shoved my head back down.

I silently laughed as Arach’s hands went back to my hips, and he began to thrust again. Rapidly. The power and depth of his slamming shaft banished my humor, and pleasure came to the forefront again, tickling up from my sex and over my breasts. I bucked back against Arach, taking as much of him as I could, then bent my head and blew flames over our naughty bits. The rapture was so great that I nearly forgot to suck those flames back in before the bed could catch fire. As it was, the silk got charred and ash rose in a delicate cloud as Arach gave one final slam, his hips locking against me as he threw his head back and roared.

I cried out with Arach, but his release drowned mine, the echoes of it vibrating through the bed and doubtless the entire palace. Did I care that everyone would know what we’d been up to? Hell, no. If they said anything, I’d just smile. In fact, I probably wouldn’t stop smiling for a while.

Arach shifted as he crumpled over me, crimson scales sliding back into pale skin and ebony horns retracting. I followed his lead and returned to my human body.

“Why?” Arach panted as he pulled me into his arms, nestling me against his chest. “Why did you break your promise?”

“I already told you why.”

“Say it again. I want to hear all of it.”

“Brevyn told me that he had to be here. He hinted that someone would die if he went back. Honestly, I thought it was you. I thought you were going to die in the battle. But it wasn’t you. It would have been Vero and me who died.”

“What?” Arach clutched me tighter.

“Jerry used the magic from a fey apple to amplify his power and control one of the Archangels on our side—the Angel of Children. He sent Zachariel to abduct one of my kids. Brevyn saw that it would be Vero and that I would die trying to save him. But he knew that if he went, he could save all of us. So, he waited for Zachariel by the tracing room and went with him willingly.”

“By the Flame,” Arach whispered.

“Yeah.” I snuggled closer. “Jerry intended to use Brevyn to force us to hand over the other Archangels and surrender, but Brevyn borrowed Jerry’s magic and used it to free the entire Host from their bonds to Jerry. Once they were freed, they realized that Jerry had been controlling them for

centuries, including that very battle. They instantly abandoned him, and he had to retreat.”

“That was the first battle?”

“Yeah.” I angled my head to look up at him. “Did Brevyn tell you there was more than one battle?”

“No, I overheard one of the Demons while we were waiting for Hekate to open a path. Why didn’t you summon me for this battle?”

“It happened too fast. I didn’t even think about it until I was about to leave. I was saying goodbye to the kids and mentioned to Brevyn that I should have mirrored you. He said it was better this way. Then he asked if I was wearing my emerald. If he hadn’t, I don’t think I would have thought to use it against Jerry, even though I was wearing it. Or it may have occurred to me too late. Whatever the case, I think he saved my life again today.”

“What?” Arach sat up, taking me with him.

“He didn’t tell you any of this when he went back?”

“No, Brevyn returned and before I could ask him anything, he handed me the ring and gave me a date, time, and place to focus it. He said that Hekate would be waiting for me with an army, and I had to tell her to open a path to Buckingham Palace’s gardens. He said people would die if I didn’t act quickly. So, I didn’t waste time on questions. I followed his instructions and found Hekate in Shehaquim with the army, just as Brevyn said. I assumed that you had sent him back for me, but then I heard that Demon say something about

this being the second battle. I knew then that you had gone to war without me.”

“That little chicken,” I muttered. “Brev could have taken the time to explain it to you. You were coming back in time; there wasn’t a rush.”

“Oh. Right. That didn’t occur to me.” Arach scowled. “That was a bit cowardly of him.” Then his expression softened. “But he saved your life twice. You and Vero. I can forgive a lot for that.”

“So you’re not angry with me?”

“No. And I’m sorry I was so harsh with you.”

“I’m not.” I grinned wickedly. “I’m looking forward to the next time I piss you off.”

“That’s a disgusting saying.” He grimaced but also pulled me in against his side and laid back on the sooty sheets with me.

I shook my head at the mess. “This burnt bed is really going to confuse the humans.”

“An entire wall is missing, I don’t think the bed will matter.”

“A missing wall and broken furniture make sense for the site of a battle. But a burned and shredded bed? Not so much.”

Arach slid a naughty look my way. “Shall we destroy it further?”

That bed didn't stand a chance.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

That night, there was a funeral for Jehovah in Heaven. As horrible as he'd been, he was still one of the founders of the pantheon, a onetime friend to many, and a father. He deserved a proper burial.

Jesus led the procession through Araboth, the Seventh Heaven. Jehovah's body floated before him wrapped in linen, and all the Angels and Demons walked solemnly behind them. My husbands and I were the only outsiders allowed to attend the burial.

We were near the gates, as far from the Throne of God as we could get while remaining in the city. Jesus turned down a gold street that ran between the back side of buildings and the city wall. At the end of the street, the gold stones trickled into a grass path that led through a grove of trees. Past the ring of trees there was a cemetery, and in the cemetery were many fresh graves.

I knew I had played a large part in killing the sacred squadrons Jerry had sent to the Golden Citadel, but knowing that and seeing their gravestones adorned with flowers were two different things. Especially now that I knew those Angels had been operating under Jerry's magical compulsion. I looked away from the bouquets, facing forward to focus on Jesus's back. There was nothing I could do for them now.

We stopped at a spot in the center of the cemetery where a marble statue of Jehovah stood over an empty grave. The likeness was spot-on and a bit eerie. The craftsman had put Jerry in robes, making him look more like the myth than the man, with his arms a little forward but pointed down, palms up, as if to say, "Here I lie. Take a good look, everyone."

Lucifer, Jesus, Azrael, and Samael moved to surround Jehovah's body. With graceful motions of their hands, they moved the shrouded corpse together, floating it forward, then gently down into the grave. Meanwhile, the massive crowd of Angels and Demons gathered around as best they could.

Jesus went to stand before the statue. "My father had high hopes for this pantheon. Big dreams. They didn't come to pass as he expected, but he did make us great. He gave those of you who left Atlantis a new life and made a home for those who came after." He paused to take a deep breath and exhale slowly. "I loved him. Jehovah was my father, and I have dear memories of him from my younger days. I won't speak about his later years or the friends he lost. Today is a day to forgive and let go. To acknowledge the man Jehovah once was and tried to be while we move forward from his failings. Today, we mourn the passing of our King so that we may crown a new one. We say thank you and goodbye." Instead of using magic, he went to the pile of dirt set to one side of the grave and took a handful. "Dust to dust." Jesus dropped the dirt into the grave. "Goodbye, Father. I hope you're finally at peace."

One by one, we went forward and laid our handful of dirt over Jerry. My husbands and I were among the first, and as soon as we were done, we left with Jesus, moving away from the grave so that the thousands of Angels and Demons could move forward and pay their respects. There would be no need for shovels to bury Jehovah. It would be done one handful at a time.

That was something at least. But it was all Jerry would get. There would be no reception. No drinks or feasting. Not on his behalf, at least. We were going straight from the graveyard to the Throne of Heaven where the next king would be crowned.

With the long line to lay the last king to rest, Jesus had plenty of time to prepare for his coronation. He led us through the city—strewn with celebratory decorations—to his father’s palace, now his home. We silently strode down the shining hallways, past the inner garden where Jesus had built a temple for the Grayel, and then into the main living quarters.

Most of those who went with Jesus, including the Archangels who would be his honor guard at the coronation, headed into the all-white living room to wait for him to prepare, but I followed him to the master bedroom.

“Vervain?” Jesus paused at the door and looked over his shoulder at me.

“I have a gift for you.”

“A gift?”

“Yes. Well, an offer.” I waved at the open door. “May I?”

“Certainly.” He waved me in ahead of him.

The room was sparse, with just a four-poster bed, but that bed was impressive. The frame—if you can call something with columns and a tiered roof a frame—was made of white marble veined in gold. Sky blue linens and a velvet quilt embroidered with stars dressed the mattress and matching silk curtains hung from the ornate top. Beautiful, but again, that was all there was.

I looked around the vast space. Across the hardwood floor, polished to a golden sheen, a pair of balcony doors stood

open, allowing a sweet-smelling breeze to flow in and billow the bed curtains. “Did you have it gutted?”

“Yes,” he said. “I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep with all of his things around me, and the Cherubim offered to remove them. There hasn’t been time for more than replacing the bed, but I did get the Grayel settled and bring in some of my clothes.” He waved toward an open doorway and the dressing room beyond. “They made me a coronation robe to wear.”

I touched his arm. “Are you all right? You don’t sound like yourself.”

“Well, I can’t be that man anymore,” he said sadly. “I have to be *the* Man now, the Authority.” He grimaced. “The Establishment. Everything I have fought against for centuries.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I have to rule Heaven now. I have to grow up.”

I made a face. “I love your mom, but she’s wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, I don’t want to evaluate why your mom said what she did; I know she has your best interests at heart. But you don’t have to conform to any standard to be a king. Being in charge means that you can be whoever you want to be, *J-man*.” I nudged his shoulder. “All the Heavens are looking forward to a new king, not a new version of Jerry.”

“But a king must be dignified.”

“You are dignified. You don’t have to talk and dress like your father to be respected and you don’t have to give up the things you love to be responsible. You have always been there for the people who needed you. The Host knows that. They all love you, J. They love you *just as you are*. Don’t disappoint them by changing.”

“But Mom ...”

“Your mother wants you to be happy. I think she’ll realize her mistake soon enough. But, frankly, what she thinks doesn’t matter. You are going to be King. This is your life and your kingdom. Do it your way, Jesus. I have absolute faith in you.”

Jesus blinked, then grinned. “I can be myself?”

“I think you need to. Heaven is relying on it. And how bogus would it be if you were suddenly this stooge of a king?”

“You’re right! I can’t be King Downer. That would harsh my mellow big time.”

“There you are. I missed you, J-man.” I hugged him “Now, Your Majesty, you have another decision to make.”

“What’s that, Lion Lady?” his hippie accent flowed back to him like smoke from a joint.

“I took most of your father’s magic.” I tapped the emerald I still wore. “I can release it into Heaven or I can give

it to you.”

His stare went to the pendant. “You have the Light?”

“Most but not all. It might be helpful, maybe even necessary for accepting offerings from humans. But I can see why you might not want—”

“I’ll take it,” he cut me off. “I was so worried when it didn’t come to me at Dad’s death like Luke said it would.”

“Oh, damn. That’s right. I remember you guys talking about that. I should have told you sooner.”

“Nah, it’s all good.” He slapped my shoulder. “I’m just glad you have it. It’s time for some big changes in Heaven. For peace and love and lots of flowers.” He grinned broadly. “I’ll use Dad’s magic in the way it should have been.”

“I’m sure you will. And once you’re done with Heaven, you could take your flower show to Earth.”

Jesus made a soft sound of joy. “I could help people. Really help them.”

“Yep. All you have to do is accept the Light of God.” I held out my hand.

“Thanks, V,” Jesus said as he took it.

“No problemo, J-man.” I drew Jehovah’s magic out of the emerald but that was all I had to do. The energy came alive

like a hound sensing its master and shimmered into my chest, then down my arm to rush into Jesus.

“Whoa,” Jesus whispered and closed his eyes. “Far out.”

As it passed through me, the Light filled me with effervescent joy, assuring me that it had been cleansed of Jerry’s evil. It was pure magic again, and it was thrilled to find a home in a man who would treat it with respect and love. When the last of it left my fingertips, I let go of Jesus.

Jesus stepped back and opened his eyes. The blue of his irises had lightened to nearly white and sparkled like diamonds.

“You’ve got the Devil’s eyes,” I said with a smirk.

“I do?” He hurried into the dressing room.

I followed him but waited in the doorway as he checked out his new eyes in a mirror.

“Trippy,” Jesus murmured as he turned his head from side to side. “I wonder if this was what Dad looked like once?”

“Luke would know.”

Jesus turned to face me and as he did, his body began to thicken. “I’ll ask him.” Then he saw my face. “What?” He turned back to the mirror just in time to see his chest and shoulders expand. “Outta sight!” He flexed, then flung back his long hair. “I look like a combination of my dad and me.”

I laughed. “You’ve got a dad-bod, but in your case, that’s a good thing.”

“Thanks. I think I dig it.” He took a golden robe off a mannequin, slipped it on over his funeral suit, and bound a white sash around his waist. Then, with far more reverence, he took a pair of round, purple sunglasses off a shelf. The J-man put on his glasses as he turned toward me, then held out his arms. “How do I look?”

“You look groovy, J-man. Groovy in a very royal way.”

“It’s the purple.” He tapped his glasses. “It’s a royal color.”

“Whatever it is, it’s very you.”

He grinned again. “Time to let my freak flag fly!”

Chapter Forty

After giving Jesus his father's magic and warning the others of his new look, I went home to fetch my children, the Intare, and the God Squad while Trevor went to get his father and the Froekn. All of Heaven's allies were invited to Jesus's coronation. We returned to find the gold streets full of sharply dressed Angels and Demons.

My immediate family and I were invited to stand on the throne's terrace along with the Archangels, Lucifer, and Holly. Not only did it give us the best view of the coronation but also of Araboth and all its rejoicing citizens.

The Host and Horde went silent as the Cherubim began to sing "Holy, holy, holy," their melodious voices carrying across Araboth. As they sang, Jesus strode down the pathway from the royal palace to the terrace. Since he was coming from behind the throne, at the same level of the terrace, none of the Angels who stood in the street below could see him at first, but they knew from the song that he was coming and an excited murmur swept through the crowd. Then Jesus reached the edge of the terrace, and Heaven vibrated with cheers and applause. The streets and sky were full of Angels, every one of them joyous, some even wept. I suspected that this was a sight that hadn't been seen in thousands of years—not the crowning, but the honest joy of the Host.

"They love Uncle Jesus," Vero said.

"Yes, they do, Son." Trevor, who was holding our boy, said with a broad grin. "He's a lovable guy."

"Oh, no, you don't!" Azrael yanked on the leash attached to Sebastian, jerking our little winged monster out of the air and back into his arms.

“Uncle!” Sebastian pointed at Jesus.

“Yes, and he doesn’t need you flapping about his head like a mad raven while Grandpa crowns him.”

Dominic had a harness on too, but so far, he hadn’t tested the length of the attached leash. He was content to sit on my hip and enjoy the vantage point. Even Lesya, who was getting too big to hold, was in her daddy’s arms so she could have a better view. My husbands stood around me, all of them, including Arach for once, and Fenrir was with us as well, but the Squad, Intare, and Froekn were standing in the street with the Angels and Demons. No Demons were in the sky because they had come in their prime forms out of respect for Jesus. There was no need for claws and horns today.

“Heaven and Hell are united at last!” Lucifer shouted as he stepped up beside Jesus.

The crowd roared and the Archangels, all of whom stood to one side of Jesus, smiled brightly. Even Abaddon was there, home at last.

“This is the way we were meant to be,” Luke went on. “We are one pantheon that should never have been divided. Although I created Heaven, I have grown to love Hell, and I don’t feel comfortable ruling here. So, I am here today to crown your new King, a man who, thanks to my daughter, possesses the magic of your old King.”

The Host went silent as they digested that.

“Relax,” Jesus said as he held out his hands. “It’s just his magic, not his downer vibe. I’m still my groovy self.”

Laughter spread, then cheering and a few shouts of encouragement.

Azrael lifted a brow at me.

“I told him to be himself,” I whispered. “No one wants him to be Jerry.”

“Thank you.” Azrael leaned over to kiss my cheek. “I was worried about him.”

“Angels and Demons,” Lucifer said, “we are one people again, but we will be ruled by two kings.”

With his wings out, I couldn’t see the crown Lucifer was holding. But then he turned to face Jesus, and a glowing band of gold came into view. It shone so brightly that it was difficult to make out the details. I could see points topping it but that was all.

The Devil lifted the Crown of God over Jesus’s head. “Before the Host of Heaven and the Horde of Hell, with our allies in attendance to bear witness, and the magic of our territory running through me, I crown you, King Jesus Christ, and grant to you the power of the Seven Heavens.”

I went still as magic thrummed through the ground, transferring its attention from Lucifer to Jesus. My jaw dropped. I had no idea that Luke was going to give Jesus full control of Heaven. Whoa.

The glow of the crown wasn't the only light upon Jesus as Lucifer anointed him King, magic also flowed down from the Devil's hands into the Son of God and settled inside him. Jesus, smiling broadly, hugged his stepfather and then turned to draw Holly into their embrace as well. All the while, Heaven shook with magic and joy.

Then Jesus turned to face the crowd, flanked by his mother and stepfather. "From this day forward, let there be peace in our pantheon!"

Gods and demigods cheered for the new King of Heaven.

Then Jesus nodded, bobbing his head a little, and said, "Groovy."

Chapter Forty-One

The crown came off just minutes after the Devil set it on Jesus's head.

J-man tossed the Heavenly Crown on the Throne of God, then through his robe over it to block the light. "Phew, that thing was frying my mind!" Then he waved the Cherubim down from their places above the Throne with a, "Knock it off already. It's time to party, dudes!"

The Cherubim cheered and landed, surrounding their new King to give him high-fives and share hits off the joint J-man pulled out of his pocket. Those of us on the terrace hurried over to congratulate Jesus before the Angels started to climb the steps to give their allegiance to their new king. Luke had offered to release the Angels who had made vows to him so that they could forge new bonds with Jesus, but a couple of the Avenging Angels refused and decided to stick with the Devil. One of them was Gaviel.

Luke suggested that Jesus sit on the Throne to receive the vows, but J-man had given that an emphatic no, saying that the Angels were his brothers and sisters and he didn't want to start this new relationship as the Man might. He'd accept their vows and form bonds with them, but he'd do it his way, with hugs, kisses, and a bit of puff-puff-pass.

The reign of King Jesus Hadranius Christ would start with peace and love.

After getting my hug and kiss (sans the puff), I went down the terrace stairs with my family and joined the rest of our group. Since they wouldn't be giving their allegiance to Jesus, the Demons were heading out of the city to a pavilion that Luke had created earlier that day. With so many in

attendance, they needed a massive space to hold the celebration.

As we followed the line of Demons through the golden streets, between the white buildings lit to nearly blinding levels, we passed Angels who were waiting in line to make vows to their King. They wept, laughed, cheered, and hugged each other. Jugs of wine were passed around and even some of those special cigarettes that Jesus favored. We received celebratory shoulder pats and were offered cups of wine as we passed by. Feathers brushed us endlessly, and my children were in, well, they were in heaven, stretching their hands out to touch Angel wings and giggling when the Angels kissed their cheeks.

But then we left the city, passing through gates that gleamed pearlescent in the lantern lights. A path had been laid to the pavilion, outlined by lampposts and set with gold stones. Ahead of us, the enormous tent was alight, Demons manning the buffet tables and setting out mugs of Hellbrew. Jim Morrison's voice trailed out of the tent, asking if we loved him madly, and there were flowers everywhere.

But all of that was like an oasis in the vast sea of sand that surrounded the heavenly city.

“Heaven's a desert?” Austin's voice carried over to me.

“Weird, right?” Adrian, one of my werelions, asked.

“I think Luke did it to piss off Jerry,” Pan said.

“I think it's lovely.” Arach, who stood on Azrael's left, stared out at the moonlit sand with a soft smile. “Peaceful.”

“I’m not a fan of sand,” I said. “I rarely went to the beach when I lived in Hawaii and desert sand is even worse than beach sand.”

“I don’t like it either,” Viper said. “It gets in weird places.”

“You’re a dragon, A Thaisce.” Arach turned toward me with a scowl. Then he looked at Viper, “And you’re a snake. Both beasts do well in sand.”

“I’m also a wolf and a lion,” I said. “Neither of those like sand.”

“And I was born in a desert, dude,” Viper said. “Under a dark star. As much as I enjoyed her, she got pretty naughty.” He winked at me. “I think it ruined sand for me.”

Arach rolled his eyes. But then we were inside the tent, and his nostrils flared. “Meat.” He hurried toward the buffet tables.

“I guess that’s the end of that discussion,” Viper said.

“Let’s find a table and get the kids fed.” Azrael went for a table near the food. “It’s past their dinner time.”

We took up quite a lot of tables since not only the Squad but also the Intare and Froekn were with us. Even though the Demons had beaten us there, we got some tables just ten feet away from the buffet because the Demons were more interested in socializing than scoring a good seat. Being close to the food becomes more of a priority when you’re a

parent. You always have to go back for things your kids want to try, and you also have to fill your own plate.

“I like this song,” Arach said as he set a plate full of ribs and sliced steak down, then took a seat.

“This is The Doors,” I said.

“That’s a silly name for musicians.”

“If you think that’s silly, get a load of this; the main singer is Jim Morrison. They called him the Lizard King.”

Arach’s stare shot to Trevor, who had called him a lizard and the Lizard King many times in the past.

“Don’t worry,” Trevor said. “You’re the original Lizard King, your title is safe.”

“I am *not* a lizard,” Arach gave his usual response.

And Trevor said his line right on cue, “You kinda are.”

“A dragon is a regal beast. A lizard is ... not.”

“That’s right!” Salem said as he ducked his head into the pavilion and stretched his long neck over a couple of tables to dangle it over ours.

“Salem!” the kids cried.

Dominic, who'd been sitting nicely beside me, shot upward. Unprepared as I was for his sudden takeoff, I didn't grab his leash in time, and he went flying toward the dragon's head, the dangling cord dragging through plates of food and spilling a glass of wine before he reached a safe height.

"Darn it!" I started to stand.

"Let him go. They're not going to venture far from Salem," Az said as he unhooked Sebastian's leash. He tossed Sebastian up like a dove, and our son went streaking toward the dragon with his brother, giggling like a lunatic.

Salem nudged Dominic with his nose, blowing smoke at my son as he giggled. "Yeah, they're fine, V. Don't worry about me."

"They haven't finished their supper," I said.

Then Lesya, Vero, and Zariel jumped up and ran to the dragon. Because if the twins could, that meant they could too. Salem withdrew his head from the tent, as the kids started scaling his body. The twins flew after him, but Salem was just outside the tent, in my direct line of sight. I sighed and sat down. Maybe I should take the opportunity to eat while I could.

"They'll come back when they get hungry," Trevor said. "Just like any animal."

I snorted a laugh, but then I looked at him, really looked at him. My handsome husband. Strong, brave, and with a lopsided grin that could melt the panties right off me. And he was just one of the men who loved me. They were all there and all so blissful. Kirill, smiling adoringly at our daughter,

then transferring that look of love to me. Odin tickling his granddaughter's cheek as he leaned over Thor's shoulder. Re, shining like the sun, the most beautiful man in all the heavens of every pantheon, and he stared at me as if I were even more beautiful than he. Azrael, looking magnificent even with his midnight wings put away, had his hand on my thigh, and that small touch was all he needed to make me feel loved. Viper, swigging his bottle of Hellbrew, winked at me, absolutely confident in our love. And then there was Arach, my Dragon King, devouring his meal as he did everything he enjoyed—with ferocious vigor. He licked his lips and looked at me as if to say that I was next. I loved them all so much.

We had built amazing lives together. Lives that stretched across realms and changed entire pantheons. Our love defied destiny and gave birth to brilliant, magical children so powerful that they could free an entire race of demigods. Together, we had triumphed again and although I knew there would always be another fight, another obstacle to overcome, I also knew that they would always face it beside me. Whether we won or not didn't matter as long as we were together.

Bring it on, Destiny. What else you got?

Pronunciation Guide

Abaddon: Abba-dawn

A Thaisce: Ah Hash-keh

Arach: Air-rock

Carus: Care-us

Estsanatlehi (Mrs. E): Es-tan-AHT-lu-hee

Froekn: Fro-kin

Gello: Jello

Grainne: GRAW-nya

Hanuman: Hah-new-mawn

Huitzilopochtli: Weet-seal-oh-POACHED-lee

Intare: In-tar-ay

Kirill: Key-reel

Saraqael: Sare-rack-key-el

Shehaquim: Shah-ha-keem

Tima: Tee-mah

Tsohanoai (Mr. T): So-ha-noe-ayee

Zachariel: Zack-care-ree-el

Glossary of Characters

This list has gotten so extensive that I've moved it to my website. You may find it on the Godhunter Series Page here:
<https://www.amysumida.com/book-list>

About the Author

Amy Sumida is the Internationally Acclaimed author of the Award-Winning Godhunter Series, the fantasy paranormal Twilight Court Series, the Beyond the Godhunter Series, the music-oriented paranormal Spellsinger Series, the superhero Spectra Series, and several short stories. Her books have been translated into several languages, have won numerous awards, and are bestsellers. She believes in empowering women through her writing as well as providing everyone with a great escape from reality. Her stories are full of strong women and hot gods, shapeshifters, vampires, dragons, fairies, gargoyles... pretty much any type of supernatural, breathtakingly gorgeous man you can think of. Because why have normal when you could have paranormal?

Born and raised in Hawaii, Amy made a perilous journey across the ocean with six cats to settle in the beautiful state of Oregon which reminds her a lot of Hawaii but without the cockroaches or evil sand. When she isn't trying to type fast enough to keep up with the voices in her head while ignoring the kitties trying to sabotage her with cuteness, she enjoys painting on canvases, walls, and anything else that will sit still long enough for the paint to dry. She's fueled by tea, inspired by music, and spends most of her time lost in imaginary worlds.

For information on new releases, detailed character descriptions, and an in-depth look into the worlds of the Godhunter, the Twilight Court, the Spellsinger, Spectra, and the Happily Harem After Series, check out Amy's website: [Amy Sumida's Website](#)

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