

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HAILEY
EDWARDS



GRAY
DAYS

GRAY DAYS

HAILEY EDWARDS



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GRAY DAYS

Black Hat Bureau, Book 9

The Black Hat compound is rubble on the ocean floor, the director hasn't been seen since the explosion that demolished his life's work, and old enemies have decided it's open season on the remaining agents. Oh. And Arden has decided now is a great time for a surprise visit to force a confrontation with Rue.

Between holding the Bureau together, searching for her grandfather, and babysitting Arden, Rue has her work cut out for her. But her distraction allows her to be blindsided by a loss that fractures her very soul. Betrayal is a familiar sting for Rue, she barely feels it anymore, but this time? She might not survive it.



CHAPTER ONE



Most adults outgrow the monsters of their childhood, real or imagined, but some will check under their beds now and then before they close their eyes for the rest of their lives. Just to be safe. Just to be sure.

Me?

I might as well be down on my hands and knees, gazing under my bed into the abyss, unsure if I ought to pray that the glowing red eyes of my personal boogeyman blinked awake for me or never opened again.

Where are you, old man?

“Director.”

Without a body, without hard proof he had been slain, I might never sleep again.

“Director.”

Not when I was standing on the granite shore beneath a cliff where a small girl once walked up to a grim mansion that would never be her home and became one of the very monsters that had tormented her. Not even the relentless midday sun beating down on me could thaw the chill from my bones.

“He’s talking to you, Dollface.” Clay braced a steady hand on my shoulder. “You’re the director now.”

“*Interim* director.” I reeled my gaze in from the churning waves and turned it on the spindly man. “Yes?”

“We pulled four more bodies from the rubble.” He blinked vertical lids. “One survivor.”

Immortality was great, in theory, but there were downsides. Say, a building falling on your head, pinning you to the ocean floor, where your regenerative abilities healed you as fast as the saltwater rushing into your lungs drowned you all over again.

The spindly man lingered, waiting on me to ask, which I did with a sigh. “Any sign of him?”

Him.

The director.

My grandfather.

We had no hard evidence he had survived, and yet...

The tipline we set up for locating missing agents, those who decided now was a great time to go AWOL, had netted us sightings of him too. With Bjorn. That I could believe. His toady was always lurking nearby. But a frost giant in Florida? Even leashed to the director, that was a stretch.

“No, Director.” His unnerving eyes blinked again. “We have yet to locate him.”

As dread crept over my skin, raising gooseflesh, I became that much more convinced he wasn't there for them to find. I doubted he was in Florida, but I bet he was somewhere other than the bottom of the sea.

“Go on up with your team.” I indicated the lift to base camp. “Get some hot soup and coffee down you.”

We had heated tents set up on the broken road above us that led...nowhere now...where divers, medics, and agents lending a (mandatory) hand after reporting in for roll call, could warm up with hot foods and beverages to combat the chill of thirty-seven-degree water.

Another slow blink lapsed before the spindly man lowered his eyes to his webbed feet. “Yes, Director.”

As he backed away, he kept stealing glances at me like he couldn't believe his luck I hadn't punished him for failing to locate the director, or his remains.

"Maybe I should have yelled or thrown sand in his face."

"You're at the helm now." Clay squeezed once before dropping his arm. "This ship is yours to steer."

"Please don't Mystic Seas me right now." I rubbed my gritty eyes with salty fingertips. "I'm not adopting that blue macaw from the exotic bird rescue either, no matter how many pirate swears he knows."

"Uncultured swine." He thumped my earlobe. "I'll have you know Black Beak sings sea shanties."

"Bet you can't say that three times fast," a tiny voice challenged him from within his sea-green mohawk.

When a flash of silver caught my eye down the beach, I left them to their tongue twisters.

Asa's stamped metal earrings gleamed as he waded out up to his hips to help drag a body to shore. He wore his usual suit, minus the jacket, which made tag-teaming with Blay easier. His hair had started the day in a French braid, but now it tangled around his face and clumped in ropes down his back.

His white shirt clung to his wide shoulders, the tail yanked out by the ocean's greedy waves. Most of the buttons had come unfastened when a desperate hand fisted the fabric as a survivor hauled her head above the choppy water. The result was a mouthwatering view of his bare skin each time the wind blew.

And if I briefly considered tossing back women who clung to that bare skin, well, who could blame me?

Once he came ashore, water sheeting off him, I walked up behind him and tugged a hank of his hair. A laugh stuck in my throat when he spun around to face me, his gaze swiveling in every direction, peridot eyes sharp.

After a lifetime of protecting nonfamily members against the *y'nai* and their twisted sense of justice, he wasn't yet used

to their absence. Until I saw him remember that, and everything that went along with it, I hadn't considered whether it was cruel to remind him.

"I'm sorry." I buttoned his shirt to give my fingers something to do. "I shouldn't have—"

"Old habits." His icy hands covered mine. "It's fine."

But I wasn't sure it was, or what to do if it wasn't.

"I'll give you another twenty." I gave his collar a tug. "Then you're *both* going to refuel and rest."

"Yes, Director."

The urge to roll my eyes twitched in my lids, but I was a good girl and checked the impulse. I had never had a problem flashing my disdain for the organization, or the man behind it, but to effect change, I would have to rethink my coping mechanisms. For now, I was too busy using paper clips and Scotch tape to hold what remained of the Black Hat Bureau together until *after* we determined if the director had gone down with his beloved ship.

Gah.

Now Clay had me Mystic Seas-ing myself.

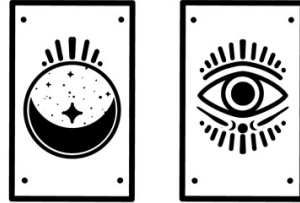
A whipcrack of pain sliced across my palm, igniting my skin, and I dashed to the water to dunk my hand. I hissed through my teeth until the sting ebbed to a tingle then yanked it out to study the fresh pink scar left behind from where the rune marking Calixta's contract due had ignited then extinguished itself.

"Goddess bless," I breathed, smoothing my thumb over the raised edges of the design. "She did it."

Hair plastered to his neck and face, Asa fished me out, guiding me onto the sand before taking my hand in his. His brow lowered as his thumb replaced mine. "What does it mean?"

"Calixta fought Stavros and won." I cast my gaze back across the fathomless deep. "Or she died trying."

CHAPTER TWO



The evening view from where I sat bundled in a blanket with Mylar lining, a travel mug of coffee gone stale at my knee, was eerie. Beautiful with the churning blue sea and bright-white crests. But eerie.

This precise angle framed what I saw—had seen—every time I looked out my office window.

Former office.

Where my *former* assistant had clipped her last clop while I was a world away.

And, on the topic of things a world away, we had yet to locate Earl. The portal to Faerie remained open. Asa and I had seen debris come tumbling through it to the other side, but the access point here? We couldn't find a hint of it. Meaning I had yet another problem on my hands. Even if it had been buried deep in the earth, I had to close it or at least contain it to prevent it being wielded against us again.

“Come on.” Clay shoved his hands under my armpits and lifted me onto my feet. “You’re going to bed.”

“There’s too much to do.” I wriggled from his grasp. “I’m writing up the next shift rotation now.”

That I could barely read the names through my sandblasted eyeballs was beside the point.

“No.” He stole the tablet from my hands. “You’re staring across the ocean like you expect Aedan to belly up on a rock and have a Little Mermaid moment.” He hid it behind his back

when I grabbed for it. “Two things.” He switched to holding it over his head when my fingers brushed the screen. “He can’t sing for crap. Trust me. I’ve heard things. Terrible things.” He hip-checked me to keep me away. “And Calixta won’t let him out of her sight for a long time yet.”

“We don’t know she has sight,” I growled, done playing with him.

“You’re not making sense.” He patted my head. “That’s why you’re going to nappy-nap. You’ve been up for twenty-four hours and change. Your workday is done.”

“We don’t know she won. That she’s alive.” My voice broke. “That *he* is alive.”

As her heir, Aedan would have been the first to fall if she failed to beat Stavros.

“Hey, now.” He reeled me into a hug I didn’t want but probably needed. “None of that.”

“I never should have let him go.” I clenched my hands in his jacket. “I should have—”

“He’s alive.”

The sob lodged in my throat broke open as Asa trudged up the hill to join us, nearly a mile away from the bustling tents. Sand caked the seat of his pants that hadn’t been there when he walked away to make his calls to confirm we had cause for celebration. I’m not saying I stared at his butt the whole time, but I was desperate for a distraction, and it was *right there*.

Which meant either Asa decided to cop a squat while he chatted, or the update from Tiago had knocked his legs out from under him. The former wasn’t his style, but the latter would explain why it took so long for him to return. He had been gone for hours.

“Are you okay?” I met him halfway and slid my arms around his waist. “Do you need anything?”

“No.” He leaned into me, hands limp at his sides. “I mean, yes, I’m okay, and no, I don’t need anything.”

“It’s okay to be sad, Ace.” Clay came up behind Asa, slinging his heavy arms around his shoulders. Colby slipped from Clay’s wig and climbed up to hug Asa’s neck, and we sandwiched him between us in a group hug. “It sucks that it happened this way.”

The ocean spray had weighted Colby’s wings, making flight almost impossible, and the heat hadn’t done her any favors either. The poor kid was so exhausted from the stress and the long hours Clay had to scoop her up before she slid down Asa’s spine like a fuzzy drop of sweat.

“He left us no choice.” He rested his forehead on my shoulder for a long moment. “Hael is better off without him.”

“But he was still your dad.” Clay stepped away before things got awkward. For once. “You’re allowed to mourn the person he should have been, the relationship you could have had.”

“Thanks.” Asa ratcheted himself into an upright position. “That’s one good piece of news.”

Capturing his face between my palms, I kissed the tip of his nose. “You don’t have to fake it for us.”

“Faking it never leaves anyone satisfied,” Clay said, eyes distant as if imparting valuable wisdom.

“You should head to the hotel.” I released Asa with a gentle shove. “Get some rest.”

That had been the plan, until the brand marked me. None of us could rest after that without answers.

“I’m fully recovered.” A flicker of amusement eased his frown. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

Rather than explain it was his heart, not his body, that concerned me, I huffed, “I’m allowed to worry.”

“I’m over the iron poisoning.” He raked his hair into a tight man bun. “I can make it a few more hours.”

Thinking he might need that time to decompress before he could close his eyes without seeing his father behind his lids, I

was about to hit the lift down to the shore with him. I stopped short when Clay gripped my arm.

“Not so fast.” He cuffed Asa’s wrist too. “You’re *both* going to the hotel. I’ll stay here to coordinate.”

The fact I was too tired to fight back *might* have lent weight to his argument, but I wasn’t about to admit he was right. That set a bad precedent.

Our SUV was one of dozens of the same make and model in the makeshift parking lot. We only figured out which was ours after Clay used the key fob to unlock the door, which honked the horn. He released Asa, who he deemed the lesser flight risk, and returned the keys to him. But he maintained his grip on me until he could open the passenger side door and help me in with a sleight of hand that deposited a drowsy moth girl on my lap, guaranteeing I would stay put.

“I’ll call if anything interesting happens,” he promised, bending to kiss Colby’s forehead.

“You better.” A yawn cracked my jaw, ruining my tough act. “Update me on the numbers as they come in.”

“The numbers can wait until tomorrow.” He shut the door in my face. “Nighty-night.”

Had Asa not spaced out, I might have grumbled about how it was barely sunset, but Asa’s world had been upended not long ago, and the hits kept coming. He didn’t have time to recover before the next strike landed. For me to fuss about Clay’s caretaking would be petty.

“You know how I feel,” he said a few miles later. “You’re maybe the only one who does.”

Not many people got put in the position of feeling guilty for being glad a tyrannical relative was dead.

“Bottling emotions is my thing, and you can’t have it.” I cradled Colby against my chest where she dozed off again. “You can’t stopper yourself up because you don’t want to step on my toes.”

“Your grandfather is missing.”

“Your father is dead.” I bit the inside of my cheek, but that didn’t erase what I had already blurted. “I didn’t mean for it to come out that harsh. I’m only saying you *know*. For certain.” I puffed out my cheeks. “I don’t. Not yet.” I made a halfhearted gesture with my hand. “I don’t know what I would feel if I did.”

“Relief?” He aimed us toward our hotel. “Anger?”

“Relief he’s dead?” I crossed and uncrossed my legs. “Anger I wasn’t the one to kill him?”

“You’re allowed to mourn the person he should have been, the relationship you could have had.”

“I’ll do you the favor of never telling Clay you quoted his advice, or else he’ll start force-feeding it to us.”

A faint smile gathered on his lips. “How is that different from what he already does?”

“Oh, there’s a difference.” I settled for folding my legs under me. “Quote him, and you’re asking for it.”

A comfortable silence filled the space between us, but it still managed to prickle my skin.

“Does this change anything?” I had been wondering since Carver put a bug in his ear. “For you?”

“Will I storm off to Hael, dethrone the new high queen, and destabilize the realm for my own gratification?” He kept his eyes fixed ahead. “No.”

“I’m not saying you won’t get a second chance, because coups happen, but this is as good of an opening as you’re likely to get.” I set my hand on his thigh, supportive, not perverted, and pushed out the rest. “You have the people’s favor now, but if you wait...”

“They’ve proven fickle,” he agreed with me, but if admitting it hurt him, he didn’t show it.

“If popular opinion turns against you—or me—the people might be swayed again.” I bobbed a shoulder. “That would be true even if you had still been Stavros’s heir when he died.”

“I would have had a legitimate claim then.” He flicked on the blinker. “Now I don’t.”

“There are ways to change your people’s lives for the better besides slapping a crown on your head.”

A smile lifted one side of his mouth. “Yes, *Director*.”

“Too soon.” I swatted him then groaned when my phone rang with a familiar number. “Hey, Carver.”

“I have disturbing news to report, my lady. As I was about to run through an assassin who dared to harm my queen, the coward begged for his life. That is common enough and does not bear reporting. But then he claimed the bounty on the Rightful King’s head has been cancelled as there is a new ruler in Hael. The rapsallion must be lying, as the Rightful Queen would have told me had that been the case.”

For a moment, I could only close my eyes and be grateful the bounty had been revoked on Asa.

The capitalized titles sprinkled throughout Carver’s monologue pinched my stomach, so I diverted him.

“When you say you were about to run him through, you mean bring him in for questioning, right?”

Rehabbing an assassin who only assassinated other assassins was not going as well as Clay had promised me. Old habits were proving hard to break. At least Carver only murdered people hired to kill me?

“Yes, my lady.” He cleared his throat. “Of course.”

A headache throbbed to life as I massaged my temple. “Report in if you spot anyone else on my tail.”

“And the rumors?”

“We’re investigating them.” I cringed away from the necessary lie. “I’ll update you when I know more.”

Before he dug in his heels, I ended the call and slumped in my seat.

“Not the outcome you were hoping for?” Asa cut his eyes toward me. “This should make you happy.”

“I am.” I angled my head to face him. “No one has a reason to come after you, guns blazing, anymore.”

“But?”

“Now we have a pet assassin with nothing but time on his hands.”

One who needed to give up on his dream of being a member of the queen’s guard if he stuck with me.

There might be more attempts on our lives until the news of Stavros’s death—and no one to foot the bills for those hefty rewards he promised—filtered to the outliers, but Asa was as safe as I could make him. With Stavros dead, Asa was better protected than he had been since before his father learned he existed.

“He’s sworn to you, and you’re the director.” His eyes crinkled. “He’ll have plenty to occupy him.”

Though I did have a list of enemies as long as my arm, it was rude of Asa to mention it.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” I drilled a finger into his side. “I’m not *that* bad.”

“I know.” He sobered from one breath to the next. “That’s what worries me.”

“I never thought I would live to see the day someone worried about me being too nice to do my job.”

“You’re competent but not cruel.” He made it sound like a bad thing, but, in our world, reputation could mean the difference between life and death. “The agents won’t know what to make of you.”

True, confusing predators was not a great way to kick-start my administration, but I wouldn’t become my grandfather. I had worked too long to crawl out from under his shadow to let it eclipse me now.

“Maybe I should recruit Dad as my deputy director.” A snort blasted out of my nose. “Can you imagine?”

The director had pinned the explosive attempt on my life at Glory of India on Dad. Did the agents buy it? It didn't matter. The director's word was law. And, if he survived to point fingers, he would gladly blame Dad for the attack on the compound too.

So, as satisfying as it would be to accomplish what the director had failed to do—and bring Dad back into the fold—I couldn't trust Dad to not finish what Luca started by blowing up the compound and taking out a quarter of our agents.

“The director must be the apex predator at the top of the Bureau pyramid.”

“Are you saying Dad is scarier than me?” I sucked in a sharp breath. “I thought you loved me.”

“I do love you, and you are terrifying, but you're also empathetic.”

“I would rather be plain vanilla pathetic.”

“You care about others—” he ignored my grumble, “—regardless of any potential benefit to yourself.”

“I'm supposed to be making you feel better, not the other way around.”

“I'm not sure there is better,” he confessed softly. “I need time to process, then I'll make my peace.”

There I was, half wishing the director had been smashed like a gnat, while Asa struggled to process an outcome he had craved every day since he learned what his father had done to his mother.

I didn't like the director. I sure didn't love him. I wouldn't miss him. But the fulfillment of a lifelong goal could, as I was seeing with Asa, leave you rudderless. It was time to give him a new dream to dream.

“Give me your hand.” I waited until I had a firm grip he couldn't escape. “Now shake.”

“Rue?” A ripple of doubt crossed his features, but he let me pump his arm. “What are you doing?”

“Congratulations on your promotion, Interim Deputy Director Montenegro.”

“Interim...” He snatched his hand back. “You can’t do that.”

“Too late.” I did a little dance in my seat. “I just did.”

Scraping his palm on his pants like that might wipe off his new title, he scowled. “The agents will—”

“Get over it.” I waved off his concern. “I need someone I can trust at my back, and that’s you.”

We had bigger problems than me showing favoritism, and I wasn’t afraid to scare them straight until the title became mine for good. And I really did need a trustworthy second-in-command with the same drive as me to reshape the Bureau on the other side of this. Asa might not want it, or might not want it forever, but he would take the job to help me.

And, in the process, he would get out of his own way until he figured out what came next for him.

“This is a pity hire.” He mashed his lips into a hard line. “Clay would make a better deputy director.”

“Everyone loves Clay.” I bit my tongue. “Not that everyone doesn’t also love you.” I threaded my fingers through his, promotion cooties and all. “What I’m trying to say is they don’t always respect him, and this is not the time to loosen our grip on the reins. Change takes time. It requires sacrifice. Clay is too big of a softie. He believes every sob story he’s told. He can’t ride shotgun for me on this.”

Worse yet, Clay was stuck in limbo. Unsure if he still had a master or if he was...free. I hadn’t brought it up, and he hadn’t mentioned it either. Hope was a dull knife poised over your heart, ready to carve its message on the meat of your soul, and I refused to be the one who plunged the blade in.

“Aside from my mother and grandmother, I’m fairly certain you’re the only one who loves me.”

“Colby loves you.” I leaned across, resting my head on his shoulder. “Clay does too. And Aedan...”

To say his name knocked the wind out of me, but he was alive. That had to be enough. For now.

“Aedan is safe.” He brought our hands to his lips for a kiss. “He survived.”

“He’s heir to a kingdom in turmoil. *Safe* isn’t the word I would use.”

Thanks to his sacrifice, he would never be safe again, unless I could deliver the director to Calixta. Even if she accepted the bribe, I had no guarantee she would release Aedan. Let alone on the spot. That bargain would require keeping Meg on speed dial and herding any other sacrificial lambs clear of the slaughter.

That meant...as much as the world would be better off without the director in it...I hoped we found him. Alive. His future was currently worth more to me than the damage he had done in my past.

“Aedan survived,” he said again. “He’s a survivor.” He brushed his lips across my knuckles. “He’ll be okay.”

I wished I was as certain, but I didn’t want to make the fallout from Stavros’s death all about me.

To distract him, I posed a question that had been niggling me. “Do you think we should rebuild?”

“The compound?”

“We could relocate.” I tapped my foot, but that jostled Colby, so I quit. “Move it somewhere else.”

To a location that wouldn’t haunt me with childhood memories each time I stepped over the threshold.

Without hesitation, he agreed. “That would be good for you.”

Black Hat maintained outposts with lodgings in major cities that required a strong Bureau presence, which meant the agents weren’t out on the street. But we did need a headquarters. A place to train new recruits, to house the administrative and technical departments, that kind of thing.

A home if they let it be one. Though I wasn't certain the agents were ready for that much sentimentality yet.

From here on out, I had a new question to ask myself. "But would it be good for the Bureau?"

As if producing an answer required him to face down a tsunami armed with only a paper drink umbrella, he answered, "A fresh start in a new location can only help."

"I love the supportive vibes you're throwing my way, *Deputy Director*." I elbowed him. "Sheesh."

His soft laughter filled the cabin, warming me to my bones, but it cut off when my phone rang. "Hollis."

"We have a problem."

"Fergal, no offense, but when don't we have a problem?"

"Fair enough." He hesitated. "I have sixteen bodies on my hands in Boston."

A buzzing filled my ears as I struggled to switch mental lanes. "Please tell me you said six."

"Sixteen." His exhale competed with the sharp tap of his fingers on a keyboard. "The MOD was poison."

"Poison." That manner of death had me clenching my fist. "Please don't tell me it was king killer."

"It was king killer."

"*Fergal*." I rested the side of my head against the cool glass. "You suck at this game."

"Apologies."

"No." I shut my eyes. "You did the right thing." I had to learn to multitask, but my sleep-deprived brain had already taken a different fork in the road. "What are you doing up so early?"

"I'm old enough to wake prior to sunset." He hesitated, as if debating whether to trust me with more. "I work from my hotel room until full dark."

“What else can you tell me?” With great effort, I organized my thoughts. “About the case, not your sleep schedule.”

“The victims were human.”

Air solidified in my lungs, and I was grateful to already be sitting. “Any para family? Friends? Lovers?”

“We’re researching each victim,” he assured me, “but I doubt we find a pattern to the targets aside from their humanity.”

Already regretting what his answer would be, I pressed on. “What makes you so certain it was random?”

“Salads were tampered with at a popular restaurant during the lunch rush yesterday. The victims were dead by dinner today. The delay from time of ingestion to cardiac arrest appears to be thirty hours.”

Had a para taken a bite, they would have died at their table with a fork in their mouth.

“Goddess bless.” I noticed I was squishing Colby, but she was too far gone to notice. “How did it start?”

“One of the victims dropped dead inside a hospital. She was an OR nurse who brought half of her lunch salad to work for dinner. The friend she usually ate with, a dhampir, caught on fast that something was wrong. He tried to save her, but she was too far gone. She died in his arms.”

“That’s a lot faster than thirty hours.”

“She was undergoing treatment for breast cancer. Radiation had compromised her immune system.”

Respect for the battle she had been fighting warred with regret the king killer hadn’t let her live long enough to win. “The dhampir probably assumed it was related to her illness.”

“The hospital has a para wing, and one of their policies is all human deaths involving paras must be investigated. We’re fortunate they did their due diligence. Some would have written her death off as a complication to save face.” He let me process that. “Her cause of death was deemed inconclusive, so the cleaners were called in and swept her belongings. They’re

the ones who located the tainted meal. When they cross-referenced a sample, they hit on a match in the database.”

“From our last case,” I clarified, like the rare Faerie-grown herb could be found at any old grocery store.

“Yes.”

“Any clue who spiked the salads?”

“The staff is healthy, accounted for, and human. We’re eliminating suspects using the employee roster.”

“Thanks.” I rubbed a knot at the base of my neck. “Let me settle things here, and I’ll head your way.”

“Of course, Director.”

The call ended, and I thumped my phone against my thigh. “Humans.”

“Luca has taken her vendetta too far.” Asa tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “This was a mistake.”

“We knew she wanted to burn Black Hat to the ground, which, take a number and get in line, but this?” I couldn’t wrap my head around her end game. “We have to take her out, and fast, or this will snowball.”

Mass attacks on humans led to one thing: more violence.

Any paras who thought they could get away with killing humans would go on a spree. And any para who suspected another para of being involved, or had an ax to grind, would execute the para and blame it on helping us prevent the existence of paras spilling into the human world in a chaotic mess of murder and mistaken identity.

Black Hat was intended to be the gatekeeper. We were meant to hold the line. But the brutal strike on the compound left us grasping a fraying rope. Pull too tight, and the delicate cocoon swaddling humans safely away from full knowledge of our existence might unravel for good.

CHAPTER THREE



Jagged ochre clouds with fluffy pink underbellies raked across a bruising sky as Asa, Colby, and I rolled back up to what I had begun to think of as ground zero.

Outside the cluster of tents, Jase Isiforos met us with a limp and a smile. “Evening, Director.”

Grumbling over his glee in using the title, I zeroed in on his stiff leg. “What happened to you?”

“I fell off my horse,” he said with a straight face.

“Do I want to know why you were riding one in the first place?”

“A rogue centaur was kidnapping human women to fill his stable.” His mouth pulled to one side. “It was either steal a horse from his herd or let him get away.” His knee made a grinding noise when he flexed it. “In hindsight, I should have let him get away.”

“Are you fit for duty?” Asa swept his gaze over Isiforos. “Fergal can stand in after dark, if necessary.”

Until all us *interims* became *terims*, or whatever you called the bump up from temporary to permanent, I would be leaning hard on my two lieutenants to help me keep the Bureau functional during this crisis.

“I wouldn’t be limping if the doctor hadn’t strapped me into a knee brace so tight it’s cutting off my circulation.” He scanned the area. “Besides, you’ve already got everything

running. All I have to do is smile and wave from the folding chair I bought at a sporting goods store on the way over.”

“Call if that changes.” I narrowed my eyes on him. “This isn’t as cushy an assignment as you think.”

“Cushy would have been if I splurged on an attachable footstool for my lounge.”

The urge to roll my eyes was strong, but I persevered thanks to patience learned from years with Clay.

After his joke failed to land, Isiforos sobered and lowered his voice. “I heard the news.”

“Yeah.” A flinch threatened my shoulders, but I locked it down. “We just found out ourselves.”

“What does this mean for you?” He aimed the question at Asa. “Are you tapping out?”

“I won’t invite more chaos into Hael, if that’s what you mean.” A brittle quality crackled in his voice. “We have a new high queen. For the sake of the people, we need to embrace her.”

Isiforos cocked an eyebrow at the endorsement. “And the new heir?”

Asa and I shared a long glance that weighed my faith in Isiforos before I admitted, “He’s my cousin.”

Had Isiforos’s eyes grown any wider, they might have swallowed his entire head. “Your...*cousin*?”

“Yep.” I rocked back on my heels. “Surprise!”

A moth-size snicker reached my ears, and I hoped he didn’t pick up on it.

“B-b-but the rumors claim he’s her familial heir.” His breathing quickened until I worried he might faint. “That he never gave up on locating his true queen. That he scoured the realms until he found her. That she awarded him the title of heir as a reward for his faithful service.”

The narrative stuck close enough to the truth of what Delma had done in service to Calixta for me not to bother

correcting it, and, I had to admit, it made fantastic PR material. When I considered the angle of a heroic backstory, I realized that might protect Aedan better than I could right now.

“Yes.”

“That means you’re related to Calixta.” Isiforos slumped against a nearby tree. “You’re part daemon.”

“Yes.”

“No wonder you’re not freaking out.” He steadied himself. “You knew this might happen.”

“I hoped,” I admitted, wondering if incriminating myself was a step too far. “That was the plan.”

“You were in on the coup?” He slid into a sitting position with a grunt. “You put this together fast.”

“Don’t be so quick to give me all the credit. It was a group effort.” I heard acrid bitterness in those words and worked to soften my tone. “Stavros wouldn’t have given up until Asa was dead and no longer a threat to his rule. We had to take him out, and my grandmother was the best option.”

“Your *grandmother*?” He toppled to one side, seconds from assuming the fetal position. “How...?”

Given his reaction, I elected not to finish drawing my family tree, as it got worse from there.

“You’ve had enough for now.” I leaned down and patted his head. “Any more truth bombs and your brain might explode.” I studied my lieutenant with fresh reservations. “No one outside my team knows. I trust you can keep a secret?” An idea occurred to me, and I seized it with both hands. “Aedan needs all the help he can get ingratiating himself to the daemons of Hael. He’s Aquatae, and they might worry he has mixed allegiances.” I sucked in a fortifying breath. “Tell your dad to fire up his Cricut. Get the word out about Aedan’s hero’s journey to save his queen. Whatever spin will make him popular enough to keep him safe but not so popular Calixta begins to fear for her throne.”

The slight rocking motion slowed as he blinked up at me. “Exclusive rights?”

“Yes.” I caved to rolling my eyes. “Contact your dad—*now*—and get the ball rolling.”

That put the spark back in his eyes, and he leveraged himself up, about to sprint away. Well, power limp, when he pivoted too fast with a grimace and smiled at me. Really smiled. “Thanks for trusting me.”

A hard thump in my chest warned of incoming *feelings*, so I broke away first. “You earned it.”

Halfway to the tents, Asa and I met up with Clay, who wore an apron from his shift in the kitchen.

“You’ve got to try this.” He thrust a paper bowl and spoon at me. “It really sticks to your ribs.”

One bite had me hooked, and I fed Asa the next spoonful of oatmeal flavored with cinnamon, ginger, allspice, and cardamon. I tasted maple syrup, Medjool dates, and toasted coconut chips.

Clay’s love of breakfast—especially breakfast for dinner—rivaled only his love for wigs.

“There’s coconut milk and date syrup in there too,” Clay said, reading my mind. “Punches up the flavor.”

“This is a winner.” I inhaled the rest. “I hope you wrote down the recipe.”

Oatmeal was always in danger of Clay dumping anything within reach into the pot. He loved mix-ins, and he went wild with them. Usually with delicious results.

“I put it in the vault.” He knocked against the side of his head. “Safer than safe up there.”

Meaning he would wing it next time, like he had this time, and I may never taste this exact combo again.

“Hey. Wait a minute. I just got rid of you two.” The high of us tasting his latest masterpiece waned, and Clay squinted at

us. “What are you doing back here? You’re both supposed to be at the hotel, asleep.”

The flavor in my mouth soured as I shared Fergal’s update on Boston with him.

Given the gravity of the situation, it was no surprise Clay abandoned his apron to come with us. Or that he managed to steal Colby from me along the way.

Jogging a step ahead, he slung his arm around Asa’s shoulders. “How’re you doing, Ace?”

“Better.” He found a smile for Clay. “The promotion helped.”

From his wig, I heard Colby breathe, “Uh-oh.”

“Promotion?” Clay skidded to a halt. “What promotion?”

The temptation to kick Asa in the shins was real, but he wanted out from under the microscope, and this was a great distraction. For him. For me? Not so much. “Meet your new interim deputy director.”

“Nepotism,” he squawked. “You can’t promote your mate to your second-in-command.”

“I can, and I did.”

“Does our friendship mean nothing?” He forced his bottom lip to tremble. “I thought you loved me.”

“I do.” I got ditched as Asa walked ahead to the SUV. “That’s why I’ve created a third top position.”

“Oh?” Clay faked a snuffle. “What is it?”

“Director of Entertainment,” I decided on the fly. “AKA Director of Fun.”

“You made that up,” he fussed, but he didn’t say no.

“It’s a real position.” I hooked my arm through his. “Google it.”

Hand moving to his phone, he scoffed at me. “You want me to be a glorified party planner?”

“Think about what you did for the centuria. Then do it again on a much larger scale.”

“Are you greenlighting a waterpark?” His eyes sparkled with delight. “Because I have ideas.”

“Uh, no.” I backtracked fast. “Think smaller.” I gestured around us. “We have a *lot* to rebuild.”

“That’s when you want to go all-in. It costs so much more to come back later and add on.”

“Assuming I’m in a position to make it happen, I’ll concede to adding an indoor pool.”

Plenty of our coworkers, aquatic and otherwise, had made comments over the years about wishing they had the option to swim for exercise. I had no doubt some, mostly the gilled or finned, would go as far as floating away their lunch hour.

“Heated, of course.” He stared down his nose at me. “You don’t want to cheap out.”

“You can have pool parties down there.” I shoved him away. “Or up there. Whatever.”

The old compound had been multiple stories, the deepest ones carved out of the rock. This time, depending on where we settled, we could build up instead of down. It was an option, anyway.

When we reached the SUV, Asa waited near the passenger door, ready to open it for me.

“Nepotism,” Asa tossed out casually. “You can’t promote your best friend into a role created for him.”

“Hey.” Clay made a hushing gesture with his hands. “Let’s not throw around the *n* word so loudly.”

“Mmm-hmm.” I stepped around him then leaned into Asa. “We meet again.”

Clay hacked until he couldn’t ignore Colby’s cascading giggles any longer.

While they settled in for the ride, I rested my forehead against Asa’s chest. “I love you.”

A soft chuckle was his answer, as were the gentle fingers he tangled in my hair.

“This is going to get so much worse before it gets any better,” I mumbled into the front of his shirt.

The volume of king killer Luca had imported from Faerie was enough to poison thousands of humans. Sixteen lives were a drop in the bucket of the potential for disaster. Had this always been her plan? Had they always been her target? Had she attacked the Bureau to divide our focus from protecting them?

Black Hat wasn't dead, but it was on life support. Fail to meet this challenge, and we looked weak.

The weak didn't survive in our world, and neither would untold victims if our agents were let off leash. If the agents knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the director was dead, we might face rebellion on a scale we weren't equipped to combat without a show of deadly force when the last thing I wanted was to kick off my tenure by cracking heads together.

The tipline was helping us to manage the first wave of agents who were testing their new boundaries to see how much I would let them get away with, but to trace each lead required more manpower than we had to spare. Especially when each potential kernel of legit intel got mixed in with twice as many reports that stretched the boundaries of my imagination. Like frost giants basking in Florida sunshine.

“Don't borrow trouble.” He opened my door and pushed me into my seat. “Take it one step at a time.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I strapped in and waited on him to get in. “Where would you rebuild?”

The question slipped past my lips without permission. Until I heard myself ask, I hadn't realized I was still hung up on the physical aspect of rebuilding the Bureau. That the big picture was easier to see than how I was going to bring that vision to life.

“Aww.” Clay leaned forward to ruffle my hair. “Rue is nesting.”

“No one asked you.” I nudged Asa to avoid dealing with the fact Clay might be right. “Well?”

“Maui.” Clay snapped his fingers. “Or Malibu.” He bounced until the SUV rocked. “Or...*Montana*.”

“You added the last one because you couldn’t think of another beach with an *m* name.” I shook my head at his ridiculousness. “Montana is the best of the three. A remote base of operations would be ideal.”

“Not too remote.” Clay scratched his jaw. “You need food and entertainment within an hour’s drive.”

“He’s right.” Asa pursed his lips, his head tilting to one side. “What about north Alabama?”

Had the director smacked the windshield like a bug, I would have been less shocked by the suggestion.

“Alabama?” I jerked on my seat belt, which was cutting into my throat all of a sudden. “*Our* Alabama?”

“Pretty sure the state doesn’t belong to us exclusively,” Clay mused. “That’s an interesting choice, Ace.”

“We could have *our* home base there.” Asa checked with me. “Samford. The farm. And the compound.”

Ours.

As in his and mine.

As in a future with a home, a job...a *life*...that belonged to just us.

“I’m not sure I’m ready for that,” I confessed, hoping I didn’t sound like a coward for the quick veto.

I had too much baggage waiting for me to unpack in Samford for me to lump them in with our plans.

“You have time to think about it.” Asa slid his hand into my lap. “You don’t have to rush any decisions.”

“Keep your hands where I can see them.” Clay poked Asa in the back of the head. “There are children present.”

Out of curiosity, I pivoted to check on Colby, but she was plugged in with her head bobbing.

“Yes,” I agreed with him, smile sugary sweet, “there’s a big one off the starboard bow.”

“I refuse to be offended when you don’t know your starboard side from your port side.”

Ping.

Before I checked my phone, I somehow knew the bright text chime was a lie.

>>*Have you heard from Arden?*

>*No.*

We hadn’t spoken since New Orleans, but I couldn’t tell Camber that.

>>*She missed work today.*

A hard thump rattled my rib cage, and my palms turned clammy.

>*As in, she didn’t ask off or call out?*

>>*No. She did call out sick. I mean, she texted me. But she hasn’t replied since or answered my calls.*

>*Maybe because she doesn’t feel well?*

>*If it’s another sinus infection, you know those antihistamines knock her out cold.*

>>*She was fine the last time I saw her, though. Not even a sniffle. I just have this bad feeling...*

The problem with smoothing the edges of a person’s memories was they were still in there. Just not at the surface. With everything that had happened to the girls, and Camber choosing to suppress it, she had a conflict between her conscious mind and her subconscious. She had instincts written into her psyche to match her trauma but nothing to call those impulses but intuition.

>*When did you see her last?*

>> *Yesterday at closing. I had a date, so she took the car, and Niko picked me up at the store.*

> *What about the car?*

>> *I didn't, um, go home last night. I'm not sure if it's in her yard or not. Niko drove me this morning.*

With me too far away to help, and Camber on the verge of a meltdown, we had one choice.

> *Call her mom.*

Careless disregard for others' feelings wasn't like Arden. Which meant I couldn't stop my brain from leaping to the worst possible reason for her silence.

>> *Give me five.*

As if the phone weighed a hundred pounds, my hand dropped, and Asa was there to catch it.

"What's wrong?" He slid his fingers between mine. "Have there been more casualties?"

"Arden called out sick, but she's not answering her phone." Colby jumped from my headrest onto my head. "Camber is worried, so she called Rue."

Annoyance Clay had sent Colby to spy on me warred with gratefulness I didn't have to explain a thing.

>> *Her mom is in Mobile, visiting family. Arden called her last night, but she hasn't heard from her today.*

>> *I'm heading to her house. I'll call when I know more.*

This time of day, Camber would have already closed up the store. She must not have gotten truly worried about Arden until it started getting dark.

> *Thanks.*

Be careful, I almost added, but I didn't want to frighten her.

She had chosen to leave my world behind, but it wasn't letting her go easily. That was the problem with maintaining our friendship. The two halves of my life were always going to

collide at some point, but the girls kept getting crushed in the middle. For their own good, I would have to let them go. Eventually.

Maybe, once the matter of my succession was finalized, I could sign over the shop to them and cut ties.

A blade through the heart would hurt less, but I had to put them first if I expected them to survive.



BLACK HAT SUVs DRANK FUEL THE WAY CLAY TOSSED BACK free homemade lemonade refills. We had to stop for gas before Camber called back, which left me pacing at the pump, ready to ditch work and drive to Samford.

“What’s taking so long?” I tapped my foot on cracked asphalt. “She should know something by now.”

Asa, his shrewd eyes measuring me, asked the question in my heart. “Do you want to head south?”

“We don’t know if anything is wrong with Arden,” I said for myself more than him. “But we know people are dead in Boston and more could join them before we get there, given the amount of king killer Luca brought back with her.”

“That’s not what I asked.” He finished up and cleaned his hands. “Do you want to head south?”

“Not yet.” I chewed my bottom lip until it bled. “Not until I hear back from Camber.”

Unable to wait another minute, I texted her to see what was holding up her call.

> *Well?*

No matter how long I stared at the screen, I got nothing in response, giving me the courage to reach out to Arden for myself.

> *Are you okay?*

Dumb question, given what I had put her through, but no combination of words would mend our fences.

Ten minutes later, when neither had replied, I began calling them with the same grim results.

Seconds from dumping Boston into Asa's lap while I raced home to help Camber search, I jumped a foot in the air when my cell rang, and then I answered before my brain caught up to my finger. "Hollis."

"Where are you?"

The roar of blood in my ears deafened me to everything else, but Asa calmly took the phone from me.

"Hello, Arden." He gave her name special emphasis to drive home it really was her. "This is Asa."

Smarter than me by a mile, he turned on the speaker function so I could hear too.

"Hello." A hard line had been drawn in her tone. "Where is Rue?"

"You frightened a lot of people when you went radio silent," he countered, matching her tone.

"I imagine you frighten a lot of people everywhere you go, Agent Montenegro."

The slight crease in his cheek was all it took to flip my switch as fascination threatened to take the wheel.

"I'm here." I sounded breathless, and I hated that. "Where are you?"

"I'm—" she waited until a blaring announcement finished, "—at Birmingham-Shuttlesworth."

The breath punched out of my lungs, and I dug my nails into Asa's upper arm. "You're at the *airport*?"

Birmingham-Shuttlesworth was in Birmingham, Alabama, a few hours' drive north from Samford.

"We need to talk." A faint hitch in her voice betrayed her. "About you, about Aedan, about everything."

Ready to tell her in no uncertain terms that she was *not* coming to Boston, where Luca had killed sixteen humans—one of which could have been Arden if this call came two days ago—I bit my tongue as Clay rested a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“We’re heading to Boston,” Clay blabbed over me. “You can meet us there.”

As my head and heart warred over whether to kiss him or strangle him, I couldn’t find my voice.

“Have a meal before you board the plane,” Asa warned her. “Don’t eat or drink during the flight or in Boston. Email Rue your itinerary, and we’ll pick you up at the airport.”

“Call Camber and your mom.” I made it an order. “They’re worried sick about you.”

“Okay.”

That was all we got before she ended the call and set her plan into motion.

“You need this.” Clay squeezed my shoulder until bones scraped together. “It sounds like she does too.”

“She’s going to ask about Aedan,” I rasped, throwing my phone at the tire. “What do I tell her?”

“What she’s asking for.” His expression pinched at the corners at my fit of temper. “The truth.”

CHAPTER FOUR



We met Fergal at The Spinnaker, a boutique hotel with a lovely moonlit harbor view that the Bureau, on his suggestion, had booked solid for the next week to give us a base of operations while we worked the poisoning case. Had humans not been targeted, en masse, I might have scaled back our accommodations, but I couldn't afford to botch the first major case with my name on the letterhead and my neck stretched beneath the proverbial guillotine of public opinion.

Thanks to its para owner, and the small fortune we were paying to keep its doors closed to other guests, he gave us run of the place. He even tossed in a dozen para employees to see to our needs and probably to ensure we didn't burn down the hotel. I wasn't sure what he thought they could do to stop a situation that had spun that far out of our control, but I was happy I could call for fresh towels anyway.

To enter the lobby, we had to pass a Bureau checkpoint and verify our identities to their satisfaction.

The poor things paled when they realized who I was, but who I was *not* was my grandfather.

I didn't smite people for doing their jobs, but I doubted they would believe me if I tried reassuring them.

"I have an update," Fergal said in lieu of greeting after we passed the screening.

His focus slid behind me, but Clay, who had ditched us in the parking deck, would be along shortly.

"More bad news then."

“There’s been another poisoning.” He must have read my eagerness to get down to business and led us to a spacious ballroom haunted by the ghosts of weddings past. The nubby carpet sparkled with ground-in glitter and bits of dove-shaped confetti gathered in the corner. “Eight victims and counting, so far.”

The room held seven tables with seven places set at each. We aimed for the one whose dishes had been cleared onto its neighbor, and the three of us plopped down. “In the same area?”

“This restaurant was about five miles from the last one.” Fergal held up a tablet with the locations pinned for us. “We interviewed the staff, spoke to the manager. We don’t have anything concrete yet.”

“What about transference?” Asa folded his arms across his chest, giving him a better look at his wrist for tracking time until Arden touched down. “Any evidence the king killer was kept at the restaurant?”

“None.” Fergal fussed with his tie, loosening it until it hung askew. “Whatsoever.”

“It didn’t appear out of thin air and sprinkle itself on the food.” I leaned in for a better look at the tablet screen. “Where is it coming from?”

“I have an idea about that.” Clay strolled in, lifting a paper bag. “You’ve been served.”

“Don’t eat or drink whatever’s in that bag.” I rose, ready to snatch it out of his hand. “What’s with you?”

“You’ve been *Served*,” he said again, a ring of portent to his words. “As in the food delivery app.”

Slowly, I sank back onto my seat. “You think a takeout courier is responsible?”

“I checked while I was waiting on my order.” He set the bag down and selected a chair. The tender care he took of his right jacket pocket told me where I could find Colby. “Both locations use the app.”

To hear the news ahead of us, he must have been digging around in the cleaners' database as well.

"Why did you order?" I palmed his receipt. "You could have just told us your theory."

"Props speak louder than words." He stuck his head in the bag and inhaled until the buttons on his shirt thought about popping off to roll across the floor. "Plus, I wanted to smell this. I love tacos al pastor from The Green Chili. Their marinated pork is out of this world. Tender, juicy, thinly sliced. Mix in pineapples, onions, and cilantro on a homemade tortilla, and you're as close to heaven as you can get on Earth."

"I smell elote, tamales," Asa said, "and chiles en nogada."

"Chiles en nogada?" I curled my fingers into my palm. "How could you, Clay?"

Poblano peppers stuffed with picadillo, a meat and dried fruit hash, got topped with a rich walnut cream sauce then sprinkled with pomegranate seeds and fresh parsley.

Mmm.

"I didn't think it would be this hard to say no," Clay admitted, his heart in his eyes. "I love you, food." He balled up the bag. "Never doubt what we had was special." He tossed the meal in the trash. "I'll never forget you."

Both of us mourned our empty stomachs and the total waste of probably-wouldn't-have-killed-us food.

"The victims ate *in* the restaurants." Asa checked with Fergal, who nodded, then engaged Clay to keep him from fishing the bag out of the trash. "Do you think a delivery driver is slipping into the kitchen?"

"Most places require the courier to check in *before* they begin preparing the food." He rested his elbows on the table, causing it to tilt. "That gives them a ten- or fifteen-minute window minimum to bum around while they wait. That's plenty of time for the courier to make a wrong turn into the kitchen while looking for a bathroom and sprinkle king killer on any side salads the servers haven't gotten to yet."

“Then the courier picks up their order and leaves a culinary ticking time bomb behind to find its victims.” I frowned at the memory of the innocuous bag plastered with stickers as seals. “In and out in fifteen minutes or less.”

But that kind of randomness made it hard to gauge if humans were the targets or only the casualties.

“Check the surveillance footage.” Asa rapped his knuckles on the table. “We need to know if—”

“Already on it.” Clay patted the jacket pocket I had been thinking of. No doubt his partner in crime was busy isolating the footage with her phone. “We should know if I’m right soon.”

“The Kellies...” Fergal straightened, his gaze sharpening. “I thought they were lost.”

Their bodies hadn’t been recovered, but neither of them was likely to have survived drowning based on their species and their location within the compound. Even though they’d betrayed me, I still mourned the loss. They hadn’t had a choice, not really, and I understood that. They just made easy targets for blame.

The pair of them had been the oil greasing the Black Hat machine, and they ran things smoothly. Their loss was a blow to the day-to-day operations. We would have to rely on the cleaners’ database for intel on our cases until we had replacements for the Kellies who could update and maintain ours.

“I enlisted the help of an independent contractor we’ve used on previous cases.” Clay twitched his lips. “She’s a rare talent and has generously volunteered to lend a hand until the Bureau is back on its feet.”

“Pass along her contact information when you get a chance.” Fergal grunted. “I can use all the help I can get with my research backlog. Most of the systems the Kellies put in place are automated, but many of the higher security levels require a manual override to access the full case file.”

“Huh.” I drummed my fingers on the table. “I didn’t realize that.”

“The Kellies kept things seamless.” His mouth thought about smiling but vetoed it. “That’s why.”

As a professional courtesy, vampires tended to avoid flashing their teeth at those around them to make them comfortable. Fergal would lose that habit quick if he hung out with this crowd much longer. He wasn’t as casual as Isiforos with us yet, but he had loosened up. For a vampire.

“I’ll see what I can do.” A calculating glint sparked in Clay’s eyes. “About *my* contractor.”

For the briefest moment, I could picture Colby looming over a room filled with nothing but wide screens and flashing CPUs and—whatever else it took to make a computer go—cackling like a hyena at a comedy roast. That kid would dedicate her life to the Bureau, if we let her. And she would end up trapped in that fancy room with all those shiny toys for the rest of her days, just like the Kellies, because the work never stopped for us. You had to erect boundaries if you wanted any semblance of a personal life.

That didn’t mean I was opposed to her and Clay getting their hands dirty in the rebuilding of our central nervous system. It was the chance of a lifetime, and I would pay good money to watch that kid do her thing. And, okay, fine. I was in it for the little moth cackles during the frenzied online shopping spree while she tossed as much in her cart as it would hold like the money came with a time limit.

Or maybe that was Clay’s fault for letting her watch too many episodes of *Grocery A-Go-Go*, where the contestants got to keep as many groceries as they could dump in their buggy within sixty seconds.

“You do that.” I kicked Clay under the table. “Make sure you check with her boss first.”

The tech temptation aside, Colby would do anything for Clay. I didn’t want her filling the Kellies’ shoes unless she wanted the job. And I didn’t want to ask until I could put a

firm timeline on when she would hand it off to someone else to maintain. Someone else, a team, most likely. I didn't want us in this spot again, reliant on two individuals for every single little thing.

"I'll do that." Clay snorted, kicking me right back. "Speaking of *my* contact, she's just sent the footage."

The latest app she developed made editing video a breeze, or so I was told. All I knew was, she was fast.

"You can use any of the big screens." Fergal flicked his wrist toward the monitors. "We have plenty."

They must have been intended for live broadcasting during ceremonies, conferences, and parties.

"Give me five." Clay rose and unbuttoned his jacket. "Then we'll see what we see."

While he went to connect his phone via Bluetooth to a display, I caught Asa checking his watch.

Eyebrows on the rise, I asked, "How are we doing on time?"

Call me crazy, but I think he was more nervous about meeting with Arden than me, if that was possible. I bet our reasons were different, though. He would be worrying about me, how I would fare after she said her piece, but I was fretting over her, and how fast I could get her butt back on a plane heading home.

"Fine." He managed a tight smile. "We've got two hours."

"Am I holding you up?" Fergal squared his shoulders. "I can handle this alone if you need to go."

"Not at all." I didn't explain since I intended for Arden's visit to last only as long as it took me to treat her to coffee that came in a plastic bottle with a seal and purchase a new ticket. "We're good."

"Got it." Clay waved us over to where he had set up our viewing. "Here we go."

Footage of the first restaurant flickered to life on screen, revealing a bustling lunch crowd jostling for a quick bite before heading back to work. The angle was perfect, giving us a clear view of the counter, plus the front door and everyone who entered or exited the building.

“*My contractor,*” Clay bragged, “cut the recording to a fifteen-minute window indicated by the receipts.”

Goddess bless.

Somehow this was more obnoxious than him rubbing the fact Colby was his new bestie in my face.

A traitorous smile threatening his mouth, Asa took my hand in a show of support. Or maybe it was to prevent me from smacking the golem upside his smug head. Hard to tell.

“Pause it.” Asa pointed out two men carrying boxy insulated bags designed to keep their orders piping hot. “The one on the left is a Served courier, but who is that on the right?”

Since the food delivery services didn’t require uniforms, he wore casual clothes, just like his counterpart. I would have pegged him for a customer if not for the bag.

“Good eye.” I studied the screen, but the fabric was a dull red-and-white pattern. “Anyone see a logo?”

“No identifying marks so far,” Clay said, restarting the footage. “Keep your eyes peeled.”

We watched a few more minutes, but either the bag had no markings or the courier was hiding them.

“Check with the restaurants,” Asa suggested. “See how many of these services they’ve partnered with.”

Nodding along with the idea, I concurred. “That ought to tell us who this guy represents.”

“I doubt the person we’re looking for used their real name to register.” Clay studied both drivers’ faces. “You can sign up to work from home, pass a few quizzes, and you’re hired. The company sends out a package with the bag and credentials.”

“That assumes they’re with a company,” Asa pointed out. “They could have purchased a generic bag from a grocery store. By showing up during lunch rush, the courier ensured the staff would be too busy to notice any small inconsistencies.”

“The guy checked in,” I recalled. “He had an order or credentials that passed muster.”

“Nan could have thrown up a website and created her own faux delivery service in her sleep,” Clay said. “It would explain why he had an order waiting.” His lips twisted. “Luca really did think of everything.”

“So, even if we get the name of the delivery service, it won’t matter.” I exhaled. “Let’s try anyway.”

Gaze touching on the trash can, Asa said, “A citywide ban on food delivery might be our only option.”

“We do that, and things get ugly fast,” I muttered, not relishing the logistics of making it happen.

Though we had a better shot of achieving that than closing restaurants until the threat had passed.

“People do love their delivery,” Clay conceded, “which makes this attack especially heinous.”

“Not the bodies piling up,” I drawled, “but the fact you can’t order in.”

Teasing helped lift the mood, but if we (and by we, I meant Colby) had to freeze those apps to save lives, I would be forced to lean on the local police to help enforce the ban. Which could get sticky fast without an ironclad excuse for commandeering their patrolmen and women.

“There he goes,” Fergal cut in, drawing our attention back on point. “He’s headed for the restrooms.”

The unmarked courier was, indeed, going down the hall, which included a cutout into the kitchen.

“Why do so many restaurant kitchens intersect bathroom hallways?” Clay wrinkled his nose. “It’s gross.”

“I can’t say I’ve ever thought about it,” I confessed as the man ducked into the kitchen.

Not ten seconds later, he stumbled out, hands raised, laughing as he indicated the men’s room.

The woman who stood in the kitchen doorway did not look amused and appeared to rip him a new one.

“Find her.” I tapped the screen. “She had direct contact with this guy.”

“I’ll get my team on it immediately.” Fergal palmed his phone. “I’ll be right back.”

As he walked away to make his calls, the rest of us huddled together to rewatch the footage.

The Served courier never moved from his post by the front counter, so we marked him off the list.

After a furtive glance at Clay’s pocket, Asa asked, “Do you have the footage from the second location?”

“Does Shorty strike you as the underachieving type?” He shot me a mock glare. “*My girl delivers.*”

Okay, I had let him have his fun, but it was time to rein him in before I erased his *shem*.

“Clay.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I know the secret location of Fort Lox.”

“Locks?” Asa glanced between us. “As in long and flowing?”

Betrayal darkened Clay’s expression, and he clutched his chest. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“L-O-X,” I explained. “It’s what he calls the safehouse for his wig collection.”

Lifting a finger to his lips, Clay snarled, “Shut your piehole.”

“It would be a pity if anyone discovered its coordinates, and the safe passcode, in an online forum.”

“Forums are dead,” Colby whispered from his pocket. “No one would see it there.”

“Hush,” he hissed at her then slapped his hands into a praying position. “I’ll behave, Rue, I swear.”

“I doubt it.” I sensed Asa’s gaze and could guess his question. “He said L-O-C-K-S was too obvious.”

“Somehow,” he said, “that reasoning from Clay doesn’t surprise me.”

“We should have answers soon.” Fergal tapped his phone across his palm. “Did you find anything else?”

“No,” Asa admitted, then threw us under the bus. “These two got sidetracked.”

“Hey.” I punched his shoulder. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“I am.” He cupped my cheek. “I’m also trying to get you to the airport on time.”

Under any other circumstances, I would have kissed his palm, but I was trying to be professional here.

“Go on.” Clay heaved a sigh up from his toes and covered his eyes. “Be disgustingly in love.”

A low chuckle escaped Fergal as he found somewhere else to look.

Awkward.

When I glanced over to Asa for support, he was fighting a smile that didn’t help one bit.

For however long it lasted, Asa, Clay, and I were the top people in the Black Hat.

May the goddess have mercy on the Bureau’s souls.

CHAPTER FIVE



The second restaurant had been visited by the same unmarked delivery service as the first. The couriers, both male, likely black witches, were different, but their bags were identical. Just a generic delivery vibe.

Colby had edited that video in record time, but it hadn't given us any additional leads.

With an hour between the poisonings, Luca had switched things up in case a description was making the rounds, but she needn't have bothered. The years she spent hiding in the compound, building her coven of black witch malcontents, had left us playing catch-up to her.

"We have an ID on the chef who interacted with our unsub," Clay read off his phone. "She's waiting."

"At the restaurant?" I gave up on the math of it. "How long has she been there?"

"Not that restaurant." Clay chuckled. "At one of those Molten Mochas, that new coffee chain."

"We have time," I assured Asa before he could flash his wrist again. "This won't take long."

The hesitation before he nodded told me he wasn't blind, that he saw I was pushing the envelope.

I hated that he read me so easily. That he saw my fear and understood its roots. But I also loved that one other person in the world knew me, warts and all, and wasn't afraid. Of me. Of my past. Of my future.

Of the girl who would soon be waiting for us at the airport...

We left Fergal at the hotel, which gave Colby the chance to stretch her wings.

By that, I mean she took turns dive-bombing each of us with wild abandon, leaving us to playfully bat the air and shriek until she was laughing so hard from her reign of terror that she touched down on Asa's shoulder to catch her breath.

We reached the coffee bar in short order, a nice bonus, since it put us that much closer to the airport.

Before we reached the counter to place an order, a short woman with sharp eyes and slicked-back pigtailed wearing a blue racerback top with black yoga pants shoved past. She didn't stop, just made a hand gesture indicating to follow her.

She hustled outside, pulled out a vape pen, and her eyebrows rose in silent question.

Of all the things likely to kill us, secondhand vape fumes, while annoying, wasn't it. "Knock yourself out."

After an inhalation that would impress even Meg, she exhaled thick plumes of white smoke from her nose.

"We're with the FBI. You spoke to our associate on the phone." Asa flashed his badge to make things official. "We have some questions for you about one particular interaction on the day of the contamination."

Contamination.

That was the key word.

Rather than admit to a string of intentional poisonings, humans had been given a more mundane excuse for the deaths. A foodborne illness outbreak. Probably E. coli or salmonella.

"The delivery guy." Her lips crimped into a hard line. "I haven't stopped thinking about that asshole."

"We have reason to believe the courier was responsible for intentionally contaminating the food."

“You escorted him from the kitchen.” Asa observed her. “Were you the one who caught him?”

“I was performing quality checks on the plates coming out of the kitchen when I saw him leaning over a row of salads.” Her next drag was sharp. “We get a few drivers who filch orders from swanky places, like ours or Kabba Kabba, to eat while they wait. I ran him off, but I didn’t see him tamper with the food. Obviously, I would have grabbed him by the ear and hauled him in front of the manager if I had.”

The name-dropping perked my ears. “You know about Kabba Kabba?”

“We all talk.” She bobbed a shoulder. “You know how it is.”

That would explain why she wasn’t shocked when I suggested a courier was to blame.

Through the smoke, she looked us up and down. “You can catch this guy, right?”

“We’re working on it,” Asa assured her. “Kabba was hit by a different courier.”

“There’s more than one of them?” The flush in her cheeks faded to ash. “Why are they doing it?”

“We don’t know yet.” I wish to the goddess that I did. “We haven’t discovered their motive.”

“Now this makes more sense.” She dug around in a pocket. “Lacey—my wife—told me to give her card to anyone from the Bureau who showed up asking questions. That’s the only reason I agreed to this meeting. I thought it was an odd ask, but I humored her.” She glanced up at us. “When I heard about the second restaurant, I worried another bad batch of romaine was floating around the city.” She handed it over. “I should have known Lacey never does anything without a reason.”

“Thanks.” I took it from her. “We’ll touch base if we require more information.”

Snatching the card from my fingers, Clay asked, “Your wife is a police captain?”

That might explain why she was quick to agree to an interview, but it stuck with me that her wife had specified *the Bureau* rather than *the FBI*. With Captain Peters in law enforcement, maybe it was simply shorthand for them the same as us. Maybe.

“Yeah.” She put away her vape pen. “I should get home.” She jerked her thumb toward the parking lot. “I hope you find who did this.”

“We will,” I promised her. “Don’t worry about that.”

Once she was safely in her car, we returned to the SUV, and I gave Clay his assignment.

“Have *your* contractor run the captain’s credentials.” I didn’t have to check the time to know we had to get moving if we wanted to beat Arden to the baggage claim. “I’m interested in why she’s interested in us.”

“The paper smells like fur,” Asa offered as he slid into traffic. “Canid would be my guess.”

“You think she’s a warg?” I turned that over in my head. “She could prove useful.”

“The scent is too sharp for a warg.” Clay inhaled along the card’s edge. “I’m betting fox.”

“Anyone with a badge and a sharp nose would be useful on this case.”

A text chime drew my attention to my phone, which was stuck in my pocket.

>>*Got her?*

>*Heading to the airport now.*

>>*Let me know she got in safe.*

>*I’ll tell her to call.*

>>*Love you.*

>*Love you too.*

“Camber,” I explained, though I was sure they could guess even without a moth on my shoulder.

“Maybe if Arden sees you in action,” Clay reasoned, “she’ll be quicker to forgive you.”

“She understands why I did what I did.” She was smart like that. “The trouble is forgiving I did it to her.”

And Camber, who had teetered so close to breaking in the moment, had chosen to surrender all she knew of my world to live snugly in hers without the fear prodding Arden to get on a plane and fly out to greet monsters.

“She has more than one confrontation in mind,” Asa murmured. “She won’t take Aedan’s absence well.”

“She didn’t take his presence well either,” I bit out and then regretted it. “That’s not fair of me.”

Her condemnation might have made choosing to sacrifice himself easier, but acceptance wouldn’t have changed his mind. He was too determined to pay me back for nurturing a healthy relationship with him, like it was a bill come due, one he had always expected to pay.

It was, and always would be, my fault. Not hers. Not his either.

“I can see you blaming yourself.” Clay tapped the spot between my eyes. “Stop it.”

“You stop it.” I swatted his hand. “Don’t you have a call to make?”

With Black Hat in turmoil, we could use all the local help we could get. Warg, fox, or otherwise. And Clay was just the golem to sweet-talk Captain Peters into cooperating with us.

CHAPTER SIX



*H*ad Arden not walked right up to me as a nearby luggage carousel hummed to life, I wouldn't have recognized her in a million years. Even then, I might have fumbled if not for the bold ID tag on her duffle.

From the fit of her clothes, I could tell she had put on weight, and every ounce was muscle. The way she carried herself was different than the girl I knew too. More confident. More defiant. Just...more.

Her khaki cargo pants were slim fit, and her simple white tee showed off taut arms and a flat stomach. The color and cut of her hair had changed too. At its longest point, the pixie cut left less than a finger length of hair on her head. That stunned me, but the platinum dye job struck me mute.

"Hi." I wasn't sure what to do with my hands—or my feelings—so I kept them to myself. "Welcome."

"Thanks for agreeing to this." She adjusted a backpack that bulged at the seams on her shoulder. "I wasn't sure you would."

"I'm always here for you." I kept my palms pressed flat to my thighs. "You must know that."

A slight nod, barely more than a twitch in her neck, mostly confirmed she trusted me that much at least.

"I need to check in with Mom and Camber." She ruffled her new 'do. "Let them know I'm with you."

Still on his call with Peters but hearing every word, Clay nodded he would keep an eye on Arden for me.

“Okay.” I gave her room to step around Asa and me. “We’ll wait here.”

As she meandered through the crowd, Asa wrapped an arm around my waist and tugged me flush against him.

“I don’t like this.” I took comfort in his familiar tart green apple scent as I breathed him in. “She’s changed a lot in a short period of time.”

“She’s been working out, not to bulk up, but to hone her body. She’s petite, but she’s strong for her size. She kept up her self-defense lessons too.” He kissed my temple. “Only fighters move like that.”

His quick assessment reminded me he was used to sizing up the competition, and I valued his opinion.

“The freebies in town didn’t do that to her.” I watched her march while she reported in, and that was how her body language read: militant. “She’s been taking lessons. Private ones. To come so far so fast.”

“She’s coping,” he soothed. “We don’t get to decide how that looks for her.”

As much as I wished otherwise, he was right. “I don’t trust her showing up like this looking like that.”

The purpose in her stride, the alertness in her eyes. None of it came natural to the sweet girl I had known.

“Clay might have a point,” he mused. “Perhaps a ridealong is a good idea.”

“You want me to expose her to *more* of our world? To the Bureau? To *us*?” I choked on hysterical laughter bubbling up from my core. “I love you, but you must be out of your ever-loving mind.”

“Perhaps.” He appeared to come to a decision. “Have you considered letting her speak to an agent?”

“I’m also now concerned about your hearing.” I pulled away from him. *“Let her speak to an agent?”*

“A specially curated one.” He flicked his gaze to the ceiling. “Or two.”

“That’s it. You’re getting another MRI. Clearly, they missed something last time.”

“Two names.”

“No and no.”

“Tibby Garnier and Eliza Toussaint.”

“The last Lazarus witch and her black witch girlfriend?”

“Two girls about her age that she might relate to better, especially since she’s never met them.”

They were out of state, training with others in their age group, but they were due back soon.

“She could vent to them.” I saw where this was heading. “And they could champion me.”

“Do you still think I need another MRI?”

“The jury is out.” I tugged on his shirt. “But I am less worried iron fragments migrated to your brain.”

Ten minutes later, sipping water from her bag, Arden approached us. “Where do we go from here?”

Good question.

I was wondering the same thing.

“Depends.” I indicated for her to start walking. “What did you have in mind?”

“I want to see...more...I guess.” She knitted her brow. “I want to put things into perspective.”

“How will Camber cover your shifts while you’re gone? She managed today, but it’s asking a lot of her to work solo when you didn’t actually ask her in the first place.” I hadn’t meant for it to come out so harsh, but it was foolish for Arden to leave town without telling anyone. “Dotha?”

“That’s the plan.” Her expression held not one ounce of regret. “They can handle things for a week.”

“*A week?*” I clamped my mouth shut before I said something I would regret then regrouped. “Okay.”

Asa, his concern for her evident, echoed me. “Okay?”

“I’m in.” Clay, who had wrapped up his call and rejoined us, winked at her. “Let’s do this.”

“You have no common sense.” I ran my fingers through my hair, yanking on the roots. “None.”

“Hurt people hurt people,” he said sagely. “That’s why I forgive you.”

“There are rules.” Asa rested his hand on the small of my back as he addressed Arden. “Follow them, or we send you home.” He moved his palm higher, to my shoulders. “Rue sets them, for you and us.”

“Okay.” Arden hiked her bag up her shoulder. “That’s fair.”

We exited the airport under a cloud. Or maybe it was just me waiting for the bottom to drop out.

The quiet walk was a good thing. It gave me a chance to come up with ground rules for her, and for us, since she chose the absolute worst time *ever* to decide on an impromptu visit. Had I not been responsible for the circumstances that brought her here, I would never have allowed her to stay. But this was all on me. I had to make this right. I couldn’t keep lying to myself that her wounds would heal on their own. Maybe if she got a quick reality check amid the chaos, she would go home sooner.

Once we piled into the SUV, Clay and Arden sharing the backseat, Colby climbed out of his pocket.

As my heart shot into my throat, I talked myself down by reminding myself they had already met.

“Mind if I join?” Colby clung to the fabric. “I can stay in, if you guys want privacy.”

“Come on out.” I trained my gaze on her tiny form. “Size up too.”

Until Arden got used to a moth-sized person underfoot, Colby was safer in her cat-sized form.

The fascination spreading across Arden’s face was a huge improvement over her previous anger at Colby for defending me, and my choices. But I couldn’t hold it against her. Everyone had their limit, and Arden had been shoved past hers the last time they butted heads over me.

A quiver in Colby’s wings telegraphed her nerves, but she put on a brave face, swelled in size, and faced Arden, willing to play verbal punching bag if the other girl needed an outlet. “Hello again.”

“I owe you an apology,” Arden said earnestly. “I lashed out at you the first time we met, and you didn’t deserve that.”

None of the adults breathed while the girls mended fences, afraid one wrong word from any of us would shatter their truce. The thud of my heart in my ears made eavesdropping nearly impossible.

Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-bump.

A soft giggle sliced through my building anxiety as the girls began chatting about planes and traveling.

I jerked when Asa slid his hand into mine, the gentle flex of his fingers almost squeezing out fresh tears. I had to pull myself together. This was pathetic. How was I going to play director if I was a sniffling mess? I hadn’t done anything, hadn’t solved anything, but to hear their voices pitched low in conversation made my chest ache like I had run a marathon.

This was the real Arden. Sweet, thoughtful, polite. Time had given her a fresh perspective on Colby, that much was clear, and I was grateful she was pardoning her for my crimes.

The harsh ring of Clay’s phone saved me from my feelings, thank the goddess, and he answered quickly.

“This is Peters,” she clipped out on the speaker function. “We need to meet.”

“Hmm.” He drummed his fingers on his knee. “When did you have in mind?”

“Now.”

“Direct. I like it. Hold on.” He locked gazes with me. “Let me check with the boss.”

Every pair of eyes in the SUV fixed on me, waiting to see if I was really in this, but I had allowed Arden to come. We agreed to pull back the curtain, and now it was time to show her the truth. A world where she was prey, powerless against the supernatural might of the creatures she met. “Okay.”

A ripple of shock went out as the others gave me a second to take it back, but I clamped my jaw shut.

“We’re in,” Clay reported back to Peters. “Where is good for you?”

“You’re staying at The Spinnaker, right?”

“If you’re asking,” he countered, “then you already know the answer.”

Husky laughter was her reply, and I rolled my shoulders to shrug off the knowledge she had eyes on us.

“See you in ten.” She didn’t leave him room to comment. “That’s plenty of time from the airport.”

Once he got off the phone, he handed it to Colby. “Do you mind running a malware scan?”

Under her breath, Colby muttered about Clay and his free Wi-Fi addiction, which I interpreted as he could have been infected while using an unsecured network. Say, from the restaurant where we met Peter’s wife. But that was sketchy for a police captain.

“She’s tracking you?” Arden frowned in response to our tension. “Why would she do that?”

“Alphas tend to keep an eye on other predators in their territories.” Asa met her eyes in the rearview mirror. “Peters might not be the alpha of a pack, but she’s an alpha at her job. The same rules apply.”

“Alpha?” Her eyes shot wide open. “Like a wolf?” They kept growing and growing. “Like a *werewolf*?”

“They prefer the term *warg*,” Colby murmured, fingers flying. “They’re not as scary as horror movie werewolves.”

“Have you seen Marita eat?” Clay gave a full-body shudder. “It’s terrifying.”

“You know were—wargs?” Arden parted her lips. “Wait.” She tilted her head. “I’ve met Marita.”

“Marita *thinks* she’s Rue’s best friend,” Clay informed her. “Marita is also, sadly, a victim of rabies.”

“*Clay.*” I spluttered out a laugh. “That’s a terrible thing to say.”

“Your phone is clean,” Colby interrupted. “Peters isn’t tracking us through you.”

More than likely, she had packmates on our tail. That I could respect. As long as they maintained their distance and didn’t interfere with the investigation, I wouldn’t complain. Not if it meant Peters’s cooperation.

“Do you need to check ours?” I twisted to face her. “I can get Asa’s for you.”

“You only want an excuse to—” Clay slapped a hand over his big mouth to buy a second to rethink his life choices, “—do the right thing.”

Chuckling under my breath, I fell silent when Arden stared at me. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just...” A line bisected her forehead. “How long have you known each other?”

“A few decades.” I twisted my fingers into pretzels on my lap. “He was my partner, once upon a time.”

She was treading close to the inevitable question of how old I was, how long I would live, all that fun stuff. But as I sat there, waiting, she backed off. Probably deciding she wasn’t ready to know. That was good. Smart, really. The only way to

open your mind to infinite possibilities was to crack open the door slowly.

Whatever else she might have asked got cut short when Isiforos called with an update for us.

“Six victims reclaimed from quadrant four,” he reported. “Two of those will most likely regenerate.”

Because I had to ask, I forced out the question. “The director?”

“No sign of him.” He pushed out a long breath. “We’re fingerprinting everyone as we pull them from the water and running a tally of names. We’re fielding a lot of calls from family, colleagues, and friends.” The wind screamed over the connection. “We need to organize a call center. The tipline is already ringing off the hook, and the volume grows as word about the compound spreads.”

Before I agreed, I checked with Clay, who checked with Colby, who gave me a mothy thumbs-up.

“We’ll send an email, round up some tech-savvy agents from surrounding cities, and draft them for you.” I should have thought of it sooner. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

“A quote for the T-shirts,” he joked. “Does Aedan have a catchphrase?”

A tremble along Arden’s jaw betrayed her reaction at hearing his name, but she didn’t push for details.

“I’ll think on it.” I angled myself facing forward to avoid seeing her hurt. “I’m on my way to a meeting.”

“I won’t hold you up then.”

Dread swam through my veins as I waited for her to ask about the shirts, about Aedan, but her face remained blank. I let myself exhale with relief that we could avoid that sensitive topic for a while longer.

“The hotel’s not far.” I toyed with my seat belt. “Time for us to lay down those rules Asa mentioned.”

“Rule number one,” Colby, always ahead of the curve, beat me to the first and most important thing to remember. “Tell no one that I exist. Rue will kill to protect my secret. She won’t like it, but she’ll do it.”

Arden laughed.

My little moth girl...did not.

CHAPTER SEVEN



We barely made it through the front door at The Spinnaker before Fergal strolled out to greet us, his gaze straying to Arden. His nostrils flared as he took in her scent, and a wrinkle gathered across his brow.

The low growl rumbling out of Asa convinced my lieutenant to ignore the unfamiliar human in our midst. And *everyone* would know she was human. Paras had excellent noses, and humans appeared on more than one faction's food pyramid. Fergal's, for example. Hence the warning from Asa she was not a meal.

"Captain Peters is waiting for you in Ballroom Two." He lingered a beat. "Do you require my assistance?"

"Film the meeting." I had no doubt there were security cameras. If not before Black Hat occupation, then definitely after. "We don't know her, and we don't know what she wants. A record would be good."

"I'll see that it's done." He inclined his head. "Call if you require anything else."

Once he returned to the makeshift control room, we navigated to the correct door with help from maps plastered across the walls. The lowest level was a maze of ballrooms, and they were all out of sequence. How many conventions did they expect to occur simultaneously to require this much space?

The captain rose when I pushed open the door. She was tall and lean with long blonde hair and dark eyes. But she didn't

circle around to shake my hand. A power play. Cute. I bet it even worked with her officers.

“We’re in a bit of a crisis, as you might have noticed.” I took the chair across the table from her. “I don’t have much time for unscheduled meetings.”

“I have five comatose lioness shifters and two kitsunes on life support, so I’m not sitting on my thumbs here.”

What had Asa said about ingesting king killer? That the black witches’ deaths were fast and painless but that when used on fae, it was the equivalent of a human drinking bleach. Vomiting, diarrhea, low blood pressure, respiratory failure, abnormal heart rhythms, and then acute liver failure.

The fact the shifters were alive meant their supernatural healing was working overtime, but I wasn’t sure it would be enough as I recalled what else he told us.

There was no cure.

Peters reclaimed her seat, but Clay and Arden remained standing, backs to the walls, eyes on the door.

“We’re sorry to hear that.” Asa, ever the diplomat, stepped into his role as deputy director between one breath and the next. “Are they counted in the tally we’ve already received?”

“No.” She set a folder on the table and pushed it toward me. “They weren’t discovered until a few hours ago. The paperwork will be uploaded into our database soon, but I have a hard copy for you.”

Given an hour or so, Colby could snag what we needed, but this was a good start. “Thanks.”

“The reason I gave my wife that card was I knew Black Hat would come, and I wanted to tell you that it’s going to get ugly out there. Rumors are swirling that the director is dead. That the compound was blown off its cliff. That your agents are running wild.” She knocked on the table. “The paras in Boston are afraid of this influx of agents, and if they think no one has them leashed, they will see threats where there are none and react badly. You need to write a statement and send it

out, let us know what the hell is going on with you and if it's safe to trust your people in our cities."

"Maybe dial back the aggression a few notches." Clay spread his hands. "We're all friends here."

"Does your charm usually work on women?" Her eyes flung daggers at him. "It doesn't work on me."

"I'm a charmer of women, men, and one time there was this giant purple—"

"Nope." I yanked the plug before he got his story going. "This is not the time or place."

"I'm a cop, and I'm married to a woman in the food service industry." She slanted me a pitying glance. "There's nothing he can say that will scare me."

"Your wife knows you're...?" Arden tipped her chin. "Sorry to blurt it out like that."

"You're fine, kid." Peters gentled her tone, just a smidge. "How could I protect her if she didn't know the truth? Lies aren't the foundation for a healthy relationship, and that's before you mix in the dangers of a loved one living in ignorance of what's out there. I wanted her to love me. All of me. Without that trust, that honesty, how would I know if any of it was real?"

"Good question." Arden bumped her shoulder blades against the wall. "Thanks for answering me."

"You're new." Peters cracked a weathered smile. "You've got that wild-eyed look about you."

"Oh." A flush hit Arden's cheeks, and she dipped her chin. "I thought I was hiding it well."

"I'm a shifter." Peters tapped the side of her nose. "I can smell your nerves more than see your anxiety." She linked her hands on the table. "Shifters tend to marry humans more often than other factions. I've seen the *oh shit* face on a ton of people who thought their sweetie proposing was the biggest shock of their lives."

“How often do the humans say *yes*, after they know everything?”

“About a third.” She reached in her pocket and pulled out a business card. “If you’re looking to get into a relationship with a para and you want someone to talk to about it, you can call my niece, Riley.” She slid the card to me, giving me the choice whether to pass it on. “She went through a nasty breakup after a two-year relationship. The guy was a selkie and never told her. Just threw on his skin and left one day.”

“I don’t know what a selkie is,” Arden admitted, her cheeks going pink, “but I do know what a douchebag is, and it sounds like he was one.” She walked over and claimed the card before I could decide if I would have given it to her. “I could use a friend, and it sounds like she could too. Thanks.”

“No problem.” Peters lost that bit of softness as she refocused on me. “I’ve said all I came to say, and I’ve seen what I need to see to back your moves.” She planted her palms on the table and shoved onto her feet. “Do yourself a favor and arm everyone else with the information to do the same.”

“In the spirit of arming allies with information,” I suggested, “you should look at the Lyonne coven out of Beverly.”

Beverly, Massachusetts, was only forty minutes away from here, and Kenneth Cale, Luca’s new lover, and a member of the Lyonne coven, had led us on scavenger hunt through King’s Chapel Burying Ground. He was the reason Asa and I had ended up in Faerie while the compound crumbled into the ocean.

“You think they’re involved in the poisonings?”

“I can vouch that they have the herb in their possession, and they’re connected to the supplier.”

“You should have led with that.”

With that final rebuke, she left us to marinate in her demands.

“I like her.” Arden rubbed the card between her fingers. “She’s tough, but she seems fair.”

“I like her too,” I confessed, “but you can’t let your heart make these kinds of decisions.”

The director had drummed it into my head at a young age that showing weakness was to bare your throat and ask for someone with bigger teeth to rip it out, but maybe Peters had done me a favor by widening my focus from the immediate impact radius to include the entire network that depended on the Bureau to keep their people safe.

How sad was it that it had never occurred to me our allies could be reassured with something as simple as open communication?

“A formal announcement isn’t a bad idea.” I smoothed my thumb across the polished tabletop. “What do you think, Deputy Director?”

“As the Director of Fun,” Clay butted in, “I think it’s a great idea for damage control on our image.”

“I agree with the...Director of Fun...that if we get ahead of this, we can spin it to our advantage.” Asa let a brief smile grace his lips. “There is one thing you possess that would reassure the masses, but it would cost you. Perhaps more than any of us are willing to pay.”

Proving yet again that our brains fired in similar patterns, I exhaled. “My name.”

“How can that help?” Arden drifted closer now that we were alone. “Everyone knows you’re Rue Hollis.”

“I meant my birth name.” I forced myself to lift my gaze to hers. “Rue Hollis is...the realest name I’ve ever had, but I wasn’t born to it.” I cast a spell to allow us to speak freely, and it was as easy as breathing with all the practice I’d had. “The Director of the Black Hat Bureau is—was?—my grandfather.”

The admission had a subtle impact, but she couldn’t grasp the scope of that damning confession.

We didn’t have time for a full history lesson, but I filled in the gaping holes in her knowledge of me with as little fanfare as possible.

“You’re the rightful heir of the supernatural FBI,” she said sometime later, “and Asa is the prince of Hael.”

“I *was* the prince.” His gaze skimmed the room, like a *y’nai* might jump out and attack him for mentioning his former position, but they were gone. For good. “I’m Rue’s second-in-command now.”

“Unless this director guy turns up,” she followed along, “and then what?”

Then we publicly mourned his death while tying a big red bow on his head in private.

“We take him to visit his ex,” I said, “and we let them have the happily ever after they both deserve.”

And, if we were very lucky, we walked away with Aedan in exchange for making Calixta’s revenge fantasies come true. But Arden hadn’t asked me about him yet, and I wasn’t ready to give her—or myself—false hope on that front.

A knock on the door interrupted our history lesson, and I released the spell as Fergal stepped in.

“Captain Peters called just now,” he told us. “She reported four more missing shifters.”

“I thought we had already run down all the patrons exposed to the king killer and determined they were human?” I got to my feet, itching to pace. “How did these paras slip through the cracks?”

“Group orders.” He had his answer ready. “The missing shifters all work downtown. They put in a group order for lunch, and a human coworker picked it up from the second restaurant.”

“How sure are we that Luca is targeting humans?” Asa rose slower. “We made that assumption based on the original victims, but if a courier is sprinkling king killer on any food they can reach in an open kitchen, then humans might not be the primary goal. They may only be the first casualties.”

“You’re right.” I yanked my hair into a ponytail. “And if you are, then goddess help us.”

“The restaurants are human owned.” Clay checked his phone, reading information that must have come from Colby, who was stuck in his pocket again. “Their staff is also human.” He started scrolling. “According to our records, there are tons of shifter owned and operated restaurants. Same goes for a dozen other factions. Plus, the establishments that are a fifty-fifty mix of para and human staff.”

Rolling an earring between his fingers, Asa agreed. “Ample opportunity to target other factions.”

“That tells us Luca is willing to kill anyone who gets in her way, which, honestly, can’t come as a surprise to anyone. She may not be after paras, but she’s not heartbroken if a few get caught in the crossfire.” As I strode toward the door, I had to wonder. “What is her end game?”

“No one knows you guys exist.” Arden fell in beside me. “If this Luca person is killing humans, it’ll be splashed all over the news. This isn’t something you can contain.” She chewed her bottom lip. “Everyone will hear about it.”

Had Luca made this move before blasting the compound to smithereens, I would have understood her motives better. She could have used the threat of revealing us to the humans as leverage to get close to the director and finish what they started all those years ago. But now? What was the point?

The compound had been obliterated, the Bureau stood on shaky ground, and the director...

Maybe that was it. Maybe she knew he was alive. Maybe this was how she meant to flush him out.

But for that to be true, she must be certain he had survived, and we had yet to confirm that.

“We’ve faced worse odds.” Clay gave a winning smile. “We can beat these too.”

An agent skidded to a stop outside the door and locked eyes with me. “You’ve got a call, Director.”

“Clay, start drafting our announcement.” I crooked my finger at Asa. “You’re with me.”

“Let me grab a laptop out of the SUV.” Clay backed up a step. “Arden, you stick with me.”

“All those years in customer service have prepared me for this moment,” she joked, and I swear I felt the weight of the world slide an inch off my shoulder. “I’m a pro at soothing upset customers.”

Except Hollis Apothecary clients weren’t as likely to eat your face as the recipients of that letter.

The jittery agent led me to a landline phone, which meant whoever had called knew exactly where to find me. I could count the number of people on one hand who had that intel, and I had spoken to one not ten minutes earlier. “Hollis.”

“Hey.” Isiforos competed with high winds to be heard. “We found something.”

For him to update me again so soon, it must be something big. “Why didn’t you call my cell?”

“I dropped mine in the ocean.” He hissed out an exhale. “I bet I’ve missed a million texts from Dad.”

“And you couldn’t remember my number?” I laughed softly. “The digital age has rotted our brains.”

“I’m just grateful my phone backs up to the cloud,” he lamented. “My whole life is on there.”

Mark my words, that was how the para world would be exposed to humans. In a data breach.

“What were you doing in the water?” I thought about his limp. “You were supposed to be supervising.”

“Can you hear me?” He cursed under his breath. “There’s a storm moving in. We’re about to evacuate to the tents. We can’t hold the shore in this weather.” The raging wind muted between one breath and the next. He must have reached shelter. “Ah. That’s better. I can hear myself think. Still there, Director?”

“Still here.”

“I was saying we have to send down another team of divers to explore what appears to be a bunker.”

As much as I wanted to laugh, I could already hear the hysteria climbing in my voice. “A bunker?”

“From what we could tell prior to aborting the dive, there was a functional generator running an oxygen filtration unit, and other life support systems were on standby. MREs and bottled water were stored in a pantry, along with a first aid kit, but it’s impossible to tell if the missing supplies were used, stolen by a curious fish, or taken by the current.”

“The bunker was intact?”

“The door was open, and the compartment was filled with water, but everything was functional.”

An open door meant...any number of things. I couldn’t get ahead of myself.

“I see.” A bitter taste hit the back of my throat. “Do you think someone was in there?”

“It could be open because someone used it then escaped after a timed release. Or because its seal failed or because the room was unoccupied, meaning no passcode activated the locking sequence, so the blast knocked the door ajar.” His frustration mirrored mine. “Honestly? We have no idea.”

“Anything off the books belonged to the director.” Noting my fingernails were lengthening to claws, I shook off my temper before I gouged the poor phone. “If he made it out, and that’s a big *if*, that’s how.”

“That’s why I wanted you to hear it from me first.”

“Thanks.” I worked my jaw as the implications unfurled through my mind. “Who else knows?”

“The four divers who discovered it.” He grunted as if his leg hurt him. “There’s no keeping it a secret.”

Agents chatted to each other worse than teens spreading rumors down the halls of a high school.

“Try to keep it contained.” I couldn’t hope for more. “I’ll be releasing a statement tomorrow.”

To avoid getting into those gory details, I hung up the phone and straightened with a groan.

Asa was there, his hands rubbing knots from my shoulders. “Do you think he’s alive?”

To be truthful, I confessed, “I’m not sure I ever doubted it.”

“You held on to the hope.” His fingers gentled. “That’s what you do.”

Except most people wouldn’t hold on to the hope they could still trade their grandfather like a collector’s card to his ex-lover who would delight in tormenting him for all eternity. I guess I wasn’t most people.

“I’m more interested in knowing how he reached this bunker of his before his precious legacy fell on top of his head, when the survivors I’ve interviewed had no warning. Just *boom*, then a swim with the fishes.”

“Luca wouldn’t call ahead and warn him to seek shelter.”

“We know how she was getting in and out of the compound unnoticed. She practically told us herself. She had to know we would block her access, which means she wouldn’t have done it unless she was finished with it.”

Framed that way, I wondered if she sent us to her home to better understand her before it was too late. I didn’t see why that would matter to her, but it did remind me I still owed her mother assistance in cleaning up the mess the explosion made of Earl, their unlikely god.

Then again, knowing Luca, maybe she crossed her fingers the explosion would trap us in Faerie. Not forever. Just long enough to accomplish whatever else she had in mind.

“She must have known he rarely left the compound,” Asa mused. “She might have also reached the conclusion she would never gain the upper hand as long as he was there. He

had too many built-in defenses, and too many agents on standby.”

“So, she decided if he wouldn’t come out, she would make him come out?”

“If she discovered his bunker during her time masquerading as an agent, then she knew where he would go if a viable threat was leveled against him.” Asa kept thinking out loud. “With the whispers of your father’s return swirling, she had ample material to craft a believable story.”

“She could have called him, posing as one of the guards stationed at the front gate, and told him his son was scouting the perimeter, looking for a way in.” Any variation on that theme would have done the job. I could see it working easily. “That would have sent him into panic mode and shot him straight into his hidey-hole.”

“It also gives us another possibility as to why the door was open.”

“She got to him first.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



Sleep wasn't high on my to-do list, but it was near dawn, and we had a human on the team whose body was used to a different schedule than ours. Well, not *on* the team. Thank the goddess. I couldn't imagine what a nightmare that would be. Protecting humans from the other agents? No thanks. Arden was team adjacent. Adjacent-adjacent.

Huh.

"Adjacent is a weird word," I told Clay. "Weird is too. *Weird*. Who thought up that spelling anyway?"

"Dollface, you need this more than I do." He pressed a mug of hot coffee into my hands. "FYI, you have to feed that hamster running in the wheel of your brain once in a while, or it falls over dead."

The first sip was heaven, and by heaven, I meant almost pure sugar. "Can you give a hamster caffeine?"

"Brain hamsters seem to like it, but maybe don't try it on non-cerebral pets?"

"I don't know how, but I understood that." I drank more. "This is good stuff."

"Come on, Director Dollface, we're going to the kitchen."

"I know that face." Arden stepped up beside me, all business. "She gets like this when she hasn't had enough sleep, or sugar. Sometimes it's hard to tell which one she needs." She took the coffee. "This isn't going to help. We need something stronger."

“I made it so sweet,” he protested, clearly stung, “the stirrer stood up straight in the cup.”

“Her sugar tolerance has grown like crazy the last few years.” She ventured a smile for me. “Camber and I used to dump Pixie Stix in her tumbler. She drank the sugar water like she was some kind of butterfly.”

Or a moth...

“Huh.” Clay recovered from his momentary hurt. “That’s one factor I didn’t take into consideration.”

“That I’ve been slowly developing a higher tolerance for sugar thanks to stealth deposits in my water?” I might as well be on Colby’s diet, if what Arden was saying was true. “Why would you do that?”

“You don’t sleep enough,” she said, “but you always show up for work.”

Lifting a hand, Clay shouted, “Amen.”

“Camber and I couldn’t stop you from doing whatever you want, because you were—*are*—our boss and our friend, so we found ways to perk you up then timed your crash for end of shift.”

“*Amen.*”

“Clay,” I threatened, heart cracking from Arden’s slip, “I will punch you in your face if you don’t stop.”

“See?” Arden rested a hand on her hip. “This is why stealth missions are necessary.”

“Amen,” Clay whispered before fleeing to the kitchen, leaving us to follow the smell of food cooking.

Knowing Clay—and his stomach—as well as I did, I wasn’t surprised his priorities involved stocking the hotel pantry with safe foods and drinks.

“He really loves you.” Arden folded her arms across her stomach. “You guys are close.”

“Even monsters have friends,” I joked, but her flinch reminded me how she had hurled that word at Aedan the last

time they met. “What I mean is, we’re not so different from humans.”

“From what I’ve been researching, a lot of this *we* eats humans.” She lowered her voice. “Pretty sure that one guy licked his lips when I walked past him.”

“It’s not like that,” I lied, vowing to hunt down the lip-licker. “He has chronic dry mouth.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Eager to outrun the conversation, I set out after Clay, relieved that Arden kept pace with me until it hit me she might stick close out of a sense of self-preservation rather than affection. But I couldn’t afford to let my guilt grow wild like kudzu, or else it would strangle the life out of me.

“Believe it or not, Clay is an excellent cook.” I drug out more idle conversation. “He taught me, in fact.”

“Rue.”

The weight in her voice dragged me down quicker than an anchor tossed over the side of a ship. “Yeah?”

“I get why you did it.” She stopped walking, forcing me to face her. “I don’t know if I’m ready to forgive you for it, but I do understand you only wanted to protect Camber and me.” She glanced around the room bustling with suited agents. “This is so much bigger than I ever imagined, and you’re at the heart of it.” She rolled a shoulder. “I’m trying, okay?” Her gaze slid to the floor. “I wanted you to know that.”

“That’s more than I dared hope for,” I admitted, wishing I could hug her like I used to do.

For a split second, I could almost read Aedan’s name on her lips, but she shook her head and walked on.

Asa, hair pulled up in a man-bun where he stood behind the stove, smiled as I took in the spread he was helping prepare.

Right on cue, my stomach rumbled a reminder that *I* might not be hungry, but it had other ideas.

“I do love a man who knows his way around a skillet.” I strode up to him and buried my face between his shoulder blades as he fried eggs. “This smells amazing.”

“That’s the fascination talking.” His laugh jostled me. “Other than this, I’m only allowed to boil water.”

“The water boiled over.” Clay reclaimed his position, checking the pans on the stove. “That’s when I put him on egg duty. It’s hard to go wrong with them. Break an omelet? Boom! You’ve got scrambled eggs. Undercook an over hard? Blam! You’ve got an over easy.”

“Mix in flour and sugar—” Arden chuckled, “—and *wham*, you’ve got a cake.”

“I like this kid.” He pulled a tray of candied bacon from the oven. “Can I keep her?”

Her laugh told me she thought he was kidding, but I knew better. “No.”

Next thing I knew, she would be in a tank next to Mr. Squiggles if I didn’t maintain a firm hand with him.

Pulling a stool up to the counter, she watched the guys work. “Do paras have human pets?”

“Yes.” I leaned my hip against the stainless edge, determined to be wholly honest. “Some do.”

“Others marry them.” Clay ignored my glare. “Have kids with them.” He taste-tested his bacon. “Live happily ever after with them.”

The interest she had shown in the food dwindled, and she cleared her throat. “Good to know.”

Eager to redirect his efforts, I zeroed in on the grub. “What’s on the menu?”

“Like you care.” Clay pointed a spatula at me. “You’ll eat anything Asa breathes on.”

A frown gathered across Arden’s brow, and she propped her chin on her palm. “What’s fascination?”

“Um.” I shoved bacon in my mouth to give me time to think. “Well...”

Asa, my knight in shining armor, stepped in. “Where did you hear the term?”

“You guys reference it pretty often.” She drummed her bottom lip with her fingertips. “There’s an inflection there I don’t think I understand. The things you blame on fascination don’t fit the textbook definition.”

“Fascination is an emotional state that occurs between two daemons who are courting,” Asa explained. “The condition is dangerous for anyone who attempts to interfere.”

“Here.” Clay passed her a piece of bacon. “Bacon makes everything better.”

Once she chewed and swallowed, she had regained her footing. “Are all witches daemons then?”

With a gesture down at my side, I cast a spell over the area for privacy.

“No.” I stole more candied bacon, for courage. “But I am a quarter daemon.”

Things got so heated so fast the last time we sat down to talk about me, I couldn’t recall if I told her that.

More bacon found its way into her mouth, but Clay didn’t make a peep. If the power of grease and sugar got us through this, I would be forever grateful to him for baking what must have been two pounds at the very least.

“Aed—” She chewed harder, her jaw tight. “Asa is fully daemon?”

“My father is—*was*—a daemon,” he answered, quick to focus on his eggs, “but my mother is fae.”

Coughing on her next bite, she smacked her chest. “Faeries exist?”

“*Fae* exist.” I took over for him. “All sorts of them.”

“Asa’s mom isn’t Tinkerbell.” Clay pounded her back. “She’s more Galadriel from *The Lord of the Rings*.”

“Hmm.” Arden tilted her head, examining Asa. “That must be why he’s so pretty.”

Spatulas clattered as the guys prepared to rush me if I felt the sudden urge to murder her, but the possessive rage of fascination never overcame me, and everyone—including me—relaxed back into conversation.

“He’s not as pretty as I am.” Clay gave her more bacon to finish winning her over. “He tries, poor thing, but he can’t compete. It’s sad, really, but at least he has Rue now to bolster his ego.”

“Goddess knows you don’t need the help,” I muttered, yelping when he flicked grease at me with his fingertips.

“Come on.” Arden stole a few more strips. “Let’s go sit over there, away from Clay’s bruised ego.”

“Bruised?” He puffed up worse than Colby when she got offended. “My ego is titanium.”

Leaving them to finish creating whatever their intended meal was in peace, I warily nudged Arden to the farthest table in the hotel’s closed restaurant. They might still overhear, but the illusion of privacy was almost as good as the real thing.

Once the two of us sat, we started fidgeting with our hands, unsure what came next. I hated that we had been reduced to this. We had never walked on eggshells around one another, but she had every right to be cautious of what she shared with me, when before she had told me everything.

“Your hair looks nice.” I picked at my nails. “I almost didn’t recognize you at the airport.”

“I wanted to try something different.” She tucked her hands under the table. “Mr. Saetang has spent the last few months drumming into my head that long hair makes a convenient handhold.”

That was a name I hadn’t heard around Samford. “Mr. Saetang?”

“I...well...” She flushed. “I started taking Muay Thai lessons five times a week after New Orleans.”

The discipline sounded familiar, but I wasn't sure I remembered correctly. "Thai boxing, right?"

"Yeah." Her cheeks reddened. "I Googled 'what martial arts form is the fastest to learn' and that was the top suggestion." She laughed to herself. "I wanted to take action to protect myself, and Camber. The second I got home, I fixated on how to keep us safe." Her gaze almost made it to mine. "I didn't expect to love it, but I do. It's a great outlet for stress." She wet her lips. "And fear."

Throat tight, I strove to sound casual. "Does Camber go too?"

"She lost interest in the self-defense classes." Her expression turned brittle. "She's horrified by the idea of me boxing, in any shape or form. She came to one of my matches and left in tears."

Because she needed someone in her corner who understood, I asked, "Who won?"

"Me." She ruffled her hair, a new nervous tic. "We wear thick headgear and mouthguards. Heavy gloves, shin guards. The works. I barely feel the contact."

One day, if she kept it up, she would lose all the padding and be forced to take the hits as they came.

And wasn't that a perfect metaphor for taking her first steps into this new world with me by her side.

"The art of eight limbs." Clay held a steaming plate in front of her mildly horrified face.

Mesmerized by his creation, she mumbled, "Fists, elbows, knees, and shins."

"Don't tell me you've never had a Luther burger." He set it down with a clank. "They're a classic."

"That's a donut." She gawked as she twisted the plate from side to side. "As a hamburger bun."

With a fried egg on top of the patty in addition to the bacon. There was no fixed recipe, except for the donut bun. He

mixed and matched toppings depending on the contents of the fridge he was raiding.

“You wouldn’t think so, but it’s weirdly delicious.” I accepted a plate from Asa. “Clay’s a longtime fan of the combo, but they’ve gone mainstream in the last few years.”

“The secret is the type of donut,” he began, prepared to launch into the history of the Luther burger.

The guys carried their plates over next, juggling enough sweet tea to go around, and sat with us.

We dug into the meal, me reaching for the shoestring fries first, but I froze mid-dip when Arden laughed with surprise after her first bite.

“It really is good.” She wiped her mouth with a napkin. “I had no idea what my life was missing.”

With her freshly cleaned hand, she snapped a photo I was sure she sent Camber and maybe her mom.

“Stick with us.” Clay tucked into his meal. “We’ll teach you all the important life lessons.”

Smacking the bottom of a ketchup bottle, Asa poured us each some. “Food pairings count as life lessons?”

“Food is life.” He clucked his tongue. “Rue, how did you end up with this guy?”

Since he asked for it, I didn’t even feel bad saying, “The knitting needles *really* do it for me.”

“Eww.” Clay elbowed Arden to join in. “We’re eating.”

“Don’t ask if you don’t want to know.” I fed Asa one of my fries. “And leave Arden out of it.”

“I’m glad Rue has this.” Arden elbowed Clay back. “I didn’t realize how lonely she must have been.”

“Hey.” I threw a fry at her forehead. “I had you and Camber.” And Colby. “I wasn’t miserable and alone.”

“It’s not the same, though.” She caught it before impact. “Having people around who are like you.”

“You’re right.” I sipped my tea. “Life was so much simpler, and more peaceful, before Clay came back.”

“How did I know you would try to pin this on me?” He threw his hands in the air. “You *ditched* me. Your best friend.” He shifted his guilt into high gear. “I didn’t know if you were alive for *ten* years.”

“You ghosted him?” Arden dropped her napkin. “For a decade?”

The past superimposed itself over the present, and looking between their earnest faces, I had no trouble picturing Arden as the one left behind. Hadn’t I been thinking it? Planning my exit? Doing what was best for those I love? I had about decided to sign over the store to her and Camber then cut ties with Samford.

This...her showing up...complicated things. And I wasn’t sure yet if I was grateful for it or if I resented it.

“I didn’t know her reasons at the time, and it hurt.” As fast as he had thrown me under the bus, he yanked me out from under its wheels. “I thought she got tired of the Bureau, of the director, and left. I understand now, why she did what she did, who she did it for, and I agree she made the best decision.”

“You cut ties for her.” Arden, thankfully, didn’t name Colby. “You were protecting her.”

As much as it oversimplified the situation, it was easiest to say, “Yes.”

Yet another call interrupted our meal, but I was glad for the reprieve from feeling so much. “Hollis.”

“You need to get back here.”

“What’s wrong?” Isiforos was usually upbeat, but he sounded numb. “What happened?”

“We know how the compound was brought down.”

Our working theory was Luca had been hiding explosives during her years sneaking around the belly of the compound. She had discovered enough of the secret areas to have plenty of hiding places where no one would stumble across the

deposits. That, and paras tended to be oblivious to nonmagical threats. It was part hubris, the conviction they could survive any mortal construct, and part certainty if a thing was in the compound, then it was meant to be in the compound. Agents who didn't ask questions of the director lived longer.

“Okay.” I waited for him to spill, but he struggled.
“Isiforos?”

“The compound self-destructed.” He let the silence build.
“The director? He pushed the button.”

CHAPTER NINE



“We’ll be right there,” I mumbled, joining Isiforos in Numbville. “Keep this quiet, okay?”

“I didn’t make the discovery.” He sucked on his teeth. “This is going to get ugly fast, Rue.”

That ought to be the new Black Hat motto: *Where things get ugly fast.*

“Keep calm.” I forced my voice steady. “Stay safe.”

“Yeah.” His laugh was strained. “I’ll try.”

As my eyes slid closed and I counted backward from ten, I felt Asa cover my hand with his.

They heard. Of course they heard. How their boss blew the Bureau a-fucking-way.

“The director might have laid the groundwork,” Asa said, “but Luca still could have pushed the button.”

“Or Nan.” Clay grunted. “Since Luca knew about the bunker, she could have infected its server with malware to grant Nan access. With Luca working from the inside, the possibilities—and the damage they could have done—are limitless.”

The reassurance almost made a dent, nearly gave me hope I wasn’t descended from total monsters, but I was too horrified by the implications my grandfather thought it was a good idea to rig the entire facility with explosives to prevent it from being sieged by outsiders—or his own agents—and had the

balls to build himself a bunker that would survive the potential jettison into the sea.

Why now?

That was the big question.

Had he done it out of fear Dad was coming for him? That would bolster the theory Luca had called in the tip that sent him running for his safe room. Had he decided it was worth losing everything to prevent his son from claiming his inheritance? Or had he hoped to fake his own death and escape his son's wrath?

"We'll figure it out," Clay promised me. "If the whole place was rigged to blow by design, then there will be evidence." He touched his pocket where Colby rested gently. "We need access to the private servers Fergal mentioned. The Kellies would have been responsible for the bunker maintenance. They would have been the ones who performed nondestructive testing or condition monitoring. A system that widespread and volatile isn't set it and forget it. Negligence would have been deadly."

Had the Kellies known what was happening? Had panic choked them seconds before detonation? Had they tried to override it in their last moments? I hoped not. No one deserved to die with fear and helplessness in their hearts.

"If I can't have it, no one can." I wanted to punch a wall until I broke something, but that wouldn't do me any good. Lately, I was telling myself that often. "That sounds about right." I squeezed my hands into fists until my knuckles popped. "He would rather destroy the compound than have it seized, would rather kill a quarter of his agents than have them turned against him. Or worse." I scoffed at his abject pettiness. "Freed from his control."

"Fergal." Asa checked with the vampire. "Can you drive?"

Even a short distance posed a risk with dawn creeping over the horizon.

"I can manage," Fergal allowed, but his hesitation made me nervous.

Hand shooting in the air, Arden volunteered, “I could drive.”

“You need rest.” Asa shifted his focus back to me. “Don’t even think about tossing your hat in the ring.”

The only reason he wasn’t getting behind the wheel, I knew without asking, was me.

If he stayed awake, I would argue I could too. But even I could tell I had no business behind the wheel.

“I’ll go raid one of the supply closets.” Clay got to his feet. “Pillows and blankets coming right up.”

“I’ll help.” Arden, carrying her burger to-go, trotted after him. “You’ll need the extra hands.”

“Yours look busy to me.” He slung an arm around her shoulder. “But I like your priorities.”

Ketchup on her lip, she mumbled, “Food?”

“Food,” he agreed, then glanced back and shot me a grin.

Alone in the restaurant, I caved to the temptation to smack my forehead on the tabletop. I got in one or two good whacks before Asa slid his hand between my head and the wood, cushioning the blows.

“Fear the director survived, and that punishment is forthcoming, is what has held the Bureau together up to this point.” I kept my head down, talking to my lap. “If it comes out he did this, we can kiss any shred of loyalty the agents felt toward the establishment goodbye.” I made peace with another truth. “The only way to hold them in line then will be through fear.”

The plans I’d made for improving the Bureau wouldn’t have happened overnight, but I hadn’t expected a setback of this magnitude. The agents would have respected a coup, especially by the deputy director. This scenario? Not so much.

“No one knows you promoted me.” Asa hesitated. “There’s another choice.”

All too quickly, the dots connected in my mind, and I jerked upright. “*Dad?*”

Earlier, I had been joking about promoting Dad, but it must have struck Asa as a viable alternative.

His reasoning, while I hated to admit it made good sense, was easy to track.

Prior to the director’s possible—but growing less likely by the minute—demise, he had launched a smear campaign against Dad, blaming him for the attempt on my life at Glory of India. Since that required resurrecting Dad in the public eye, I figured the director had done it in order to paint himself as the grieving father who regretted aiming the full might of the Bureau at his son instead of a fraidy cat scared of finally getting his comeuppance. Had I been thinking too small? What if he felt confident in mashing his big red button because he had laid groundwork to pin the explosion, and the resulting deaths, on Dad?

A bomb had almost taken me out at the restaurant, and a bomb had demolished the compound. That they were two distinct types of bombs—one magical and one chemical—wouldn’t matter to some.

“He’s the most powerful black witch alive today,” Asa reasoned. “No one would dare to oppose you with him by your side.”

“I don’t want to rule by fear.” I flicked my wrist. “Not all fear, anyway.”

“You have other avenues.” He stood and pushed in his chair. “I just want to make sure you’re aware of them.”

“Thanks.” I let him pull me to my feet. “I’ll keep that in mind as my nuclear option.”

Honestly, the best course of action would be to give Dad the big chair, but I wasn’t sure I could trust him. Not where the Bureau was concerned. He might be willing to scare the agents straight for me, as a favor to his daughter—not the interim director—but he wouldn’t want the day-to-day responsibility for their care. As much as I didn’t want a boogeyman as my

second-in-command, Asa wasn't wrong in suggesting I consider Dad for the position. But it all came down to the director.

If he was alive, and Dad fulfilled the animus vow, Dad had no future. Therefore, I couldn't appoint him. There would be too much upheaval after he was gone.

If he was dead, and Dad had no means to fulfill the promise that would kill him too, then...maybe?

We cleaned up our mess and met Clay and Arden in the foyer near the check-in desk.

A glimpse of the stark white moth operating in hairbow mode, tucked into Arden's short hair, caused my heart to skip a beat. Or two. Or fifty. I was pretty sure my heart stopped altogether while I processed the scene. How many times had I imagined a world where Colby could make friends with the girls?

To see it...

Stupid tears itched the backs of my eyes, and I had to fight to corral them as Arden laughed at some joke Colby told that even had Clay in stitches. Arden, smart kid that she was, had earbuds in as cover for their conversation.

Asa didn't say a thing as I watched them head out to the SUV to prep for our mobile sleepover, but he stood next to me, his quiet presence anchoring me.

"Director."

Without prompting, I responded to the title and found Fergal standing behind me. "Yes?"

"I wanted to let you know your..." his gaze followed Arden, "...*friend* is safe with me."

"I trust you." I think I surprised both of us with my sincerity. "I'm just overprotective."

"She's new to our world," Asa supplied, deeming Fergal worthy of the knowledge. "She's still learning."

A curious note entered Fergal's voice. "Does she know what I am?"

"Not yet." I couldn't read his expression. "Do you mind if I tell her?"

"Humans are fascinated by vampires." Amusement lit his eyes. "They believe we're bad boys who can be tamed with the love of the right human girl." He shook his head. "They seldom appreciate how rare prey is that tames its predator." He crooked a grin. "However, it will, I believe, put her at ease."

As a longtime reader of improbable shifter romance, even if I had been neglecting my TBR pile as work took precedence, I understood the appeal of believing—against all odds—you were meant to be with a certain person. That no matter your differences, or dietary restrictions, love would conquer all.

As a longtime consumer of horror flicks, Arden might faint on the spot to meet a classic movie monster.

"She'll bug the snot out of you if I do," I warned him. "I'm sure you're used to the drill."

"I've been used to the drill since 2008." His laugh grew deeper. "I had a friend who wore shimmer lotion with mica in it so he would sparkle under lights. He smelled like sun-ripened berries for a whole year."

The idea vampires would capitalize on a movie's success to lure in starry-eyed prey had occurred to me. I just hadn't thought it would involve copious amounts of sparkly skincare products. "Did it help him?"

"Oh." He really chortled now. "No." He finally caught his breath. "He was just a fan."

"I admire his dedication." Asa smiled as my lieutenant wiped pink tears. "You must have hated it."

"The smell was a punch in the nose." Fergal took the keys Asa offered him. "Even his girlfriend left him after a glitter bath bomb incident."

"Vampires soak in tubs with glitter bath bombs?"

“We do more than drink virgin blood and wear swirling black capes,” he said dryly.

“Fair point.”

The three of us walked out as Clay finished lowering the backseats to enlarge the cargo area for sleeping during the drive. Arden lined up three pillows, as much as the width of the vehicle allowed, but the math didn't hold. Someone had to ride shotgun for us all to fit.

As friendly as Arden was with Clay and Asa, I doubted she could rest easy sandwiched between the guys. Either I slept between her and Asa, leaving Clay precariously loaded next to Fergal, or Asa rode up there.

Reading the situation, Arden lifted her hand. “Shotgun.”

As much as I trusted Fergal to behave, I still worried. I couldn't help myself. “Are you sure...?”

“I am a vampire,” Fergal announced theatrically, opening the door for her. “Ask me your questions.”

A slack expression swept across her features before a smile broke out. “You are *so* cool.”

Once he had her settled, he glanced over his shoulder with a look that said *I told you so* clear as day.

Before I climbed in, I layered a spell to conceal the passengers in the SUV. Magic clung to every glass surface like window tinting, obscuring all occupants and protecting Fergal's sensitive skin and eyes.

That ought to help us hide Arden *and* keep our chauffeur from crisping his retinas.

“I'll moderate.” Clay nudged Asa in first, then me, and then himself. “I'll make sure they keep it PG.”

“Thanks.” I turned my back on him, cuddling up to Asa. “Just for that, I'll keep it PG too.”

On top of Arden's head, Colby rounded her eyes, about all the movement she could manage while in stealth mode, and I

would have kicked myself for the slip if I had room to bend my leg.

“Sleep.” Clay pressed a piece of hard candy into my palm. “We’ll be there before you know it.”

“What’s this?” I didn’t recognize the wrapper. “Smells like chamomile...and magic.”

“Let it dissolve on your tongue, and it will knock you out cold.”

I could have asked why he had them, but I didn’t want to inflict an accidental wound. He experimented from time to time with potions, spells, and charms guaranteed to make the recipient sleep. But golems weren’t made for dreaming, so nothing affected him beyond rendering a slight daze.

Studying the candy, Asa took a cautious sniff. “Is that wise for Rue in present circumstances?”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Clay hit him between the eyes. “I have a piece for you too.”

“You’re going to poke someone’s eye out one day.”

“That’s why you have two,” Clay countered before Asa could reply. “You didn’t even hear the best part.”

“I’m afraid to ask.” I eyed the candy with more suspicion. “What is it?”

“The spell doubles what sleep you receive. Two hours equals four. Four hours equals eight. So on.”

“I’m game.” I shoved it in before I could second-guess myself. “See you when I see you.”

As if the candy flipped a switch in my head, I passed out cold with my nose buried in Asa’s throat.



FOR SOME WEIRD REASON, I DREAMED ABOUT VAMPIRES shopping for live goats at the grocery store.

“I have known vampires who lived on animal blood for short periods of time. Eight months at the most.” Fergal’s voice drifted to me as my brain kicked back online. “It was a survivalist choice, not a moral one.”

Ah.

That would explain why frantic bleating interrupted my sleep.

“Is animal blood a long-term option?” Arden sounded way too invested in their conversation. “Or not?”

“Not.” Fergal hummed. “The taste isn’t abhorrent, but the nutrients aren’t there.”

“How do you become a vampire?”

“Well,” he began, “you must first—”

“Are we there yet?” I cut in before she got any ideas. “I can’t reach my phone to check the GPS.”

Sandwiched between Asa and Clay, I could barely breathe, let alone bend my arm toward my pocket.

“We’re ten minutes out.” Fergal caught my eye in the rearview mirror, his twinkling with amusement. “I believe the weather system plaguing the shore has moved on. We should be able to take the lift down.”

“Good.” I noticed then I was the last one to wake. “You guys want to pull the seat up or...?”

“Let’s stay here.” Asa slid his arm across my waist. “We might as well.”

“Ick.” Clay picked up Asa’s hand at the wrist and threw it off me. “Keep those to yourself.”

Twisting in her seat, Arden smiled back at me. Actually smiled. Like she was having a good time.

Luckily, that meant Colby was now facing the wrong direction for us to emotionally scar her with PDA.

Who knew all I needed to win Arden over was a one-on-one Q&A session with a vampire? Or a warg.

As popular as they were in fiction, I felt certain either one would have done the trick.

Not that I was going to insult Fergal by saying so out loud. Just in case rumors of their rivalry were true.

Once Fergal parked in the makeshift lot, he angled himself toward me. “Are you sure about this?”

Nope.

Not even a little bit.

“Yeah.” I sat up and rested my hand on Arden’s shoulder. “I am.”

“Will you stay in the SUV?” Asa squinted in the early sun. “Or do you need help reaching shelter?”

“I can find my own way,” Fergal assured us. “I’ll retreat to the blackout tent.”

A blackout tent was meant to provide temporary respite for light-sensitive agents from the unrelenting sun. Not protect a vampire from immolation. His loyalty might get him flambéed if we weren’t careful.

For him to be up before dusk and willing to face the dawn, he must be older than I thought.

For him to risk his life in a blackout tent, he must be less risk-averse than most vampires.

For both those things to be true... I got a bad feeling about just how old he might be.

To resist the sun’s call to rest meant he must be nearing the end of the five-hundred-year lease on life—*afterlife*—most vampires received after resuscitation. Past that point, they died a final death that no amount of necromancy could reverse.

Staring where I touched her, Arden frowned. “What’s with the tingling?”

“Remember how we all agreed I make the rules?” I drew from Colby to push untainted magic over her. “This is one of them. A spell that will blur your features so no one will recognize you.”

“That’s handy.” She brightened. “Why didn’t you do that sooner?”

“It’s not as handy as you might think.” I finished casting and sat back. “It won’t prevent them from smelling you and identifying you as human. Some factions, wargs for example, can track you based on your scent. It’s by no means an ironclad protection.” I waited for Clay to exit first. “Under the circumstances, it’s the best I can do.”

“We’ll keep the number of agents on the shore to a minimum.” Asa brought out his phone. “That will cut down on her exposure.”

“The high winds will help disperse her scent too.” Fergal hung back, a question in his eyes I answered with a nod. Careful to maintain a polite distance, he said, “Arden, you’re with me.”

A grin split her cheeks as she stepped up to the vampire, invading his personal space, and I knew then I had to disabuse her of the notion they were all as polite as Fergal. Most of them, especially within the Bureau, would drink her dry and leave her corpse for the cleaners. But I couldn’t very well tell her that now and risk her fear perfuming the air. That was asking for someone to walk up and take a nibble.

The two of them set out, deep in conversation, a white moth still threaded into Arden’s hair, and my stomach flip-flopped like a pancake on a hot griddle to see both girls walking away.

“She’ll be fine.” Clay ruffled my hair. “Vampires are uber territorial.”

“That isn’t as comforting as you might think.” I swatted his hand. “She’s not his territory.”

“She’s yours,” Asa explained more fully. “Fergal will protect what’s yours.”

“I’m not sure that’s any better.” I twisted my hair into a tight bun, not that it would keep the wind from yanking it down into my eyes in three seconds flat. “Just because she’s

human doesn't make her on par with a DVD I can loan out to friends."

"It's cute you think DVDs are still a thing." Clay chuckled. "Trust me when I say that it's safer for her if it's known she's under your auspices. Humans are food in our world. This is the equivalent of writing your name on your yogurt before putting it in the company fridge."

"I...am going to pretend you didn't compare Arden to yogurt."

"Hey, I never said she wasn't premium yogurt. Like granola on top and fruit on the bottom."

"You're not helping your case." Asa cradled my elbow in his palm. "Let's catch up to Arden."

The sound of her name jolted me, convincing me to let it drop and head for the lift.

As I stood on the edge of the cliff, I peered down at where Fergal had given Arden his suit jacket to wear, guaranteeing his scent would bathe her.

As far as I knew, vampires didn't experience fascination, which could strike at first glance. As it had with Asa and me. But they had been known to fixate, which was infinitely worse. People who caught the eye of a vampire, to the point the vampire only craved them, didn't live long. From what I understood, vampires had no control over it. No control meant Arden wasn't safe with Fergal if he had developed an interest in her, no matter how honorable his intentions started out.

"He's just being polite, right?" I stepped onto the lift. "This is just him being nice."

"Yes." Clay leaned over the edge. "That's definitely his polite hand resting politely on her polite back."

On the way down, I scrubbed my face with the heels of my palms and pretended to see nothing.

Fergal wasn't Aedan, and Aedan was the only guy she had ever shown interest in. Therefore, this was, as Clay put it,

polite. Nothing more. Just a nice guy being nice to a nice girl. Full stop.

The somber mood on the shore helped me push all other thoughts aside to focus on the job.

“I see you brought a friend.” Isiforos, in a wetsuit, shook hands with each of us. “Is she yours...or his?”

“Mine.” I jabbed him in the chest, hating what I said next. “Make sure everyone knows it too.”

“Will do.” He wiped dried salt off his cheek. “So, boss, have you ever gone diving?”

I wasn’t a fan of water—no witch enjoyed its disruptive influence—but I could manage if I had no choice. A quick survey of the faces surrounding me warned that was my exact predicament.

“Wetsuits and such are that way.” He indicated an equipment stand. “I’ll go brief our team leader.”

Arden’s whisper to Fergal carried, “Can I...?”

“No,” Fergal, Asa, Clay, and I said together.

At least that was one thing we all agreed on.

CHAPTER TEN



The next half hour was spent cursing, hopping on one leg, and swearing vengeance on neoprene while Arden and Colby—the traitors—laughed from their spot beside Clay. Colby and Clay were on Arden detail now that Fergal had retreated to the blackout tent to avoid full sun exposure.

Our team leader gave us a refresher and told us what to expect and what not to do, and then it was go time. Had I not felt duty-bound to see the cowardice of my grandfather with my own eyes, I would have passed just to avoid the reminder of what a messed-up person had raised me.

“Aedan promised me anyone with a drop of Aquatae blood can’t drown,” I found myself telling the guys.

Neither of them had anything to say to that, and I waded in to avoid reading their expressions.

Even with a wetsuit insulating my body, the water was a frigid slap to my masked face as I ducked under the waves. Most of the divers working the site were aquatic in nature and had no problems with lower temps. Frankly, I was starting to envy them.

A faint sting had me checking my palm where the brand from the contract with Calixta had been, but the skin was unblemished. I flexed my fingers, almost numb from the cold, but the irritation soon quit on its own.

The soft touch of fingers on my cheek brought my attention to Asa, who was gesturing toward our guide. I

nodded once, following him to where the green-skinned man held a heavy rope anchored on the shore and to a distant spot too deep for me to see through the gloom. We clipped the heavy carabiners on our weight belts to the line as he instructed, and then it hit me why this setup was familiar.

This was how they had been transporting bodies to the surface, protecting them from floating out to sea.

The reminder chilled me worse than the water temperature.

As we descended, I witnessed the destruction of the compound from a fresh perspective, and it gutted me. It was one thing seeing stills or video shot by the divers, another to see it with my own eyes. How anyone survived being crushed and pinned under debris of this magnitude was a miracle. More than chunks of black stone or random bits of architecture, entire rooms had been submerged. This must be how Atlantis looked, fresh in its ruin.

“There.” Isiforos’s voice crackled in my ear. “See that sharp corner?”

“That block’s got to be six by six by six.” Clay, who had to stay behind due to a lack of...let’s call it buoyancy, hit the feed next. He was watching the stream on his laptop from a camera on a strap around Isiforos’s throat. “Looks like the bunker was more of an enclosed ejector seat.”

“An ejector seat?” The communication spell the divers used tickled my back teeth, and I rubbed my jaw. “Are you telling me the director meant for the bunker to withstand being lobbed into the ocean?”

The cube of metal was smaller than I expected, but for a single person, even two, it was doable.

“Based on the explosives deposits we’ve located,” Isiforos said, “it looks that way.”

“Have you determined whether it was occupied?”

“We have a specialist flying in,” Isiforos answered. “We don’t have the resources to make the call.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky.” Clay sounded sure of it. “A fresh pair of eyes can work wonders.”

Anything he missed, Colby, snug in Arden’s hair, would catch and relay for consideration.

As Isiforos had warned us, the door to the heavy bunker hung open. The outside of the box was charred, dented, and scratched. No surprise there, given what it had been through.

Isiforos began an examination of the exterior under Clay’s directions, hoping for the equivalent of a black box like the ones used on planes. Meanwhile, Asa and I slid into the tight interior, rifling through the contents of cabinets to hunt for clues that might tell us if this room had been activated prior to the explosion.

Much like Isiforos, I had to admit there were no clear signs of use. With the door pinned open by its own weight, and the waters choppy, items floated around us, drifting out the door. We would have to seal up this room once we finished with it to keep from polluting the area with harmful plastics and food rations in their metal pouches. Not to mention the fuel running this tiny shelter.

“I found something,” Isiforos announced, peering down at us from the doorframe.

A black plastic rectangle the length of his palm flashed with a green light.

“Does that mean you’re ready to go?” I took one last look around the room. “I’ve got nothing.”

“Without tools to pry open the other panels,” Asa agreed, “we’re done here.”

“We’re good,” Clay told us as Isiforos kicked off the wall and out of the opening. “I want to get this on dry land before the saltwater gets a chance to corrode it through the port.”

The tension on the rope jerked Asa and me along for the ride. All I could do was cross my fingers that what Isiforos had found held the answers we needed to determine what had happened here. I had been so certain Luca was to blame, and

maybe she was, but the existence of the bunker had broken my brain.

About halfway to shore, I stiffened as a ripple of magic swept over me. “Did you guys feel that?”

“Yeah.” Isiforos, who was in the lead, spun toward us. “What was that?”

“Daemon magic,” the guide told us. “Aquatae if I had to guess.”

A lump formed in my throat, but I had to get better at letting go of hope.

Knowing my luck, Calixta had given orders to kill me on sight if I stepped foot in any body of water.

“We need to go.” Asa cuffed my arm. “We can’t afford to wait around to discover who’s out there.”

A glimmer of flame-bright magic teased the corner of my eye as Blay took control.

“Hi, Rue.” He slung me over his shoulder until I was clinging to his back. “Blay get Rue to land.”

Hand over hand, he hauled us up the rope at breakneck speed, nearly bowling over Isiforos.

Content to hold on for dear life, I couldn’t help but laugh. “Thanks, big guy.”

“No pool noodles for Blay,” he said proudly. “Blay can paddle like doggy.”

That combination of words convinced me he had been practicing his swimming in the various hotel pools, likely with Clay playing lifeguard, in preparation for the grand opening of the daemon waterpark on the farm.

“Something is out there.” Knowing what Clay would say next, I cut him off. “And I don’t mean fish.”

“We have patrols in the area,” Isiforos assured me. “No one will get through without us knowing.”

“Sharks were a problem,” the team leader clarified, in case we couldn’t use our imaginations.

The only thing worse than being an immortal stuck beneath debris while you drowned over and over was drowning over and over while a shark chewed off your face. “Are you keeping out the local wildlife too?”

“Anything larger than a foot square hits a magic mesh.” The diver pointed toward the blackened depths. “There are ten mermaids maintaining it, and they’ve already attacked two of my people for getting too close.”

Despite what iconic cartoons would have humans believe, mermaids weren’t friendly or cute. They were drop-dead gorgeous, and they were vicious. Salties were the most ruthless variety, which explained how these had ended up in Black Hat. Freshies were slightly less murderous but were more likely to eat you if you invaded their lake, river, or pond. Or so the theory went. Salties had a lot more options to blame if a human or ten vanished in the ocean. Harsh weather, bad judgment calls, poor maintenance...icebergs.

A dozen yards from shore, an ear-piercing shriek vibrated through the water. “What is that?”

“The alarm.” The team leader unclipped their carabiner, turning to Isiforos. “Can you take them back?”

“Sure.” Isiforos jerked the line to snap our attention to our escape route. “You heard the man.”

“You’re going to leave him?” Before I could wriggle off Blay, he clamped down on my hands, locking me in place. “What if he needs help?”

“It’s probably another juvenile blue shark,” the group leader reassured me. “I’ll have to ask the mermaids to be sure.”

The reminder he had backup, dangerous as they were, helped ease my conscience.

“And you don’t want to be around when he does,” Clay warned us, clearly eager for us to get moving.

“They ate the last one.” Isiforos read my uneasiness. “Shark, I mean. Not team leader.”

“Blood in the water will send them into a frenzy.” I knew that, I just couldn’t shake the sensation of eyes on me. “Okay.” I quit fighting Blay. “Let’s get to shore.”

Ten minutes of clinging to Blay later, we waded ashore, and I spun to check for signs of the group leader.

“You need to get warm.” Asa, wearing a wetsuit now split down the sides, took my hand. “Come on.”

Even knowing he was right, that I was probably freezing for no reason, I still couldn’t peel myself away.

When Isiforos turned back, I waved him ahead to deliver the external hard drive to Clay.

A full minute later, I understood what my senses had been telling me, and hot tears mixed with the cold saltwater running down my cheeks. I shook off Asa’s grip and high-stepped out to where Aedan emerged from the depths. I didn’t wait for an invitation, just flung myself at him and wrapped my arms around his neck.

“You idiot.” I squeezed until he choked. “I’m never going to forgive you for taking my place.”

“I missed you too, Rue.” He pressed his icy face against my neck. “It’s good to see you.”

“How are you here?” I only let go when Asa pried me off him. “We heard the news about Stavros, but...”

I wasn’t sure I ever really expected to see Aedan again. I wasn’t sure I believed he was here now.

“The High Queen learned of Black Hat’s troubles and allowed me to play emissary. I opened a portal as close to shore as I could manage to avoid your security.”

“In other words—” I choked on a laugh, “—she wants to know if the director is really dead.”

“Never look a gift seahorse in the mouth.” He folded his arms across his chest. “But seriously, is he?”

“We don’t know.” I raked the salt-sticky hair off my face. “There’s evidence to suggest he’s alive.” I flicked my hand toward the sea. “We just finished documenting a secret bunker that’s got his name written all over it.”

“That explains why you were in the water.” He dug his toes into the sand. “And how she knew where to find you.”

“The mark.” I rubbed my thumb across the phantom brand. “It stung when I got in the water.” I swallowed hard. “How can she track me through a fulfilled bargain?”

“I don’t know.” He took my hand from me and examined it. “I would find out, and fast, if I were you.”

“I’ll add it to my to-do list.” If I had any room left. “I typically avoid bodies of water, so I should be okay.”

“I don’t have long.” His gaze slid past my shoulder. “I was hoping to say hi to everyone before I—”

“Aedan.”

The whipcrack of his name as it burst from Arden’s lips snapped his head toward her. “Arden?”

No small wonder he hadn’t noticed her, with the spell I cast on her, but her voice remained the same.

Much like me, she didn’t waste time on greetings. She frog-marched through the deepening water, tears streaking her cheeks, and smacked against him hard enough to send him back a step. She flung her arms around his neck, latched her legs around his waist, and buried her face in his throat.

A moment later, eyes crushing shut, he returned the embrace with heartbreaking ferocity.

Unable to keep his balance with her in his arms, he simply sat and rocked her in time with the waves while I backed away to give them privacy.

Armed with a thick towel warmed by magic, Asa draped it over my wet hair and started drying me with a thoroughness I appreciated since the chafing motion helped bring circulation back into my numb limbs.

“I’m surprised Calixta let him go.” He began peeling off my wetsuit. “Even for the sake of curiosity.”

The lack of guards to escort the new high queen’s heir to her new throne struck me as odd too.

“Same.” I shivered as I stepped out, wishing the spandex dive skin beneath was thermal. “I hoped but...”

“Do you think he knew Arden was here?” He wrapped me in another towel, his tone speculative. “The timing of his arrival is interesting.”

To prevent him from worrying, I explained what Aedan told me, but the plan backfired spectacularly.

A growl rumbled up Asa’s throat. “Calixta can *track* you?”

“Meg might have an idea if this is a weird contract side effect.” I shoved my palm in his face to keep him from storming off to question Aedan. “The terms were fulfilled, on both sides, so I don’t get why I would remain marked after the fact.”

“How soon can you consult her?” He captured my hand to examine it for himself. “I’ll pay the fee—”

“No, you won’t.” I pinched his side. “I can summon her as soon as Aedan leaves.”

For however long we had him, I didn’t want to miss a thing.

“All right.” He returned to rubbing my arms to warm me. “Arden forgave him?”

“I’m not sure that’s what we’re seeing.” I watched them clinging to one another and felt a stone drop in my gut. “She convinced herself she would never see him again. Him showing up like this, out of the blue, I think it’s messing with her head.”

“Or her heart.”

“Or that.” I snuggled into him. “Goddess, I wish we could catch a break.”

Warm lips brushing my forehead, he bundled me tighter. “In the case or in life?”

“Both.” I could almost feel my face again. “Either.”

“What do we tell Arden about his situation?” He studied the couple in the surf too. “What do you think he’ll say?”

“We have to follow his lead.” I curled my fingers into his shirt. “We shouldn’t tell her more than he does, now that they’ve gotten a chance to talk.” I flexed my hands to ward off the prickle of circulation returning. “They can’t be together the way things are now, and we don’t know if that’s what she wants.”

“He deserves an honest answer as to whether she can return his feelings.”

“And she can’t do that until she knows...everything.”

“They’ll figure it out.” He made it sound like a promise. “They’re young, but they’re smart.”

“Since when does intelligence have anything to do with feelings?”

Pretty sure the phrase *emotional intelligence* was an oxymoron.

“Fair point,” he allowed, ready to walk me to the heaters.

“Just another minute.” I rooted my feet in the sand. “I don’t want to miss my chance to say goodbye.”

“He wouldn’t leave without seeing you again,” he reassured me, but he didn’t make me go.

Without a wetsuit, Arden didn’t last more than five minutes before Aedan rose with her clinging to him. He carried her straight to the heaters, wrapped her in fluffy towels until she was the next best thing to a burrito, then kissed her cheek before seeking me out.

“I have to go.” His fingers brushed his throat, over the silver torque he wore. “I’m being summoned.”

Heedless of the effort Asa had put into drying me, I attacked Aedan with another hug that soaked me all over

again.

“I love you.” I held on tighter. “You know that, right?”

“I love you too, coz.” He reached out to shake hands with Asa. “Take care of her.”

“I will,” Asa vowed, and no one could have doubted his sincerity.

“Colby will be heartbroken she...” I reared back to see his face. “She was in Arden’s hair.”

Used to her sticking with Clay, I hadn’t processed my shock at seeing Aedan enough to remember.

“We got to talk a bit, but she flew up to the tents. The spray was getting her wings too wet.”

“Are you sure you can’t stay for brunch?” I kept my grip on him. “Or a game of Mystic Seas?”

A slight wince told me he was fighting the compulsion to have stayed this long, and it renewed my vow to see him free of Calixta. She might have been revered by her people, but that was before she spent decades trapped in a swamp. The isolation, the impotence of her situation, had twisted something in her. I had no doubt Aedan was bearing the brunt of her anger with me for leaving her caged after killing Delma. For her heir to scorn her... Yeah. She hadn’t taken that well, and she was making him pay for it.

“I wish I could.” He cast a longing gaze toward the warming tent. “I wish...a lot of things.”

“Can I ask if you two are okay?” I shifted my feet, uncomfortable with the heart-to-heart. “You don’t have to tell me—”

“You should know.” His focus drifted back to me. “You’re the one who has to pick up the pieces.”

That did *not* sound good. At all. And I immediately regretted asking him.

“I told her I’m a prince, that I was called home to serve my queen.” His eyes darkened with emotion I couldn’t put my

finger on. “I told her I must court a female of the queen’s choosing when the time comes. I told her...” he lowered his chin, “...I love her.”

“Are you in fascination with her?”

The question coming from Asa startled me, and I leaned back against him to brace for the answer.

“I am.” A grim smile bent Aedan’s lips. “And I will be for the rest of my life, if I have any choice in the matter.”

For some reason, that sounded more like a threat than a lover’s vow.

“I’m not leaving you there.” I took Aedan’s hand. “You know that, right?”

“I know you’ll do everything in your power to save me.” His expression warmed. “Thank you, for that.”

“Thank me when I pick you up in time to attend the waterpark’s grand opening.” I forced one more hug on him, but the muscles in his neck twitched as if the torque were more of a shock collar, so I let him go. “We’ll keep Arden safe for you.”

“Keep her safe for her own sake.” He backed into the surf. “I shouldn’t factor into any of her future plans.”

His bitterness was a knife through the heart, but I couldn’t make him stay, and I couldn’t afford to make more promises that might fall through if the director actually had died in the blast. I didn’t have a Plan B.

He didn’t turn his back on us until the water closed over his head. The last thing he saw as the ocean took him was Arden hunched in on herself, sobbing into her towels as if her heart were breaking.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Aedan

Tentacles coiled around my ankles, snatching me hard against the rubbery side of the giant squid sent to fetch me. Its beak clicked, but I had forgotten what little of its language I once knew. I stared into its eye, which was the size of my palm, and I swore I read pity in its depths as it began its swim to the Haelian Seas. The royal guards would be waiting on the shores of Hael to escort me back to the palace, back to Calixta.

As the current tugged on my hair, whipping it into my eyes, I did my best to steel myself for my welcome home. She had warned me of the cost of fleeing her court, but when she sensed Rue, I lost my resolve to lock those soft parts of myself away where no one could reach them.

A moment of weakness. That was it. Nothing more.

Within minutes, mermaids with dagger teeth met us at the portal I had used to access this world. The ten of them, an entire pod, darted around me and the squid, clicking questions to it that resulted in a growl I felt rumbling through my bones. The beast clearly wasn't a fan of mermaids, or their curiosity.

"Princeling." A mermaid, her hair as black as squid ink, scratched my cheek with her fingernail. "You are a fool to let yourself get caught. Perhaps I ought to help you escape?"

“He’s pretty,” another chimed in, both speaking daemonish to ensure my comprehension of their taunts as they circled me like a school of sharks. “I bet he tastes even better.”

“The former queen would punish us,” a third pouted. “They say she has lost her mind.”

A fourth, her fins a deep gold, wondered, “Then would she notice if she lost her heir too?”

The four of them bobbed around us, deliberating whether I was delicious enough to risk Calixta’s wrath, until the squid, tired of their antics, whipped out one meaty tentacle, cinched it around the black-haired female’s elegant throat, and snapped her neck.

Rather than horror, their gasps were of delight as they bit into her flesh and began to feast.

Having created a distraction, the squid hurtled toward the portal, punching through into another world. One filled with hurt and hate and horrors I had never known. Until Calixta.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Esyes swollen and cheeks blotchy, Arden gazed across the ocean with a trembling bottom lip.

“We need to get you a change of clothes.” I took her by the arm. “There are hot drinks topside too.”

“Yeah.” She rose with the stiffness of a woman in her eighties. “That sounds good.”

Are you okay?

A pathetic question to ask someone when you could see the answer was a resounding *no*.

How can I help?

Not much better, since if anything could make a difference, Clay would have done it already.

What happens now?

Had Arden known the answer, she wouldn't look so lost.

Better for me to stick to caretaking and not prod any tender spots until she revealed them to me herself.

With an arm around her shoulder, I guided her onto the lift, shuffling to make room for Asa.

While I got Arden into a dry change of clothes and forced a cup of broth down her, Asa went to check on Clay. Arden thawed out quickly, but I couldn't help noticing a new distance in her expression. Or maybe *disinterest* was the right word.

This world of vampires, wargs, and daemons had lost its sparkle in under twenty-four hours.

That had to be a record of some kind.

An hour later, Asa found us, reporting that Clay was ready to see us.

“Can you take her on ahead?” I gave Arden over into Asa’s care. “I want to see if Fergal is still awake.”

Once they left, heading in the direction of the parking lot, I blew out a long sigh and girded my loins.

The only thing worse than having feelings was talking about them.

Once they were out of sight, I went in search of the blackout tent and let myself in per its protocols.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t full dark but bathed in an almost infrared light that allowed me to see the room. It housed a half dozen cots, all empty except for the one where Fergal lounged, and a small fridge with a microwave on top.

“Hey.” I toyed with my bracelet, a habit I had mostly broken. “Do you have a minute?”

“I have hundreds.” He held out his hand, palm up toward the tent’s ceiling. “Dusk is a long ways off.”

Laughing softly at the mild joke, I shifted from foot to foot, uncertain if I wanted to sit or stand for this.

Fergal, reading my discomfort, broke the ice. “Arden had a relationship with Hael’s new heir.”

With him confined topside during Aedan’s visit, I was confused at his insight. “How did you...?”

“She told me a little. I overheard more after their reunion. I pieced together the rest.”

Agents did love their gossip, and they didn’t have to recognize Arden to identify Aedan as Hael’s heir.

“The break is fresh.” I let him fill in the details. “She’s in a lot of pain.”

“I can tell.” He pinned his arms behind his back. “She smells like a wounded animal.”

That would have been helpful to know before bringing her into the midst of so many predators.

“She’s a tough girl. She’ll pick up the pieces.” I wasn’t sure who I was trying to convince, him or me. “I just worry about her in the meantime.”

“Do you think I’ll take advantage of her emotional weakness?”

“I don’t know you well enough, when it comes to food, to be sure.”

To call her *food* curdled my gut, however true it might be from his perspective.

“I can respect that.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m willing to offer a binding vow not to harm her.”

“I’ll take you up on that.” I reached for the athame in my kit, cut my palm, then passed him the blade for his own slice. “Ready?” He nodded, and we pressed our palms together, mingling our blood. “Speak your truth.” I gripped him hard. “Make your vows and know you will be held to them until you cease to exist.”

Usually, *until death* did the trick. Not so much with vampires. They were already dead.

“I swear Arden is safe in my presence,” he recited. “I will not harm her or allow her to come to harm.”

We went back and forth, me tying up loopholes, and him humoring my requests for specific phrasing. As soon as I ran out of ideas, I sealed the vow with dark magic funneled through the Hunk for extra oomph, binding him to his word for the rest of his existence.

Fixation could still happen, yes, but if he raised a hand against her, he would keel over on the spot.

Problem solved.

No, I wasn't so far gone I didn't register what a horrible idea it was to rely on the Hunk. It just made it *so* easy to reach for more power in a pinch.

And yes, I realized that meant I was in deep trouble, but I hadn't heard from Asa's grandmother as to whether she had found a means of untangling the Tinkkit choker from the book and the djinn's pendant. Until she got back with me, I was forced to follow my own advice to learn to control its influence over me.

Obviously, that was going *really* well for me.

One awkward pause later, we were washing our hands and plotting our next moves.

Knowing Arden would ask me, I checked with him. "Will you return to Boston at dusk?"

"I will." Fergal sat on one of the cots. "Isiforos doesn't need me here."

"Good deal." I was happy for the extra hands to lighten the work. "I'll see you then."

He stretched out, locking his fingers behind his head, and I headed to the SUV to meet with the others.

Arden rode shotgun, a white moth pinned in her hair, while Clay looked on with compassion that hurt to witness from his spot in the back. Asa sat behind the wheel, which left me to slide in next to Clay.

"Please tell me you have good news." I focused on Clay while ignoring the subtle inhale as Asa scented my blood on the air and raised an eyebrow at me for coming back with a scab. "Did you save the hard drive thing?"

That Clay didn't snipe back about how he was the only one who missed the visit with Aedan told me Colby had flown right to him. Since he was aware of what put Arden in a funk, he avoided the topic, but I knew he would have questions for me later. That was fine. I had some for Colby too. She must have overheard enough to grasp that Aedan meant his private moment with Arden as a goodbye.

Had he doubted my ability to disentangle him? Or was he too hurt to risk his heart on her again?

From his parting words on how I ought to protect her for her own sake, not his, I couldn't tell.

"Yes." Clay laughed gently. "I saved the hard drive thing." He angled his laptop toward me. "The case was waterproof. Only the port got exposed, and just for the amount of time it took Isiforos to breach the surface."

"Excellent." I patted him on the thigh. "Let's see what you've got."

"We should get back to the hotel first." He flashed a glimpse of footage pre-bomb from inside the bunker then blacked out the screen. "You don't want this played out here."

"Boston isn't that far." Asa considered him in the rearview mirror. "Do you have everything you need before we go?"

"Nowhere close." Clay got comfortable. "I've got enough for now, though."

With Arden in the SUV with us, I had limited options on how to tell Asa how things went with Fergal. As I didn't want him texting and driving, I pinged him before he hit the road then kicked the back of his seat.

>Fergal made a blood vow not to harm Arden.

>>Ah. That's why you smelled like blood.

>He offered, so I took him up on it.

>>Do you think he's in danger of fixation?

>He's a solid guy, workwise, but I don't know his feeding habits.

>Am I being super paranoid because it's Arden?

>>You have to be until she understands the danger she's in by virtue of being human.

>I'll take that as an endorsement of my crazy.

To prove he was sincere, that my concerns were valid, he sent me a kiss emoji.

With Clay and I shoulder-to-shoulder, I wasn't surprised to learn he had been reading our text messages.

>>*You can never be too careful, Dollface. Better to be vigilant than look back and wish you had been.*

>*That's ominous...but thanks?*

>>*We don't need Arden to rebound with the first nice paranormal guy she meets.*

>*So, you agree there's something there?*

>>*I agree his sudden interest is odd, but they got along well on the drive. They talked the whole time. He even laughed a few times. A vampire knows better than most the fragility of a human life. Maybe it's as simple as him recognizing Arden is a good person and wanting to do his best to protect her.*

Since a vampire was a dead human resuscitated by necromantic magic, he had a point.

>*Okay, this is me, letting it drop.*

>>*How about I hold on to it in case you need to pick it up again?*

A twitch of my arm was all it took to bump shoulders with him.

>*You're a good friend.*

>>*It's embarrassing how much you flatter me.*

>>*Really.*

>>*Stop it.*

Resting my head on his shoulder, I was shocked when the next thing I knew, a hand was shaking me awake. We were in a parking garage, the return trip to Boston a dream.

I hadn't realized I had conked out, and that was saying something. Golems weren't exactly cushy.

"Mind if I go on ahead?" Arden mumbled, her eyelids swollen. "I need to call Camber."

Whether to vent or check in, I didn't have the right to quiz her, so I nodded I was fine with it.

She exited the vehicle and punched in a number, leaving us sardines to un-can ourselves.

Only when I spotted the back of her head did I realize her hairbow was MIA. “Colby?”

“Back where she belongs.” Clay pointed to his forest-green bob. “She traded out a few minutes ago.”

All Colby had to do to make that happen was pretend to slide out of Arden’s hair and let Clay catch her. We had a lot of practicing playing mothy hot potato in public, where she had to remain quiet and still.

Eager to share his findings, Clay all but trotted ahead of Asa and me. That worked out well, because he was there to help Arden past the security checkpoint, even though I had left word she had free run of the place. She peeled off, heading for a group of cozy chairs in the lobby, while he continued on.

When Asa and I reached the ballroom turned HQ, we saw Clay had kept going down the hall until he found a smaller space with its own projector. He locked us in, I cast a privacy spell, and we each chose a seat. For Clay to be this cautious, the recording must be damning.

Moments later, while my anxiety churned, Colby sailed over to me. “Hey, you.”

“Hey yourself.” Her antennae twitched with curiosity. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“It feels like I haven’t seen you in forever.” I kissed her head. “You’ve been so busy with Arden.”

“I just thought... She could use a friend right now.” Her voice softened. “I can dial it down, if you want.”

“Don’t you dare.” I held her close. “I’m thrilled you guys are getting along so well.”

While we cuddled and caught up like we hadn’t seen each other in days, Clay finished setup and hit play.

From a camera positioned in the upper lefthand corner of the ceiling in the bunker, we watched as Bjorn, the frost giant who played butler (and henchman) for my grandfather, folded

himself into the room and began a methodical check of electronics systems hidden behind the metal panels.

“He does this for about thirty minutes.” Clay fast-forwarded the clip. “This is where it gets interesting.”

Asa leaned forward, elbows on knees. “There’s no sound?”

As he thumped the projector remote across his palm, he shook his head. “Nope.”

“I’ll take this as a win.” I gripped his wrist. “We wouldn’t have this much without you.”

On the upside, we wouldn’t miss out on key plot points if we talked during the movie.

The screen cleared in time for the director to enter, tug down a hidden seat built into the wall, and strap in. Bjorn checked to ensure the director was secure then folded open a second chair for himself. The two men took up the entire space with an exactness that left me wondering if it had been built with Bjorn as the second occupant in mind. Their knees touched, and their arms folded over their chests. It was clear they had drilled this exact scenario more than once.

“Out of everyone, he chose Bjorn.” I scoffed. “Of course he did. Who doesn’t pack their butler?”

“Bjorn is dangerous.” Clay’s eyes were glued to the screen. “He’s kept the director alive this long.”

Given the director’s penchant to hide within the walls of his empire, I hadn’t given enough credit to Bjorn as the driving force behind the director’s survival. How hard could his job be? With all the extra security, I doubted Bjorn had to do more than loom and breathe through his mouth to be an effective deterrent.

But Clay was old, and his memory long. He could recall how it had been, back in the Bureau’s beginning. Maybe Bjorn had been more impressive then than he was now after decades of deference and comfort.

“Something’s wrong.” Asa was drawn to his feet by his certainty. “Watch their shoulders.”

“It’s like they’re hearing an unexpected noise,” I agreed, “and both jumping at the same time.”

“Might have been whatever mechanism that powered the ejector warming up,” Clay cautioned. “I didn’t get further than this point before. Everything from here on out is new to me too.”

A few seconds later, Bjorn didn’t have to reach far to bang on the door with his fist.

“Does he want out?” Asa drifted closer to the projection. “Or is someone trying to get in?”

“If it’s the former, then the unit might have malfunctioned, and Bjorn hoped whacking it would reset the controls.” That was my go-to move when tech failed to cooperate with me. “The latter could mean someone saw them go in, guessed what was happening, and tried to wedge themselves in with the director and Bjorn.”

“We don’t have enough to speculate yet,” Clay cautioned, always quick to prevent me from making assumptions.

Grumbling, I settled in to watch as Bjorn punched the door one last time, and then...static.

“The feed must have been powered by the compound.” Clay popped his knuckles. “Makes sense. The bunker wouldn’t waste precious energy on filming its inhabitants when its resources were focused on their survival.”

“This proves the director knew the blast was coming,” Asa said, “but not if he was responsible for it.”

“He escaped without warning the others,” I countered. “That’s as bad as pushing the button himself.”

After picturing a cartoon big red button with a glass cover that said *don’t push*, I couldn’t stop seeing it.

“I’ll slow it down, see if I can pick out some of what they’re saying.” Clay straightened his jacket. “There’s a new program for lipreading I’ve been wanting to try.” He rubbed his hands together with glee. “A teen trying to catch his

girlfriend cheating on him designed it, but I've heard good things, and it's open source."

"Mmm-hmm." I nodded like I had a clue what that meant. "Open source."

"Never mind." He waved his hand. "I'll text when I have something."

After exiting the room with Asa, I locked Clay in with another spell so that Colby could stretch her wings safely. The poor thing had been exiled to his pocket or frozen in hairbow mode more than ever the last few days. There had to be a better way for her to move around unseen, but if there was one, I hadn't figured it out yet. At least with Arden here, she had one more option for transportation.

With the pair of them secure, Asa and I went to check on Arden.

We found her with a very unexpected and mildly ruffled friend.

Fergal sat with her at a table in the otherwise empty café. She was sampling a drink he must have made for her while he sat with a cup I doubted he had taken a sip from to fuel the illusion he was just an average guy. His posture was relaxed as he leaned in to show her something on his phone that made her smile.

Who knew a vampire could make such a fantastic babysitter?

They noticed us, and Fergal stood, putting away his phone. "Director."

"I can buy you being awake before dusk and after dawn, but it's full sunlight out there."

"You'll never believe it." Arden choked on her next sip. "Tell her."

"Another agent had booked a transport to Boston." He picked imaginary lint off his wrinkled suit jacket. "I requested to join them."

“In a *body bag*.” She bent and picked up a hefty black crinkly plastic sack with a wide zipper. “Can you imagine?”

Part of me wondered if he always traveled with one. The other part decided it was rude to ask.

“They were fresh out of coffins,” he said with a sniff that sent Arden into peals of fresh laughter. Pretty sure that was his intent, based on the twinkle in his eyes before he turned to me. “Any news?”

“Yeah.” I noted the number of agents milling around who didn’t need to know how thoroughly their former boss had screwed them. “Clay will text you an update soon.”

After I told him I wanted Fergal and Isiforos in the know. I was getting better at the trust thing, a little bit anyway, but I still had to remind myself to keep them informed on what was usually a team-only loop. With the Bureau on shaky ground, I had to delegate and extend faith to those who had earned it.

“I hate to be a bother, but do we have a room?” Arden pushed to her feet. “I’m exhausted.”

The mental picture of her crying herself to sleep on her pillow flashed before my eyes, but I smiled as if I were oblivious to her hurt, not wanting any pity on my face to send her spiraling. She hadn’t had a moment alone to process her visit from Aedan, and she deserved time to cry, scream, or rage. Whatever helped her cope. “I’ll get you one.”

“I don’t...” Sawing her teeth over her bottom lip, she stole a glance at Fergal. “I don’t want to be alone.”

And I didn’t want her shackled up with an attractive vampire while her heart was breaking.

“Clay is working on a video project in a side ballroom,” Asa volunteered. “There’s no sound, so we could have a cot brought there, if you want company.”

“I’ll make the arrangements.” Fergal didn’t give her a chance to decide. “It won’t take long.”

She slumped in her chair, dejected, and I could have kissed Asa for the suggestion.

Smart people made stupid decisions when they were hurting, and I didn't want Arden to wake up tomorrow a pint low and regret her life choices.

Less than fifteen minutes later, he returned, rolling a folded cot, and she hustled over to him.

Since I had sealed Clay and Colby into the ballroom, I had to follow Fergal and Arden to let them in.

Sure.

That was why I was stalking them.

>>*Fergal incoming.*

After texting the warning to Clay, I sent one to Colby as well.

>>*Activate hairbow mode.*

"There's a decent gym," he was saying when I got too close to be casual about my eavesdropping. "I told the others you have free access whenever you choose, and that the room must be cleared for your use."

"Will you join me?" A flush of color rushed into her cheeks. "I would love to see your moves."

"What moves are those?" I wedged myself between them. "Would you be willing to show us both?"

A faint snort escaped the vampire, but Arden's jaw had fallen open, her eyes huge in her face.

"He practices Muay Thai." Her hand rose to her throat. "What did you think I meant?"

"Exactly that," I lied through my teeth. "That is exactly what I thought you meant."

"He's a vampire, so he's super-fast." Her eyes pinched tight at their corners, familiar with my tells. "I would love to see him go full speed." The flush, which I was now realizing stemmed from a different type of excitement, returned with a vengeance. "Maybe even spar with me in slo-mo."

“That would be so cool.” I jerked when Asa caught me by the elbow. “Let me know when and where.”

A faint snort escaped Asa, whose shoulders shook with laughter, and he tugged me back to his side.

Heat rushed into my cheeks, which Fergal could probably smell, and I felt like an idiot. More than usual.

This was what I got for trying to unravel the twisting pathways of someone else’s heart when half the time, I wished for a how-to manual to explain untangling my own.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



With Arden tucked away with Clay and Colby, and the privacy spell recast, I got to face Fergal awkwardly in the hall with Asa as a witness. “So...I owe you an apology.”

“Arden is young and vulnerable,” Fergal told me gently. “I won’t take advantage of her pain, even if she invites me to distract her from the hurt. I can be a friend, but I won’t be more than that.”

“Thank you.” I tried to smile, but I felt it go crooked. “She’s an adult. She can make her own choices. It’s just hard for me. Letting go. I’m not great at it.”

“Neither are newborn vampires. They often mourn the loss of their humanity, even if they chose to embrace a life after death.” His gaze went distant as he stared at the locked door. “They are more prone to bloodlust because they still identify as human, and they’re drawn to human friendships and romances. They’re dangerous because they’re naive enough to believe they can ignore the call to feed.”

Sliding his hands into his pockets, Asa ventured, “You speak from experience.”

“I was engaged when I died.” His eyes shut tight. “I rose a vampire, with no choice in the matter, and the second my master let me out of his sight, I ran to my betrothed to tell her I was alive.” He exhaled. “But I wasn’t, and the smell of her...” He shook his head. “She was the first person I killed as a vampire, and the memory still haunts me. I had never fed on a

living person, you see, and I tore her to pieces in my frenzy to get at her blood. And, without my master to control me, I kept on killing until Black Hat caught me.”

His story was a familiar one. Vampires’ loved ones were often their first casualties. Or at least eventual ones. Even the strongest could succumb in a moment of weakness, and human lives were fragile things.

After Fergal fell silent, Asa read between the lines. “You killed your master.”

Not a question. A certainty. Asa already knew the answer.

“He was my second victim,” Fergal confirmed, “and I have no regrets about his final death.”

Plenty of shady necromancers were willing to resuscitate humans without consent if a master vampire paid them well enough. Fergal must have had talents, or resources, the master vampire wanted for him to foot the bill.

“I’m sorry you went through that.” I hated doling out canned condolences, but I was shocked he had shared so much of his history with us when vampires were notoriously private about their pasts. They had an almost unspoken rule not to discuss the lives they led before they rose again. “No one should have the change forced upon them.”

“You offer this as proof,” Asa said, “that you would never harm Arden of your own volition.”

As my eyebrows drifted higher up my forehead, I couldn’t help asking him, “Do you speak vampire?”

“I speak regret.” He brushed his thumb over my cheek. “I believe we’re all fluent in that language.”

Perhaps Asa envied Fergal for succeeding where he had failed in killing his tormenter. Or maybe he drew parallels between Fergal’s fiancée and his mother. Innocent women who had fallen victim to powerful men. It was hard to say how Asa understood Fergal so well, but I couldn’t deny they were on the same page in this.

“Arden is...” Fergal appeared to struggle, “...an opportunity to make amends.”

There was too much room for interpretation in that statement. “Are you offering to train her?”

From what I had gleaned, that was her main interest in him. She wanted to learn from him.

“Yes.” His stare held mine. “I’m willing to educate her as well, so that she doesn’t fall prey to our world.”

His longing for redemption made me an even worse person for making negative assumptions about his motivations. But I had made so many mistakes with the girls. Nearly fatal ones. I couldn’t afford another.

“I’ll do better going forward.” I heard my doubt and sighed at myself. “I’ll at least *try* to do better.”

With amends made, I pivoted toward the main ballroom. “Any luck IDing our couriers?”

“None so far,” Fergal reported with a quickness that told me he was ready to move on too.

The familiar ring of my phone in my pocket made me wince, but I had to answer it. “Hollis.”

“There are three rather large creatures skulking in the bushes outside your first aid tent.”

Why was Carver...?

Hold on. First aid tent. Forget the why. Where was he?

After a sputtering start, my brain kicked back into gear. “Did you tell Isiforos?”

“No.” Carver sounded confused about the correlation. “I recognize the breed. Otdrel. They’re often used in mass assassinations. Since *you* are the one I am protecting from such threats, I called you.”

“Oh, Goddess.” I smacked my forehead with my open palm. “Don’t let them kill anyone.”

“Two agents were slain while using the facilities in the shrubbery.”

“I’m calling Isiforos.” I hung up on Carver with a growl then dialed my lieutenant. “Hey—”

“Little busy right now,” he panted. “Three half-gorilla/half-wolf things are eating people.”

“Carver just called to warn me. He’s at ground zero.” I was too far away to be of any immediate help. “I’m sending reinforcements now.”

“Are you telling me there are *more* of these?” He grunted. “Can’t talk. Gotta fight.”

The call ended, and I phoned Clay, prowling the ballroom like I was the one who was half wolf.

“What’s up, Dollface?” He kept his voice low. “Arden is out like a light.”

“Great.” I winced at my tone, but there was no time for pleasantries. “Get backup to ground zero.”

“Give me five,” he said, all business, and the line fell silent except for his fingers clicking on a keyboard.

Fergal and Asa watched me, unsure how to help, but I had no bright ideas either.

“I’ve pulled in everyone within fifty miles,” Clay reported. “They’re coming in hot.”

“Thanks.” I rubbed the heel of my palm over my heart. “Isiforos is under attack by *otdrels*.”

“That...is not good.” Clay’s breath hitched. “How many are we talking about?”

“Three are on the shore, and I’m not sure how many are cliffside with Carver.”

“They’re lone hunters. They have been known to hunt in pairs, but usually during mating season. It’s like foreplay. Gets the engines running.” His chair creaked when he shifted his weight. “Whoever sent them, in those numbers, they didn’t plan on leaving any survivors.”

Knuckles popping as I made a fist at my side, I gritted out, “What else can we do?”

“Pray,” he said. “Just pray.”



AS IT HAPPENS, I’M NOT GREAT WITH PRAYER. THE WHOLE patience thing had never been my forte. Neither was putting faith in a higher power. I was getting better about trusting the universe to do more than kick me in the teeth, but I was also aware the universe wore steel-toed boots.

Since the shortest line between two points was as the crow flies, I gave up on waiting and hoping, rode the elevator to the top floor of the hotel, and summoned my wings in a gust of fetid air. They were dark gray with a few random black primary feathers mixed in, but I took heart they indicated some goodness left in me.

“We’ll be right behind you.” Asa watched me flexing my muscles. “Call if you get tired and need a lift.”

“I can do it.” I had to believe that. “If I go now.”

No kiss, no parting words, no pep talk.

Instead of the goddess, I placed my faith in myself and stepped off the ledge into open air.

At the last second, I remembered to cast a cloaking spell to conceal myself from the humans below.

The streets zoomed toward me, packed with cars and people and bikes, but I spread my wings wide, and they caught me. I fought the burn in my shoulders to keep myself aloft, squinting into the afternoon sun. I was panting from the effort in minutes, but I got high enough to clear the city. Then I threw everything I had into reaching ground zero before it was too late.

As much as I wanted to call Dad and beg for his help, I doubted he could hear me on his phone over the wind. I had never flown this fast or this far. Asa was right to offer me

assistance. I might very well crash and burn, or I guess, crash and splat was more accurate.

Warmth spread across my chest from the Hunk as it reminded me I wasn't alone. I had power for the asking. All I had to do was take it. The worst part might be I fully intended to, if that was what I required to save the agents from this latest attack.

If High Priestess Naeema didn't get back with me soon, there might not be enough *me* left to care. Had a certain little moth girl not been filtering out the stain on my soul, I would have succumbed before now.

Naeema had gone searching for a cure in the libraries at other temples, but she hadn't had any luck. The Maudit Grimoire had twisted the Tinkkit choker into a dark artifact unlike anything she had ever seen.

And here I was...chained to it. Literally.

When at long last I reached the road that led to nowhere, I used it as a landing strip. Good thing too. I touched down too hard, too fast, and went tumbling off into the bushes where I smacked into a tree and slumped flat on my back, pinning one wing under me.

With the air knocked out of me, and at least one bruised rib, I wheezed through my gritted teeth as I got to my feet and forced myself into a jog. Carver ought to be around here somewhere, but I didn't see anyone yet. With the sun beginning its descent, I had to act fast before I lost the light.

Calling out would amount to ringing a dinner bell, so I would have to settle for blindly searching the area for signs of life. I needed to locate the creatures, and the survivors, without bringing attention to myself.

As the tents, what remained of them, came into sight, I clenched my jaw at the blood spattering the canvas and spraying the trampled grass. The stink of death hung over the camp as I drew my wand.

A guttural roar raised the hairs down my arms, and I prowled toward it, happy to answer its call.

From the food tent emerged a creature with the black skin and short fur of a gorilla. Its muscular torso and arms were very Kongesque. So was its smaller, rounder head. But its hind legs were canid, and it was built to go from bipedal to quadrupedal without breaking its stride. And, of course, it had a mouthful of pointy teeth. Its slightly elongated muzzle made it look like it was using a rusty beartrap for dentures.

A single golden eye, the other ruined, fixed on me, and it licked its chops as it padded toward me.

For once, I hoped the Hunk would take matters into its own hands, but it left damning my soul up to me. I lifted my wand, cast my spell, and magic blasted from the tip. It arced high then slammed down into an explosive punch through the creature's chest.

Sizzling meat went flying.

Everywhere.

“Impressive,” a familiar voice called from behind me. “I had no idea witch magic was so...theatrical.”

Whether Carver meant the bizarre quirk of my magic that launched spells without contact, or the death, I just smiled to avoid a more in-depth discussion. Avoidance was fast becoming my superpower. “That’s why they pay me the big bucks.”

Before he could decide what to say about that, a second creature ripped through a tent with a swipe of its claws. Once clear of the fabric, it bunched its muscular hindquarters and leapt onto Carver. He thrust his dagger up, through its stomach, but it clamped down on his forearm as he hit the ground under it and showed no signs of letting up anytime soon.

“Hold still,” I barked at him and took aim with another spell. “I don’t want to hit you.”

Carver went limp in its jaws, confusing the creature, who spat out Carver’s arm to investigate.

Magic hummed under my skin, and I shot off another blast that flung massive chunks of charred flesh for yards in every

direction. Carver, having been dead center of the blast, was dripping with ichor. Part of the creature's tail was trapped under his thigh, still swishing back and forth.

"Highness." He coughed and spat to the side. "You are truly a master of the dark arts."

Had he not unintentionally added that zinger at the end, I might have felt proud. But the power wasn't mine, and I was a fool to keep leaning on it to see me through fights I ought to be smarter than to pick in the first place. As it was, the bitter reminder of my weakness left me grateful for more otdrels to battle.

"You okay?" I crossed to Carver, offered my hand, and pulled him to his feet. "I didn't wing you, did I?"

"Not at all." His smile flashed white teeth in a gore-smeared face. "Shall we?"

"After you." I gestured for him to lead the way. "How many are left?"

"I've killed three. Yours makes five. There are more on the shore, but I couldn't say how many."

"Where is everyone?" I hadn't seen anyone besides him. "Have the reinforcements arrived?"

"I evacuated as many as I could before the creatures reached the heart of the camp. Others fled when they beheld the otdrels." He indicated the scattering of bodies. "Most of the corpses belong to the reinforcements."

In my mind, when I ordered reinforcements to the cliff, I pictured everyone banding together to fight off the creatures. It hadn't occurred to me the agents working the site would flee, or that Carver would encourage them to evacuate, leaving the reinforcements to walk onto a killing field.

How had I ever thought I was qualified to lead? All I had done so far in my tenure was get agents killed. I had no great respect for how my grandfather ran the Bureau, but at least he hadn't run it into the ground.

“The area is clear,” Carver called, sprinting toward the lift. “Shall we go down, my lady?”

“Yes.” I jogged to catch up and peered over the edge the whole way down. “Goddess.”

The sand had been dyed crimson, and pink foam frothed against the shore. Bodies were scattered down the beach, and only a few agents remained to battle three more otdrels. Among them, I spotted Isiforos.

Grip tightening on my wand, I consulted with Carver. “How did you take out the others?”

“I regret to admit, Highness, that I do not know if I can repeat my performance.”

Meaning he got through it on skill and grit alone. He was likely exhausted from his efforts.

“You kicked ass and took names,” I assured him. “I’m proud of you.”

“Took names?” His dagger drooped as he frowned. “I did not realize that was a priority. Shall I go back?”

“Never mind.” I clasped him on the shoulder. “You did well.”

A gust of wind smelling of death and rot blew my hair from my face as a dark form blocked out the sun. Panic shivered through me as I ran to meet the figure with hope banging drums in my ears.

Sure enough, Dad landed and folded in his wings, his expression grim. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” I couldn’t deny the warmth in my chest sparked by his question. “I just got here.”

“We need to save your people.” He worked his jaw. “Or so your mother told me.”

Thank you, Clay.

He must have tipped Dad off that I was in trouble, but he wouldn’t have thought to warn Dad off hurting the agents he was being sent to help. That was all Mom.

“I’ll take all the help I can get.” I smiled up at him. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“For you?” He brushed his knuckles down my cheek. “Anything.”

Wishing that were true, I couldn’t fault him for saying what he probably believed in the moment.

“Carver, this is my dad.” I felt a zing of pride in introducing him that I hadn’t before. “Dad, this is Carver.”

“The murderous stalker you adopted.” He drew his wand, held it at the ready. “A pleasure, I’m sure.”

“Dad.”

“It is a pleasure to serve the future High Queen of Hael,” Carver agreed, and Dad raised an eyebrow.

“Talk later.” I brushed past them. “Fight now.”

With introductions handled, ensuring Dad didn’t kill Carver by accident, I was done chatting.

Knowing it would earn me a stern talking-to later, I quit my advance when I got in firing distance and let the Hunk funnel its power through my arm in a catastrophic burst that sent the creatures tumbling away from the huddled agents. A second blast burst two of them down their seams. A third twisted the last pair inside out. A fourth warmed my palm as the agents rose from their hiding places...

No, no, no.

I gripped that damning wrist with my left hand and forced my wand down to my side. To better conceal the battle raging within me, I hit my knees, back facing the agents. I ducked my head and gritted my teeth, channeling the building power into the sand where it left glassy veins as if lightning had struck.

“You’re not going to win,” I growled at the Hunk. “Piss me off and see what happens.”

Despite the fact it had to know I was searching for a way out from under its thumb, it obeyed me.

This time.

As soon as it released me from its grip, Dad was there, grasping my shoulders and shaking me.

“How bad is it?” He snarled at the twisted metal hung around my neck. “How much control does it hold over you?”

“This is the...first time.” I flexed my fingers open, allowing my wand to fall from my grip. “It’s...never done this...before.”

“This is what happened at Lake Pontchartrain,” he was quick to correct me. “The only difference is you’re in its debt so deep now that it doesn’t black out your mind while it does as it wishes. It can act however it deems fit, because you’ve given it permission often enough, it can act on your behalf.”

The book had already been using the Tinkkit choker as an excuse to protect me with lethal force. To hear I had given it permission often enough that it no longer shielded me from its scheming wasn’t a surprise. I had known all along that the more I took, the further I would fall under its control. I couldn’t even say it shocked me, how fast it happened. Not when I had thrown around so much of its magic lately.

“I made my choices.” I bowed my head, unable to hold his stare. “Now I have to live with them.”

“Now we sever your connection to the book before it takes full control of you and never lets you go.”

Hand resting on his, I dug my nails into his skin. “How?”

“I don’t know yet.” He kissed the top of my head. “But I will find a way, or I will make one.”

As one of the black witches responsible for penning the Maudit Grimoire, if anyone was going to free me of its hold, he had a better chance than most. Or he had, before it began melding itself with the other items I hadn’t meant to feed it.

A warg, barely able to stand even on four legs, wobbled toward Dad with its teeth glistening.

All of a sudden, I ran out of patience for the lies woven by the director that I had perpetuated all my life. I’d had no choice but to do as I was told as a child. I was no longer at the

director's mercy, or obligated to spread his propaganda, and I had to protect my dad.

“Stand down,” I ordered, rising to my feet and tucking away my emotions.

A female with purple eyes defended the wolf. “The Director—”

In that moment, I made an irrevocable choice. I told them the truth my grandfather kept to himself.

“*I* am the director.” I held her stare without flinching, but she did. “This is my father, Hiram Nádasdy.”

“Nádasdy,” a man with silver thorns for hair murmured through leaf-green lips.

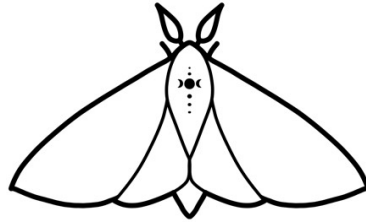
Nádasdy. Nádasdy. Nádasdy.

The whispers grew almost deafening as they competed with the roaring ocean.

Gazes sliding between him and me, the others fell back behind Isiforos, content to let him shield them.

Isiforos, on the other hand, only had eyes for me. And they weren't happy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“Mr. Nádasdy.” Isiforos limped forward with his arm outstretched to Dad. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“My daughter trusts you.” Dad shook his hand. “See that her faith in you is warranted.”

Coming from Dad, I was impressed he was that polite to another agent.

“Yes, sir.” Isiforos angled his body toward me. “We need to talk.”

A wobble in his knee caused it to buckle, and he toppled onto his butt, a gash in his thigh pulsing red.

Fear the others would strike at Dad competed with worry Isiforos wouldn’t make it without immediate medical care, but Isiforos’s need won out. “Will you be all right alone for a few minutes?”

“I’m sure I can manage,” Dad said dryly, the wind running its fingers through his golden curls.

“Isiforos.” I didn’t give my lieutenant a chance to protest. “I’m taking you topside.”

Without Colby acting as a filter, I didn’t trust myself using healing magic. But I could get him where the EMTs could reach him faster than the lift. As long as I didn’t kill us both in the attempt.

Magic erupted on either side of my spine, a carrion breeze filling my nose as my wings stretched wide.

A gasp rang out from the agents, who recognized the magic they had just seen Dad use to reach them. A display of familial power, born from dark magic, must have worked better than my claim he was my dad.

Seeing was believing, I guess.

After helping Isiforos stand, I wrapped my arms around his waist and his around my neck, and we flew.

“You knew your father was alive,” he rasped. “How could you not tell me?”

“I can’t catch a break.” I cast my gaze skyward. “I hoped the blood loss would work in my favor.”

“How can I protect your interests if you keep secrets from me?” He glowered in my face, which was easy with him, well, right in my face. “Little ones, okay, sure, but *this*? Your *father*? The Director’s lost *son*?”

“Lots of emphasis happening here.” I reared back. “Lots of spit in my eye too.”

“Why is he here?” His voice rose an octave. “Is he going to take over the Bureau?”

“Uh, no.” I snicker-snorted and sucked down a bug. “He would burn it down if he had the choice.”

“Someone already beat him to it.” His eyes turned hard and seeking. “They did, didn’t they?”

“This wasn’t his doing.” I could promise him that. “He’s had his hands full with his own problems.”

The choice to trust Isiforos with the knowledge of Mom’s existence lingered in the air, but I couldn’t find the words to explain her situation or its impermanence. It hurt too much.

The best I could do for now was tell him a different truth. “He’s helping us with the king killer dealer.”

“How does he know the dealer?” A frown knit his brow. “Have you been feeding him information?”

“The other way around, actually.” I scouted a safe place to touch down. “She’s the one who freed him from his cell

beneath the compound.” As I landed, I blurted out the rest. “The director kept Dad caged in a hidden prison where no one would find him. Luca, the poison dealer, discovered him, figured out who he was, and set him free in exchange for Dad’s vow to kill the director.”

The other details would have to be filled in later, but those were the broad strokes.

“How did she find him if no one knew he was down there?” He grunted when I sat him on the loose dirt, and he squinted at me. “You didn’t know, right?”

“The director told me both my parents were dead.” I fought down the tight fist of guilt threatening to squeeze my heart to a pulp recalling what that had done to me as a child. “He told me I killed them.”

“You were a kid.”

“I was.”

“His granddaughter.”

“Yep.”

“And he blamed you, then raised you and concealed your identity from the Bureau?”

“Yes, and yes.”

“He was afraid of you from the moment he first set eyes on you.” His gentled tone held a grim certainty. “Why else would he try to break you before you were strong enough to protect yourself? Why else hide his heir, if he wasn’t afraid of another public mutiny that would threaten his image?”

“I never thought of it like that,” I admitted. “I always figured he was ashamed of my white witch half.”

“He wouldn’t have done his best to crush the goodness in you if he hadn’t been afraid of what it might do.” He offered a tentative smile. “What *you* might do.”

The wail of incoming sirens jerked me from my thoughts, and I ran toward the strobes of red and white lights glaring in

the fading sunlight to intercept the EMTs and guide them to Isiforos.

One big point in favor of rebuilding locally was the support network that had sprung up around the compound over the years. Some private ventures, some financed by my grandfather. Para certified EMTs, and the private para hospital built to accommodate the Bureau's many and varied species of agents, were handy in our line of work. But never a more welcome addition than now.

Once I had Isiforos in capable hands, I soared back to Dad, who had loaded the others onto the lift. His gaze slid past my shoulders, to my wings, and I didn't miss the glint of pride in his eyes. Or the warmth. He hadn't gotten much of a chance to be a father, so I couldn't be sure, but I thought he could be a great one given time. Too bad we had so little of it left.

Together we hovered, keeping a steady pace with the lift and protecting the wounded from toppling over the edge. At the top, I passed the agents off to the EMTs while Dad went to inspect one of the otdrel carcasses. I hadn't given them much thought beyond how best to kill the beasts before they killed us all, but I landed next to Dad and peered at what remained of this one over his shoulder.

"Otdrels are rare," he said. "I've never heard of so many deployed at once."

He picked through the charred meat with his hand and showed no signs of the gore bothering him, but I suppose it wouldn't. I wasn't keen to touch it barehanded, but my stomach had lost its capacity for queasiness in most areas along the way too.

Except when those I loved were threatened.

"This is my first experience with them." I crouched beside him. "What are you looking for?"

"A brand." He lifted a piece of flesh with what might have been half a symbol stamped onto it. Or, it could have been an old scar. The hide was tough, so it was hard to tell. "From the breeder."

Weird as a gorilla-wolf—Goolf? Worilla?—combo was, Faerie had birthed more diverse monsters.

“These are bred *on purpose*?” There was no accounting for taste. “And they’re trained as assassins?”

“Only in the sense you can train an attack dog.” He let me snap a picture of the hunk of meat before he flung it away. “Left alone, they would run in packs and only defend their territory.”

The mental picture of shaggy, gorilla-headed wolves running on all fours across the plains flitted through my head. Good thing Clay had missed out. He would have tried to adopt one. “Now I almost feel bad.”

“They killed several of your agents.” He used a spell to clean his hands. “They ate a few as well.”

That would make notifying any remaining family they had difficult. “I feel less bad now.”

“*Rue.*”

Exhausted as I was from the flight and the fighting, I couldn’t help my smile. “Over here.”

As more reinforcements arrived, trickling from their vehicles to assess the scene, so did a bright-crimson daemon, who bulldozed his coworkers to reach me.

“Blay here.” He snatched me off my feet into a hug. “Rue safe?”

“I’m good.” I knew my job and started raking my fingers through his hair. “You got here fast.”

“SUV too slow.” He set me on my feet. “Blay jump out and run.”

That would explain the heaving breaths and sheen of sweat on his skin. “Are you hurt?”

“Blay stronger than road.” A snort blasted out his nose. “See?”

Twisting to one side, I got an eyeful of road rash that didn’t convince me he came out on top against the asphalt.

The wounds were already sealing, but they had to hurt. I would have healed him, but I couldn't trust my magic to behave, and I didn't want to push my tainted energy through him without a filter.

"You showed that road who was boss," I said instead of fretting. "I'm impressed."

After he finished preening, he noticed Dad and smiled. "Hi, Rue's dad."

"Hello, Blay." Dad allowed himself a twitch of his lips. "Thank you for rushing to my daughter's aid."

"Blay protect Rue." He set me down beside him. "Blay love Rue."

"I love you too, big guy." I wrapped my arm around this thick waist. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Blay good at favors." He passed me more of his hair. "What can Blay do for Rue?"

"Can you gather all the larger body parts into a pile? We need to burn them."

Used to the gore of the arena, he didn't bat an eye at the task. "Okay."

As he began stacking limbs in his arms like cordwood, I spotted a familiar golem jogging toward us.

"I tried to stop him." Clay reached me and bent double, sucking in great gulps of air to catch his breath. "I wasn't fast enough."

"It's fine." I rubbed his back when he coughed. "He's helping us gather what's left of the creatures."

From the depths of his wig, I spied Colby's wide eyes rounded with fear for me, but she was stuck.

As much as I wanted to trust Dad with the truth of her existence, I didn't. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

"We need to examine the corpses before they're burned." Dad flattened his lips. "We need that brand."

“I wish I had known that was important before I exploded so many of them.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “Oops?”

“A brand?” Clay lifted his head. “They’re marked by their owners?”

“Hmm.” An idea struck, and I pivoted toward him. “Can you take photos of any partial brands we find and run them through some program that glues them all together into a cohesive whole?”

Chuckling, probably at my ignorance of the extent of his skills, he still managed to sound earnest. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.” I noticed movement behind him and spotted Arden. With Fergal beside her. Dressed in a black hoodie pulled forward to shadow his features, thick gloves, and a full face and neck balaclava. “Explain.”

“It appears your daemon was correct in his assessment.” Fergal sounded muffled under all the layers. “I was too slow.”

“Not that.” I gestured to his getup with a sweeping wave. “How are you here?”

Drawing himself up taller, I braced for what he said next. “I rode in the trunk—”

“—in the body bag.” Arden snickered. “It was hilarious.” She held up her phone. “I took photos.”

“As I was saying...” He snatched at her phone but fumbled it. “I dressed appropriately and rode in the trunk.” Oh, yeah. It was totally his personal body bag. “I’ve heard of otdrels, and I knew you would need all the help you could get.” Arden, who caught her cell before it hit the ground, stuck her tongue out at him. “Right before dusk, Asa lost control of the SUV as Blay emerged without warning. Blay jumped out while the vehicle was still moving and ran away. Arden slid into the driver’s seat and threw the vehicle in park until we sorted ourselves. Then she continued the drive with Clay giving directions.”

“What’s that smell?” Arden tugged the collar of her tee up over her nose. “It’s like barbecued tires.”

“Why don’t you help me with contacting the evacuees?” Fergal tapped her elbow then guided her toward one of the few remaining tents. “We need an accurate headcount.”

Had Blay not been on pickup detail, I was horrified to imagine what she would have seen to go with the smell.

“He’s a useful guy, that Fergal.” Clay watched them go. “You cool with them bonding?”

“We had a long talk.” I filled him in on the high points. “I don’t think it’s going to be a problem.”

“The body bag thing doesn’t concern you?”

“When was the last time you saw a vampire pull on a hoodie to come to work early?”

“That would be never.”

“Exactly.”

“So that’s a yes about the concern.”

“That’s a hard yes.”

The blood bond seemed to have heightened his sense of obligation toward Arden. That, or taking her on as a student (I refused to think of her as his trainee), someone under his protection, made him willing to risk more to keep her safe.

“Before we left...” Clay rubbed his nape, “...she was calling for Aedan in her sleep.”

“I can’t think about them right now. The relationship thing. How to fix it. If it should be fixed. If it’s any of my business either way.” I took the coward’s way out. “I have to stay focused on the big picture. On keeping them both alive.”

And it made me feel like a dirt sandwich to prioritize others over Arden—yet again—but I had no choice. Or maybe, instead of always blaming a lack of options, I should admit that I could only live with one path available to me. The one that saved the most lives.

“I get that.” He wiped a piece of goddess only knows what off my cheek. “You’re stretched too thin.”

“Sir Golem.” Carver strolled up with a rag in hand as he cleaned his blade. “We meet again.”

“You saved a lot of lives tonight.” Clay patted his head like he was a good boy. “I’m proud of you.”

“Your praise warms the cockles of my heart.” He beamed, sheathing his weapon. “It’s all for my queen.”

That was yet another thing I couldn’t think about right now. How to burst his bubble.

“Did you hear that?” Clay clasped his hands in front of his chest. “I warmed his cockles.”

“Shut up, Clay.” I shoved him. “Go take pictures.” I pushed again. “Be useful.”

“I will assist,” Carver volunteered. “As long as my lady queen can spare me?”

“Yes.” I flicked my wrist in a very royal manner, minus what goo the gesture flung off my fingertips. “Please.”

As soon as we were alone, Dad wiped a hand over his mouth, failing to hide his smile. “You’re so like your mother.”

“Violent tendencies do seem to run in the family.”

“You collect lost souls wherever you go.” He turned his grin on me. “Yours are even more varied than hers.”

“She stuck to wargs?”

“Mostly. There were other white witches as well. A vampire.” He tilted his chin. “But you have surpassed even her capacity for seeing the best in people.”

“I’m not sure that’s true.” I couldn’t help from zeroing in on Carver. “I’m not *that* wholesome.”

“And yet an assassin has sworn himself into your service, along with the golem and dae who are already loyal to you. Your lieutenants are a daemon and a vampire. That’s no small feat.”

“To be fair, Clay adopted me first.” I wouldn’t have known the first thing about friendship without him. The delusion I

was fit to lead was probably also at least mostly his fault. “The assassin was also his idea.”

“The assassin you bound first with your blood and magic?”

“Yes?”

“Forgive me. Your actions made it appear you instigated your current relationship.”

“I can see how it might look that way, from the outside, but it’s Clay’s fault.”

“*Rue.*”

“Your daemon sounds excited.” Dad craned his neck. “He must have found something.”

“Let’s hope it’s something useful.” I set out in the direction of his voice. “I will assume the otdrels were presents from Luca, but I would like confirmation there’s not another enemy out there targeting us.”

The one good thing about Calixta on the throne was it nullified any value Asa or I held. He was no longer the Haelian heir, and Stavros was dead. I was no longer the Haelian Seas heir, and Aedan held that role. I wasn’t exactly thrilled about either situation, not with a pocket of daemons holding out hope an uprising would crown Asa, but it was limiting the number of assassination attempts and bounties on that front.

That left us with precious few enemies who could afford to splurge on such a luxury murder spree.

Chin tucked to my chest, I pretended not to see anyone signaling for me as I hunted down Blay.

We located him standing next to an impressive pile of body parts with a fleshy rib cage in his hand. Behind him, blood seeped in a crimson spread across the dirt beneath his feet. The scene reminded me of every time I had seen him fight in the arena, and I was thankful beyond words he would never face that wanton carnage for his father’s amusement again.

“Found clue.” He tossed his head on his way to me to slide his hair over his shoulder. Bits of gore fell off with the motion,

and blood dripped down his torso. “Ready?”

Once again, I was relegated to petting while I waited for his big reveal. I might as well. It wasn't like I hadn't been exploding myself. I was disgustingly filthy. “Sure thing.”

“See code?” He tore off more meat to expose fresh bone. “Like for expansion packs.”

Ah, Mystic Realms.

Forever growing. Forever broadening horizons. Forever charging me a fortune for access.

“I do see the code.” I got out my phone. “Let me grab a picture.”

Careful to make sure the entire string of numbers was legible, I startled when he took me by the elbow, smearing cold blood down my arm, and guided me to a small mound behind the mountain of corpses. A pile of rib cages.

“More numbers.” He let go when we reached them. “Blay help Rue?”

“This is a *huge* help.” I forced myself not to make a face at the mess on my arm. “You did a great job.”

Chest puffed, he tossed his head to send even more clotted hair falling into my hand. “Blay tries.”

That comment was textbook Clay, but I had made peace long ago with the fact he was a terrible influence on everyone he met. Me included. But mostly Colby. Or so I had thought, until this little performance.

“Let's get the rest of these logged.” I released his hair. “I'll owe you brush, wash, comb, braid.”

Eagerness glinted in his burnt-crimson eyes. “All of it?”

“All of it.”

Waving Clay over, I set him to work as the cameraman while Blay exposed the numbers.

>>*I put the kid in my pocket. The smell was about to gag her.*

The silent update on Colby from Clay was more than welcome.

>*You wouldn't want moth puke in your glorious hair.*

>>*Exactly.*

>>*I think she's also maybe scared your dad might eat her.*

>*Valid concern.*

“Perhaps I could speak to Asa for a moment?”

The request from Dad drew me up short as I pocketed my phone, but Blay took no issue with it.

As Asa emerged from the fires of transformation, Dad cocked his arm and punched him in the jaw.

Asa stumbled from the force of the blow, his lip bloody, but he simply nodded as if he had been expecting it. Well, that made one of us. With fascination hot in my veins, I couldn't stop magic from pooling in my hands, eager to pay back what had been done to my mate.

“No.” Asa caught my arm before I turned on Dad. “Your father and I have come to an understanding.”

After a brief pause where Dad considered Asa, and then me, he jerked his chin in agreement.

“Well, I don't understand.” I glanced between them. “What am I missing here?”

“If you don't need me,” Dad said, rather than answer, “I'll return to Howl.”

The twitch in his shoulders conveyed his eagerness to see her again, and I wouldn't hold him up longer.

“We've got it under control.” I hoped I wasn't cursing us by saying so out loud. “You can go.”

“I'll think on your problem.” He leaned forward, jerky and uncertain, then awkwardly kissed my forehead. As confused as

I was about what just happened, he was lucky I didn't kick him in the shins. "I'm only ever a call away, if you need me."

"Thanks, Dad."

Great black wings burst from his spine, and he lifted off, a smile of anticipation at seeing Mom on his lips. Smiling in return, I pivoted to find Asa spitting blood on the dirt. His cheek was already bruising.

"What was that about?" I gestured to his swollen face. "I want the truth, not some BS."

"I called your father." He touched the tender spot. "I asked him a question, and this was his answer."

"Could you be more cryptic?" I curled my fingers into fists. "At least tell me the question."

"I'll do one better." His gaze softened on me. "One day, I'll ask it of you instead."

Head pounding, I gave up on understanding what earned Asa the sucker punch.

If he and Dad were both happy with the outcome, far be it from me to question their sanity.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



With ground zero resecured and triage of the agents underway, Isiforos had ousted us from his post as I had, in his words, “freaked everyone the fuck out” with the admission I was Hiram Nádasdy’s daughter. I had expected the news I was the director’s granddaughter to reassure everyone, but apparently not.

Oh well.

Out of the three remaining Nádasdys, I was the only one on their side. Even if they didn’t yet believe it.

And, freaking out agents aside, Boston made more sense for us.

Easier to play mission control from The Spinnaker than source equipment for a second command center. Plus, we still had the poisonings to solve. No. Solve was the wrong word. We knew who was responsible. We just had to catch her, or her black witch cohorts, to end it.

On the bright side, thanks to Blay noticing the serial numbers magically burned onto the ribs of the otdrels, Clay had a name for the breeder/trainers within an hour of our arrival. Their location meant we had a second reason to be grateful for our return to Boston. The airport. And its multiple nonstop flights to where we needed to go if we wanted to confirm our suspicions the attack had been intended to stretch our already strained resources.

As much as I hated leaving Colby behind at the hotel with Clay, she deserved better than I could give her on this short

recon mission.

With me, she would be stuck as a mute hair accessory.

With him, she could spread out, play *Mystic Seas*, and catch up with her friends behind a locked door.

No contest, really.

“Visit Florida.” Clay fanned his hands in a wide arc over our heads. “Leave your grandmother behind.”

“Most people love their grandmothers.” I wasn’t sure that was true, but movies made it seem that way.

“Visit Florida,” Clay tried again. “Home to weird-ass paranormal animal experiments.”

A delighted inhale told me Colby was nestled in the silver-black pompadour he changed into once we got back to give the previous one a chance to air out the abattoir scent of dead ottdrel.

“Weird assassins.” He cleared his throat. “That’s what I meant.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You should get going.” He nodded to Asa when he joined us near the SUV. “Your flight’s leaving soon.”

“We can drive, if you want to come.” I hated leaving him behind. “It’s doable.”

“We don’t have that kind of time.” He chucked me on the chin. “I’ll be fine.” He fluffed his wig. “I have Shorty to protect me.”

“Our ride is here.” Asa had booked us a driver through a para rideshare app. “Are you ready?”

As I would ever be, but I didn’t want to be the downer, and I couldn’t think of anything better to say.

“I won’t let anything happen to Clay,” Colby promised, her voice fierce. “You worry about you.”

As much as I wanted to snort, I held it in. She was earnest, and I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

“Yes, ma’am.” I cast her one last glance before turning to join Asa. “We’ll update after we land.”

“Use the flight to get some sleep,” Colby ordered as loud as she dared. “Those otdrel are nasty.”

“They should be a big bad in Mystic Realms,” I mused. “Think how terrifying that would be.”

A spark of intrigue lit up her eyes that left me questioning what, exactly, I had done.

“Hey.” A smile tugging on my lips, I jostled Clay. “Got any more of that candy?”

“One more.” He dug it out of his pocket as if he had been holding it for just such an occasion. “You and Asa can thumb wrestle for who gets it.”

“You might have to give me your friend’s contact information.”

“Sadly, it only works about four times.” He dumped the candy in my hand. “Then nothing.”

“Did your friend mean for that to happen as insurance against addiction, or are you telling me we’re now part of a clinical trial?”

“Po-tay-toh, pa-tah-toh.”

About to argue I didn’t want my po-tay-toh to be pa-tah-toed, Asa took my hand and tugged me toward the waiting car.

“You aren’t concerned about leaving those two alone with most of the eastern seaboard between us?”

“Hey,” Arden cut in before he got a chance to reassure me. “I made you a smoothie.”

“I haven’t had one in *forever*.” I snatched it and pumped the straw, missing the squeaky noise that was a reminder of a simpler time in my life when I drank smoothies for breakfast every day on my way to work at Hollis Apothecary. “You’d be surprised at the dearth of quality smoothie shops.”

There was also the pang in my chest every time I passed one, reminding me how far behind me those days were, which

had made me lose my taste for the frozen treat.

After a long sip and swish, I decided on a flavor. “Pineapple mango.”

“It was the most appealing combo the coffee shop had left in their fridge.” She spread her hands. “Might as well use it before it spoils.”

“Thank you for putting your blending talents to good use.” I lifted the cup. “This is delicious.”

“Yes, well, I have a boss who enjoys a good smoothie, so I’ve been working on my game.”

Throat tightening at the easy affection in her words, I handed Asa my smoothie and hugged her close.

“I’m so sorry.” I hadn’t meant to say that, but that was what came out. “For all of it.”

“I know you never meant to hurt Camber or me.” She hugged me back. “It’s okay, Rue. Or it will be.”

Grateful for even a sliver of forgiveness, I clung to her until Asa cleared his throat.

“We should go.” He gently pried me off her. “We’ll miss our flight.”

Our flight. As in the four of us. Him, Arden, Fergal, and me.

“Check out these sightings while you’re down there.” Clay noted my curiosity. “Those are the hot tips on the director.” He sighed at my eyeroll. “I know, I know. Odds are good they’re bogus, *but* there’s a tight cluster within miles of each other, *and* you’ll be in the neighborhood anyway.”

While I stood glowering at his wheedling, he emailed me a list with a perp matching Bjorn’s description.

“*But* it’s a waste of our time, *and* no.”

Surely we had one free agent in the whole of Florida who could run point on hunting down these leads.

“*But* it’s your job, Director, *and* you can’t say no to that.”

“That’s enough *buts*,” Asa cut in, “and *ands*.” He glanced at Clay. “We’ll do three, but that’s it.”

The three he must have picked while reading over my shoulder wouldn’t take that long, so I nodded.

“I knew I liked you for a reason, Ace.” He shrugged at me. “Who knows? Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

As much as I wanted to leave Arden with Clay in the relative safety of the hotel, she wanted to come.

Immersion therapy.

That was the phrase that kept ping-ponging in my mind.

She had braced herself as best she could, and she wanted to see it all. Every ugly corner of my world. It was like she had been holding her breath since the airport and wouldn’t exhale until she got back home.

Looping her arm through Fergal’s, she dragged him off, chattering about building core muscles.

“Life just keeps getting weirder,” I told Asa as I watched the vampire let a human tug on him.

And, if the otdrels were any indication, it was about to get even stranger.



HUMIDITY ATTEMPTED TO SUFFOCATE THE FOUR OF US AS WE exited the airport and picked up our rental. Black Hat lacked the manpower for me to order a subordinate to leave a Bureau-issued SUV in the lot for us, so we had to make do with what the rental agency had available. In this case, a shiny silver compact SUV.

Fergal must believe that his duties included driving me where I wanted to go, since he preferred to climb behind the wheel, but it was honestly just plain weird for me to be in the back instead of riding shotgun.

The flight lasted three and a half hours, but we lost about six at the airport total.

Meaning body bag or no body bag, Fergal had limited time before he had to either zip up or bed down.

“I feel you staring at the back of my head,” he said dryly. “Do I have otdrel in my hair?”

“You know you don’t have to play chauffeur, right? That’s not your job.”

“It’s not that.” He tightened his hands on the wheel. “I...”

“Fergal gets carsick when other people drive,” Arden explained for him, earning a scowl for her answer.

“Ah.” A carsick vampire was a first for me, but we all had our quirks. “As long as you’re good, I’m good.”

Arden elbowed him until he grunted agreement then settled in to check the GPS.

The next two hours were a blur of me waking myself up with my snores and potholes jostling me into brief fits of consciousness. I had split the candy with Asa, and a half dose wasn’t nearly as rejuvenating.

“Rue.” Asa raked his fingers through my hair. “We’re here.”

A damp smudge under my cheek told me not only had I fallen asleep again, but I had been drooling.

“Sorry.” I sat up and wiped my mouth on the back of my hand. “I don’t know why I’m so tired.”

“I can’t imagine.” He brushed his lips over each of my eyelids. “It’s not like you’re running the Bureau, solving the poisonings, searching for the director—and Luca—while looking out for Arden.”

More lingered in his gaze, no doubt a mention of Aedan and how I fretted for him. But he wouldn’t say it when Arden was smiling and laughing again. There was no reason to remind her of what she had lost.

“I didn’t realize how bad my timing was until it was too late.” Arden twisted in her seat toward me. “That isn’t an excuse. It’s not like I gave you a choice. I made up my mind to find you, to face these things that happened to me, and I refused to take no for an answer.”

Not exactly an apology, but I was happy for it. “Life isn’t usually this chaotic.”

“From the stories I’ve heard, I’m not sure I believe that.”

“Not from me.” Fergal was quick to protest his innocence.

“Oh,” I drawled, “I can guess who blabbed his big golem mouth.”

This was the most time I had spent with Fergal, so he hadn’t met but a handful of skeletons in my closet. Any stories that made Arden think the Bureau’s post-apocalyptic circumstances were just another day at the office for us had to be part of my inner circle. And also full of crap, since things were about as bad as they could get for Black Hat with its headquarters destroyed and Luca poisoning humans, which threatened to reveal our existence to them in the worst way possible.

A flashing neon sign caught my eye, and I pointed out the window. “This is...a hotel.”

“You’re dead on your feet.” Arden twisted in her seat to face me. “Unless you want to make that dead, *period*, then you need sleep.”

“I see her mouth moving,” I murmured to Asa, “but I swear I hear Clay’s voice coming out of her.”

Since drool had crusted in a dribble down my chin, I couldn’t very well argue with her logic. As much as I wanted to bull through this case to the end without closing my eyes, I was dead to the world soon as my heavy head hit the pillow in the room I shared with Arden.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Sleep was *glorious*. I had forgotten just how glorious until my eyes opened at sunset with crust in them. I might have gone back to sleep had Arden not been dressed and waiting for me with an iced coffee and a smile. With her urging, I got ready then stumbled out the door, sleep drunk, and into Asa’s arms.

“Good night.” I kissed him with minty fresh breath. “Sleep well?”

“Tolerably well.” He kissed me back. “You?”

“I expected to spend the day staring at the ceiling, but I slept like a rock.”

“Time for this rock to roll.” Arden nudged me toward the SUV. “We’re burning moonlight.”

Next to Asa on the backseat, our knees brushing, I sipped coffee until my brain came back online.

“We’re only two hours away from where Calixta was entombed.” Asa rested his hand on my thigh. “It makes me wonder what—and who—else is hidden in the Everglades.”

“With my luck, probably more of my long-lost relatives.” I was joking. Mostly. “Or more giant spiders.”

“Giant what now?” Arden whipped her head toward me. “Those are out here?”

“You’re fine with otdrels,” Fergal asked, “but giant spiders scare you?”

“I can’t picture a half-gorilla/half-wolf creature. It’s just too freaking weird.” Arden wrinkled her nose. “Giant spiders, though? I grew up watching *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* movies. I have no trouble imagining how that would look or what it would do to me.”

Confirmation she hadn’t seen the creatures’ corpses relieved me, and I hoped that streak continued. We hadn’t exactly called ahead for an appointment, and the kind of people who bred otdrels didn’t strike me as being the welcoming type to folks who dropped by out of the blue.

With that happy thought, I noticed Fergal decelerating and peered out my window at the lush forest.

“I’m having déjà vu.” I peeled myself away. “It’s like visiting my grandmother all over again.”

“She might prove the more hospitable host.” Asa frowned at the landscape. “I doubt the otdrel breeders will be happy to learn their creatures were destroyed on their mission.”

“Maybe we gloss over that part,” I suggested, already thinking ahead. “What’s our cover story?”

“We go in as customers willing to pay whatever it takes to have our problem solved.”

“That sounds quick and painless.” I rubbed my hands together. “I like it.”

“Except these guys deployed what Clay called ‘a giant-ass horde’ of otdrels,” Arden countered. “He said it was more than he had ever seen in one place at one time. Since they targeted ground zero, and you’re the director, aren’t you worried they might have been sent after *you*?”

“I haven’t been the director for five minutes,” I protested on reflex, but I had been deputy director long enough for that news to make the rounds.

With our current issues, it wasn’t rocket science to figure out the line of succession within the Bureau.

“You’ve been targeted by several assassins.” Fergal pitched his lot in with hers. “More than usual lately.” He made

a thoughtful sound. “But it’s no secret Black Hat is vulnerable.”

Most of the recent attempts on my life could be laid at Stavros’s feet, but I wasn’t getting into that now. I had already traumatized Isiforos with my daemon lineage. Fergal could wait his turn. “That’s why I believe they were targeting us as a whole.”

Carver confirmed the bounties had been lifted, meaning it was far less likely I was a specific target.

“Too risky. Everyone knows you.” Arden smiled, and I didn’t trust it one bit. “But they don’t know me.”

“*No.*” I slashed a hand through the air. “Forget it.”

“She could go as my pet.” Fergal chuckled at her indignant squawk. “I can keep her safe.”

A vampire taking point on this expedition would explain why we came at night versus during the day...

No, no, no.

I couldn’t afford to start thinking of Arden as a chess piece for me to move on the board.

“Your concerns are valid, but you’re a civilian.” Asa thinned his lips. “A *human* civilian.”

I didn’t like how Fergal was staring at me, like I had missed an obvious cue. “What?”

“They won’t just tell us who hired them.” Arden rolled her eyes. “Loose lips sink ships.”

For a heartbeat, I thought she was Mystic Seas-ing me, but then I reminded myself not everyone was an addict.

“You want us to split up,” Asa said slowly. “You’re the distraction.”

“You’re the retrieval team.” Arden nodded. “Um.” Her gaze slid to Asa. “You can use computers, right?”

“What are you trying to say?” I folded my arms over my chest. “I can use computers.”

“I came back early from lunch once to find you holding the shop’s all-in-one desktop computer over your head, ready to smash it on the floor.” She coughed up a laugh. “You are not computer friendly.”

“I’m competent,” Asa assured her. “If I get stuck, I’ll call Clay.”

Given this was a losing battle and I wanted to get in and out ASAP, I caved to the popular vote.

“Okay,” I gritted out from between clenched teeth. “Let’s do this.”

No one was fooled, but they all seemed too content when I agreed to care if I was unhappy.

Obviously unhappy.

Storm-clouds-flashing-with-lightning-over-my-head
unhappy.

The headquarters of the breeders’ operation, or at least its gatehouse, was a lopsided cypress lodge the size of a child’s playhouse. But, even as ignorant as I was when it came to technology, I spotted the blinking lights of cameras mounted at each corner of the roof. For an operation of this size—and it must be massive to own so many otdrels to spare for one mission—there must be less obvious security in plenty of areas where we couldn’t see.

Time to get this show on the road.

“I’ll go ahead and cloak Asa and me.” I tapped Arden’s shoulder. “You two keep your vehicle doors open and give us time to climb up and out before you shut them.”

“So they don’t see the back doors open and no one exit,” Arden said, catching on quick. “Gotcha.”

Palms sweaty from what came next, I rubbed them dry on my jeans then focused on my breathing. I had to get calm before I attempted magic. I was already rolling the dice by casting over us. Only my certainty the book knew better than to harm Asa, or those I loved, gave me the strength to overcome that fear.

And no, it never got more terrifying that a book was sentient enough to understand my hard lines.

Once my heartbeat evened out and I had let go of my worry for Arden, I clasped hands with Asa.

Inhale, exhale.

Careful to draw from myself and not the Hunk, I wrapped Asa and me in invisible shrouds.

The faintest tinge of rot hit my nose, a reminder my clock was ticking, but I got the job done.

Lines cutting across her brow, Arden asked me, “What’s that smell?”

“Let’s go.” Fergal twisted her forward-facing and reached over her to open the door. “We can’t afford to waste any time. We probably won’t have long before they start trying to kill us.”

That got her attention, and she swallowed audibly before sliding out of the SUV and stepping aside.

Ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump.

Her heartbeat thundered in my ears, but she did a fine job of acting excited as she gaped in wonder at...I guess the trees? I wasn’t sure what angle she and Fergal had decided on, but Arden was working hard to sell it to anyone watching their arrival.

Grunting from the effort of squeezing between the front seats, I flopped onto Arden’s side then eased out next to her. “Clear.”

Pretending to only just notice she hadn’t shut her door, she closed it and circled around to join Fergal with a sway in her hips that made my stomach squirm. I didn’t want to put her in this situation, but she was here now.

Warm fingers glided over my skin, Asa cuffing my upper arm so we could keep track of one another. He must have scented me. Or heard my heart drumming against my ribs. I hadn’t even sensed his arrival.

A thud broke our standoff as the door to the lodge swung open, and a young girl in a pink ballgown emerged brandishing a wand with a glowing star at the tip. Her crown, easily half her height, sparkled.

“Bow before me, peasants.” She brandished her wand—or was it a scepter? “I am your queen.”

Grateful for the magic concealing me, I let my face say what my mouth wished it could blurt.

Fergal, proving he was a gentleman, swept into a low bow. “Your majesty.”

“You brought a pet.” Her eyes lit on Arden. “Can I play with her?”

Her eager smile bared crocodile teeth, and a long blue tongue wet her glossy lips.

“She is mine.” He infused more intent in those words than made me comfortable. Even knowing he meant it to protect her, a vampire wasn’t an ideal friend for a human. “I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

The girl appeared to consider this for all of five seconds before her head dropped back, and an unholy wail rent the air. The scepter went flying into a tree, where it lodged in the trunk, and she stamped her feet until she broke the heel on her glittery shoes.

“Angelina,” a woman bellowed from within the lodge. “What have I told you about temper tantrums?”

The girl dialed up her anger by ten notches, her face splotchy with rage as she made tight fists at her sides. The seams in her dress began popping, the fabric splitting, and a shaggy black beast ripped out of her skin.

“That’s better.” The woman stepped outside in jeans and a plaid shirt. “Now, go finish your snack.” As the creature stomped off, still wearing its tiara, the woman watched her go with a fond smile. “Kids.”

Proud as she was of her offspring, I was glad to avoid the spotlight. The girl reminded me of an otdrel. As far as I knew,

they couldn't speak, but I had no clue what she—and by extension her mother—might be.

“Your daughter is quite the beauty.” Fergal inclined his head to her. “Her tiara was impressive.”

“She won second place earlier today in the Little Miss division.” She wiped her hands on a cloth from her pocket. “Unfortunately, she devoured the winner before her father or I could stop her.” She chuckled. “Girls will be girls, I suppose.”

“Indeed.” Fergal tightened his hold on Arden. “I regret to impose during your family time, but I’ve heard you breed otdrels. I have a rather urgent need for one. Otherwise, I would have gone through proper channels.”

“We don’t stand on ceremony around here.” She beamed at him, too welcoming for my liking. “We do breed otdrels, but we’re waiting on our vixens to return before we can send out even one more.”

“Your entire stable is vacant?” His eyebrows twitched higher. “Your services must be quite in demand.”

“You know how it goes.” She waved off his praise. “Do your job right, and your reputation builds itself.”

“The Crawford clan is indeed renowned for their breeding and training programs at Circle T Farms.” Fergal oozed charm. “Do you have any dames or sires I might view?” He patted Arden’s head. “My pet would like to see one.”

“We do keep the grand matriarch on site,” she said with a straight face, as if they were selling purebred corgis and not murder gorilla-wolves. “You’re welcome to tour the facilities.”

“Oh, can we?” Arden leaned into his touch. “I bet they’re *adorable*.”

“Fair warning.” She rolled up her sleeves. “We feed them trespassers, so they have a taste for humans.”

The Hunk warmed on my chest, rousing to see what had riled me, eager to see if I would summon it.

“I’m confident I can protect her.” Fergal caressed Arden’s cheek with his knuckles, leaving me no recourse but to watch

this play out. “Please, lead the way.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” She threw the mini lodge’s door open, and warm light poured out. “Confidence is sexy.”

As I suspected, given the size of the crown-wearing creature that stormed into it, the lodge was glamoured to conceal what appeared to be a well-lit front gate leading onto an expansive property chockful of stables with metal cells for stalls and corrals enclosed with a faint orange magic to contain the agile creatures.

The entire operation melded zoo enclosure with horse farm and came out somehow oddly impressive.

Had their otdrels not been unleashed on my agents, I would have given them two thumbs-up for their facilities.

Quick to follow Fergal and Arden, Asa and I gained entrance with them then stepped aside. They were at a juncture leading to the largest stable on the property, but we needed an office to access records. Yet it required Asa firmly towing me away before I could get my feet to cooperate with leaving Arden behind.

“We need to be fast and careful,” Asa whispered in my ear. “If we falter, she will pay the price.”

The reminder allowed me to get my head back in the game, and I nodded, not that he could see me.

A hot spot on my chest warned the Hunk was watching, intrigued by my elevated heart rate and the tight curl of my hands into fists that promised violence. That more than anything got me to unclench.

Before we could decide where to go next, a man wearing a scuffed cowboy hat emerged from a nearby paddock. He wore the same jeans and flannel combo as the woman, and the crimp of his features when his cellphone rang told me he was annoyed to put a pin in what he had been doing to answer.

“Mo speaking.” He locked up behind himself. “We got one left. Yeah. Crazy, right?” He set out toward an orange- and white-striped building. “She asked for everything we had, and she got it. Except for Old Rose. We haven’t decided what to do

with her yet.” He shrugged to himself. “Why waste the meat, yanno?”

Unsure if that meant his family would eat Old Rose, or if she would become dinner for her offspring and, I assumed, siblings, I withheld my judgment.

Okay.

Fine.

I judged him.

Hard.

“Let me check.” He punched in a passcode to gain access. “The schedule ought to be on Lynn’s laptop.”

That sounded promising, so I used Asa’s hold on me to telegraph we should follow this guy. As awkward as it was for two invisible people to synchronize movements, he and I had worked together long enough to have a good idea of how the other person moved. Hopefully, we would avoid any collisions.

Mo headed for a desk, one of four, and plunked down in a chair in front of a laptop.

Careful not to get too close, I edged behind him to get an idea of what else might be on the computer.

“The fifteenth? Of this month?” He pulled up a new tab. “I’ve got you down.”

Each window he opened showed a map with a different dot, each of them black.

That didn’t stop him from assigning the job to what must be one of the dead otdrels.

“Wire the deposit, and you’re good to go.” He hesitated. “No, thank *you*.”

As soon as he ended the call, he set down his phone and took several slow breaths, in and out.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He fully embraced his mantra. “We are so fucked if Glenn doesn’t get this system back online before

Linda finds out we've lost contact with the whole fucking pack."

Ah. So those black dots *were* the dead otdrels. And it looked like Mo was hoping a glitch in the tracking program was to blame for their sudden absence from the board.

To be fair, a blip in satellite GPS coverage was ten times likelier than anyone surviving that many otdrels.

"She'll kill me if..." He rose slowly. "No." He rubbed his face. "It's not going to come to that."

Except it was. Eventually. Ideally *after* we had made our escape.

Telepathy would have been handy right about now, but I couldn't risk another spell in the presence of an unknown para. Asa and I had a choice to make. I could smell this guy's panic souring the sweat on his shirt. He was working up his courage to face Linda, who I assumed was Angelina's mom, and tell her they had lost contact with their entire pack of otdrels.

As soon as he grasped he had no choice but to confess this, he would seek her out to break the news. He would also ruin our shot at getting more information and endanger Arden and Fergal if Linda got suspicious. It was one thing to allow potential clients in when you were high on what must have been a fat check to clear out their stables. But potential witnesses to their downfall? Those wouldn't be quite as welcome. They couldn't afford the news to get out, or they would be ruined.

Mo had been sitting on this information far longer than was good for his health already. Was it too much to ask that he leave it be a teensy bit longer?

As I was debating what spell to use to put Mo down for a bit, he contorted and gurgled, unable to speak while throwing punches and kicks that probably landed on a certain dae who appeared to have Mo in an unbreakable chokehold. Within seconds, he quit fighting and slumped forward, his body going limp as an unseen force lowered him into a seated position on the floor then dragged him away from the desk.

“We won’t have long,” Asa warned, “before he wakes and sounds the alarm.”

“You take the computers, Mr. Competent, and I’ll search for physical files.”

And then we had to extract Arden, preferably before the Crawfords realized they had been duped.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“Any luck?” I finished my examination of the filing cabinets, but the materials within were relics from another era. “Looks like they moved to digital bookkeeping about two years ago.”

“I’ve saved their files from the last six months on a thumb drive.” He kept typing, searching. “Now I have to upload a program Clay sent with me. It will grant him access to their system for a deeper dive.”

There were definite benefits to having a friend—and a familiar—who thrived on tech advancements.

Their addiction to technology was the only reason why I got to remain stuck in the stone age, which was what my ability to power on and off a laptop, and navigate Bureau paperwork, amounted to these days.

Seconds later, the chair appeared to wheel itself back, and a text chime pinged. “Clay’s in. We’re done.”

“I don’t suppose anything jumped out at you while you were downloading those files.” I cracked open the door and peeked through the gap. “Like who hired them?”

“I didn’t open any files.” His warm breath hit my nape. “There will be time for that later.”

When his hand rested on my hip and his thumb made small circles, I got very interested in *later*.

“Clear.” I slid out the door and let him close it behind him. “Can you track Arden?”

I had a good idea of where they had gone, according to the tidy paths leading from place to place, but if I was wrong, we didn't have time to waste.

Granted, I got the sense from Mo that Linda would implode when she learned about the dead otdrels. We might get lucky and she'd be so focused on "locating" them, she wouldn't have time to connect the dots on the information breach until it was too late and Clay had what we needed to pin down who was gunning for Black Hat. Or me. Scary to think they amounted to the same thing as long as I was the director. Interim or not.

"I can." He hesitated. "Easily."

"What's with the meaningful pause?" I waved my arm until I hit him then grabbed on. "Is Arden okay?"

"She's...bleeding."

A blast of heat singed my chest as the Hunk decided to involve itself, its power tingling in my fingertips.

No, you don't, I warned it. Act against me, and I will act against you.

A faint sense of amusement drifted to me, and I recognized the book's foul scent breaking through.

"Take me to her." I forced out a wobbly exhale. "Hurry."

The sooner I set eyes on her, all in one piece, the sooner I could quench the heat pulsing through me.

Hand in hand, Asa led me down the path we saw them take earlier then veered off to the left. Toward the largest paddock I had seen yet. I almost tripped over my own feet when an enormous otdrel glanced up, pinpointing me with ease. Old Rose. It must be. But rather than sound an alarm, she huffed as if invisible people were a daily occurrence and kept loping in circles.

With Arden on her back.

Arden.

On.

Her.

Back.

I was going to kill Fergal. And this time, I would make sure it stuck.

Pressure on my fingers warned me Asa sensed my temper spiking, but I was locked on to my lieutenant. Fergal, his hands fisted at his sides, watched Arden pretend to enjoy herself atop Old Rose. Linda, beside him, smirked at his unease. She gestured toward the creature then barked out a series of commands that had it performing various acrobatic tricks without jostling Arden. The display might have been impressive, had she not been human and so very breakable.

“She’s ninety-three years old,” Linda was saying. “She’s the matriarch of our stock.”

“I wasn’t aware otdrels could be used for sport.” Fergal sounded as stiff as when I first met him. “Do you often book for riders?”

“Sadly, no.” She stared off into the distance wistfully. “Otdrel hunts could be a fresh revenue stream and an excellent option for retired breeders, but the animals don’t listen to the commands of anyone except their masters.”

An edge had crept into her voice since we left them, a subtle warning she was the only thing standing between Arden and the massive creature beneath her. I wasn’t sure what had changed during that time, or if she had been humoring him up to this point, but this mission was wobblier than a newborn colt’s first attempt to stand.

“Pity.” He awarded her a tight smile. “They truly are impressive beasts.”

“I agree, but I admit I’m biased.” She squinted over at him. “How did you say you heard about us again?”

Oh crap.

That’s what this was, the equivalent of interrogating Fergal at gunpoint. Linda was definitely onto them.

“Through a colleague who used your services,” he lied smoothly. “Are you opposed to vampire clients?”

“Not at all.” She grinned. “I don’t care where money comes from as long as it goes in my pocket.”

“Excellent.” He made himself appear satisfied with her answer. “Can I read a sample contract?”

“You could.” She whistled twice, and the otdrel trotted closer. “But that’s not why you’re here, is it?”

“I’m not in the habit of making handshake deals, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“Female otdrels have the ability to camouflage themselves.” She reached for the bridle on the creature. “Did you know that?”

“I hadn’t been aware of that, no, but it makes sense.”

“Yes, and it also makes sense that we would install infrared cameras throughout the facility to ensure none of our yearlings escape their pens. They’re handfuls at that age, just learning how to blend into their surroundings. They like to play tricks on their handlers, but we have to be careful to make sure we don’t lose stock to the forest. I’m sure you can imagine, with their high-protein diets, they cost a small fortune to raise. It’s a labor of love, but it is a business nonetheless.”

Cold sweat beaded down my spine as I caught her drift, and I thanked my lucky stars the old protections in place at ground zero had been embedded enough over time to rip the camouflage off the creatures. If we hadn’t gotten that heads-up from Carver, it would have been a massacre.

Fergal maintained his neutral expression, his eyes going dark, but Arden was tensing in the saddle. I could tell by her mount’s antsy sidesteps.

“That’s why I know two others followed you into our home,” she continued, tightening her grip on the bridle. “Why don’t you tell me why you’re really here?” She jerked her chin toward us. “And why your friends over there broke into my office and knocked out my husband.”

Since we had been spotted, I released the magic concealing us and met the woman's hard stare.

Rather than revealing Asa, Blay materialized in a wash of flame and proceeded to look menacing.

"You attacked the Black Hat Bureau." I reached for my wand. "Did you think we wouldn't retaliate?"

"Your compound is at the bottom of the sea, your director is dead, and your agents are rats fleeing from a sinking ship." She scoffed at me. "I did you a favor wiping out a few of the stragglers."

"Who hired you?" I needed to buy time to form a new plan. "Tell us that, and we'll go."

"You'll go?" Her laugh sliced through me. "I'm afraid not, and I won't be spilling my guts to you either."

"I can make that happen," I offered, heat flaring to life where the pendant touched my skin.

Her nostrils flared, and her eyes narrowed, but she didn't loosen her grip. "Who are you?"

"You don't recognize me?" It came out sounding cocky, but I was serious. "I'm the Interim Director."

"Rue Hollis." She snapped her fingers. "I was warned about you."

"I get that a lot." I spread my hands. "Reputation proceeding me and all that."

"You weren't there during the attack." She looked me up and down. "I had specific orders, and I followed them to the letter." Her chin jerked higher. "I don't botch jobs."

The second she targeted Black Hat, she broke that winning streak. Into atom-sized pieces.

"You were ordered to *spare* me?" I couldn't wrap my head around it. "That's new."

As much as it should have heartened me to learn I hadn't personally been the target, I couldn't imagine why Luca would

spare me. Then again, she hadn't blown the compound until Asa and I were in Faerie.

What was her game? How was I more use to her alive than dead? It made no sense.

"Those were the parameters of the job." She guided the ottdrel closer. "But you're on my turf now, Director."

Curling his lip in a snarl, Blay growled a warning at Linda to think twice before hurting Arden.

"I don't want to devolve into cliched threats," I said, "but...I will kill you if you hurt her."

"Ah." She nodded to herself. "She's not the vampire's pet." She snorted. "They're both agents of yours."

That was a logical conclusion, and yet my blood ran cold at the idea of Arden conscripted to the Bureau.

"We only want to know who hired you. Tell us that, and we'll leave." I let magic build in my hand, aware her heightened senses would detect the threat. I needed her to focus on that, because I still had no idea how to get us out of this alive. "Without returning the favor to your home and your family."

"You're so like your grandfather, flinging threats all willy-nilly."

That she already knew the director was my grandfather troubled me, but I couldn't put that cat back in the bag. I told the agents on the beach knowing the entire Bureau would hear it from them eventually.

"I'm willing to take my people and go. That's the best offer you'll get from me."

"I can't let every upstart with revenge fantasies run amok on my property." She set her lips into a mulish line. "It's bad for my reputation, and that's bad for business."

As much as it terrified me to cast magic from the Hunk on Arden, I didn't have enough power on my own to pierce the spell containing Old Rose to her paddock, protect Arden from the beast, and keep Linda on the other end of a loaded wand.

Maybe the visit from Dad had spooked it into good behavior. There was no stress to fighting the power. I ought to be more afraid of that acquiescence and the way I relaxed into its familiar hold, a silk noose tying itself around my neck.

With a flourish of my wrist, I punched through the barrier, encapsulating Arden in power. Not a ward, exactly, but something. The grimoire held a wealth of dark knowledge. There was no telling what it could do. That was the terrifying part. I had to trust it. *Trust* it. Not to hurt her.

Linda barked an order in what might have been German, and the otdrel whipped its head to one side and attempted to sink its teeth into Arden's closest leg. It smashed into the spell and snarled in fury. Linda wasn't happy about it either. The next string of commands was delivered with bite, but the otdrel couldn't get at Arden to hurt her.

Growling at its failure, it began bucking and rubbing its side along the fence, trying to scrape her off. The magic held her tight, but the creature was done playing. It climbed the metal bars then dug its claws into the faintly glowing magic dome. It must have thought if it turned her upside down, she would fall off and be a sitting duck for it to pounce on and devour.

With my focus on protecting Arden, I wasn't much good for anything but smack talk. Blay shifted enough to draw Linda's eye to him now and again, providing a decent but nonthreatening distraction. We had to get Arden and get gone before backup arrived for Linda. I wasn't worried about more otdrels, but an operation this size required employees. Lots of them. They had to be around here somewhere.

If I confessed about the otdrels, I could bring this farce screeching to a halt. But that was a last resort.

While Blay watched our backs and Fergal kept his blood-red eyes fixed on Arden, his muscles tensed, ready to intercept her if he got an opening, I attempted to anticipate Linda's next move.

This three-prong tactic was nothing more than bailing water on a sinking ship. We had to patch the hole, or we would

go under. But the only help in reach was the one force I shouldn't be calling on to fix all my problems.

“Hey,” a stout man yelled as he ran toward us. “Get away from there.”

Others fell in behind him, until thirty or more employees had us surrounded where we stood.

Power warmed my chest, flowing down my arms, the promise of escape at my fingertips.

Had the glint of a tiara not caught my eye, I might have repeated the Lake Pontchartrain incident.

A child is present, I reminded myself. I'm not so far gone that I will hurt a kid.

A searing agony rippled in my veins as the Hunk wrestled my conscience for control of my actions, but I had hard lines. That was one I would never cross. No kid deserved to pay for their parents' sins.

“Let her go,” I tried one last time. “Do that, and we'll leave you and your people in peace.”

For a heartbeat, I dared to hope the tiara had worked its magic on her too, as panic for her child pinched her eyes. But either she trusted her people—whatever they were—to protect her daughter, or she believed her daughter—whatever she was—could keep herself safe.

If anything, the girl's appearance spurred Linda into escalating the situation. Perhaps she wanted to show her daughter what it took to run a business like this. Or maybe she wanted to crush me before I returned the favor of zeroing in on her weakness.

“Take her.” She made a signal with her hand that snapped her employees to attention. “She's worth more alive than dead.”

With the director missing and presumed dead, Luca MIA, and Stavros dead, I wasn't sure that was true. There weren't any other power-hungry despots on my tail to my knowledge.

Their client hadn't wanted me harmed during the incursion, and that seemed to hold true now.

Weird.

Usually people loved trying to murder me.

"Sugar lump?" Mo rounded the bend with a tablet held in his trembling hands. "We've lost contact."

A hush fell over the shuffling crowd as they turned to hear a report that would seal our fate.

Goddess bless, he would have to find his spine at this exact moment.

"How many?" Linda anchored a fist on her hip. "One or two might have been wounded in the fight."

"All of them." Mo quivered in his boots. "They're all nonresponsive."

"It's a glitch." She dismissed him with a wave of her hand. "Reboot the system."

"I did, sweetness." He wet his lips. "Five or six times."

"Five or six...?" Linda slowly turned her head toward him. "When did this happen?"

"A few hours ago." He scratched behind his ear. "Several hours ago?"

Mo wriggled like a worm on a fishhook, unwilling to fess up to just how long he had hidden it from her.

"I hate liars," she snarled, prowling toward him. "I hate cowards more."

Her forearm darkened and thickened, the muscles bulging, and her fingers curled into claws.

Fast as a blink, she punched through his chest, ripped out his heart, and flung it into the dirt.

Okay.

Well.

That would explain Mo's healthy fear of upsetting his sugar lump.

Whirling on me, Linda pointed a quivering bloody finger at my face. "*You.*"

"Me?" I jabbed my chest with my pointer. "What about me?"

"What have you done?" Her shriek brought the otdrel galloping to her side. "Those were my babies."

Holding on for dear life, Arden slipped and slid in the saddle until she righted herself, but my skin crawled having her so close to Linda.

"They killed my people." I was done wasting time. "What did you think would happen?"

"I was promised less than a dozen on site," she ranted. "She swore to me—"

"Let me guess." I allowed a low warmth to build in my palms. "Luca told you the Bureau was dead, and you were picking vultures off its carcass." I snorted. "You didn't stop to wonder why she purchased so many of your otdrels? What good would a show of force do if there were only a handful of agents left?"

"I'm done talking." She spat another command at the otdrel. "You brought this on yourself."

"Yeah," I agreed, reaching deep into the well of my borrowed power. "You did."

Rather than lash out with life-ending force as the Hunk willed me to do, I gambled on my ability to control it and cast a complex enchantment that knocked everyone except for my people unconscious.

"Arden," Fergal breathed, sprinting after the otdrel, who was also unaffected by the spell.

Wand at the ready, I ran after him, prepared to hem in the creature.

“Blay get Arden.” Blay moved with impressive speed and leapt onto the creature’s head. “Hi, Arden.”

“H-h-hi,” she stuttered back, afraid of him or her predicament, I wasn’t sure which.

“I’m going to release her,” I shouted to Fergal. “Catch her before she falls.”

With a giant daemon cocooning her head, the otdrel roared and thrashed, bucking Arden free the second I let my magic go. Fergal, proving vampires could *move*, caught her as she went airborne. He wrapped his body around hers, cushioning her landing, and rolled out of the path of the battle.

“No,” Linda whispered from nearby, the enchantment wearing off after being spread thin over so many people. “Not Rose.”

Without Arden to worry about, Blay swiveled until he could flip himself onto the otdrel’s back.

“Take picture,” he yelled. “For Derry.”

“No.” I rolled my hand in a *hurry up* gesture. “We have to go.”

“Okay, Rue.” Blay leaned forward as if he intended to hug the beast. “Sorry, ugly monkey thing.”

Using his patented finishing move, he snapped the creature’s neck then tore its head off its body.

Behind us, Linda’s anguished wail tapered into a bass growl as she shifted into the same giant shaggy creature as her daughter and clawed at the invisible bonds holding her. Her thrashing helped the magic loosen its grip, and soon she was free to the waist. Her natural form must have some magical resistance.

“Hurry up, big guy.” I waved him on. “Fergal, let’s go.”

Together, the four of us bolted for the exit, running as fast as the boost I cast over us allowed.

We sped through the lodge, and the others ran for the SUV. I paused to slam the door shut and slap a ward over the

entrance to lock them inside and give us a head start. It wouldn't last long, as mad as Linda was, but it was something.

Asa was using fast food napkins to clean his hands when I slid in beside him. "That went better than expected."

"We got caught." Arden knotted her fingers in her lap. "That thing would have eaten me if not for you."

"Rue never would have let that happen." He finished scrubbing, frowning at the end result. "I was thinking more along the lines of we didn't have to kill anyone."

Aside from Old Rose, but she wasn't a person, so I decided that didn't count.

"It's a nice change." I slumped back, exhausted to my bones. "Had the kid not been there to witness it, things might have gone differently."

How is your control?

The question hung in the air above his head, flashing in neon red lights.

To put off more talk of my decline, I jerked my chin toward Arden and Fergal to indicate we'd talk later.

"Where to next?" Fergal adjusted the mirror, his wary eyes on the road behind us. "Which tip sounds most promising?"

In all the excitement, I had forgotten we had to track down three leads before we hit the airport.

"Let's see." Phone in hand, Arden took point on the list. "The supermarket, the firehouse, or the spa?"

A prickle on my nape prompted me to rub it, but I couldn't put my finger on what, exactly, bothered me.

"None of them sound likely." I shut my eyes. "If they weren't in such a tight cluster, they wouldn't have been flagged for further investigation."

I might have agreed to check them out, but I hadn't agreed not to sulk while I did it.

“The spa hasn’t opened since the break in.” Arden lifted her gaze. “What do you think of starting there?”

“Bjorn could have wrecked the place.” I hummed. “Have they filed an insurance claim?”

“Not that I see, but there’s no police report either.”

“That’s not unusual if a para worked there, and that seems likely since someone called the tip line.”

“Then I say we hit the firehouse.” She clicked a few buttons. “It’s closer, and I’ve always wanted to see inside one.”

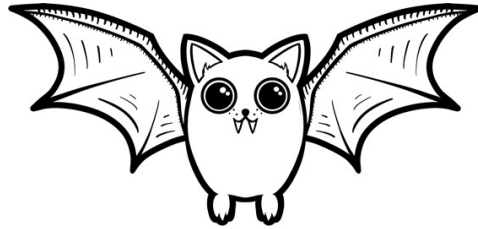
“*Always* since you watched that movie about the guys who hunt ghosts for a career and live in one.”

“The pole.” She made a wistful sound. “How fun would that be to have in your living room?”

“I have a one-story house, so not much.” I forced my lids up before I fell asleep again. “People would think it was a stripper pole.”

Then again, maybe I could FaceTime Marita and get pole dancing lessons. I heard it was great cardio. I could probably use more of that. The only regular exercise I got was running from my problems.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The firehouse turned out to be about two hours from the otarel breeders' hideaway. I heard Arden sigh when the building came into view. I doubted it was more than five years old. If that. It held the bright shine of a new penny. A far cry from the vintage horror vibe she had been hoping for.

To add insult to injury, it didn't bother skulking in shadows. It was lit up like a spaceship. The entire block housing the station and the high tower centered in their training facilities was as bright as day.

Out of the three bays, two stood open with gleaming fire trucks primed and ready for action. The third acted as a backdrop for a cookout. Five firemen and one firewoman, identifiable by the matching tees they wore, played touch football with an honest to goddess dalmatian on the front lawn.

The guy wearing pajamas who sat on a cooler near a smoking grill with a beer in one hand and a spatula in the other, I was less sure about. Maybe he was on shift earlier and had just rolled out of his bunk.

Hard to tell at a glance, but this must be a para neighborhood for the station to be active so late. Otherwise, even a grateful community would hold a grudge at the ruckus. That meant the firefighters were likely para too. Good. That simplified things.

"Get 'em, Tripp," he hollered. "Let 'em win, and I'll dye your fur pink."

Curious about the nasty look the dog shot him, I powered down Asa's window to follow up on a hunch. "Shifter?"

Nostrils flaring, he breathed in their scents and then rubbed his nose. "The dog and the cook."

"Excellent." Confirmation meant I wouldn't have to tiptoe around them. "Who's with me?"

"I'm good." Arden fiddled with her seat belt. "I've had enough adventure for one day."

"Wise choice." I glanced sidelong at Fergal. "That means you're on Arden duty."

"Gladly." He wrinkled his nose. "How much lighter fluid did they use? The whole bottle?"

Vampire noses were sensitive to perfumes and skincare products. Agents with vampire partners even wore unscented deodorant. To me, the grill was putting off fumes that made my stomach growl, but I could see how the smoked meat would be a double whammy for someone who didn't eat food. Or not much food. I wasn't sure what vampire nutrition requirements were like outside of blood.

"That means you're with me." I set a hand on Asa's arm. "Come on, handsome."

Color warmed his cheeks as he exited the vehicle and fell in beside me to approach the shifter cook.

"How can I be of service?" He rose with a smile. "Come to make a donation? Get your picture took?"

"We're following up on a call from someone at the station about a 'giant blue angry dude.'" I didn't react to him scratching his cheek with the spatula, but I was grateful he hadn't offered to share the meal. "Any idea who phoned in the tip?"

After sniffing the air, he sneezed twice in a row. "You're Bureau."

"We are," I agreed, waiting to see what that meant to him.

“Cool.” He wiggled his fingers. “I’ve always heard you guys are the boogeymen of the paranormal world, but you’re hot.” He swept his gaze up and down me. “You smell like roadkill, but I’m a possum shifter.” He winked. “That’s not a deal-breaker for me.”

“I forgot to introduce myself.” Asa stuck out his arm. “I’m Asa Montenegro, her mate.”

“It’s true what they say.” The cook shook his hand then kicked the grass. “All the good ones are taken.”

“You understand I’m a black witch, right?” I raised my eyebrows. “That’s where the scent originates.”

“Oh.” He took a healthy step back. “Uh, no.” He put the grill between us. “I’ve never met one of you.”

“Now you have.” I pasted on a smile. “Mark that off your bucket list.”

“More like kick the bucket list,” he muttered. “And someone from *this* station called *you*?”

Already this was off to a great start. I was going to hide one of Clay’s wigs for wasting our time.

“The local police.” Asa loomed over him, which gave me warm fuzzies. “We’ve come to investigate.”

Thanks to a relay system I couldn’t pretend to understand, Clay had suspect calls rerouted to our tipline. I hadn’t realized this was one of those. He must have been trolling for activity in this area by that point to log it so quickly.

“You think there’s a— What did you call it? A giant blue angry dude hiding in a locker?”

A low whine brought my attention to the dalmatian, who had trotted up to see what the fuss was about. I didn’t hesitate to follow him when he jerked his head toward one of the open bays. After the otdrels, a spotted shifter who would look adorable in a little red fire hat was a welcome change.

The dog ran into a locker room and kicked the door shut behind him, leaving me to wait.

About ten minutes later, an impressive speed for transformation, he emerged wet from the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist. As was the case with most shifters, he was all muscle. The view wasn't half bad, but it wasn't half as good as the one I got every morning when I woke up cuddling Asa.

“Oh. Hey. Hi.” He swooped in and hugged me. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Tripp.”

“I’m—” I shoved him off me, “—wet.”

“Sorry about that.” He flashed a smile. “I’m a hugger. I like to hug.”

“A hugger who doesn’t use his brain,” the cook grumbled from nearby. “She’s a black witch.”

“Obviously.” Tripp tapped the side of his nose. “How could you not tell?”

“I’ve never met one.” The cook flung the spatula at Tripp’s head. “How was I supposed to know?”

A gleam brightened Tripp’s eyes when he caught the handle before it smashed into his face.

“No.” The cook held up his hands and backed away. “Bad Tripp.” He kept inching toward escape. “I’m not playing fetch with you.” He shuddered. “It’s just plain weird when you’re on two legs.”

This was the stuff unconventional shifter romances were made of.

But, sadly, I was here to work. Not daydream a plot where a werepossum and weredalmatian find love between putting out fires and saving kittens from trees.

“Tripp.” I flinched as his intensity flipped to me, and I realized I was still holding up my hands. I did *not* want him to interpret that as I was willing to play fetch, so I snapped them down to my sides. “Do you know who called in the tip about the ‘giant blue angry dude’?”

“Oh. Yeah. Right.” He shook out his hair, flinging water everywhere. “That was me.”

“Great.” I was finally making progress. “When and where did you see him?”

“Two days ago maybe?” He scratched behind his ear. “He was raiding our first aid supplies.”

Excitement shivered through me, and I felt bad about mentally threatening Clay’s wigs. “That’s all he took?”

“Yeah. Mmm-hmm. That’s it.”

“We had to do an emergency run to the store to restock.” The cook shook his head. “You wouldn’t believe how many Band-Aids these guys go through in a shift.”

“Why did you call it in?” Asa tilted his head to one side. “To the human authorities?”

“Plenty of para agencies monitor those transmissions, so I figured why not? Humans would think it was a crank call and ignore it, but if anyone was looking for a giant blue angry dude, then I would have helped them find him. Win/win.”

“Um.” I wasn’t sure I followed all that, but okay. “Did he say anything?”

“I don’t think so?” He scratched the other ear. “I called out to him, and he punched me.”

For him not to remember, it must have been some hit. “He knocked you out?”

“Oh, yeah. Out cold. Dead to the world.” He smiled like it was hilarious. “I called it in after the guys found me and shook me awake. They thought I was napping on the job, but dude. I need my sixteen hours of beauty sleep.”

Then again, maybe Clay’s wigs weren’t entirely out of danger yet. This witness was...something else.

“Do you have security cameras?” Asa glanced from corner to corner. “Inside or out?”

“Both,” the cook confirmed. “Come upstairs, and I’ll show you what we’ve got.”

“I already altered the feed,” Tripp announced. “Just email them the file called ‘giant blue angry dude.’”

Happy for an easy fix, I dug in my pocket. “Here’s my card.”

The cook refused to take it from my hand, so Tripp did it for him. “You’re the deputy director?”

Close enough. “Yeah.”

“Cool.” Tripp passed it on to the cook, who aimed for the stairs. “It was nice meeting you guys.”

Without another word, he loped off, tossing his towel and shifting back into a dog between strides.

“Huh.” I watched him go. “He’s fast.”

“He was also *naked*.” Arden hiccupped from behind us. “Really naked.”

“Shifters usually are,” I muttered, quirking an eyebrow at her. “What’s up?”

“Fergal told me to show you this.” She thrust out her wrist. “Looks like a bug bite to me, but he says it smells funny.” She curled her fingers into her palm to resist the urge to scratch it. “What do you think?”

“Hold that thought.” I called up to the cook. “Do you have any cortisone cream?”

“Check the locker,” he yelled back. “The big red one. With a white cross on it. Help yourself.”

The locker was bigger than some coffins I had seen, and it was well stocked, as promised. I found a half-empty tube of cream, not surprising given we were in Florida, and applied it to her wrist.

Arden scowled at the offending spot. “Why are you smiling?”

Until she mentioned it, I hadn’t realized I was, but it made sense. The last time I had to whip out an anti-itch cream had been...

Oh crap.

When Asa gave me the bracelet made of his hair, signifying the start of our courtship.

“When did you say this started?” I got out my phone and took a few pictures. “Today?”

“Nah.” She frowned at my documentation efforts. “It’s been itchy for days.”

Days.

Like since the last time she saw Aedan?

“I don’t see anything weird.” I brought her wrist to my nose. “Smells like that lotion I make you.”

Years ago, I let the girls pick their personal fragrances and mixed batches of lotions, oils, and soaps to gift them on their birthdays. To discover she continued to use it warmed me to the bone.

“Good deal.” Her gaze strayed after Tripp. “Weredalmatians are a thing?”

“In our world,” I admitted, “pretty much everything that can be a thing is a thing.”

By the time I finished medicating her, I had the email with a link to the camera footage. I forwarded it to Clay then shut the locker and returned to the SUV.

Fergal was pale, for a vampire, and it made me wonder if he was hungry. He had been working around the clock and might not have had time to grab a meal. That would explain why he sent Arden to us with a bug bite.

I *hoped* it was that simple.

More than likely, I was being paranoid. Again. And overreacting. Again. But Aedan had admitted he was in fascination with her, and I had no idea how that progressed in other daemon species or in a non-royal daemon. Though he was a prince now, and his bloodline was heavily royal-adjacent.

Goddess bless, love was a headache.

“We need to get to a hotel.” I didn’t want to stop yet, but even though Arden sounded okay, and she looked okay, she had this glazed look about her I equated with shock. Riding an otdrel had taken a lot out of her, and so had everything that followed. “I can touch base with Clay and have him arrange it.”

As soon as she got some food down her and crawled into bed, Asa and I could sneak out again.

“You got spoiled by being the boss fast.” Arden chuckled. “Can’t you book your own room?”

“I tend to park at whatever hotel appears in front of me the moment I get tired,” I admitted, thinking Colby handled accommodations these days. “I don’t do a thorough background search like he does.”

“You mean a ratings search?” Her amusement turned to snickers. “Have you forgotten how to check reviews?”

“Rue handles other aspects of our cases.” Asa came to my defense. “We each have a role to play.”

“I don’t want to know about any roleplaying you guys are doing.”

For someone who hadn’t spent much time around Clay, she was starting to sound like she was auditioning to play the third Stooge with him and Colby.

I used to be feared and respected. People used to flee before me. I was terrifying.

Now I got bossed around by a moth, sassed by a human employee, and mocked by a golem.

A call saved me from straining my brain to produce a witty comeback. “Hollis.”

“We’ve identified the partial remains of six agents and matched them to names on the roster, but we’re still going through the otdrels’ stomach contents. Current estimate is nine dead.” Isiforos got straight to the point. “We’re contacting their next of kin.”

Nine agents slaughtered by the otdrels. Maybe more. *Probably* more. Most of them acting as reinforcements on my orders.

Not all of them had family or friends to manage their last rites. That was the Bureau's job, its final duty.

"It could have been worse." Asa set his hand on my knee. "You and your father saved a lot of lives."

"Thanks," I said to both of them. "Make sure they're all put to rest as their wills outline."

Along with the copious paperwork filed during the drafting process, each agent was required to have a current will. As tied to the agency as we were, we all expected to die in the line of work eventually. Any last wishes had to be outlined if an agent had special requests.

"Already on it," he promised me. "I'm also calling you to make a formal recommendation we cease our search and rescue efforts. We're not pulling up bodies—alive or dead—and the debris needs to be cleared away."

Allowing my eyes to close, I wrestled with the voice in my head that asked what I would do if Clay or Asa were still missing. Would I give up on them so fast? Had I done enough for this decision not to haunt me in the years to come? Did I believe the chances of bringing up survivors was greater than the risks involved in sending more agents into the depths, into the debris field?

"All right." I exhaled and found Asa regarding me. "I trust your judgment and will back your decision."

After the call ended, I sat there wondering if I had done the right thing, which Asa, of course, could tell.

"Any mortals who survived the blast would have drowned by now." He kept his tone gentle. "Any immortals will survive until they can be retrieved."

"I knew we would reach this point." I rubbed my face. "Luca might be the first person to decide to pick off agents, but she won't be the last. The temptation to remove Black Hat

while it's at its weakest is too strong. It's dangerous to have agents on site without proper backup or resources."

"We need to pick a temporary headquarters, whether it's Boston or somewhere else, and get the staff in there to keep the Bureau functioning." He rubbed one of his earrings between his fingers, his gaze distant. "Captain Peters' idea isn't a bad one either. We should make an announcement soon."

That had been the plan, until the otdrel attack. Then my priorities shifted to survival mode.

"I like all this *we* business." I cuddled up against his side. "I couldn't do this without you."

"As your deputy director, it's my duty to support you." He kissed the top of my head. "And protect you."

"Any speeches you make on my behalf counts as protecting me, in case you were wondering."

"You're the director now." He wrapped his arms around me. "You have to give *some* speeches."

"Doesn't being the director mean I can veto any public speaking required of me?"

"The agents will feel steadier if you address them directly," Fergal interjected. "Our lives are bound in service to the Bureau, to you. For our sake, as well as yours, I encourage you to gather as many agents as you can and give them reassurance things will continue on as they always have."

For now, I agreed it was safest for them to believe nothing had changed. They wouldn't believe any promises I made them anyway. I had to show them I was serious about making a difference for them to place any faith in me.

"I'll do that." I breathed Asa in, and even that comforted me. "I would like to have answers about the director first, but I can't afford to wait much longer. The otdrel attack was a wake-up call for me."

Not only did I have to reassure my own people that I could protect them, and enforce the rules set down by my

grandfather regarding the preservation of human lives and the protection of our secrets, but I had to let everyone with a chip on their shoulder where the Bureau was concerned know I would go down fighting for these people. I wouldn't stand back and let them get picked off one by one.

I was *not* my grandfather.

That was both my greatest strength *and* my ultimate weakness.

To hold on to my title as the new director, I had to prove myself on a worldwide stage, and right now, my performance wasn't going to earn me any applause from the factions Black Hat oversaw. Or, in the wake of the otdrel attack, my own people.

"Hotel booked." Arden flashed her phone at me. "I'll put directions on speaker for you, Fergal."

Her competence made me miss my little moth girl, who always kept me in line.

While I had my phone, I dialed Clay to see if he had watched the video yet. The files we liberated from the otdrel breeder, I assumed, would take more time for him to parse. "Any luck?"

"Hello to you too," Clay grunted. "I missed you too. I love you too."

"I'm confused."

"You ditched your One True Bestie, and now when you call, you treat me as a lowly employee."

"I don't have time for drama, so I'll play along. Hello, Clay. I do miss you, and I do love you. You're amazing. Epic. Handsome. Your wigs mesmerize all who behold them, and your personal style belongs on billboards." I gave it a minute. "Good enough?"

"There's a distinct lack of sincerity there, but I believe what you said enough for the both of us."

"Phew." I caught Asa smiling. "I was running out of material."

“I would educate you on how odes have been written about my charm and wit, but we have a problem.”

“Oh, so it must be a day ending in Y.”

“I know who hired the Crawfords,” he said, not laughing at my joke, “and it’s a doozy.”

For him to go serious on me, the news couldn’t be good. But good was relative here. I mean, was it ever a good time to find out someone hired slaving beasts to mass slaughter your people? I was thinking no.

“The anticipation is killing me,” I said flatly.

“Dollface, it wasn’t Luca.” He allowed me a brief moment to digest that. “It was...well...Calixta.”

“Calixta.” A burst of heat on my chest warned me my temper was intriguing the Hunk, and I forced myself to calm down. “That explains the order not to harm me.”

The contract we signed had a gaping loophole, in hindsight. She was forbidden from harming me or mine, but Black Hat hadn’t been mine then. I hadn’t given the agents’ safety a second thought. I was too worried for my family, my friends. Somehow I seriously doubted she would sign an amendment now.

She had struck out at me, and she had done it legally. Or at least not been in violation of our agreement. But why? She had to know provoking me was a bad idea. Had it been retaliation in her mind? For what? I wasn’t sure, but to ensure this never happened again, I was going to have to find out.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Aedan

Needlelike spines pierced every inch of my skin, sparing only my face. I might not act as she wished, but I had to look the part of dutiful heir. Now that Calixta was the High Queen of Hael, she couldn't afford for her new kingdom to grasp the depth of the rift between us, or they would tear us apart. I had to appear as though I didn't dream of slitting her throat every time she opened her mouth to spew hate, while she had to put up with me until her power base solidified among the land dwellers.

Only then, when she felt she could stand against Rue, would she risk replacing me.

"The queen wishes you to accompany her on a tour of the lower tiers," my jailer informed me with a hum in his voice. "She's sent me to remove you from the maiden."

The iron maiden was a human relic, one of many Stavros had collected during his time on the throne. He had dedicated an entire floor for his dungeon and filled it with implements of torture from various realms and time periods. Calixta was giving me a grand tour, day by day, to repay me for my inability to be a full and willing partner for her.

"The latch is stuck." The jailer grunted. "Let me get the hammer."

While I waited for a fresh torment, that of metal jerking free of healed wounds, I smoothed my thumb over my palm, relishing the small scar where a scale should be. I had torn it loose and done the unforgiveable. I had used the numbing effect of the sea on Arden's fragile human skin and thrust a piece of myself inside her. As if she were mine. As if I could have her. As if I could *keep* her.

"Back." The jailer swung at the latch, the strike of metal on metal reverberating through my bones. "This won't take long." He cackled to himself. "Just close your eyes and think of topless mermaids until it's over."

When I shut my eyes, as the wet noise of torn flesh filled my ears, I saw Arden wearing my mark instead.

And I smiled into the blackness that claimed me as the door swung open and my body hit the stone floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY



We picked up burgers and fries on our way to the hotel and split into two groups in the lobby. Boys got a room next to the elevator and girls got the one beside the ice machine. Arden picked at her food, unable to conceal her yawns. I wasn't much better company. I wasn't tired. I was mad. Furious, really. I couldn't get it out of my head that Calixta had taken a potshot at the Bureau.

Had I expected her to come for me eventually?

Yes.

Had I expected her to play dirty?

Of course.

Had I anticipated the wholesale slaughter of agents working in search and rescue?

No.

As I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, waiting for Arden to fall asleep, I couldn't make it make sense.

But, I had to admit, I had tunnel vision where Calixta was concerned. I had used her to save Asa, and she had used Aedan to get her revenge on me. I thought that was it. For now. Until the dust settled. But that was before the compound was blown to smithereens. Maybe the temptation to stamp out the director, and his legacy, had proven too much for her to resist?

>>*Fergal is in position.*

The text from Asa threw the brakes on my downward spiral and got my blood pumping.

>*Be right out.*

I rushed around the room, pulling on clothes, ready to do something. *Anything.* Then I let myself out and Fergal in. Asa took my hand and led me to the elevator, and we rode down in silence.

As soon as the doors opened, I was out and striding across the lobby. “How are we getting into the spa?”

“I know a witch who’s handy with an unlocking spell.”

“Do you now?” I breathed easier outside. “That gets us in, but what about the rest?”

“I have a program to upload onto their computers. It will allow Clay to scour their records and surveillance footage.” He held up a thumb drive. “We’ll be in and out in a few minutes.”

“Excellent.”

“Then we’re going to the supermarket to question the employee who called in the tip about, presumably, Bjorn. Clay’s already verified the boy is working.”

“Any word on the footage from the fire station?”

“Clay said to call when we get on the road, and he’ll have an update for us then.”

Back in the front seat, my world righted itself the tiniest bit. Asa behind the wheel felt more normal, and I could use all the normal I could get. I waited until we got on the road to call Clay. “Hello again.”

“I knew you couldn’t stay away.” He heaved a dramatic sigh. “You can’t resist my charms.”

“That, and you told Asa to tell me to call you, so...”

“You don’t need to make excuses.” He clucked his tongue. “It’s embarrassing, really. For you.”

Now it was my turn to sigh. “Do you have an update or not?”

“I’ll get right to it—after I say this.” He sucked in a gasp then rushed out, “*Dalmatian shifters are real?*”

“Wait.” I rubbed a thumb between my eyebrows. “You didn’t know that?”

“I assumed they existed, but I’ve never seen one.” His voice kept rising. “And he works at a *firehouse*. He’s a little *fireman*. He’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen in my whole life except for Mr. Squiggles.”

“He’s half human,” I said slowly. “You can’t adopt a human as a pet.”

“Can I send him a little red helmet? And a little red coat? Oh! What about little black booties?”

“Call me once you get this out of your system.” I readied to hang up on him. “Bye.”

“Okay, okay.” He pouted across the line. “The ‘giant blue angry dude’ was definitely Bjorn. He took a boatload of medical supplies from the locker you mentioned, but that was it. I’m not sure if it was his only target, or if he left after the adorable puppy spotted him.”

“Spotted.” I shut my eyes to keep from rolling them like dice in my skull. “I see what you did there.”

“Heh.”

To avoid encouraging him, I switched topics. “Do you think this means the director is injured?”

“Makes sense to me. Bjorn doesn’t appear to be injured, and he wouldn’t leave the director otherwise.”

“The door.” I thought back to the moment before the explosion. “We need to know what happened before the feed cut out.”

“I’m working on it,” he promised. “It’s on my to-do list.”

As he shouldered the bulk of the IT, he must have one a mile longer than even mine.

“What do you think we’ll find at the spa?” I couldn’t imagine why Bjorn would go there. “There are no medical

supplies or special equipment that could help an injured black witch.”

“How far is the spa from the firehouse?”

“Five miles,” Asa answered for me, leading me to believe Arden was right, that I had to overcome my technophobia and learn to figure out things on my own. “The supermarket is another ten from there.”

Hoping answers would fall into our laps at one place or another, I asked Clay, “Anything else to report?”

“No more poisonings. Three more deaths reported. They fit their respective timelines, but the victims lived alone. Their remains weren’t located until a few hours ago.”

“That’s good.” I grimaced. “Poor word choice.”

“None of this is good. I know what you mean. We can only make the best of it and hope to survive it.”

“Your cheerleading skills never fail to impress.”

“I do what I can.” He grew serious. “Be careful out there, Director Dollface.”

“That goes double for you, and Colby.”

“We’re not leaving the hotel, so no worries there. We’ll be here when you get back.”

Ending the call on a high note, I allowed myself to relax into the knowledge they were okay. For now, everyone I loved was safe. I called that a win.

>> *You didn’t ask to speak to me.*

A groan crawled up my throat that I had made her feel neglected while I was away.

> *I’m sorry.*

>> *You’re forgiven.*

That was quick and painless. A little too painless.

>> *As long as you deposit fifty galleons into my Mystic Seas account. It’s payday, after all.*

Ah.

That was more like it.

>I'll do that now.

Payday wasn't technically until midnight tomorrow. I had a reminder set on my phone. It was the only way to prevent calls exactly like this one. I hadn't missed a payment yet, so she must want something badly if she was willing to ask for an early deposit.

>What are you buying with this?

I realized my mistake as soon as I hit approval on the transfer.

>>Love you.

Without leverage, I might never learn what atrocities against seafaring orcs I had just financed.

"We're here." Asa parked at a gas station with a clear line of sight to our target. "Ready?"

"Yep." I jumped out, eager to channel my anxiety into action. "Let's go."

The spa was the anchor store in a small strip mall, which wasn't saying much. None of the buildings were that large. I couldn't begin to imagine what had drawn Bjorn here when their big attraction was, according to the sign, their Scandinavian saunas.

Circling around to the back, I hesitated near the employees' entrance.

"I can sense faded magic. A ward, maybe?" I tried to pinpoint details, but the asphalt was wet. Any chalk or salt circles would have been washed away. "It's too faint for me to tell who or what cast it."

"They must be long gone then," he said, mirroring my disappointment.

Using a burst of magic, I unlocked the rear door then let us in.

Lavender and chamomile punched me in the face when we entered the facility. There was a metallic undertone that convinced me the smell was via a plug-in air freshener and not natural oils or dried flowers. The stink burned my nose until it was all I could do not to sneeze.

To be on the safe side, I tuned into the part of me that would always be up for a hunt and listened for the telltale heartbeat of a janitor or anyone else who might be working odd hours. “We’re clear.”

“We need the office.” Asa stepped around me then paused. “Do you smell that?”

“Fake essential oil?” I coughed when it tickled the back of my throat. “Yes.”

“Blood.” He flared his nostrils, following a scent. “I think we have our answer as to why Bjorn was here.”

Joining Asa in the entryway to the employee’s break room, I cursed under my breath at the bloody mess Bjorn had left behind. The estheticians’ organs had been devoured, along with choice bits of muscle, but enough of their bones remained for us to estimate four or five people had died here.

“The skin looks...” I couldn’t think of another way to say it, “...freezer burned?”

Decomp wasn’t pretty, but it didn’t leave remains looking like chunks of stew meat left in an unsealed baggy in a freezer for six months.

Since one of the victims called the tip line, they must have had para connections. But whichever one had reported Bjorn hadn’t survived long afterward. Had the caller screamed or panicked during her message, Clay would have prioritized the spa. More than that, he would have dispatched any agents in the area to capture Bjorn. But she hadn’t signaled her distress beyond picking up the phone and relaying her details.

Why not? What were we missing here? How had Bjorn coaxed her to end the call?

“They’re wechuge.” Asa barred the door with his arm. “I saw one once, in Antarctica.”

“I want to hear the story about what you were doing in Antarctica, but for now, enlighten me.”

“Wechuge are evil spirits who dwell in cold climates. They possess human travelers in order to feed.” His gaze slid to mine. “They’re cannibals who use their hosts to hunt and kill food. In extreme isolation, they will cannibalize themselves to eat.”

“Why would evil ice spirits be living in Florida?” I rubbed the back of my neck, the hairs there prickling with unease. “That makes about as much sense as Bjorn visiting a sauna.”

“We need the security footage to determine what happened here.” Asa grasped the doorknob, as if he meant to close it, then hesitated. “Can you burn the bodies?”

“Are the spirits still in there?”

That would explain why he didn’t want me to get near them.

“No.” He inhaled again. “These are human remains. Now. The spirits are gone.”

“But you still want me to do a controlled burn.” I wanted to double-check, since fire wasn’t as easy to put out as it was to start. “Are you concerned about contagion?”

“The locals burned the bodies.” He stepped aside to give me room to work. “I’m not sure why, but they’ve lived with the creatures long enough to know what’s effective.”

“Okay.” I couldn’t argue that logic when most things couldn’t regenerate after they were ash. “I’ll handle this if you want to get started uploading that program.”

“I would prefer to stay with you.” He lingered in the hall. “I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I.”

I had too many plates spinning. Any minute, one was going to tilt, fall, and smash into a million pieces.

For our records, he took out his phone and filmed the scene from the doorway, then he texted it to Clay.

Taking Asa's warnings to heart, I cast from the Hunk, allowing a spell to fly from the tip of my wand. It struck the nearest body and charred it, the magic spreading until nothing remained but black powder and the stink of carnage.

A frown gathered across Asa's brow as I put away my wand, but he didn't caution me against using the Hunk.

We both knew it was too late for warnings.

Together, we located the office, and I stood watch while he handled the technical work. He kept stealing glances at me over the monitor that I pretended not to notice while I called the cleaners and focused my will on cooling the heavy weight on my chest where the Hunk simmered with possibilities.

"Done." He rose as I ended the call. "We should go before the cleaners get here."

Otherwise, we would be tied up in red tape and miss our chance at questioning the supermarket clerk.

Happy to leave one mess in someone else's hands, I followed him out and locked up behind us.

The cleaners had the resources to notify next of kin, and/or local law enforcement. We could piggyback off their intel once they identified the victims. Any help they could give us would be welcome until I got the Bureau back online.

The trip to the supermarket was short, or maybe I was so lost in thought I didn't notice the drive. I had too much in my head. I was like a clogged drain. I had to clean out the block, or else I would pour out my frustrations on the floor where everyone could slip and slide on them.

Gah.

I wasn't sure that made sense even to me.

I needed rest. I needed food. I needed...to wake up and realize this was all a bad dream.

"This is it." Asa touched my shoulder. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah." I rubbed my eyes like a sleepy child. "I'm good to go."

Before my shoe hit the pavement, a lean boy with floppy hair shot out the rear of the store. He set eyes on us and picked up speed, running full-out to reach us. He ran like the hounds of fictional hell nipped at his heels. About to draw my wand, afraid Bjorn had circled back to take care of the witness, I gaped when the kid shifted mid-stride into a silver dapple mule. He had a gleaming spiral horn barely longer than his tall, slender ears, and glossy feathers hung over his dark hooves.

“This trip has been all kinds of enlightening,” I said out of the corner of my mouth. “A pegacorn?”

Technically, a pegacorn was the offspring of a unicorn and a pegasus. This guy had a donkey parent, so it must have been a quarter pegacorn. Interesting combo. Florida had all the fun.

“He’s not stopping.” Asa angled himself ahead and slightly in front of me. “Should we make him?”

“Give him a second.” I wasn’t hot on the idea of hurting a kid. “He looks more excited than dangerous.”

The faster he went, the less control he had over his legs. When he finally put on the brakes, he skidded into a spin that whirled him into the side of the SUV, denting the door, then fell into a buggy return rack.

Oh, yeah.

We would have to call the cleaners about this one. I wasn’t sure what was happening with this kid, but the security footage needed to go bye-bye, and any witnesses would require a memory adjustment.

Hoping they would hurry, I put in the request before the situation escalated then watched until I was certain the kid was truly stuck and no longer a threat. Only then did I approach with caution. “Do you need help?”

His pathetic bray confirmed he required assistance, and Asa moved in to help me untangle the kid from the metal corral. The entire thing was awkward—grabbing and yanking on a stranger’s legs—and left me curious why he didn’t just shift to human. He could have freed himself then.

When the kid let out a pained whimper, I decided Asa and I needed help to do this properly.

He must have been thinking the same thing. He unleashed Blay in a burst of flames.

In for a penny, in for a pound. The cleaners were already en route. Might as well make them work for it.

The kid, understandably panicked at the fiery transformation, began to buck and kick and make everything that much worse.

“He’s not going to hurt you.” I rested a hand on the kid’s shoulder and willed him to calm. “He’s here to help. Hold still, and we’ll get you out of this mess.”

“Blay careful,” he promised the kid. “Not hurt horsey.”

With his superior strength, the corral didn’t stand a chance. He ripped the metal tubing in half, freeing the kid’s legs, then bent it mostly back into shape. It wasn’t pretty, but I had seen people in minivans do worse. As long as no one pointed at it and screamed *this was clearly the work of a daemon*, I didn’t care.

Once the kid was free, he sat on his butt and stared up at us.

If there was a more polite way to ask, I didn’t know it. “Are you stuck?”

The kid nodded in an exaggerated fashion as Blay exchanged places with Asa.

“Can we call anyone for you?” Asa straightened his suit. “Do you have family nearby?”

The kid shook his head, and I made an executive decision. “Hold that thought.”

A few steps away, far enough to salve the kid’s pride, I dialed Marita. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” She crunched loudly. “Miss me?”

“Yes?”

“That didn’t sound convincing, but I’m willing to give you bonus points for effort due to the whole black witch thing.” She munched even louder. “What’s up, BFF?”

“I have a pegacorn stuck on four legs. He claims he doesn’t have family close to help. What do I do?”

“Those are super rare.” She slurped so loudly I held the phone away from my ear. “How did you luck onto it?”

“He’s a witness I need to interview on two legs, so any help you can give would be appreciated.”

A moment of silence lapsed where I swear I heard the gears in her brain turning. “Where are you?”

“Too far away for you to help.” I felt a smile wanting to break through. “I’m asking for tech support, not a home visit.” I hesitated. “He’s got some donkey in him too. Does that make him a muleacorn?”

“Oooh.” She must have been intrigued. She quit snacking. “Can you take a picture of him?”

“For reference, or...?”

“Yeah.” She was quick to assure me. “Reference.”

“Sure.” I doubted the kid would mind me seeking professional advice. “I can do that.”

Wild laughter spilled into my ear the second after I hit send, Marita whooping with glee.

“I’m going to Photoshop myself onto his back,” she said after she caught her breath. “Derry will *die*.”

“*Marita*.” I should have seen that coming. “You’re supposed to be helping the kid, not exploiting him.”

“Put me on speaker and hold the phone next to his ear.”

A warning prickle made me hesitate. “Can you use your alpha mojo on another species?”

“Just do it.”

Already doubting whether this entire call had been a good idea, I walked back to them. “Ready.”

Sucking in a great breath, Marita roared to put a pride of lions to shame. I don't mean she howled like a warg. I mean her human throat produced an ear-splitting threat meant to terrify prey.

The poor kid lasted less than a second before shooting to his feet and sprinting off into the night.

"*Marita,*" I yelled over her. "All that did was scare his pants off him."

"If he's got pants, I fixed your problem."

"Rue." Asa wiped a hand over his mouth, but I couldn't tell if he was concealing a smile. "Look."

The kid had snapped back onto two legs when he tripped over the curb, smashed his shoulder into a newly planted tree, and flipped onto his back in time for a bird's nest to hit him in the face. The mother bird screeched and dove at him, pecking and clawing him long after he set the nest in the grass beside him.

Hanging up on Marita before she caused the boy more emotional trauma, I ran to his side to kneel near his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"No." He gave up, allowing the momma bird to scratch and peck him. "Dad bought me a bad-luck charm to throw at an enemy in the event of an emergency." He stared up at the moon. "I threw it at that big blue guy, but he swung a log of salami like a bat, hit it back at me, and it burst on my forehead."

That would explain...a lot.

More than one parent with a kid who got bullied but didn't approve of violence had gone the luck-charm route. The good-luck charms burned out fast, and the bad ones almost always backfired. Just like this. As the parent-ish of a moth girl who wanted to fit in with her peers, I understood the pain of being outcast.

"You said you didn't have family nearby," Asa reminded him. "Are you saying you do?"

The boy mumbled about not wanting to involve his parents because he didn't want them to feel bad.

Me?

I got the sense he was too embarrassed to ask for help, even if it killed him.

“That part doesn't matter now.” I waved it away. “How about I remove the curse while we talk?”

“Can you do that?” The boy wrinkled his nose. “I thought black witches ate people like me.”

Having only ever eaten one particular organ, I almost corrected him but decided it was beside the point.

Dead was dead. No one survived a black witch feeding. Plus, he was already terrified and exhausted.

“As tasty as I'm sure you are, no. I'm a gray witch. I don't eat people.”

“A gray witch.” He scrambled back when I reached for him. “What's that?”

A metallic squeak drew our attention to where a buggy in the lot began rolling toward the kid, picking up speed.

Asa, who moved to intercept the projectile, asked, “Perhaps let her cure you and then ask questions?”

The buggy was an easy catch for him, but against all odds, one of its wheels popped off. The pucklike object hit the curb, bounced, and smacked the kid between the eyes. He slumped back, dazed, as it struck the bird's nest, sending the momma bird into another frenzy.

“Please fix me.” He shut his eyes. “Or eat me.” He sighed. “I don't care which.”

Gently, I pulled magic from my core to minimize the black magic stain and fed it into him with an eye toward breaking the curse. The charm had been a strong one, but it unraveled under my attention without a fuss.

“There.” I sank back onto my haunches. “You're cured.”

“Are you sure?” He sat upright, leaning away from the nest. “How can I be sure?”

“You can trust Rue’s word.” Asa sounded amused. “But just in case...”

He reached into his pocket and tossed something to the kid. The kid caught it without a fumble, which brought a smile to his face. He opened his hand to find a heads-up penny on his palm.

“They’re good luck.” The kid clenched his fist over the coin. “Can I keep it?”

“Of course.” Asa tilted his head down to hide his smile. “It’s not a talisman. Only pocket change.”

The look in the kid’s eyes convinced me he wouldn’t leave the house without it anytime soon.

That charm had done a number on him.

“Can we talk now?” I offered him a hand up, and he took it. “We don’t have much time.”

I would prefer to wrap up this final pit stop and return to the hotel before Arden realized we were gone.

“Yes, ma’am.” He guided us away from the angry bird. “You’re here about the blue giant.”

“That’s right.” I gave him a minute to quit flinching in expectation of disaster. “What can you tell us?”

“I was unloading one of the trucks.” His gaze kept darting around him. “I heard this weird noise, and it got super cold in the trailer. I’ve worked in the freezers, but I’ve never felt anything like that. I wasn’t sure what was going on, but I worried it was a refrigeration truck on the fritz, so I went to find Si.” He paused. “He’s the nightshift manager.”

“Go on.” I smiled encouragingly. “What happened next?”

“I got outside on the dock, and it was twice as cold as inside the truck.”

Asa and I exchanged a wary glance, but we waited for the kid to keep going.

“I saw this blue guy. He was *huge*. With icy spiked hair. He was holding a box. It was white and powdery, like packed snow, kind of. I couldn’t tell what he was doing, but I called out a warning because he shouldn’t be in the back. It’s dangerous. We have to sign waivers and everything to work back there.”

Hoping I kept my polite-interest face on instead of my *hurry up and get to the good part* face, I nodded.

“He turned when I yelled, and he cracked the lid. There was all this howling noise, and it freaked me out. That’s when I grabbed the charm and threw it at him.” He swept his arm out toward the mangled buggy rack. “You know the rest.”

“He left after that?” I couldn’t help thinking the kid left something out. “Just turned and left?”

“Well...” The kid groaned and covered his face with his hands. “I tripped on a pallet, fell into the forklift, and kind of turned it on when I tried to climb out. The steering wheel popped off, so I sort of...hit him?”

“You ran over him with a forklift?”

“Yes.” He dropped his arms. “I would be so fired if the boss found out.”

I took back my uncharitable thoughts about that charm. It might have saved his—and his coworkers’—lives.

“We’ll handle it.” I rested a hand on his shoulder, and this time he didn’t flinch. “You’ll be okay.”

Since Asa had Clay’s program at his fingertips, I would ensure all the charm-induced chaos went away.

“Really?” He beamed up at me. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” I handed him my card. “Call me if you see him again.”

“You were brave to intervene.” Asa softened his voice. “But if he comes back, run.”

The kid swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and he clutched the paper in his hand. “Okay.”

Noticing his jitters, I offered to do him a solid. “Want us to walk you back?”

“Would you mind?” His shoulders hunched up around his ears. “I’m not a dumb little kid, but...”

“You would be dumb not to be afraid of that guy.” I tousled his hair. “You did good.”

Over the kid’s head, Asa shot me an amused expression I had trouble reading.

As promised, we walked the kid to the back entrance of the supermarket and waved goodbye.

On our way to the SUV, I jabbed Asa with my fingertip. “What’s with that look?”

“When we arrived, he was terrified of you.”

Aware I reeked like a black witch, thanks to the Hunk, I shrugged. “As he should be.”

“By the time we left, he would have walked over hot coals for you.”

“That was a powerful charm. I bet one of his parents sacrificed a scraping of their own unicorn horn to make it.”

“You can deflect all you like, but people are drawn to you.”

“People are drawn to who or what can protect them from the monster.” I spread my hands. “Sometimes that’s just a bigger monster.”

With the SUV in drive, he aimed us toward the hotel. “You’re too hard on yourself.”

“No.” The faces of my victims flashed behind my lids in the blink of an eye. “I’m really not.”

An incoming call spared me from a pep talk, and I hoped Carver had good news. “Hey.”

“My queen.” He cleared his throat. “There are...I’m not quite sure what...en route to your location, but they are quite

vocal in their plans to kill you. I ought to slay them for the nerve.” He sniffed. “However, I will defer to your wisdom.”

“My location?” A fist of dread squeezed my heart. “Or the hotel?”

“You left?” Carver, the former stalker, was not the best at some aspects of his job. “I meant the hotel.”

“Hours ago,” I confirmed, used to him popping up out of thin air. “I didn’t sense you.”

“I located the vampire and the human. I assumed you were in separate quarters or nearby.” He kept his voice low. “I apologize for my tardy arrival, but I was tracking these beasts.”

“Can you give me a description?”

“They’re shaggy and bipedal, and one of them is wearing a tiara.”

The girl.

Angelina.

Linda had brought her daughter with her.

Goddess bless, what a mess.

Thinking back to our standoff at the Circle T, I exhaled slowly. “How many?”

“I count nine of them, my lady.”

“Protect Arden at all costs,” I bit out. “We’ll be there soon.”

“As you command.”

A surge of rage tempted me to hurl my phone through the windshield, so I punched my window instead. I hissed as cracks spiderwebbed across the glass, slicing into my hand. When that didn’t dull the edge, I kept going until I had knocked out every single jagged tooth and the entire window was wrecked.

Cutting his gaze to me, Asa asked, “Do you feel better?”

“Maybe a little.” I flexed my fingers. “I think about doing that all the time, but...”

...I wouldn't have without the teeniest, tiniest push toward violence.

Without taking his eyes off the road, Asa reached across and placed his hand on my shirt above the Hunk. He swore and jerked his arm back. I caught his wrist and found a fresh welt on his palm.

Stumped as to how it had burned him but not me, I peeked down my shirt.

A large expanse of skin between my breasts, where the Hunk usually rested, had turned bright red with raised edges that looked inflamed. A faint sheen of blood stained my top, and as I stared, I made a connection that had me tasting bile.

“The skin is fusing around the edges of the Hunk.” I swallowed hard. “It's growing *into* me.”

And it was smart enough to use magic to numb me, so I wouldn't notice its plan until it was too late.

A dangerous growl rumbled from the driver's seat, but we had no time for distractions.

Part of me understood the longer I waited, the worse the reckoning with the grimoire would be, but this changed nothing. I couldn't remove the Hunk, and I had tried everything I could think of to pop the clasp and rid myself of its influence. There was no use panicking now, not when Arden was in danger.

I had to act. Fast. And it wasn't going to be pretty.

Gritting my teeth, I grew my fingernails into brutal talons. I dug into my flesh, sinking under the metal of the ruby pendant, and pried it off me. The skin beneath was inflamed and weeping blood, but I was free.

For now.

With its plans foiled, the Hunk quit anesthetizing me, allowing the pain to wash over me in waves.

“We’re going to fix this,” Asa promised me, his voice hard as granite.

“I know.” I released the pendant so it rested on top of my shirt rather than under it. “We will.”

As much as I wanted to believe that, the words rang hollow. Asa might have called me on my doubt if I hadn’t stolen his phone and dialed Fergal. No answer. Arden didn’t pick up when I tried her either.

Not good, not good, not good.

Before I could panic, well, panic *more*, Asa cut the wheel to enter the hotel parking lot and got an eyeful of shaggy I-don’t-know-whats.

Camber and Arden made me watch a horror movie once, where the monster lived in a swamp. That was what these creatures reminded me of, with their long, matted coats, their faces painted in dry mud like a primitive war paint, and their reflective eyes glinting in the headlights.

“They’re not camouflaging themselves,” I realized as he threw on the brakes.

“No.” He threw the SUV into park. “They’re not.”

Still on Asa’s phone, I texted the cleaners our address before I stepped out. We had to get help to contain the situation before Linda and her family ended up as the next viral sensation.

“Fear not, my queen.” A familiar black-clad assassin leapt onto the top-floor railing. “I am here.”

The second the words left his mouth, two of the creatures lobbed massive spears right at him.

Only his quick footwork saved him from becoming an assassin kabob.

“How is he not dead yet?” I shook my head. “He’s as subtle as the meteor that killed the dinosaurs.”

“He’s not without talent.” Asa held me back, pointing out the golden sheen turning Carver’s eyes metallic. “Give him a

moment.”

Right on cue, the creatures began cupping their heads and moaning. A few began crying. Bawling, really. They hit their knees while yanking on their knotted hair. Within minutes, they were all curled in the fetal position on the pavement, rocking and whimpering.

This was my first time watching his miserae powers at work, and I had to admit I was impressed. He had saved us time and bloodshed by immobilizing the creatures. Asa waded in, wrenching their arms behind their backs, and I applied magical restraints. He dragged them into a clump, and I drew a circle then brought a ward up to contain and conceal them until the cleaners arrived.

“You can stop now,” I yelled up to Carver. “They’re not going anywhere.”

The shine of his eyes was eerie as he said, “Yes, Highness.”

The title made me grind my teeth, but I didn’t have time for that fight either. I didn’t have much time for anything these days except for staying alive. Unless it was an in-my-face risk, I had to back-burner it. That didn’t bode well for my life expectancy, not if the Hunk was attempting to meld with me now too.

Had I reached that far? Or had it gotten a firmer toehold in me via my wand?

Wands were extensions of their witches, a direct conduit to their power.

And mine was part of a tree root saturated in the waters that held my grandmother captive for decades.

There was a very real chance the only thing keeping me autonomous was my bond with Colby.

“Um, Rue?”

Arden’s voice came from behind me, in the parking lot, where she absolutely should not be.

Whirling toward her, I found one of the creatures trapping her back against its hairy chest while it pressed a spearhead into her throat. That it had escaped the range of Carver's miserae powers pissed me off even more than I already was, making it that much harder to think past the Hunk's urgings.

"Are you wearing your gloves?"

Asa sounded like a mother chiding her child on a winter morning to dress warmly.

"Gloves," I echoed. "What gloves?"

"Didn't you wonder what I've been working on," he teased, his voice light.

"I..." I'd had too much on my mind lately. "I'll pay closer attention going forward, sneak."

I expected Arden to balk at the order, but she maintained her cool and held her arms out to her sides, confirming she wore a pair of gorgeous black fingerless gloves that could only be his work.

"Be ready," he told her, still far too calm. "Rue, can you stun the creature like you did before?"

Still wary, I glanced between her and him. "I can't guarantee my aim from this distance."

The whole magic-shooting-from-my-wand thing was still new to me, and its blasts weren't an exact science.

"You'll make it." He left no room for doubt. "You can do this."

Based on my experience with these creatures at the Circle T, I couldn't immobilize them long. But I knew he wouldn't ask, wouldn't endanger her, if he didn't have a plan.

A ball of nerves writhed in my gut as I took aim and fired at the creature without warning.

Arden held perfectly still. She didn't even blink. And when the beast went stiff behind her, she didn't run to safety like she had a lick of sense. No. She pivoted toward it—*toward it*—sinking her fist into its gut with punishing results. It hadn't

fought free of my hold on its muscles, but the strain as it struggled was written all over its face.

A frantic laugh burst out of Arden as she delivered a blow to its chin that snapped its head back.

With a megawatt smile for Asa thrown over her shoulder, she lashed out with one lightning-fast kick that knocked it onto its back. Her face was glowing when she limped toward us, her ankle clearly smarting.

Gazing at her gloves in wonder, she asked Asa, “Can I talk you into knitting me matching socks?”

“For now,” he said, ever the diplomat, “I believe the gloves will better serve you.”

“What do they do?” I took her hands in mine. “That was incredible.”

I had seen his crafts work wonders before, but this was something else.

“They give her the strength of her opponent.” His lips twitched. “That was the intent, anyway.”

Had anyone else hoped for the best with an untested gift where Arden’s safety was concerned, I might have detonated on the spot. But Asa’s talent had never produced anything less than stellar results.

“You are wasted in the Bureau,” I told him. “You should be out there building a craft empire.”

Leaning down, he kissed me on the cheek. “But then I wouldn’t get to work with my *mate* every day.”

A snort escaped me as Arden pursed her lips, pondering us and what mating entailed no doubt.

That was *not* a conversation I wanted to have, and I considered delegating it to my deputy director.

Okay, fine. I wasn’t that much of a wimp. Probably. I mean...if he decided to do it, with no prompting from me, I wouldn’t stop him explaining all the awkwardness that stemmed from daemon fascination.

Shame hit me in the gut two seconds later. “Where’s Fergal?”

“Oh.” Arden flushed bright red. “I wasn’t sure how long this would take, so I locked him in a closet.”

As she confessed, the first rays of dawn broke the cloud cover, and I understood the precaution.

“Vampires are flammable.” I released her hands, having forgotten I was still holding them. “Good job.”

Though he could have busted out of the closet on his own, at any time, facing down the sun was another matter.

All she had to do was slow him down long enough to get outside and dump his protective gear where he couldn’t reach to make her escape from him.

That could be a serious problem down the road, but we could burn that bridge when we got there.

“Fergal’s my partner as long as I’m here.” She grinned. “That makes his safety my job.”

Had the theme from *The Twilight Zone* begun playing, I would have been less creeped out by the disembodied music than by Arden roleplaying as an agent.

Fergal was a training officer. Maybe he had fallen back on that knowledge and experience in teaching newbie agents to keep themselves alive to ensure Arden learned how to do the same. That I understood and could forgive. But I didn’t want her getting stars in her eyes about what we were doing here.

The gloves might have been a dangerous step in the wrong direction, but I wouldn’t take them from her.

“I’ll handle the cleaners.” I nudged Arden toward the hotel. “You release Fergal and update him.”

Not that I expected her to find him huddled in the closet where she left him, but he would be trapped in her room without his gear protecting him from the sun.

Once she departed, with Carver on her heels, I plopped down on the sidewalk. “I’m tired.”

“I know.” Asa sat beside me, hauled me onto his lap, and cradled me against his chest. “It will all be over soon.”

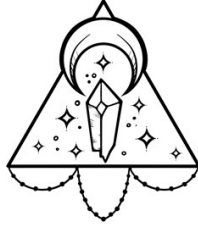
For good or bad, he was right, and that was terrifying. “Everything is a hot mess.”

“Not everything.” He pressed his lips to my forehead. “You and I, and our family, are safe.”

“For now,” I grumbled, unwilling to be soothed, which was a warning sign I was getting hangry.

Tightening his hold on me, he allowed a contented purr to vibrate his chest. The rumble moved through him into me, achieving what his words had failed to do. Cuddled against him, I shut my eyes and let the steady beat of his heart strengthen me against what was yet to come.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Warm sunset colors bathed my face as I stretched across the soft bed I had no memory of climbing in, and I rolled over to find Asa knitting a new project while watching over me. He put aside his hobby, and I snuggled against his hip. He scooted down in bed until we lay side by side and pulled me half over him.

“Status report.” I realized I had morning breath—night breath?—and angled my head away. “Sorry about that.”

“I don’t mind.” He stroked my hip with his fingertips. “Linda and her clan were taken into custody by the local wargs and placed in a secure facility to await trial.”

“Wait.” I rubbed my eyes like that would help me hear better. “Wargs?”

“Linda trespassed on pack lands and instigated an attack on Black Hat’s director.”

“She’s not a warg.” I pushed on his chest until I sat upright. “Why would that matter?”

“Any shifter is required to announce themselves to the pack or clan or pride who controls an area where they intend to remain for more than twenty-four hours. Anyone can pass through to eat, for work, or on vacation, but you can’t stay until you meet with the alpha, or equivalent, to ask for permission.”

“That doesn’t sound right.” I narrowed my eyes on him. “Warg packs don’t involve themselves in other factions’

drama. They call us or wait for us to show up and handle it.” I studied him for a moment. “Marita did this, didn’t she?”

Silent laughter moved through his shoulders. “Marita *might* be related to the local alpha.”

And he must have called around to find out if it was safe for him to align with a former black witch.

“She’s that worried we can’t hack it?” I shifted on the mattress, uneasy that other factions might still view us as easy pickings. “What will the pack do with Linda?”

“The alpha will decide on a fair punishment and then give the Crawfords’ alpha, or equivalent, the opportunity to carry out the sentence themselves. Otherwise, the wargs will handle it in-house.”

“I appreciate what she did for us, but a move like this will only make us appear weaker.” I raked my fingers through my hair, untangling it. “It will also make it appear that her pack is aligned with us.”

“Your mother’s relationship with Meg was well known.” He reached for my hand. “Would it be so bad to show the world you have allies too?”

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt on account of me.” I didn’t want friendship with me to cost another pack their lives. “I want them to keep their distance from the Bureau.”

“You are the Bureau now.” He kissed my fingers. “When we find the director, he won’t reclaim his title.”

“Not if I can help it,” I admitted. “He gave us the perfect opening to trade him to Calixta while the rest of the paranormal world believes he died in that explosion. It would make officially taking the reins much simpler too, if he was presumed dead.”

Calixta wouldn’t kill him. No. That would be too kind. She had decades of pent-up rage to spend on him first. Not only for taking her son away from her, robbing her of the chance to help raise my father, but the director was happy to let her fester in the swamp for eternity if it kept her out of his hair.

The pressure of Asa's fingertips increased where they rested on my hips, and I let my worries drift as the promise of time alone with him caused my body to tingle with possibilities.

"How about you and I," I suggested, "finish this conversation in the shower?"

That would help dampen the noise and wash off the film of grime I conked out wearing.

"Yes," he said, his voice deepening to a growl.

I want to say I let him out of bed, but he was still wearing his glasses, and the urge to climb up his body won out. We could always get clean *after*.

Wriggling out of my clothes, I flung them onto the floor then shimmied up Asa until I straddled his hips.

Desire burned in his eyes, setting me ablaze, and he palmed one of my breasts, coaxing my nipple into a hard peak with his thumb. "We're not going to make it to the shower, are we?"

"We will." I shoved his tee over his head then yanked down his pajama bottoms. "Eventually."

"Eventually," he agreed, fisting my hair in his other hand, drawing me down for a slow kiss that branded every corner of my soul as his.

But we didn't have time for slow. We had too much work to do. And...I wanted him. So badly. Always.

Easing a hand between our bodies, I lined his hard length up with my entrance and slid down him until he was as deep as he could go. The dull sting of him filling me dragged a moan between my lips, a burn I didn't mind one bit. I thrust my tongue into his mouth in time with the punishing rhythm of my hips, and I savored his groans as I pushed me, and then him, over the edge.

Sometime later, with a layer of salt dried on my skin, I devoted serious thought to my views on personal hygiene. I

was happy, lying there with my ear pressed to Asa's pounding heart and my legs tangled with his.

"Do you think we'll ever have time to slow down and savor one another?"

"Maybe when this is over, and everybody and their momma isn't trying to kill us." I didn't have much experience categorizing emotions until this last year, but I felt my cheeks burn. "Was it not good?"

"Rue." He cradled my cheek in his palm. "I'm not complaining."

"That's how it sounded." I heard the worry in my voice and hated feeling so exposed. "I didn't realize—"

"I'm not complaining," he said again, pulling me close enough for a soft kiss.

"I don't want you to be..." I made a vague gesture, "...unsatisfied."

"You've taught me all I know about pleasure." He chuckled while my face ignited into flames. "I'm being greedy. I want more time with you." He reached down and squeezed my butt. "I want more of this."

"You can have all of *that* you want." I looked anywhere except at him. "When this is over."

"When this is over," he announced without fanfare, "we're going on our honeymoon."

Forcing myself to laugh, to move past my embarrassment, I pointed out, "You have to get married first."

"Yes."

"Married." I recoiled from the softness in his eyes. "Like with a ceremony and rings and..."

"I understand and respect your reasons for not mating, in the daemon way, with me." He captured my wrist, keeping me from escaping. "But I want to bind myself to you in every other way."

The air left my lungs, and I groped for words but couldn't get my mouth to work.

"Marry me, Rue." He twisted his wrist so he could mesh our fingers. "Be my wife."

Jaw dropping, I produced a wheezing noise that tapered into a squeak.

"I want you by my side." He kissed my fingertips. "Forever."

Gulping oxygen, I managed a breathy, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yes." A dizzy sensation swept through me. "I'll be your wife."

Happiness.

That was the cause of the room spinning, my heart galloping, my palms sweating, my eyes tearing...

I was happy.

So happy I could die on the spot with no regrets.

Asa, face splitting into the widest smile I had ever seen from him, said, "Thank you."

His obvious relief floored me, and I couldn't help but turn it around on him. "Like you had to ask."

"I did." He sat up, leaned over, rooted around in his bag of knitting supplies, and produced a black box. "For you."

"I..." I let him flatten my palm and set the gift there. "You didn't have to..."

"Open it." He tapped the lid. "Tell me what you think."

Bracing myself, I fumbled open the box and sucked in a sharp breath. "It's gorgeous."

A Tinkkit band woven from silky white superfine yarn sat nestled in blue velvet. Threads of golden metal along its edges helped hold its form. The design reminded me of the broken rib stitch, but I was far from an expert. I only remembered that one because the name made me laugh. I hadn't known knitting

could sound so violent. Maybe he remembered too, and that was why he chose it.

Careful not to hurt the ring, I pinched one edge and lifted it from the velvet. “Are you sure it will fit?”

Smugness radiated from him as he toyed with my fingers, and I caught his drift. “You dirty sneak.”

All those times I thought he was rubbing my knuckles to soothe himself, or me, had been a feint.

“I’ve been knitting it in bed beside you for months.” He laughed softly. “You just didn’t notice.”

“*Months.*” I gaped at him, fingers closing over the ring. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Long enough to know you’ll panic if I say from the day we met.”

“That...is a lie.” I hoped it was a lie. It was a lie, right? “You didn’t even *like* me.”

“That doesn’t mean I didn’t *want* you.”

“You were sex deprived,” I spluttered. “You probably wanted everyone.”

“You haven’t put the ring on.” He wasn’t easily tricked. “Do you need help?”

The way my hand trembled, he might have a point. “It is traditional.”

There.

That sounded mature and suave. Not terrified and shaky. Or like I was about to throw up on him.

“All right.” He pried open my fingers, retrieved the ring, and held my gaze. “Are you ready?”

“Yes?”

As he slid the band onto the ring finger of my left hand, I did my best not to faint. “Breathe.”

“I am breathing. It’s just hot in here. And the sheets are scratchy. And I think I smell—”

Gently, he reeled me against him and wrapped his arms around me. He stroked my hair and whispered sweet nothings in daemonish in my ear. He kept his hold on me until my heart slowed and my lungs quit needing a reminder to inflate.

“Clay would never let you live it down if he found out you had a panic attack when I proposed to you.”

“Do *not* tell him.” I snapped out of my spiral in a blink. “He would pester me until the end of time.”

For a golem, *the end of time* was literal.

He would probably visit my grave and lay flowers on the headstone before mocking me even more.

“Your secret is safe with me.” He caressed the band on my finger. “What do you think?”

“That you’re fishing for compliments.” I admired my new bling. “And that you deserve them.”

“There’s something you haven’t asked me yet.”

The knot I had just swallowed past reformed in my throat. “Oh?”

Eyebrows climbing, he waited, and my brain flatlined. I had no idea. Unless... “Will you marry me too?”

“Yes.” Laughter moved through his chest into mine. “But I meant the ring.” He kissed me. “It’s Tinkkit.”

“*Oh.*” My brain finally caught up to what he meant. “What does it do?”

Every gift he crafted had a special power that worked only for the intended recipient. That was how Tinkkit worked, what made the craft so special. I should have put it together sooner, but I had been a smidge preoccupied with my all-consuming panic attack.

“Twist it clockwise as you count back from five, and you’ll fall into a dreamless sleep.”

Dreamless.

Sleep.

Two of the most beautiful words I had ever heard.

I couldn't wait to try it out...after this was over.

A fist of emotion closed around my throat. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He stroked the length of my spine. "You deserve peace."

The echo of what he had given Colby versus what he had given me made it feel like she was a part of this moment. I wished she and I hadn't been so damaged we couldn't find rest on our own, but it made me that much more grateful we had Asa in our lives to help us heal.

Colby, who would be the most adorable flower girl ever, even if we had to cut our guest list to those in the know to make it happen.

A loud knock ruined my chance to tell him what he deserved—namely, everything.

"There's been another sighting," Fergal called through the door. "About thirty minutes from here."

The possibility we were closing in on the director lit a fire under me. I rocked forward, smacking a kiss on Asa's lips, then rolled off the bed. The exhaustion dogging my footsteps hadn't magically vanished, but it had fallen a few steps behind me.

Asa watched me bounce around the room like a kid who had tossed back a few dozen Pixy Stix while we dressed for the night. A happy smile played around his lips that had me flashing him an answering grin.

A second knock sent me jogging for the door, expecting Fergal on the other side.

"Hey." Arden studied me, her expression tight. "Fergal said to give you this."

"Ah." A new phone to replace the one I had smashed in a fit of temper. "Thanks."

Having seen the broken window before I used magic to fix it, she asked, "You doing okay?"

“I am better than okay.” I flashed her my hand. “I’m engaged.”

“Are you serious?” She clamped down on my hand to admire the ring. “That’s fantastic.” She beamed at me. “Congratulations.” She peered around me. “To both of you.”

“Thank you.” Asa stepped up beside me and pressed a kiss to my throat. “Perhaps you would consider throwing her bachelorette party?”

“Me?” Her eyes sparkled. “I would love to host.” She flung herself at me. “We’ll do it at home.” She drew back when I went stiff in her embrace. “Camber would disown us if she missed it, and the whole town will want to wish you well.”

“I would love that.”

As soon as it was safe for me to return to Samford.

Which meant we might be in for a *long* engagement.

“Engaged?” Fergal lingered in the doorway. “Do mates require a ceremony?”

“Yes.” Arden swatted him, saving me from answering. “Every girl deserves her dream wedding.”

A wedding wasn’t a thing I had ever pictured for myself, but I could let Clay plan it for me. He would be thrilled for a chance to play dress-up with me as his personal doll. As long as the food was good and the cake was plentiful, I didn’t care about the details. Making it official with Asa in the only way available to us was all that mattered to me.

“Then congratulations.” Fergal dusted his suit jacket. “I look forward to the ceremony.”

“Let’s keep a lid on it until we get back to Boston.” I worried my bottom lip. “I need to break the news to Clay.”

From behind me, Asa chuckled softly. “Who do you think I asked for your hand?”

“Clay?” I whirled toward him. “You asked him for permission to marry me?”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry or both.

“For a long time, he was all the family you had, and I knew you would want him to be a part of this.”

“Plus he would never let you live it down if you didn’t.”

“That too.”

“Oh no.” A groan poured out of me. “What about Dad?”

Unless we had a shotgun wedding, I couldn’t guarantee he—or Mom—would be around to throw rice at us. Confetti? Paper airplanes? Something got thrown. I had never attended one, so I wasn’t sure. Movie weddings were these huge productions that cost stupid amounts of money and involved choreographed dancing. They also always ended in bloodshed.

Hmm.

Now that I thought about it, those were all horror movies, which explained the excess of dance scenes. And blood.

Touching his jaw, Asa huffed softly. “You asked why your father punched me.”

Good grief. That was about as bad as my guess. “Did he find out you asked Clay first?”

“No.” He dragged out the word. “Perhaps you shouldn’t mention that to him.”

“So, you called Dad, asked for my hand, and a fist to the face was his response?”

“He wanted an easier life for you than the one he and your mother had.”

A life they *chose*, just as I was choosing mine.

The preeminent black witch marrying a white witch remained the stuff of myths and legends to this day.

“Nothing about my life has been easy.” I flashed the ring on my hand. “This? This decision? This is easy.”

“Your father was under the misconception I required his permission to proceed,” Asa continued, “which he refused to grant, and I informed him that the choice was yours. Not his.”

Yep.

That would have lit his fuse all right.

Dad was a relic of another time, for one thing. For another, he felt he owed me for all the years he was locked away. And, with Mom in her current state, an earful of love and marriage plans had to sting.

“Mom must have talked him down.” I rubbed my eyes. “You’re telling me the punch was his blessing?”

“That’s how I chose to interpret it, yes.”

Fergal stuck his head back in the room when I hadn’t noticed him leaving. “We need to go.”

Alarm at his grim expression trilled through me. “What’s wrong?”

“A human captured Bjorn.” His lips thinned into a hard line. “He believes he’s discovered a sasquatch.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



*M*ore troubling than the idea of a human capturing Bjorn was the assumption Bjorn was a sasquatch. He was obviously closer to a yeti. Did this guy not know his folklore? Or did he think Bigfoot sold better? It was clear this Detrick Clark guy had a monetized agenda, since he sent a press release to the local news stations with a time and place to see the sasquatch live. If video or photos of Bjorn hit social media, we had a major problem on our hands. We simply didn't have the resources available to squash the footage in-house.

The Kellies had been a Black Hat institution, but I had to prioritize damage control going forward. To that end, I texted Clay the go-ahead to brainstorm with Colby about temporary network solutions. We would have to pack up the control room they created and move it to its permanent location eventually, but we needed para eyes sweeping the human internet stat.

>> *Arden with you?*

That Clay was asking made me wonder what he had to tell me.

> *Yes.*

>> *Then I'll summarize here and email you a full report later.*

> *Okay.*

>> *Ace was right. Those were wechuge at the spa. Bjorn carried his murder box into the store at closing time, corralled all the employees in the break room, then released the spirits.*

They inhabited the humans' bodies, imbuing them with feral magic.

>What about the caller?

>>She dialed from the break room, got halfway through her message, and then the wechuge took over. It finished the recording, polite as you please, then hung up and smashed the phone.

>Those poor women.

>>They took turns ripping out each other's hearts and giving them to him. I assume for the director to eat. It wouldn't hold the same power as a natural para, but it would give him a boost.

>Weaker hearts would explain why he required so many.

>>Yep.

>>I've also got a theory as to why the scene remained undisturbed for so long.

>Oh?

>>Bjorn set a ward around the building prior to entering it to contain the wechuge. Once the feeding frenzy was over, the spirits remained trapped inside it. That's how he was able to collect them and put them back in his murder box. He walked out later, but he didn't touch the ward. He left it active.

Witches had to break their wards to cross them, but that wasn't true of all para factions.

>The magic had dissipated too much for me to tell by the time we got there, but he could have layered in a compulsion for anyone who got close to the building to forget what they were doing there and leave. It would prevent any interruptions while he collected the hearts. He might have left it up to give himself a head start getting back to the director since he knew one of the victims had made a call before she died.

>>From what I can tell, the murder box was his plan at the supermarket as well.

>The boy and his bad-luck charm saved his coworkers' lives. Actually, I would consider that good luck.

>>Hard same. Have fun hunting bigfoot. Enjoy the mosquitos!

Oh yeah. He was still in a snit over his limited menu. Poor baby.

>Enjoy your takeout! Oh. That's right. You can't have any.

>>Enjoy the silent treatment!

Snorting at the last message, confident he wouldn't hold out long, I turned to Asa.

"Where is this press conference?" I recalled what he said earlier. "Thirty minutes out?"

The hour put it too late to hit the six o'clock news but early enough a recording could be used at ten.

"About that," Fergal confirmed from behind the wheel. "We'll arrive two hours early."

"I'm sure we won't be the only ones." I realized I was spinning the band on my finger, stopped to admire it, and noticed Asa's soft smile reflected in the glass of his window. He must have caught me at it. "There are thousands of claims every year made by humans convinced they've found Bigfoot. I figure we'll run into local cryptozoologists and looky-loos, but I doubt any serious news stations send reporters to investigate."

Sadly, this day and age, all it took was one kid with a smartphone and a following to cause harm.

As much as I wanted to doubt this guy was legit, I remembered the wechuge and expected trouble.

"Clark will want time to stage his presentation," Asa mused. "He'll be there soon if he's not already."

"We need to get in, get Bjorn, and get out without ending up the latest internet sensation." I puffed out my cheeks on an exhale. "Then we convince Bjorn, if it is Bjorn, to tell us where he's stashed the director."

One thing I was certain of was, if this was Bjorn, then the director wouldn't be far.

"Sounds simple enough." Arden flashed dance hands in her gloves. "Where do you want me?"

Nowhere near the action. That was for sure. Bjorn was a beast. That was why the director kept him close.

"Stick close to Fergal." I never imagined a vampire as her best source of protection. "Do what he says."

"Yes, ma'am." She saluted, a spark of her old self shining through. "Whatever you say, boss."

As much as it warmed me to witness her acceptance, her enthusiasm concerned me. I didn't want her to think she could take on supernaturals without qualified backup. And no, her gloves didn't count. She had to go home certain she was no match for paras. Or else she would get hurt.

The way she embraced this job—this world—left me convinced part of her was doing it for Aedan's sake. But I had been wrong about her motivation so far. Maybe I wasn't giving her enough credit. She wasn't a lovesick teen, or the scrawny kid who babbled nonstop about the boy she liked, or the girl who got hiccups when a handsome guy talked to her. She was an adult. If barely. And I ought to treat her like one instead of lumping her in with Colby as an ageless, changeless child. She had scars from what our world had done to her, even if you couldn't see them, and she had the right to cope with that in her own way.

A vibration in my pocket had me reaching for my silenced phone. "Hollis."

"Peters," the police captain responded. "You were right."

"Oh?"

"The Lyonne coven was operating a food delivery service. They had a website and everything. But they didn't take external orders. They only placed them. That was how they targeted specific restaurants. Then they sent their people, with the king killer, to pick up. While the couriers waited for the

food to cook, they sneaked into the kitchen, laced the plates with poison, then took their orders and left.”

“There have been no more reported deaths?”

“None.”

More than the Lyonne coven had access to king killer, but this was a start.

“Let me know what they have to say after you interrogate them.”

“I’ll do that.” She paused. “You haven’t taken my advice.”

“I’ve taken it to heart,” I countered. “I just need to put out a few fires before I start speechifying.”

“I hear you.” Her tone softened. “A woman’s work is never done.”

The call ended, and I allowed myself a moment to be glad we had accomplished something.

When we arrived at the address in the press announcement, we found ourselves at a campground.

The curtain Clark had strung across what might be a cage to conceal Bjorn told me he was a showman. Even if the curtain resembled a king-size comforter, and the line holding it up was probably missing from the area where they air-dried laundry. Lanterns of various makes and models, likely sourced from his fellow campers, created a spotlight effect.

With the number of vehicles already in the parking lot, I couldn’t say for sure how many people had come to witness the spectacle versus folks for whom the spectacle was coming to them. Several RVs and simple tents dotted the area around the stage, making me wonder if it was a raised patio for campers to mingle with their neighbors he had conscripted for the sake of production value.

We didn’t have to wait long to set eyes on Clark. He was the tallest human I had ever seen. Easily seven feet tall. And lanky. With his tank top and *short* shorts, he was all arms and legs, elbows and knees. The fringe of hair around the top of his bald head pegged him at middle-aged, but his exuberance

made him look like a kid as he shuffled and danced along the stage in preparation for his great unveiling.

Breaking it to him that Bjorn wouldn't be unveiled, now or ever, would be about as much fun as kicking a puppy. "Mr. Clark?"

"Howdy, folks." He spun on a dime, agile for his size. "Here for the show?"

"I'm Rue Hollis." I flashed my faux FBI badge. "We're here to evaluate your claim."

"Oh no, you don't." He wagged a finger in my face. "The people have a right to know what's out there."

Actually, the people would crap their pants if they had a clue what was out there.

"Sasquatches are an endangered species." Asa radiated authority, which was impressive given the topic. "You can't remove it from its natural habitat."

"Sasquatches aren't real." He harumphed. "This is..." He studied the sky like a passing plane might write him the answer. "This is Lim Porter, my neighbor, in a Halloween costume."

Proud of his answer, he chuckled and rested his thin hands on his lean hips and waited for our response.

"You staged a hoax, which means you lied." Asa stepped forward, and Clark had the sense to step back. "If you make a materially false statement to a federal law enforcement agent, you can be sentenced up to five years in prison and be fined up to \$250,000."

The color drained from Clark's face, and he shuffled from foot to foot while deciding if his discovery was worth the financial cost or the time behind bars. Cute how he thought he had a choice.

"I didn't lie." He worked his jaw, the hamster in his brain running furiously in its wheel. "I just..."

With Asa busy flustering Clark, I did an incredibly stupid thing after what happened last time and drew on the Hunk for

enough power to put the entire campground to sleep. Clark included. He hit the deck with a thud and began to snore. The trick hadn't worked great against Linda, but these were human spectators. I might have been able to knock them out on my own, which left me asking myself, why had I leaned on the Hunk if I could manage alone?

The answer was a grim reality check, a reminder of how deep its hooks had sunk into me.

"Are you all right?" Asa, his nostrils flaring, had scented the black magic on me. "You look pale."

"I'm good." I tapped the pendant, somehow back inside my shirt despite me leaving it out. "I just need a minute."

With a nod that he understood and a faint darkening of his gaze, we quit wasting time and got to work.

Asa fisted the curtain and yanked it clattering down to reveal a simple cage made of twisted vines and twine with Bjorn kneeling in the bottom. The design was as odd as the materials. Peaked at the top was a small opening, but it was flat on the other end with no discernable bottom. The walls pressed down on Bjorn's shoulders, forcing him to bow his head. His neck must be killing him.

Part of the magic in the trap had to include immobilization. Otherwise, Bjorn would have been trying to tear his way out, all the while shouting what a lowly worm I was for daring to blah, blah, blah.

"Bjorn?" I kicked the side. "You alive in there?"

Not that I cared one way or the other, but it was the polite thing to ask.

Hatred burning in his eyes, he glared up at me, but his mouth set in a mulish line.

"Cooperate with us," I bargained, "and we'll release you."

The look he gave me could have flayed the skin off my bones.

"Fine." I heaved a sigh. "The hard way it is."

Stepping up to the cage, I rested my palm on the top, then yelped when a jolt of power stung me.

Still smarting, I reached my senses out to determine if it was enchanted or spelled or cursed or what. Clark didn't seem the type to own such a powerful relic. He was pure human. That didn't mean he didn't have para friends, but those wouldn't gift a person with the knee-jerk response to parade a supernatural creature on TV a weapon that could be used against them.

"This is..." I tried to explain it but failed. "I don't know what this is except it's soaked in magic."

"Blay can carry the cage deeper into the woods," Asa offered. "We can deal with it there."

Flames erupted the second he finished his thought, and Blay swooped in to hug me.

"*Rue.*" He nuzzled my cheek. "Rue marry Asa?"

"That's the plan." I scratched his scalp and earned a purr. "Are you okay with that?"

"Clay says that makes Rue Blay's sister. In law." He casually let his hair slide over his shoulder into my hand. "Rue is Blay's sister? In law?"

It shouldn't have surprised me that Clay had sat Blay down to explain the concept of marriage. I ought to expect that sort of thoughtfulness from my oldest friend. It wasn't like Blay and Asa could talk it out between themselves. They did communicate, but their bond was...complicated...since they were, technically, the same person.

"Yep." I petted his hair. "That makes you my brother-in-law."

"Blay like that." He squeezed me again. "Sister Rue."

"Sister Rue." Arden chuckled. "That makes her sound like a nun."

The pinch of Blay's forehead warned me he didn't get the joke, but he didn't seem to care. He was too happy Arden was talking to him. He had been, to borrow from Colby, Asa's

“battle mode” form for so long, he was only now given regular social interaction. A chance to make a new friend excited him as much as it thrilled Colby.

“Come on, Brother Blay.” I elbowed him. “I’m going to cast a spell that ought to protect you from getting stung by the magic.” I took his massive hands in mine and concentrated on using only my power to create a barrier. “Give it a try, big guy.”

As easy as breathing, Blay lifted the entire cage, Bjorn included. “No hurt Blay.”

Had a human not brought Bjorn here, I might not have thought anything about the feat of strength. This left me curious if the enchantment also lightened whatever the cage held for easier transportation.

“Excellent.” I made a quick decision and pointed to Clark. “Bring him,” I ordered Fergal. “We need answers before I tackle this magic. I don’t want to blow Bjorn to bits if there’s some type of fail-safe.”

Would I cry if I did? Probably not. He had always been snotty to me and downright hostile toward Asa. But those weren’t good enough reasons for me to explode someone. Even if I wasn’t shown the same courtesy.

“I’ll help.” Arden sidled up to Fergal. “Want me to...” Her eyes widened as he gripped sleepy Clark by the collar of his tank top then slung him over his shoulder in one fluid move. “Right.” She smiled. “Vampire.”

“Watch our backs.” He delivered the line with an earnestness that had Arden straightening her spine. “Clark’s audience might come looking for him when he doesn’t show.”

With that reminder, I texted Clay an update then touched base with the cleaners. We needed Clark’s big unveiling labeled a hoax, and we would need his memories smudged or outright removed to prevent this story from leaking.

Bjorn was a high-value target, and I didn’t want any of the director’s minions riding to his rescue. As pampered as the director was, paired with his borderline agoraphobia, I wasn’t

sure he could survive on his own. This world was not the same as when he built his empire, and he himself wasn't as mighty as his legend. He would never be more vulnerable than he was right now.

"Will do." She fell in behind him, like an obedient little soldier. "How did a human catch a frost giant?"

"That's a very good question." I couldn't stomach letting her bring up the rear, so I fell in step with her. "I'm going to have to wake up Clark and find out where he got the cage and how he learned to use it."

Arden absorbed this, then decided, "We have to go far enough away they won't hear his screams."

"I..." I didn't know what to say to that massive shift in her logic. "Um..."

"Do you know how many times I've seen idiots tromp out into the forest to a remote cabin, too far to call for help, no cellphone service, who get eaten by monsters or killed by psychos *or* reveal they're actually a psycho monster who lured their friends to the slaughter?"

Fergal glanced over his shoulder as best he could at her. "None, I would hope."

"None in real life." She curled her fingers like claws. "I like horror movies."

"The world is scary enough," he said, "without bringing your darkest fears to life on the silver screen."

"Silver screen?" She snickered at him. "How old are you?"

Fergal sniffed in response and didn't answer. A common response from vampires. Most of them wanted to live in the *now* and forget their roots. It was a survival mechanism employed by many of the long-lived races who found it difficult to adapt to the ever-changing world if they dwelled on the past.

"Hold on." She missed a step. "Scary?" She cocked her head. "Vampires get scared?"

“Only the ones who want to squeeze every drop of life from their resuscitation.”

While they chatted on about what scared vampires, we spent the next hour hiking deep into the woods. Fallen trees, brush, and a slow upward gradient meant we didn't make fast progress. Especially not with the cage and a limp human in tow. My only consolation was whoever came behind us would have the same fight ahead of them.

Every so often, I cast out my senses to pick up any heartbeats in the immediate area. When I no longer heard anything large enough to be human, aside from our little troupe, I called it good.

“This works.” As Arden had suggested, we were outside of screaming range. “Set the cage down over there.” I pointed to a bare spot. “Fergal, can you restrain Clark before I wake him?”

After he dumped his burden, Blay sniffed the air above Bjorn. “Sticks smell familiar.”

“Oh?” That was never good news. “How so?”

“Remember giant spiders?” His nostrils flared again. “Cage smells like dirty water.”

A low groan ripped out of me. “You've got to be joking.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Smells like mean lady that took Aedan.”

The click of my teeth was audible, and Arden's head whipped toward me.

“Thanks.” I gave him one last pet. “Can you let me borrow Asa, please?”

“Okay, Sister Rue.” He dissolved into flames that parted to reveal a chagrined Asa. “The swamp.”

Apology for Blay's slip-up lingered in his eyes, but I couldn't blame Asa. I had asked, and like asking a kid, I knew Blay would give me the unvarnished truth whether I wanted to hear it (or someone else *not* hear it) or not.

“Giant spiders?” Fergal must have sensed the tension too.
“When was this?”

“Which time?” I leaned into the distraction. “We’ve bumped into them more often than I would like.”

Arden’s expression was hard to read, for me at least, but I decided I had been so wrong up to this point, I should quit speculating.

If she wanted to ask about Aedan, so be it. I would own up to my role in his tragedy.

If she wanted to join in our collective ick over the spiders, that was cool too.

“They were giant *talking* spiders.” Asa continued dangling the bait. “The size of ponies.”

“Nope, nope, nope.” Arden snapped out of her deliberation. “That’s just wrong.”

With a little more effort, we nudged Fergal and Arden into their own conversation while I circled back to get Asa’s opinion on the cage’s origins.

“It resembles a primitive fishing trap similar to ones made by modern survivalists.” He indicated the peak, or whatever you called the top. “Fish swim in, drawn by bait, but they can’t swim out.”

“Bjorn didn’t swim into it.” He would find it too undignified. “I can promise you that.”

“I’m not certain what bait would tempt him either.”

“The more we learn, the less it makes sense.” I had one shot to figure it out. “I’m waking up Clark.”

Fergal had worked while he talked, securing Clark’s wrists at his spine with zip ties and propping him in a seated position against a tree. Clark was out cold, which was a good thing, meaning the other humans at the campground likely hadn’t shaken off the magic and noticed he was missing.

Though I might have given them a new phenomenon to report on. I could see the headlines now.

Sleeping Beauty Spell Leaves Campers Sawing Logs.

Thankfully, that was an easy fix for the cleaners, who could blame it on a propane leak or poisonous swamp gas or an RV meth lab... They would think of something plausible.

Sinking into a crouch so he wouldn't wake to me standing over him, I touched his leg to break the spell.

"Hello again." I moved out of kicking distance, just in case he had quick reflexes. "I need to ask a few questions about your trap."

"You can't do this to me." He jerked his arm, probably itching to point at me, and realized he was bound. "I'm a citizen of the United States of America. I don't care if you're FBI, CIA, or NSA, this is illegal." A dark flush spread through his cheeks. "You can't—"

"You're alone in the woods with an agency that can make you disappear." I let his imagination do the work. "Either you cooperate, or we make you cooperate. And when we're done, we'll slap you between two pieces of bread and feed you to Bigfoot."

Wariness hardened his eyes, and he lifted his chin. "What do you want to know?"

As a show of good faith, I started him off easy. "Where did you get the trap?"

After a short deliberation, he admitted, "I stole it."

"Okay." That sounded like a terrible idea. "From whom?"

"My daughter's boyfriend," he mumbled. "He's always out-hunting and out-fishing me. He uses all these weird old contraptions he makes from vines he sources in a nearby swamp. The fish trap was small, and I had seen how he uses it, so I sneaked into his shed and borrowed it to try for myself."

Given his downcast eyes and ruddy cheeks, I was inclined to believe his grudging story.

Clearly, I wasn't the first person to have the bright idea to use magically imbued materials collected out of Calixta's former bathwater. I had taken a branch to carve into my wand.

The boyfriend, who must be a para to sense the magic in the vines let alone craft such a trap, had seized the same opportunity. I couldn't fault him for it either. Anyone who hit the jackpot on powerful, free supplies would use them.

The boyfriend had no way of knowing his girlfriend's father had a petty streak a mile wide.

“Where did you set this trap?”

“I figured Lake Okeechobee would be the best spot to try it, in case it got snagged and I had to wade in and free it.” He looked to me, like he expected me to agree it was a great idea. “I set it and then...well...nature called. It was a long conversation, if you catch my drift.” His amusement faded in the face of my waning attention. “I finished up, cleaned up, and went to check the trap.” He wet his lips. “That was when I saw it.”

“And your first thought was—*Now I've got you, Bigfoot?*”

“You would do the same.” He puffed up his chest. “I bet you've never seen anything like it. No one has.”

“Actually, I saw him every day when I was a kid.” I saw no harm in telling him, since he would be visited by the cleaners and a memory eraser. “Even then, I had the sense to connect the fact he's blue with he likely comes from a cold climate.”

“A yeti?” His knobby knees bounced as he kicked his legs. “I caught a *yeti?*”

Rubbing a finger between my brows, I accepted I only had myself to blame for this. “Close enough.”

“But...” Clark's expression pinched, “...what is he doing in Florida?”

“That's what we're about to find out.” I rose to my full height. “How do you open the trap?”

That might tell us more about how Bjorn got in there in the first place.

“You're going to let him out?” Clark flattened himself against the trunk. “Are you crazy?”

“It’s highly likely,” I admitted, “but I need to interrogate him.”

“How do we open the trap?” Asa, who had done his blending thing, reminded Clark he was still there by stepping closer. “You saw how the crafter did it, you were going to do it yourself, so you can tell us.”

Drawing his legs up, he made himself as small as possible. “I—I—I don’t think that’s a good idea, sir.”

Sir?

Really?

I got sass, but Asa got Mr. Manners?

Sheesh.

“I’m not the one you should defer to,” Asa said, jerking his chin toward me. “She’s in charge.”

“That thing’s not going to be happy when you let it out,” Clark tried again, but I didn’t hear a ma’am in there. “You ought to leave it to the professionals.”

“Asa.” I flicked my wrist at Clark. “He listens to you better anyway.”

With a curt nod, he went up in flames, causing Clark to scream as Blay emerged from the transformation with an eager glint in his eyes as he stared down at Clark, who wailed and thrashed in his bindings.

“The FBI is in league with the devil,” Clark shouted. “I knew the government was corrupt, but *Satan?*”

“Satan here is my coworker.” I kept a straight face. “He wins employee of the month every month.”

“I’m going to die.” He moaned and went limp. “I’m going to Hell for coveting my neighbor’s fish trap.”

Not sure that was what the Bible meant, but I wasn’t an expert on Christianity, so... “Sure.”

“I’ll do whatever you want, lady.” Tears poured down his face. “Please, don’t let the devil get me.”

Lady was a far cry from *ma'am*, but I would take it. “Tell us how to open the trap.”

“Is the yeti—” Clark sniffled, “—one of Satan’s minions?”

“Yes.” I was happy to let him fill in the blanks for me. “Satan wants him back, right, Satan?”

Though confusion pinched his brow, Blay got the gist and played along. “Yes.”

“There’s an alligator tooth on string.” Clark whimpered. “Rub it with your thumb, and the bottom opens. I don’t know why, but that’s how Tumu does it. Maybe you pull it, and there’s a lever. I don’t know.”

The tooth must be a charm. It made sense. Bone held magic easily.

Since I needed Blay to keep intimidating Clark, I sought out Fergal. “Do you mind?”

Without any hesitation, he crouched beside the trap and began searching for the tooth. “Found it.” A brief moment of hesitation was all he allowed himself before rubbing it and then hissing. “It cut me.”

“It cut Tumu too,” Clark croaked. “I thought he was just clumsy.”

For a few minutes, nothing happened, and I decided Clark hadn’t gotten it right or Tumu had hidden the real method from him. I could open the trap, but I couldn’t promise the result we wanted in order to question Bjorn. Namely, that he would survive it.

“I don’t get it.” The tension bled out of Clark. “It always worked when Tumu did it.”

Arden stepped up to Fergal’s side, and before I could snap at her to get back, she had cut herself too.

With his impressive vampire reflexes, Fergal swept Arden out of harm’s way in the next breath as a blast of magic exploded from the trap, and Bjorn burst from the smoldering vines with a thunderous roar.

Ah. The charm required living blood. I was impressed how quickly Arden figured it out.

Clark made a gibbering noise then fainted. Oh well. One less thing for the cleaners to erase.

“*You.*” Bjorn’s icy gaze fixed on me. “I should have known.”

“This was *not* my fault.” I blasted him with a restraining spell laced with a touch of relaxation that began to loosen his muscles. Soon, it would loosen his lips too. “You walked right into his trap on your own. A *human* caught you. That’s got to burn.”

“That was no human trap,” he snarled, “and I did not, as you say, *walk right into it*. I’m no fool. I was fishing for dinner when it ensnared me.” His lip curled up one side. “I demand satisfaction.”

Whirls of snowflakes formed over his head, melting in the Florida heat as soon as they appeared.

“Not gonna happen.” I shook my head. “Human, remember? That’s not a fair fight.”

His scoff didn’t surprise me. Few agents cared about human life. They just had no choice about keeping them safe to preserve the secret existence of paranormal creatures. Usually, their pro-murder stance on humans was what landed them in Black Hat in the first place.

“He besmirched my honor.” Bjorn blinked slowly. “I will have my revenge.”

Slowly, I fed more magic into him, grateful he didn’t know I could do that kind of thing from a distance.

“You’ve been a very bad butler.” I changed tactics. “And we got a whole lot of it on film.”

“Film is a passing fad.” His disdain twisted his features. “No one will remember it in a hundred years.”

About to argue, I admitted to myself I could ask Arden what an 8-track was, and she would shrug.

“Be that as it may, film is very much relevant today and to our discussion.” I tested the boundaries of my suggestion. “Why are you in Florida?”

“Enjoying the sun,” he said archly.

“This is the last place I would think to look for a frost giant.” I needed to get a rise out of him. “You must have been terrified when you fled the compound if you were willing to come all the way here. You were there, right? When it collapsed and fell into the ocean?”

His disdain for film told me he didn’t have a clue how much evidence we had on him.

“Release me.” He flexed his muscles, but brute strength wouldn’t help him. “I command you.”

“That’s not how this works.” I kept my smile hidden. “I’m the director now.” I jabbed him in the one spot he couldn’t ignore. His pride. “That means you answer to *me*.”

A white flush spread across his cheeks and down his throat, and his eyes bulged in their sockets.

“I will *never* obey you,” he spat. “You will never command me, mongrel.”

“Mongrel?” Bjorn had never had the balls to call me that to my face. “You’re feeling zesty tonight.”

“Blay smash blue man’s face.” He bared his teeth. “Blue man not talk to Rue like that.”

“You’re a worse abomination than she,” Bjorn bellowed. “How dare you even speak to me.”

This was going nowhere fast, and we didn’t have a ton of time on our hands to deal with Clark. We had to hand him over to the cleaners, and then we could take Bjorn—and the trap—and leave.

“Unless you want your teeth punched in,” I warned the snotty giant, “you’ll ease up on the name-calling.”

“Blue man rude.” Blay sniffed. “Old director also rude.”

Frost swirling across his features, Bjorn snapped, “Watch your mouth, abomin—”

As promised, I punched him in the mouth.

However, I might have glossed over the part where I used magic to enhance my strength for the swing.

Oops.

Violet blood smeared his lips as he bared his teeth at me. “You’ll die for this.”

“I get that a lot.” I shrugged. “Hazard of the job.”

“Your grandfather should have tied your mewling infant body in a burlap sack and tossed it in the sea.”

“Don’t hold back.” I snorted. “Tell me how you really feel.”

“Where is the director?”

The cold voice snapped my head toward Blay, who had shifted into Asa while I was busy shaking the sting from my knuckles.

If I had to guess, my fiancé—how weird was that?—didn’t appreciate the death threats.

“He died in the...” Bjorn shook his head as if a fly was buzzing him, “...explosion.”

Finally, the spell was seeping into him, loosening him up, and opening him to suggestion.

“We have a recording of you and the director evacuating to an emergency shelter.” I pushed the magic a little harder, having underestimated the nudge required to affect a giant. “You *both* survived the blast.”

“No.” He blinked twice, each slower than the next. “I am alone.”

“You killed all those people, harvested all those hearts, for yourself?”

Large frame swaying, he listed to the right. “Yes?”

“You stole medical supplies.” I reined in my power before I knocked him out. “Supplies you clearly don’t need for yourself. He was hurt, wasn’t he? That was why you had to harvest so many hearts. He needed the magic to recover.”

“She...knows him...too well.” He tottered on his heels. “She was...waiting. She tried to...break down...the door.” His knees buckled, and he landed on them with a thud. “She cast a rending...” He tipped sideways and hit the dirt. “...disemboweled...”

A rending was a nasty bit of spellwork used almost exclusively by black witches to eviscerate threats.

“Who?” Asa bent and shook Bjorn to keep him awake. “Who was waiting?”

“Siobhan...of...Ish’ran.”

The giant’s eyes rolled back in his head, and his body went limp.

“I hit him too hard with the relaxation spell.” I cursed under my breath. “I didn’t mean to knock him unconscious.”

“He would never betray the director.” Asa joined me near Clark. “We would have had to kill him first.”

Much like Clay, Bjorn was bound to the director. The only difference was while Clay had no choice in the matter, Bjorn had a fanatical devotion to the director and his mission. I wasn’t sure Bjorn was Black Hat. I had never seen him do more than buttle. If that was even a word. How else the director got his hands on a frost giant, I couldn’t begin to guess. Maybe Bjorn had been recruited for field work but the director decided he would rather use him as a servant. He did intimidation well, and he was fastidious.

Plus, he was just as snobby as the director and relished staring down his nose at, well, everyone.

“So, new theory. Luca called in a Dad sighting, the director scurried to his hidey-hole, and she came after him. If she knew the bunker was there, then she knew it was built for two. Odds were good the director and his plus one would head down alone to avoid alerting the rest of the compound to the threat.

Luca banged on the door, and when she couldn't get in, she prepped her rending spell. Meanwhile, the director had the bright idea that he could eliminate her once and for all by bringing the compound down on her head. He hit the eject button, and she cast on him. Unfortunately, both survived."

"I hadn't considered Luca might be injured as well." Asa sounded thoughtful. "It's not a bad theory."

"The pieces all fit, given the information we have, but that's not saying much. I could be totally wrong."

"Do we need Bjorn to locate the director?" Fergal slid his gaze to Asa. "Your tracking abilities are well documented."

"I was thinking that too." I studied Bjorn, unwilling to take my eyes off him. "Do we have anyone we can trust with babysitting him?"

As I began cycling through my options, Fergal and Asa tensed, staring toward the campground.

"Cleaners." Asa breathed in deep. "I smell the chemicals on them."

"Isiforos too." Fergal appeared to consider this latest development. "How did he know to come?"

"Clay," Asa and I said together.

"I texted Clay an update," I admitted, "and he must have decided we needed backup, which we do."

Though, for Isiforos to get here so quickly, Clay must have made that determination a while ago.

About ten minutes later, Isiforos ambled into view with barely a hitch in his stride. "Hey, guys."

Two cleaners in magically enhanced biohazard suits marched toward us with tackle boxes full of their equipment. The bright-white fabric was glaring against the brown and green of the woods, but they weren't here to blend in. They were here to make sure everyone else did.

"Hey back."

“The rest are swarming the campground,” he answered my unasked question. “Maybe next time don’t abduct the main event and knock a couple dozen people unconscious before a press event?”

“I make no promises.”

Goddess bless him, Asa took point with the cleaners, explaining the situation and our immediate needs. That freed me up to check over Isiforos and make sure he was fit enough to handle Bjorn.

“You’re going to need to rent a dungeon at the rate you’re going,” he said, after I told him Bjorn had to be put on lockdown. “He can have the cell next to the Ogunquitch.”

The black witch in Ogunquitch who rudely attacked me in her candy shop hadn’t been of any use to us. Her geas was still in effect, which meant she hadn’t told us anything about Luca or her ultimate plans for the king killer, but she was too much trouble to set free. I would have to decide her fate eventually, but not today.

“We have to build a new compound,” I reminded him. “I’ll be sure to consult you on its design.”

The old compound had cells for holding prisoners while they were questioned, but the director had more secret rooms than I realized—obviously—since he had hidden my father from me for so long.

“You do that.” He chuckled like I was joking. “I have crayons, and I’m not afraid to use them.”

I took that to mean he was no great artist, but I wasn’t either. I could barely manage stick figures.

A throat cleared behind me, and I pivoted to find Arden with her hands linked behind her back.

“Fergal has volunteered to help Mr. Isiforos with Bjorn.” She dug the toe of her sneaker in the dirt. “I was wondering if I could go with him.”

As much as I didn’t want her anywhere near the director if—*when*—we located him, I didn’t like the idea of her sticking

to Fergal like glue.

“I’ll be careful.” She clung to my arm, and all I could see was the lanky teen girl who used to hang off me like she didn’t have a reason in the world to fear me. This Arden knew better, but the old habit softened me like room temperature butter. “I’ll keep my phone on me, and I’m wearing my gloves.”

The gloves were fast becoming a comfort object for her in the same way Colby wouldn’t leave home without her blanket.

“Okay.” I reminded myself that trust had to start somewhere and that Fergal had shown only good intentions toward her. “You can go.”

And if I thought, briefly, about setting Carver on her tail as her guardian, then I could forgive myself for two seconds of weakness.

“Thank you.” She smacked into me with a full-body hug. “You won’t regret it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I relaxed into her embrace, wishing I could go back in time to when I got these daily, *without* promising her she could run off with a vampire. “Be smart and stay safe.”

After she bounded off to tell Fergal the news, Asa stepped up to me and rubbed my shoulders.

“Arden has been bleeding since she touched the charm, and Fergal hasn’t so much as sniffed the air in her direction.” He worked on the tension causing me to hunch, but I wasn’t ready to let go of it yet. “He would have attacked her by now, if he had control issues.” He hesitated. “He still hasn’t fed.”

The reminder didn’t encourage me to send a human off with him, but Isiforos was going too. He could watch her while Fergal grabbed a bite. That ought to protect her well enough.

“Just when I think I trust someone, life puts it to the test, and I realize there’s a lot more to it than simply liking someone and believing they’ll keep their word.” I leaned against his shoulder. “I’m being ridiculous again, aren’t I?”

“You’re never ridiculous.” Asa’s lips twitched at what we both knew to be a lie. “You’ve known Arden since she was a child. You’ve got a right to worry about a human, let alone one you love, surviving our world.”

“Am I this bad with Colby?” I had protected her for so long, I might be worse. “She would tell me, right?”

“You put more faith in Colby’s ability to protect herself. She may have a child’s soul, but she’s powerful. She was born fae, and she was raised to be wary. Arden doesn’t have that foundation to build on. She’s starting from scratch, learning as she goes.” He caught my chin and forced me to look at him. “If you can trust Fergal, let her go. If you can’t, we’ll figure something out to keep her close. You need to be focused when we find your grandfather. Any distraction could get you killed.”

The director was a dark arts practitioner through and through, no half measures like me.

“Fergal it is then.”

With the big decisions made, Asa and I began extracting ourselves from the scene.

We had a lake to explore and a black witch to sniff out before he caught wind of us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Lake Okeechobee, nicknamed Florida's inland sea, was the largest freshwater lake in the state. It was, as best Google could tell me, seven hundred and thirty square miles. And every speck of the seven hundred and thirty miles was ringed by cabins. Some of which, of course, were VacayNStay rentals that made tracking down the current occupants that much harder.

"This is it." Asa, who had driven us over, peered through the windshield. "Ready?"

Commotion in the water drew my attention, and I felt a smile coming on. "Yeah."

We got out and bumped into six naked men built like tanks and twice as many women in bikinis having a water fight. The scene was oddly wholesome, if you knew they were wargs and not spring breakers gone wild. Wargs shredded their clothes during their shifts, so they tended to strip first. To avoid humans that might get the wrong idea, they kept caches around their territory loaded with clothes and other supplies required while on two legs. But we weren't human, and they weren't worried about flashing skin.

Neither were they worried about what the neighbors thought, with all the whooping past midnight.

Stepping onto the shore, I cupped my hands around my mouth. "Which one of you is Neilson?"

That was the name Marita had given me for the cousin who had taken care of the Crawford clan for us.

The shortest guy quit attempting to dunk the woman he held in a headlock and grinned. "That's me."

"These guys are definitely related to Marita," I said out of the side of my mouth then waved to Neilson. "I'm Rue. This is Asa." I waited for them to high-step out of the water, which involved a lot of pendulum action that no one but me seemed to mind. "Are you sure you guys want to get involved?"

A freckle-faced woman with black hair reached land first. "Is it dangerous?"

"Very." I kept my tone grave. "We might not make it back alive."

The director was sly, and he would have set wards and nasty magical traps all over any property he inhabited.

"I'm in," Neilson said. "Marita promised us a good time if we stuck with you."

To be on the safe side, I asked, "You did hear the part about not making it back alive, right?"

"We're pack enforcers," a blonde woman with swirling tattoos across her cheeks told me. "Not civilians. We can handle it." She sounded military to me. "Marita swore you'll have our backs."

"The black witch we're tracking is the second deadliest one alive. There won't be sea monsters or ghosts or anything else fun. Just us trying not to get killed long enough for me to incapacitate and restrain him."

"Raise your hand if you're in." Neilson punched his fist in the air. "Tuck your tail and run back to your mommy if you're out."

The wargs shoved each other, chuckling and not taking it seriously enough for me. "You're all out."

"What?" Neilson lost his smile. "Why?"

"She doesn't think we're taking it seriously enough," the blonde explained to him then faced me. "Look, I get our way of hyping each other up for a mission might not jive with how Black Hat operates, but we're not Black Hat. We're wargs."

This is what we do.” She arched an eyebrow. “Do you really think Marita would have volunteered a team who couldn’t protect themselves?”

In tossing out Marita’s name, she had thrown down a gauntlet. Either I trusted my friend, or I didn’t.

Trust.

Just as it did with Fergal, it all boiled down to trust.

I was really, *really* starting to hate that word.

There was no room for regrets and no second chances, but...I couldn’t do this alone.

“You’re right.” I spread my hands. “I apologize.”

“We’re not *quite* as out there as Marita, so we do have some sense of self-preservation.” She spoke with a fondness that proved she knew Marita well. “We wouldn’t have signed on if we didn’t want to help, and we would rather partner up with you for this than go it alone. As enforcers, we’re responsible for the removal of threats from the pack’s territory. We’ve got a better chance of walking away from this if you’re with us.”

I hadn’t considered that angle, that in telling them we suspected the director was hiding here that we had condemned them to confronting him. No wonder Marita sent the pack’s enforcers and not their trackers. She had already connected the dots and enlisted the people best equipped for the job.

“Okay.” I made my peace with leading them, I hoped not into a trap. “We’ll give you a minute to shift.”

More like ten or twenty minutes, depending on their individual speeds, but it took most wargs a while to change into their wilder selves. The transformation was brutal, and the process took a lot out of them. Had I not been in such a rush to reach the director before he realized Bjorn wasn’t coming back, I would have brought them bulk meat to help replenish the calories they would lose.

While Asa and I waited, I caught a whiff of decay, and dread bottomed out my stomach.

Surely, the director hadn't found us. Not this fast. We just got here. There was no way he viewed wargs, a non-magic species, as threats worth investigating. Besides, he wasn't the type to go searching for trouble. That was what minions like Bjorn were for.

"Hey, baby."

Crushing my eyes closed, I kept facing the water to avoid turning to face who I now knew stood behind me.

Mom...and Dad.

Dad, who had promised Luca he would kill his father.

Dad, who had taken an animus vow that would end his life the second he did.

Dad, who was fading away the same as Mom, despite being alive.

"We came to help," Dad said, and the carrion scent of him grew closer.

"By help," I had to ask, "do you mean kill your father the second you lay eyes on him?"

"Rue." Mom set her cold, slightly sticky hand on my shoulder. "It's not that simple."

"I need him alive." I cast a privacy spell around the four of us. "He's my leverage to get Aedan back."

"He deserves to die," Dad clipped out. "It's a mistake to let him live."

"But...?" Mom prompted him, her grip tightening on me.

A long sigh gusted out of him. "I will honor your request."

Slowly, I turned to face Dad. "Are you serious?"

"I took Aedan from you once, and I have regretted it ever since." His golden curls lifted in the breeze, his blue eyes piercing and earnest. "Let me do this to make amends and return your cousin safely to you."

Without thought, I ran to him and flung my arms around his middle. "Thank you."

“You’re my daughter.” He stiffly patted my back. “I will always want what’s best for you.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Mom wiping tears off her cheeks.

Though I wouldn’t say it, since I had come out on top, I suspected she was behind this change of heart. It meant the world to me, to experience my parents like this. And, if we did capture the director, there was the slightest possibility I would get to keep my dad even after Mom...

Nope, nope, nope.

I wasn’t going there. I couldn’t let myself hope. It would hurt too much if things fell through.

A chuff drew me from Dad’s awkward embrace to find Neilson pawing the dirt near the water.

The rest of the enforcers trotted out, their tongues lolling, ready for the hunt.

To speak with him—at him?—I had to remove the spell. “How do you want to do this?”

Probably should have asked that *before* he lost his ability to speak, but he made it easy on me.

A short yip from Neilson, and the wolves divided into two equal groups.

Half ambled over to me and the other half joined Dad.

Based on his reputation, or his scent, I expected the wargs to be wary of him. But they didn’t so much as blink. Even with Mom, who was a vengeful-ish spirit, they were more excited than anything. Mom was a legend in their family, thanks to her friendship with Meg, and they were getting to meet her.

Assuming we all survived, I wouldn’t be surprised if they asked for pics with her before we parted ways. Not as cool as a sea monster, but how many wargs could say they met a vengeful spirit willing to pose?

Neilson barked at me and tossed his head then set out with his crew along the shoreline.

“That’s our cue.” I waved to my parents. “Be safe out there.”

“You too, baby.” Mom blew me a kiss. “Stick close to your friends.”

Her tone reminded me of a mom sending her kid off to school.

“Do *not* engage without backup.” Dad rocked forward, like he wanted to follow me. “Call for help first.”

Snarling his lip, he held up the cellphone I’d bought him like it was a rabid skunk ready to attack him at the least provocation.

Turning to hide my face, so he didn’t see me laughing at him, I waved and set out with Asa beside me. “Do you think I can trust him to keep his word?”

Ugh.

That word again.

“With your mother here?” His mouth tipped into a smile. “I don’t think she’ll give him much choice.”

“Do you think he feels bad about kidnapping Aedan to force that first meeting with me, or do you think she conned him into cooperating so his vow would go unfulfilled? I don’t know her well, but it seems like something she would do.”

“She knows there’s no hope of them reuniting after death,” he said gently. “I imagine she wants him to live.” He glanced at me. “For you.”

“That does sound motherly,” I conceded. “She’s very good at guilt.”

I wasn’t her only target. She was a dual-edged blade. She cut Dad and me both.

A pointed snort from Neilson reminded me we were hunting and that the quickest way to lose our prey was for it to hear us coming. With that in mind, I fell silent, trying not to think ahead. There was too much riding on finding the director.

Aedan's freedom. Dad's life. There was also Luca to worry about. *And* Calixta.

Pushing all those fears out of my head, I readied for the attack I knew would come.



FOUR HOURS LATER, WE STILL HADN'T FOUND THE DIRECTOR. The wargs had been shot at, and an alligator gave us its opinion on us trampling its nest. I was surprised we hadn't bumped into more of the leathery beasts. The preliminary report on Lake Okeechobee mentioned it being home to some thirty thousand of them.

That was a whole lot of lizard. Reptile? Either way, it was a bunch of teeth.

The tattooed blonde strode out from behind a bush, naked as the day she was born.

"We need to eat and rest." Her jaw was tight. "That frost giant knew what he was doing. He laid false trails all over this area. Every time we pin down a path, it dead ends or turns onto another one."

"I'll buy breakfast." I wanted to check in with Clay anyway. "Any requests?"

Shifting required calories. Lots of them. So did running on all fours while hunting.

"We'll eat anything." She plopped down on a log. "I'll bring in Team Two while you're gone."

"Good deal." Already knowing the answer, I checked with Asa. "Coming with?"

Eyebrows climbing up his forehead, he asked, "What do you think?"

"That you would throw me over your shoulder if I tried to go without you?"

“Yes,” he agreed, taking my hand and cutting through the brush to a paved concrete path we passed a few minutes earlier.

“I’m not saying I thought this would be easy,” I confessed, “but I didn’t think it would be this hard.”

We reached the SUV after a short walk, climbed in, and picked the nearest twenty-four-seven diner.

“I doubt your grandfather ever imagined the compound would be compromised to this degree.” He drove while I navigated and perused the menu. “Otherwise, Bjorn wouldn’t have had to source medical supplies. They would have had them on hand for emergencies.”

That hubris might have bitten my grandfather on the butt didn’t surprise me, but I couldn’t celebrate the circumstances that cost so many agents their lives. “He wouldn’t have required so many hearts either.” As he pulled into the parking lot, I dialed Clay. “Hey.”

“How is life in the land of untainted food? Tasty? Delicious? Yummy?”

“Food hasn’t been a priority of mine.”

“Blasphemy.” He sucked in a sharp breath. “You can’t fight evil on an empty stomach.”

“We’re still searching for evil, and we’re in line at a fancy-pants diner, so I think I’m okay.”

“No luck on your end?”

“Not yet.” I dreaded his answer, but I had to ask. “How about yours?”

“Nothing so far.” He sighed. “Vacation rentals are the bane of my existence.”

“Except when you’re using them.”

“Except when I’m using them.”

For the renter, a VacayNStay provided a level of anonymity I could appreciate.

For agents on a manhunt, it spat out red tape faster than we could cut through it.

“Mom and Dad are here.” I let that hang to see how he responded. “Just flew right in.”

“Weird.” He slurped on a drink. “Must be that motherly instinct I’ve heard so much about.”

“That must be it,” I pretended to agree. “Not the golem who snitched on me and sent backup I couldn’t turn down.”

“The director will be fighting for his life,” Clay warned, serious as I had ever heard him. “You need all the help you can get.”

“I’m not sure I can trust Dad not to kill him, but he says he’s going to turn him over to me.”

“Luca won’t like that.”

“Luca is on my to-do list, and she can wait her turn.”

As selfish as it was of me to prioritize locating the director to use him as a bargaining chip for Aedan, it was also necessary if I wanted to maintain control of the Bureau. Two birds, one stone and all that.

“The power has gone to your head.” He chuckled. “I *like* it.”

“How is my girl?”

“Busy.” He hesitated. “She misses you.”

“I miss her too.” I leaned against Asa while he ordered from a gourmet menu that would make Clay cry to miss. Bacon and egg mini tarts topped with tomato relish, strawberry ricotta muffins, white chocolate and blueberry honey buns, baked egg cups with prosciutto, Gruyere, and truffle oil *and* lime muffins topped with smoked trout and a wasabi caviar. “I’ll be back the second I’m able.”

“Don’t worry.” He sipped his drink. “I’m keeping her occupied.”

The cashier handed over six bags of food, and one nearly toppled out of Asa’s arms before I caught it.

“Gotta go.” I took another bag from the pile. “We have to feed our helpers.”

“Food that doesn’t have to be tested first to make sure it hasn’t been poisoned?”

“Yes.” I rolled my eyes. “That kind of food.”

“Must be nice to order whatever you want and not die from eating it.”

“As much as I enjoy listening to you pout, Asa really does need my help, and the wargs are waiting.”

“Oh sure.” He sniffed. “Go hang with your new friends and their not-poisoned food.”

When another bag threatened to topple out of Asa’s arms, I ended the call and swooped in for a save.

“Clay doesn’t sound happy.” He readjusted his burden. “Or is that only his stomach talking?”

“Clay is a talking stomach, so make of that what you will.”

The cashier, noticing Asa had a helper, hooked two giant plastic bags of orange juice on my fingers.

I made the return trip buried under delicious-smelling food, which wasn’t a bad way to go.

I was almost sad to hand over half the bounty to Asa when we arrived in the lakeside parking lot, but I was anxious to get back to the wargs. I didn’t like the idea of leaving them alone, even with Dad nearby.

About halfway back to where we left the wargs, a figure stepped into our path dressed all in black.

Had my brain not caught up to my hand, I would have flung the heavy bags at his head.

“Carver.” I got my heart rate under control. “What are you doing here?”

“There has been no threat to your person in twelve hours.” His shoulders slumped as he rested his hand on the hilt of his dagger. “I believe I have vanquished all of your enemies.”

“That can’t possibly be true.” I indicated for him to walk and talk. “We’re hunting one now.”

“A royal hunt?” He drew his dagger with gusto. “May I be allowed to join?”

“We’re coordinating with a warg pack, some of Marita’s cousins. Don’t try to maim, torture, or kill them. They’re the good guys.”

“Oh?” He considered the forest. “Where are these *good guys*?”

“We left them by the lake for a break while we went to get food and drinks.”

“Odd.” He twirled the blade then sheathed it. “I checked there first.”

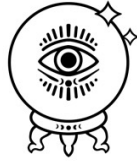
An uncomfortable sensation writhed in my gut, but I pushed it down and picked up my pace.

Thanks to the sidewalk, I had an easy time finding my way without help from Asa’s keener nose.

But Carver was right.

The wargs were gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



*A*fter shoving the food into Carver's arms, I called Dad, counting the rings with a lump in my throat.

No answer.

Asa set his offerings on the sand, his gaze roving the area for signs of the wargs or my parents.

"Come on, come on," I chanted, kicking myself in the butt for leaving the pack alone. "Answer."

Just as I was ending the call, ready to try again in case I fumbled the numbers, I heard voices. "Asa?"

"On it." He was consumed by the fires of transformation, and Blay emerged. "Blay go check."

The Hunk grew warm where it rested on my chest, an unwelcome reminder I was never alone.

"Highness?" Carver placed his load next to Asa's, careful not to let the food spill. "I smell burned hair."

That couldn't be good. Blay wasn't back yet, but I was done waiting. I marched off after him.

The pungent sent of my dad hit my nose and relaxed my shoulders, and I hustled to join him and Mom.

"What happened?" I scanned the gathering for my half of the wargs. "What's that smell?"

Now that I was on top of them, I could smell it. The reek was strong enough to turn my stomach.

“A ward.” The tattooed blonde lifted her bare foot, which was charred down to the bone in places. “Or a spell?”

“A ward.” I hustled to her, pausing with my hands above her skin. “Do you mind if I help?”

Given the source of my magic, especially with the Hunk active, I wasn't going to force healing on anyone. But she needed help. Fast. The pain must be excruciating. Even a warg with its enhanced healing abilities would suffer for weeks to regrow the muscle and flesh.

“Knock yourself out.” She didn't budge as I cupped her calf. “I might have to punch someone if it doesn't stop hurting soon.” Her gaze slid to Neilson. “A lot.”

“Punch all you want.” He dropped to his knees beside her. “Just hang in there, okay?”

“I'm not getting my foot amputated.” She smacked him upside the head. “I've had worse.”

Smiling to myself at the familiar lie, I shut my eyes and focused on drawing magic from my core through my body and into my hands. I pushed the power into her body, down her leg, regenerating new muscle and skin. I did my best then sat back to examine my work and found the entire pack gawking at me.

“That was fucking amazing.” The patient flexed her ankle then clasped forearms with me with hot tears in her eyes. “*You* are fucking amazing.” She laughed. “Do you know how long it would have taken me to heal that on my own? How much it would have fucking hurt?”

An instinctual flinch tightened my shoulders as she hurled the F word like a frisbee, but there was no little moth girl around to be scandalized. Which sucked. I missed her like crazy.

But I couldn't risk her getting hurt when the director would grab at any lifeline to save his hide.

When this was all over, I was taking her and the guys... maybe even Arden...on a family vacation.

“I’m the reason you’re out here.” I rubbed my cramping fingers. “It’s the least I can do.” I examined my work then searched the area. “Where did this happen?”

“Up that way.” She pointed toward a narrow path. “You can’t miss the blood.”

A knot in my gut warned that was only the opening salvo of the fight to come.

“You smell like smoked trout.” The freckle-faced woman wet her lips. “And wasabi.”

Out of the spread Asa had purchased, those would be the two dominating scents.

“Tia almost lost a foot,” Neilson chastised her. “Show some respect.”

“Tell me where the food is,” Freckles bargained, “and I’ll serve Tia first.”

“We set the bags down over...” Freckles was gone before I finished my thought. “Okay then.”

“Ahem.”

Carver stepped up next to me with his thumbs hooked into his belt.

“Everyone, this is Carver.” I got to my feet. “Carver, this is everyone.”

“Carver,” Mom echoed. “The assassin from Salem.”

That was where Carver met up with me and made his bid to become my personal assassin.

“Yes.” I realized how bad that sounded, but Mom didn’t press. “He’s blood sworn to me.”

“Carver has come to join the hunt,” Asa explained as the wargs sniffed at him. “He’s a gifted Miserae daemon.”

“I heard about your skills.” Neilson studied Carver with interest. “Marita told us you’re hardcore.”

“Thank you.” Carver inclined his head. “I am a simple servant of the rightful High Queen of Hael.”

That brought on a fresh wave of discomfort as everyone who was not a delusional assassin checked with me to see if he needed his bubble burst. I shook my head, but I don't think they noticed. Freckles rushed over to Tia with bags full of food, a helper behind her, and the wargs fell on the meal with gusto.

While they feasted, Mom, Dad, Asa, Carver, and I withdrew a safe distance from the light snarling over a handful of muffin crumbs left in the bag. Crumbs were tasty, yeah, but I wouldn't fight a wolf for them. Clay might, but I wasn't that dedicated. I guess being wolves themselves, the threat level was much lower for them.

"The ward is unlike anything I've ever seen." Dad rubbed his knuckles. "It didn't defend, it *attacked*."

The whole purpose of a ward was to protect what was inside, but the process was similar to building a wall with bricks. You could punch a brick, but the brick wouldn't punch you back.

Chewing my bottom lip, I debated our options. "Have you searched the area?"

"I thought it wiser to seek medical attention for your friend."

We had lost the element of surprise, but I would trade that for the health and safety of our allies any day.

"We'll only get one chance." Mom flickered like a projection then solidified. Dad pretended not to notice the blip, so I did too. Even if it made my stomach ache to think of her disappearing for good. "We need to be smart about this."

"We need to verify it's him." Asa, as usual, was the voice of reason. "Several paranormal creatures own lakefront property here. We need to be certain the director is in there before we harm an innocent."

"Rue and I will fly over." Dad cut me a grin. "Practitioners often forget to ward the space above them."

The pride in his eyes when he talked about us working together wrenched my heart with the fear I might lose him too.

But this was his fight as much as it was mine. Really, it was more his due than mine.

The director was responsible for Mom's death, Dad's imprisonment, and my blood-drenched upbringing.

"The director covets your wings," Asa countered. "He promoted Rue to deputy director, not only to keep an eye on her, but because she knew your spell. He won't leave the airspace as undefended as you might expect."

"Good point." I cast under my breath, and my wings unfurled around me. "Aerial surveillance is still a solid idea, though. We'll stay high and be careful."

"I'll cloak us," Dad offered. "We'll be visible to each other but not to anyone on the ground."

"That's a neat trick." I hesitated before putting it out there. "You'll have to teach me someday."

"I would love to," he said, his lips curling into a smile that gave me dangerous hope.

Unable to help myself, I kissed the frown off Asa's face then leapt for the sky.

Despite my head start, Dad beat me to the mark near where I thought the ward singed Tia.

Together, we glided over a stretch of treed shoreline that resembled every other property. Until you got close enough to smell it. There was no mistaking that odor. The tidy wooden cabin with its cute front porch and kitschy lake-life signs was the lair of a black witch.

"Your mate is right." Dad hovered above a simple brown cottage. "The ward is a dome shape."

"Why isn't he concealing the smell?" I blinked away tears from the stink. "It's like a flashing neon sign."

"It's venting in the air." He set his jaw. "The wargs wouldn't have gotten so close if it smelled this foul on the ground." He caught my eye. "How do you wish to proceed?"

Though I doubted my grandfather recognized my authority, with my title as Black Hat Director behind me, I could perform a search. “Do you think we can bring down the ward before we rally the troops?”

As badly as Tia had been hurt, I didn’t want to risk the magic lashing out and harming someone else.

“I’m certain we can.” He studied the pendant. “But can you do it without the book’s help?”

“I’m not sure.” I hated to admit it, especially to him. “I’ve been leaning on it hard lately.”

His grim expression told me what he thought about that, but he didn’t lecture me. Probably on Mom’s orders. Since the Maudit Grimoire was partly his, and full of his spells, he didn’t have room to preach its evils. Then again, since he cut that darkness out of himself, maybe he did.

And maybe that was why I put more faith in him freeing me from the Hunk than I did Naeema. He had done it for himself once before. He could do it again.

“All right.” He surveyed the area one last time. “Do you want to get the others first?”

“Let’s test it first.” I chewed my bottom lip. “We’re more likely to survive a black magic attack.”

With that decision made, he swooped low and landed a safe distance from where I could sense the ward radiating power. I mimicked his moves and managed to land without tumbling headfirst into the barrier.

If I wanted to keep using my wings, I definitely needed to pencil in time to work on my flying skills.

“Based on those pawprints, it appears the ward can strike three feet from where it’s anchored.” Dad wore a peculiar expression. “I experimented on a spell similar to this one, but I never perfected it.”

The grimoire was fresh on my mind, so I asked, “Did you leave notes behind?”

“From my younger days,” he mused. “I’m sure I left notes on many unfinished projects behind after...”

“Mom,” I supplied, aware of how she had shifted the axis of his world.

“Yes,” he said softly. “I made my choice, and I didn’t look back.”

That meant the director had access to any materials Dad left in his rooms, and he’d had decades to coerce talented practitioners to finish what Dad started. The director was a powerful witch, but the entire reason he crossbred himself with other factions was to create a child with untold powers.

With Dad, he had succeeded in forging a black magic prodigy unequaled in the magical world.

Which was the whole problem. Jealousy. The director didn’t have the raw power or the ingenuity Dad had in spades, thanks to his half-daemon heritage. That was why the director had wanted the wing spell so badly. Only a true craftsman could teach magic to behave in new ways. And, often, only a practitioner of similar caliber could wield that fledgling power until the magic settled into an established pattern.

“So, odds are good this is one of your experiments.”

“Yes.” He let his eyes go out of focus, as if homing in on a magical spectrum I couldn’t see. “It’s my work, but there have been subtle changes made.” He blinked a few times. “Whoever finished the spell did a decent job of mimicking my style, but they missed one of the minor faults that kept me from using it.”

“That sounds promising.” I rubbed my hands together. “Do you think we can hammer it until it cracks?”

“I’ll have to release the cloaking spell first.” His eyes gleamed. “Can you read magic?”

“No.” That explained his earlier trance. “That’s a thing?”

“It’s advanced magic that your grandfather wouldn’t have taught you or encouraged you to learn.”

For a black witch, I got a top-notch education, but the director hadn't sunk any of the extra resources into me that he had with his own son. He must have learned his lesson about molding his future rivals and didn't make the same mistake again with me.

All those years he kept Luca knocked up, all those children she lost, all the present trouble that stemmed from his past greed, made me wish I could afford to let Dad put him down. But he was worth more alive. I had to remember that. And I had to remind myself I couldn't sympathize with Luca. She was a victim, or had been, in the beginning, and I understood her hunger for revenge. But she had taken it too far.

The choice she made to poison humans with king killer had signed her death warrant.

"Do we have time for a lesson?" I felt naked in my sudden visibility. "Out here in the open?"

"Yes." His lips twitched. "But only because of hereditary magic." He held out his arm. "Ready?"

As I took his hand, even though I shouldn't remember, I swear I flashed back to when he and I had done this last. To when my hand was a quarter the size of his. I had been a daddy's girl, or so I had been told, and I hated not being able to recall what little time we had spent together. Most of what I thought were memories were stories Meg told me so often they became real, not true remembrances.

"Ready," I said through a dry throat. "What do I do?"

"Allow your magic to flow into me, and I'll direct it. Joined with me, you can see the fault too."

Grateful I didn't have to worry about barbecuing him, I relaxed into my power. "Okay."

As my energy hit him, he cradled it, molded it, and it circled back to me, swimming up my arm and through my chest until the backs of my eyes tingled with a new layer of vision that sprung up with startling clarity.

A grid of bright lines fluoresced before me, showing me exactly where the ward had been anchored. The modifications

Dad mentioned were Greek to me. The patterns revealed no weaknesses to my untrained eyes. They were throbbing lights with vague geometric suggestions, but that was all I got out of it.

“Are you familiar with the parallel axis theorem?”

“Uh, no.” I flushed to admit I had no clue what he meant. “No one told me math would be involved.”

“Do you see the knot in the upper left quadrant? It’s larger than the others, not pulled as tight. The gap is the flaw. It gives us an access point to the other side.” He held out his free hand and curled his finger. “We must sink our power into that point until it frays and begins unraveling the area around it.”

“I had no idea creating spells was this intricate.”

“Spellcrafting for a witch isn’t dissimilar to a chef creating a new dish. The initial labor is arduous and rife with calculation. The process requires hours of effort and months or years of testing. A dish never turns out right on the first try. It requires adjustments made in ingredients, heat, and cooking time.”

“I feel like you’re using food to relate to me, but you’re making me hungry.”

The wargs hadn’t offered to share the food, and I was starving. If he started talking about what ingredients went into his metaphorical dish, we wouldn’t have to announce ourselves. My stomach growling would do it for us.

“I’ll buy dinner when this is over,” he promised, as if *over* couldn’t mean I never saw him again.

“I’ll hold you to that.” I tried to smile, but it got wobbly. “Show me what to do.”

Dad sent a tendril of his magic into the grid, snaking it up the existing pattern, reinforcing what was already there. I did the same, and the zing of my magic combining with his *and* the ward left my skin prickly as if ants crawled up my arms. It didn’t hurt, but it didn’t feel good either. It felt like a warning.

“Good work,” Dad praised me. “We must force the energy higher but remain within the existing grid.”

“Will he know we’re doing this?” I struggled to direct my flow, breaking out in a cold sweat, while his efforts appeared seamless. “Can he tell we’re out here poking his fence?”

“Not if we do this right,” he said, a frigid smile forming on his lips.

“Because we’re following the existing structure,” I guessed, “and the magic doesn’t expect that.”

“Correct.” His smile warmed as it landed on me. “As long as we don’t engage in activities that would cause it to react, such as a brute force attack, it has no reason to think we’re doing anything wrong. Therefore, it should remain stable.”

“Magic is sentient.” I rolled the idea around in my head. “It’s a living, breathing thing.”

“You think spells aren’t?” He poised with his magic about to thread the knot. “They behave in predictable ways because that is how they were trained.”

“How can spellcraft be like a chef but also like a dog trainer?”

Exhaling through his nose, Dad shook his head. “I see I have a lot to teach you.”

“Will you hang around long enough for that?”

A hot flush crept up my throat, and I bit the inside of my cheek. That was the last thing I meant to ask.

After a brief pause, where he had trouble meeting my gaze, he murmured, “I’ll do my best.”

Understanding what even that concession cost him, I vowed not to push him. “That’s all I can ask.”

“Follow my lead.” He returned his focus to the ward. “We must be precise.”

Grateful to get back to business and pause the mushy stuff, I mirrored his motions to the best of my ability, and together we threaded the eye of the needle. Our magic poured through

the gap and spread across the inside, saturating it with our power.

“*Now.*” Dad gritted his teeth. “Pull it down.”

With one jerk of his hands—mirrored by his energy—Dad caused the ward to buckle outward.

I joined in a beat later, yanking as hard as I could while digging my heels into the sand.

We wrestled with the fragile membrane for an eternity. Probably less than a minute to someone on the outside. But together we cracked the ward and shattered it into fragments of magic that glittered as the final bits of power ebbed from them, leaving nothing behind.

When Dad removed his hand from mine, my fingers cramped and throbbed from how I had been holding on to him. If he was sore, he didn’t mention it, but I felt bad anyway. Or I did until the magnitude of what we had done hit me. I couldn’t decide if I was bitter that I hadn’t already known this, that my dad hadn’t been there to instruct me, or if I was grateful I lacked his mastery of the dark arts.

Then again, if I had been raised by my parents, I would have become a different person. One who likely walked the line of gray magic from birth rather than fumbling to define what it meant now.

That fleeting glimpse of what I might have been was bittersweet, but I was here now. So was Dad. With his help, I might get the hang of this gray witch thing yet. “That was amazing—”

A sizzling burst of power struck Dad in the chest, spiderweb veins crackling over his body, and a vicious snarl twitched in my upper lip as I pooled searing magic in my eager hands.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Dad grunted when the magic hit, hissing across his skin, but he wiped it off, balled it up, and threw it back.

A scream from the bushes alerted us to our next obstacle, but it was too late to call for backup now.

Good thing wargs had excellent hearing. They would have heard the commotion and come running.

“Show yourself,” I barked at the air, unsure where the target had gone.

Rather than answer, a charred man reeking of black magic dropped in a scorching heap.

Hard to feel sorry for him when Dad had only hurled the guy’s magic back at him. Had Dad been a less powerful witch, he would have been the smoking corpse. That kind of lethal force attack was a bit much. Unless you were in charge of protecting a valuable target who had given you license to kill.

A small flame of hope kindled in my chest that we had found the director, that this was almost over.

“Rue.”

Blay barreled across the fallen ward, the wargs struggling to catch up to him. Blay was a speed daemon when he wanted to be. The pack fanned out, scenting for other hidden surprises, but Blay stuck to my side. His aura exuded menace, and he growled low in his throat as the three of us advanced on the cabin.

A yelp drew my attention to the pack, where a spell had knocked one of the wargs flying into a tree.

Men and women in black bled from the shadows of trees, their wands at the ready, not bothering to camouflage themselves.

“Leave them,” Dad snapped out the order. “The pack can take care of themselves.”

Everything in me rebelled against ditching my allies, but that word plagued me again.

Trust.

“Blay protect wolf friends.” He squeezed me in a side hug. “Rue be careful.”

“You too.” I locked down the panic burbling in my chest and homed in on our target. “Dad?”

“There’s another ward, but it’s weak.” His gaze had gone unfocused. “I can take it down myself.”

As he wound his arm, about to pitch a blast of magic at the barrier, I realized he was lobbing spells too.

Though I wished it was an inherited quirk, I got a bad feeling it was a result of the grimoire’s taint. For us both. I held no command over it when the Hunk wrested control away from me, but Dad was a master. If he was flinging magic, he meant to do it. More proof I was curable and not beyond redemption, and I clung to it with both hands.

As the ward failed under Dad’s power, the sounds of battle raged behind us. The air was ripe with the stink of black magic. I doubted the black witches were Black Hat. The director wouldn’t trust anyone other than Bjorn now that he knew Luca had infiltrated the compound. Most likely they were hired muscle.

Side by side, our wands sheathed, Dad and I stepped onto the front porch.

“I knew you would come,” the director spat from inside the cabin. “You and your treacherous offspring.”

“Bjorn isn’t coming back.” Dad blinked his vision clear, narrowing his gaze on the door. “You have no more allies to protect you.”

“I don’t require allies to best you, you insolent whelp.”

The director’s tone convinced me Dad and I were missing something. He sounded way too chill for a guy with only a piece of wood between him and the reckoning that had been coming for as long as Mom had been gone. He ought to be trembling in his dress shoes, not riling Dad up for a fight.

Another ward. I could sense it tickling the edge of my periphery. An ugly one too.

I wasn’t sure what this one did, but it was giving the director the confidence to stand behind it.

“Surrender,” I called to him, “and we’ll let you live.”

“On whose authority? *I* am the director of the Black Hat Bureau. *You* are nothing.”

Now I knew where Bjorn got his lines. These two definitely read from the same script.

“As far as anyone knows—” I hated to break it to him, “—you went down with the ship.”

Good grief.

Maybe an expansion pack was a good idea. I seriously needed a rest from Mystic Seas.

“Do you honestly believe the Bureau will follow you?” A sneer twisted his voice. “I appointed you as deputy director to keep an eye on your scheming.” Temper crackled in his tone. “I knew you were in contact with your father, that you would betray me at your earliest opportunity.”

“You know all about betrayal, don’t you?” I couldn’t resist the urge to goad him. “I met Luca.”

“That name means nothing to me.”

“Then how about Siobhan of Ish-ran?”

“*No.*”

“Yes.” I quirked my lips up on one side. “I have her to thank for freeing Dad.”

A string of vile curses poured from the other side, and I couldn't help but relish his shock.

He might have finally learned Luca had access to the compound, and allies within it, but he clearly had no clue how deep her meddling went into his affairs. Honestly, neither did we. She had been planning his reckoning for a long time, and all we could do was put out fires as she set them.

“You're lying,” he snarled. “She wouldn't dare cross me.”

“She loved you, and you used her.” I kept recalling all those graves and the heartless man responsible for them. “She denounced everything she believed in for you.”

For him, she had turned her back on her god, her duties, and her family.

And all she had gotten in return was heartbreak as their children died and her lover abandoned her.

“I never told her she was anything more to me than a fertile womb.”

Siobhan must have believed she could reform the notorious black witch, the way Mom had shown Dad a generation later there was another path. But my parents' relationship was remarkable for a reason. Black witches didn't do love. Most weren't capable of it. And I hated it for the woman Siobhan had become that she tried for so long, allowing herself to grow bitter as she came to understand she was but a means to an end to him.

“With pickup lines like that, she must have really loved you to keep trying.”

“She failed me.” He smacked the door with his palm. “I owed her nothing.”

“Ah.” Dad inclined his head. “And do you count my mother among your failures?”

Ice spiked the words, and I felt the chill from where I stood next to Dad.

“Calixta and I had a bargain.” The director’s voice moved closer. “*She* was the one who broke our deal.”

“She wanted a relationship with her child,” Dad growled. “You could have given her that much.”

This smacked of an old argument, and I didn’t want to get between them. I couldn’t afford to look a gift horse in the mouth. While the director was distracted, I had to figure out a way to get us through the front door.

“And have you spirited away to the Haelian Seas? To her court under the waves? No. I never would have seen you again. She would have raised you as her heir, and I refused to lose the one offspring of mine to survive past infancy.”

They must have had a bargain that spelled out a custody agreement, and when she violated it, or the director grew paranoid she had intentions to, he struck first. That explained why the director locked her away, but not how Dad was involved, since it was his magic that had contained her.

“You think I created a monster when I raised you?” The director laughed, full and loud. “You have no idea how she would have twisted you. She is wicked and cruel. More vicious than I have ever dreamed of being.”

A pit opened in my gut, the reminder Aedan was living that nightmare sickening me.

“That must be what attracted you to her.” I snorted. “You two would have made a lovely couple.”

“I should have let her have you,” he spat at Dad. “Then you wouldn’t have married that pathetic excuse for a witch or birthed this abomination you call a daughter.”

“It’s not nice to speak ill of the dead,” Mom said...from *inside* the cabin. “But you never have been a nice man, have you?” Her voice grew frosty and hard. “You killed me to spite your son. You couldn’t let him have even a taste of happiness, could you?” More power leaked from under the door. “Your envy was so all-consuming, you couldn’t bear for him to have a child who not only lived but one who loved him.”

Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-bump.

Any faster, and Dad's heart would beat out of his chest.

"Howl," Dad, heedless of the final ward, pleaded through the door. "Please."

"What's happening?" I helped him search for a way in. "What's she doing in there?"

"She's a vengeful spirit." He grew his nails to talons and ripped at the hinges, at the frame. "Her instincts have taken over." Blood leaked from his fingers, smearing the door. "She's going to kill him, and then..."

Then she would disappear, back into the ether from which Jai Parish had summoned her.

Had that been the real reason she hadn't vanished yet? Could she move on without fulfilling that task? I thought her remains were too scattered, but now... Would she kill the director? Instinct I hadn't realized she had, since she quit trying to murder me, must be riding her hard this close to her killer.

The layers of wards had done their job in protecting the director, but she had his scent now.

"Okay." I gathered Dad's hands in mine. "I got this." I pulled him away. "Stand back."

"Rue..." He held on with bloody fingers. "Don't—"

Before his brain won the battle over his heart, I reached for the Hunk, and it answered with glee.

With its power simmering in my veins, I let my gaze slide unfocused and gripped a random grid line on the wards. With my bare hands, I ripped it away, braced to take the kickback. Magic rushed over me, blinding me, but I palmed a metal sphere I prayed was the doorknob and twisted before I hit my knees.

"Get her." I rubbed my eyes, but I couldn't shake the afterimage. "We can't let her kill him."

For Aedan's sake, and hers, we needed the director alive.

“Howl.” Dad rushed past me, a blur to my hazy vision. “You can’t do this.”

“He deserves to die,” she whispered, and that was more chilling than if she had screamed her rage.

“Yes, he does.” Dad approached her with slow footsteps that clanged in my tender ears. “But Rue needs him.”

“My baby.” Mom’s voice rattled like dried cornhusks. “My baby girl.”

“I’m here, Mom.” I didn’t know if it would matter, but I had to try. “Don’t let him win.”

Finally, *finally*, my vision cleared as the Hunk fed power into my healing abilities.

The radiant blue outline of her noncorporeal form began to throb and twist as she stalked the director, stretching her limbs and wrenching her features into something otherworldly. She became insubstantial, well, *more* insubstantial, until she resembled a flickering hologram.

“You did this,” she seethed at him. “You did this to me. To *us*.”

“Howl.” Dad bent to scoop her into his arms, but his hands passed through her. “Come back to me.”

“Get her away from me.” The director kept a step out of range. “Or I’ll end her for good this time.”

Probably not the smartest thing he ever said with Dad within striking distance of him.

“You deserve to die.” Her feet no longer touched the ground. “You deserve to be *punished*.”

“Let me do it.” Dad hurled a bolt of pure energy at the director. “Let me punish him for you.”

The director screamed, dropping his cane, and hit the wall. He had backed himself into a corner.

“A life for a life.” She was beyond hearing us. “You will pay what is owed.”

The cold rush of adrenaline flipped a switch in my brain. No. That wasn't right. I didn't have the idea. It was given to me. Engraved into my memories as if it was my own. But it wasn't mine. It was...

The Hunk seared my chest with its scalding power, and the throb in my head worsened until black spots bloomed across my vision like mold on cheese.

"Please," Dad said again. "Don't do this." He kept in front of her, walking backward. "Don't go."

"*Dad.*" I gripped the sides of my head and hit my knees. "I know what to do."

"Then do it quick," he shouted, trying and failing to run interference between them.

A series of instructions spilled across the backs of my eyelids as if they were written there, as if they had always been there had I only known where to look.

And I understood.

The Hunk was offering to save Mom. All I had to do was let it in.

I'm sorry, smarty fuzz butt, but you're stronger than I ever have been.

As long as I was alive, Colby had a fighting chance. Even if the grimoire took me, she could rebel against its taint.

Palming the pendant, I tucked it back into my shirt, allowing it to rest against my skin. The agony as it cut into my flesh, burrowing into me, made me dry heave. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I couldn't waste this opportunity. Not if it was the last conscious decision the Hunk allowed me to make.

"You..." I tasted blood in the back of my throat. "I..."

Dad saw me go down, and he hesitated, but then he left Mom and rushed to help me.

"Let me..." I couldn't get my tongue to work, "...show... you."

When he touched my hands, I funneled the grimoire's instructions into him, burning him as he held on. I didn't know how he could stand it, but the determination spilling across his features told me he wouldn't let go until he went up in smoke.

As the information singed him through our connection, he blinked away tears. Not of pain. Of hope.

"Go." I broke away from him, bits of his charred skin stuck to my fingers. "Now."

Without him propping me upright, I toppled onto my side, where I watched him run to Mom.

And, just as I had done when I had no choice, he committed what some would consider an unforgivable sin. He spoke the spell I had used on Colby that night when her soul was all that kept her on Earth. His was a flawless casting with instructions taken straight off the pages of the Maudit Grimoire rather than instinctual rambling cobbled into the shape of a spell.

The knowledge it had teased me with existed after all. I had started to wonder. But it had taken the most valuable, at least to me, information it possessed and chosen its moment.

It struck Mom like an arrow through the heart, and she froze in place as his magic pierced her.

Cheek mashed into the hardwood floor, tears pricking at my eyes, I witnessed the birth of a new *loinnir*.

Had Mom been anything other than a white witch, and already in spirit form, I wasn't sure the magic would have accepted her. But whatever the test, she passed it, and Dad's power sank into her, illuminating her from within. She was a pure light, her body too bright to look at directly.

As I watched, she sank back into herself, the light dimming. She lost sharp edges and gained soft curves. Her fury dissolved into a blissful expression as her form solidified and took on new dimension. She became...real. Tangible. Alive in the same way as Colby.

Except my rash actions had trapped Colby as a moth in order to save her. I hadn't had time to undo what the Silver

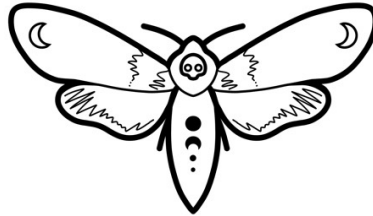
Stag had done to her. Even if I had, I hadn't known how. I still didn't. And, unlike Dad, I hadn't had a spell to cast. I saved Colby with grit, desperation, and perhaps the first hope I had ever felt.

Most of Colby's transformation was a blur of panic, terror, and confusion, but this filled in those blanks.

Skin flushed pink, Mom smiled at Dad with her whole heart in her eyes.

As darkness swamped me, I smiled too, relaxing into its cool embrace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“**S**aint, get Asa.” Gentle hands cupped my cheeks.
“Welcome back, baby girl.”

“Mom?” I blinked awake and licked my chapped lips.
“Are you...?”

“Fine.” She stroked her warm fingers over my face.
“Thanks to you.”

A low growl clenched my gut as Asa stormed into the room with angry red lines carved into his throat, waist, and wrists. Even his ankles wept crimson, his footsteps leaving bloody imprints behind.

“Asa?” I shoved upright, head spinning, and fell back against Mom. “What happened?”

“You passed out.” Mom rocked me, which was nice, but also slightly nauseating. “Asa...”

“I restrained him.” Dad rose from a chair in the corner and helped Asa come to me and sit on the floor. “He refused to let us near you, and we had to act quickly to counteract the grimoire’s hold on you.”

Until he mentioned it, I had forgotten that part. The cost of the knowledge to save Mom.

Namely, my autonomy.

I also hadn’t noticed the thick bandages padding my chest or the searing burn radiating from the dead center of my torso that throbbed in time with my heart.

Or the fact I might be on the floor, but I wasn't indoors. There was sky above me. "I didn't do this, did I?"

"No." Asa took me from my mom, and I slumped against him, boneless. "I did."

"When he ran out of cabin to destroy," Dad said, "we worried what he might target next."

"We worried he would hurt himself," Mom corrected him. "That's why we restrained him."

"Looks like he still managed to hurt himself plenty." I traced the mark at his throat. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He kept arranging me until I found myself sitting in his lap. "How are you?"

"Sore." I coughed into my shoulder. "Weirdly parched."

Maybe sunburned too. I must have been out for a while. That, or the magic fried me.

"We'll get you a drink," Mom promised, "as soon as you can sit up on your own."

That was the best news I had heard in days.

"We've got him." Asa smoothed the hair off my forehead. "The director."

Nope. Too soon. I had been wrong. This—*this*—was the best news. "For real?"

"For real," he confirmed, leaning down to brush his lips over mine. "I've already dispatched an emissary to Calixta."

"Thank you." I fisted his shirt then focused on Mom and Dad. "And thank you, both of you."

"You gave Howl back to me." Dad patted the top of my head. "His life for hers is a small trade."

"*Life* is a stretch." Mom extended her arm, admiring her faint white glow. "I'm still dead, aren't I?"

"You're a soul given form," I told her. "You're not alive-alive, but you're not dead either."

“I’ll take it.” She laughed, loud and bright. “I feel like I do when I cast a spell. All tingly.”

“Magic is...kind of your skin now. It’s the outer barrier that protects the vulnerable soul within.”

From what I recalled with Colby, it took a few months for the nightlight effect to dim.

“How did you know it would work?” Dad’s keen gaze settled on me. “So little is known about *loinnir*.”

“The grimoire has an entire chapter dedicated to them, but it won’t let me read it. This was the first time it’s offered to share what it knows.”

“That implies the knowledge has value to you, if the book held it over your head.”

Neither of my parents had met Colby, and I hadn’t told them about her either.

To them, it must have seemed like I pulled the idea out of thin air, but *loinnir* were a daily part of my life.

“You smell odd.” Asa sniffed my hair, saving me from that line of questioning. “Like...your shampoo.”

“So, odd but in a watermelon-strawberry kind of way?” I tried to laugh, but it hurt. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t smell any black magic on you.” His gaze fell to the crimson-smeared gauze wrapping my chest. “I don’t smell hydrangeas either.” He gave me one last check. “I don’t smell any magic at all.”

The burn in my chest worsened, constricting my heart when I reached for power and found...nothing.

“I bound your magic,” Dad said softly. “It was the only way to prevent the book from overtaking you.”

“Oh.” A hard lump formed in my throat, but I swallowed past it. “I understand.”

I understood I was helpless until we discovered the means to remove the Hunk, and I got my powers back.

And I had to stand against Calixta without tipping my hand that I was more vulnerable than ever.

“I won’t let you out of my sight,” Asa promised, curving around me as if he could shield me from a world that would strike me down if my enemies learned of this latest development. “I’ll send an emissary to locate Grandmother and bring her to the farm.”

“It’ll be okay.” I cupped his cheek, forced him to look at me and believe me. “*I will be okay.*”

The disorientation and pain I had blamed on my battle of wills with the Hunk, and the director’s wards, might not be a result of those skirmishes. I’d had my magic cut off once, during the challenge that almost cost Blay his life. I had felt scooped out and hollow. Empty. Then I had burst through the limitations placed on me, but I doubted I could blast my way out of this. Dad was too powerful, and too clever.

“Where will my mother expect to meet Rue?” Dad crossed his arms over his chest. “We must prepare.”

“You aren’t serious.” Mom grabbed his arm. “She can’t butt heads with Calixta without her power.”

A denial readied itself on my tongue, and I drew myself up, preparing to argue my point.

“Rue didn’t come all this way,” he said gently, “only to fail.”

The rush of emotion as my dad sided with me threatened to close my throat all over again.

“You two are not going to start ganging up on me.” Mom jabbed him in the hip. “You can forget it.”

“He’s right.” I held out my hand, and Dad took it. “I’ve come this far. I’m not quitting.”

“Calixta will meet us where the compound used to stand.” Asa stroked my back with his thumb. “She’s more comfortable with an ocean at her back, and she’s aware your magic doesn’t play well with water.”

“The shore will be tough to defend.” I had already learned that lesson the hard way when the otdrels attacked us. “She’ll have us backed against a cliff.”

“She knows you can fly,” Dad told me. “The second you released her, she would have gathered all the information available on you to determine a strategy in the event you became a problem.” He released my hand, probably because I hadn’t thought it out well, and my arm felt like it was about to pop out of the socket at this angle. “You have a bargain in place, correct?”

“Yes.” I hit the high points, namely that she couldn’t harm me or mine. “That doesn’t mean she can’t get creative with her interpretations.” I settled into lotus position. “She and I verbally spar, but we don’t get physical. Mostly.” I kept thinking back on our interactions. “She’s more likely to harm Aedan to get a rise out of me. He signed himself over, so he’s no longer under that blanket protection.”

“Do you believe she will trade Aedan for the director?”

Asa aimed the question at Dad, who would know better than anyone the going rate on his father’s head.

“Father contained Calixta in a brackish inlet for the first three years of my life. Her ties to the sea enabled her to send and receive messages to her court, but she couldn’t rule from her cage. Her allies turned against her once they were confident she couldn’t escape, and a relative seized her throne.” He lapsed into silence, as if gathering his thoughts. “When he heard the news, he came to mock her for it, but she’d had time to prepare for his visit. She lured him close to the water’s edge with her tears, then she yanked him in with her. She would have drowned him had Bjorn not frozen her into a block of ice.”

“The loss of her kingdom had already begun deteriorating her mind the last time we saw her,” Mom agreed, “and that was decades ago. I can only imagine her state of mind when you found her.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask.” I studied Dad. “You never told me how she ended up in the swamp.”

The spell caging her had been his and Mom's work. The design was gray magic, from what I understood.

"After my mother almost succeeded in killing my father, he decided to place her in a saltwater tank within the compound. He didn't want to kill her outright, since I was showing promise, but he couldn't risk allowing her contact with the outside world any longer. He wanted her cut off, desolate, dependent upon him to fulfill her every need."

"He kept her in a *tank*?" I could *not* have heard that right. "Like a pet fish?"

"Yes." He squeezed Mom's fingers when she slid her hand into his. "That was why, after I met Howl, and we discussed our families, she agreed to help me relocate my mother. I would have set her free, but she was borderline feral by that time. Broken. She was too dangerous to be released, so we caged her."

"It was the best solution we had at the time," Mom consoled him. "We had to move fast." She turned toward me. "We knew once his father accepted Saint would never come home, Saint would be barred from the secret levels. There was no time for elegant solutions. We had to act."

"We visited Mother once a year." Dad shook his head. "We hoped for signs of recovery but saw none."

"Then I died," Mom continued, "and Saint was locked away. There was no one to tend to her."

"What changed?" I couldn't reconcile their version of her with the one I knew. "She's got an ax to grind, but she's coherent. I didn't spend much time with her, but she was scheming away. She had big plans for me, and she used another of my cousins to set them into motion. She was definitely thinking and speaking rationally by the time our paths crossed."

"That must be the difference," Asa mused. "We don't know how she located Delma, but she used her to lure Rue to the swamp. The area brought in lots of foot traffic as an attraction. It's possible she reached out to one of the children,

since their minds are more open to suggestion, and implanted the command to help her. They could have been the first link in a chain that led you to her.”

“The stimulation from the tours, and the wildlife, must have helped get her out of her head.”

“There were all manners of creatures in those waters.” Dad exhaled. “That was why we chose it.”

From the sound of it, he had feelings for his mother. I wouldn't call it love. It didn't sound like they had that kind of relationship. Or any relationship beyond captive and pitying onlooker. Maybe it was simply a sense of duty. She was his mother. Even terrible parents could inspire loyalty in their children.

Another thought occurred to me. “I'm guessing this means she won't be thrilled to see you.”

“It might be best if she didn't,” he allowed. “I'm not sure how she feels about me.”

“She's big into vengeance, so maybe you should hide behind a tree or something.”

The slight of me leaving her in her cage had cost me someone I loved, and I hadn't put her there. For the crime of transporting her from one prison to another, I doubted she would offer to hug out their differences and become the family they could have been, if not for the director.

Distant voices drifted to me, but I recognized a couple as belonging to the wargs.

“The wargs are fine.” Asa, noticing the shift of my attention, assured me. “They're enforcing the perimeter your father set. They refused to leave until after you woke.”

“Help me up.” I let him haul me to my feet. “I want to thank them.”

Each step was tender, and the ground felt awful wobbly, but I managed to reach them.

Asa held one of my hands, and Mom took the other while Dad loomed behind me.

“*Rue.*” Arden jogged over and smacked into me, sliding her arms around my waist. “I thought...”

The fresh wave of pain almost sent me to my knees, but I was too glad for the hug to fuss.

“I’m tougher than I look.” I pulled free of Asa and Mom to fully embrace her. “Where’s Fergal?”

Now that I was up and about, I noted the cleaners milling around, eager to get to work where the director’s cabin once stood. A few agents were in attendance as well, but their presence left me twitchy. Maybe it was the staring. The darting glances between Dad and me.

Oh, yeah.

They had heard the news about us Nádasdys keeping the Bureau in the family.

Then I saw him. Fergal. And it was all I could do not to dissolve into hysterical laughter after all I had been through in the last few days.

He wore his black hoodie, balaclava, and gloves over his usual suit. He had added knee-high black boots I thought might be waders, and he now carried the largest umbrella I had ever seen outside of the beach. Black, of course. He also made an odd metallic, crinkling noise when he walked that made me wonder if he had wrapped himself with aluminum foil to help reflect any sunlight that seeped through the fabric.

Clearly, if he continued sticking to Arden like glue, I had to work on a sun-proofing spell for vampires.

“I’ve already filed our report,” he said, walking up to me. “It’s a pity this home was destroyed during your hunt for a rogue otdrel, but without its handlers, it would have killed anyone who crossed it.”

Ah.

So that was the official story.

“I see,” Dad said dryly, as if the excuse were ludicrous. “Are you often blown up in the line of duty?”

“Yes,” Asa and Fergal said together, causing Mom to sink her fingernails into my arm.

“Only a few times.” I patted her hand. “And only recently.”

Vibrating on a frequency that hurt the back of my teeth, light began seeping from her pores until she glowed like a beacon. Lucky for us, it was so bright outside, she drew stares, but no one pointed at her and shouted *loinnir*.

“You need to calm down.” I gripped her forearms. “You’re like catnip for black arts practitioners.”

A low growl poured from my father’s chest, raising the hairs on the back of my neck.

“Just dial down the glow.” I kept hold of her, hoping touch would calm her. “There.” I smiled as she dimmed a fraction. “That’s better.”

Hard gaze raking the faces of everyone present, as if memorizing them, Dad demanded, “How do you know so much about *loinnir*?”

“There’s someone you should meet.” I leaned into Asa. “But not yet.”

“Can this person help me adapt?” Mom was mostly back to normal. “Can they teach me...what I am?”

After all the years of trial and error with Colby, half of which stemmed from her being a fae girl trapped in a moth body, and the other hurdle being her mental age, Mom wouldn’t have half the battle ahead of her. But, I knew down in my heart, that teaching Mom about her existence—how to *live*—could heal wounds Colby might not realize still held her back from fully embracing her present.

Herself.

“We’re heading back to ground zero,” I informed Fergal. “Do you have everything under control?”

“Yes.” Arden winked at me like she had something in her eye. “The eagle has landed.”

Eagle? I was talking about the director. “What?”

“The cuckoo is in the nest.” She winked again. “The cow is in the barn.”

“Arden.” Fergal rested his hand on her shoulder and pressed down. “Yes, Rue, we’re done here.”

I took that to mean the director had been secured where no one loyal to him could locate him.

Arden, heels planted firmly on the ground, nodded. “What he said.”

“Excellent.” I had to do this next part on my own. “Let’s get out of here.”

“We’ll meet you there.” Dad pressed a kiss to the top of my head so quickly I wasn’t sure I hadn’t imagined it. “Asa, I expect you to keep my daughter safe.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mom embraced me gently, her touch warm and soft, and whispered in my ear, “Stay safe.”

The two of them walked toward the shore, giving Dad room to summon his wings and prepare to fly.

This was not the time for a show of weakness, so I held my head high and my expression locked down. I walked every step from where the cabin had been to the SUV on my own. Like I was still a badass witch with full control of her powers and not little more than human at the moment.

Asa opened the rear door, and I collapsed on the bench seat, groaning as every part of me radiated hurt.

Behind me, Fergal stepped into his body bag and loaded himself into the trunk with help from Arden.

To my surprise, she slid behind the wheel and plugged in directions without giving me a chance to fuss.

Careful not to jostle me, Asa eased in beside me and rested my head on his lap.

The trip to the airport passed behind the darkness of my eyelids.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



We reached ground zero at sundown, and I exited the SUV to the crash of waves and the cries of seagulls.

Though it didn't speak much for my childhood, it was the most peaceful moment I could recall spending here. The absence of the manor helped, I was sure. As if a giant hand had swept the misery of my youth into the sea, leaving a blank canvas behind for me to fill in how I wished going forward.

A whiff of rot, and Dad landed beside me, setting Mom down gently.

That was one bonus of our late start. It allowed him to arrive around the same time as us.

She emanated a soft light, and I didn't want to know what they had done to get her glowing again.

"Asa and I will take the lift down to the shore." I frowned at my parents. "There aren't many great places left to hide, but half a tent is still standing. You guys could huddle under there."

Had Clay been here, he would have cracked a joke about keeping their hands to themselves, but *eww*.

They were my parents, and I was determined not to think about what a corporeal body for Mom meant for their relationship.

I had enough nightmares without adding fresh material to the lineup.

"All right," Dad agreed with reluctance.

To make this work, I might need backup, but I couldn't risk pissing Calixta off more than she already was with me. If she saw Dad, she might view it as a threat. She wouldn't get within shouting distance of land if she thought he might recapture her. I only had one shot at this, and I needed it to go smoothly.

Adjusting her gloves, Arden strode up to me with grim resolve. "Where do you want us?"

The much less conspicuous vampire had shed his protective gear, safe under the moonlight.

"Fergal, I want you on the lift," I decided, "but keep it all the way at the top."

Slowing her stride, Arden frowned. "What about me?"

"You go with my parents." I expected her to push back, to hope for a glimpse of Aedan, but she surprised me with a short nod that prompted me to explain, "I don't want Calixta to know you exist."

"I get it." She lifted her fists, showing off her fingerless gloves. "I'll be here if you need me."

The confidence those gloves inspired in her was not comforting. To me anyway. But when she returned to Samford, to the shop and her normal life, they would make a good defense against anyone who might attempt to harm her based on her connection to me. I owed her that much, a means of protecting herself when I wasn't around to do it.

Before my parents left, I asked, "How long will it take to retrieve the director if all goes well?"

"Four hours, as the witch flies." Dad took Mom by the hand. "I'll collect him as soon as you're ready."

"Thanks." I chuckled at what might have been his first attempt at a joke. "Here we go."

Shaking out my hands, I wished I could fling away my nerves.

This had to work.

It *had* to.

“We don’t want to be late.” Asa cupped my elbow and guided me onto the lift. “It won’t be long now.”

The ride down dropped my stomach into my feet, and it had nothing to do with the quick service.

As we stepped onto the sand, I got my first glance at the cleanup effort. “Where is Isiforos?”

This was his baby, but I saw no signs of him or those responsible for the mountains of debris piled along the shore. The lights, however, we could put to good use. Asa turned them on, illuminating the shore.

“We thought it safer to clear the area.” Asa kept a sharp eye out for company. “Backup is on standby.”

A sour taste rose up the back of my throat, but I swallowed it down along with the pain raging through me.

“The director ruined Calixta’s life.” He cut his eyes toward me. “She’ll be eager to return the favor.”

“Dad might get in hot water over this.” I couldn’t help but feel guilty for that. “Am I being selfish?”

“Your father would be forced to fulfill his animus vow if he killed the director, as he promised Luca.” His expression softened. “Your mother is alive. As alive as Colby. Your father won’t miss out on a second of time he could be spending with her. He wouldn’t do anything that put their second chance in jeopardy.”

“I notice you didn’t give me a straight answer.” I snorted. “But you still made me feel better.”

A half hour later, the waves began to froth and foam, and Calixta rose from the waters in a black suit that might have been light armor. Interesting choice. The two guards who emerged after her matched, both in navy blue, but Aedan was nowhere in sight.

Another interesting choice, or a threat?

The old *harm me, and you'll never see your cousin again schtick?*

More concerning were the half-dozen sharks circling the daemons, their dorsal fins waist-high on Calixta.

For the High Queen of Hael, she had dressed for her former title. Both daemons appeared to be Aquatae or at least an aquatic species. This was not how to win over her new kingdom. She was falling into habits that would get her overthrown if she wasn't careful. She couldn't rule Hael like it was the Haelian Seas.

Hael was its own ecosphere with its own species, and she ought to remember that if she wanted to keep her head acquainted with her neck. Beheading was *very* popular among daemons, as Blay had proven to me over and over during challenges.

"Calixta." I bent at the waist, my spine twinging. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

I doubted anyone believed me, but oh well. I was being polite. Lying through my teeth, but polite.

"Granddaughter." She approached until the water lapped at her calves. "I was told you have something I want." She held up the director's cane, which Asa must have sent along with the emissary as proof. "You are always so full of surprises."

"I'm certain you have your hands full running your new kingdom—congratulations on that, by the way—so I'll keep this short." I had already settled on a narrative she would enjoy, so I got ready to sell it. "The director was injured in the blast when the compound was destroyed."

"I was led to believe he died in the explosion."

"He remained hidden until he could heal from his wounds."

A cunning smile curled her lips. "You found him."

"I did."

"And you want me to...? Take him off your hands?" Her eyes glittered with cold avarice, but she kept her tone firm. "If

you've enjoyed your taste of power, kill him. Claim your birthright." Her laugh was bitter. "It ought to serve as a reminder of what happens when you palm off your problems on someone else."

This was going about how I expected, but she was standing firmer than I had anticipated, which meant her control was better than I had given her credit for. She was going to make me work for it.

"He's too valuable to kill." I hated it was the truth. "The woman who destroyed the compound wants him too."

Okay, so that stretched the truth, but the truth wasn't one size fits all in these situations.

Black swallowed her eyes from corner to corner. "Oh?"

"They were lovers, and he wronged her." I left out the part about the children, even though it might have won me points. "Woman scorned. That whole thing. That's why she came after the Bureau. She wants to tear down everything he's built—ruin everything he loves—and only then will she kill him."

Probably.

Realistically, I had no idea what Luca would do with the director if she got her hands on him. She wanted Dad to kill him, yeah, but that was far less satisfying than keeping him alive. The person who left her, the children they had together, and the dreams of a family with him she lived for all those years might enjoy the irony of his hopes resting in her hands. They would be much easier for her to crush then.

After a moment of consideration, she led with, "I'm sure my claim on him predates hers."

"Uh, no. They were together prior to him building the compound. He actually built it here to be closer to her. Who knew he had a romantic bone in his body?"

"He bred with her as he bred with me."

"Yes."

"Yet she waited all this time to strike out at him."

“From what I can tell, she’s been playing the long game. The only piece of her revenge that’s incomplete is possessing him. As soon as she has him, she will have done all she set out to do.”

“Why, then, if you believe her cause just, have you summoned me here?”

“I have something you want.” I made my big pitch. “You have something I want.”

“Someone,” she murmured. “Your cousin.”

“Set Aedan free, and I will deliver the director to you to punish for his crimes against you however you see fit.” I shrugged like it didn’t matter, like everything didn’t hinge on her agreement. “Or I hand him off to Luca. She’s pretty creative. I’m sure she’ll think of something to do with him.”

“Give him to her.” She pivoted, staring out at the sea. “I will rest knowing he is being punished for what he has done to me, and other women like me.”

“Ready to go?” I peered up at Asa. “We can make our delivery then grab some dinner.”

“I have been craving kitfo.” He ushered me toward the lift. “Good injera is hard to find.”

“I agree.” I checked my phone. “We need to call ahead if we want to beat their closing time.”

He and I stepped onto the lift, chatting about our favorite Ethiopian foods, the shore far below us.

“Wait.”

Calixta might have whispered the word, but I heard it, and I pounced on it. “Yes?”

“I will return your cousin to you when he is no longer of any use to me. For that, you will give me Albert Nádasdy to do with as I please. You will swear to me in blood that you will not attempt to reclaim him later, as you have done with my heir.”

“You’ll have to be more specific in your wording. You could claim to have use for Aedan until the day he dies.” I saw the problem as it smacked me in the face. I needed Meg for this. I needed a written contract I could take to her. I needed Calixta wrapped in red tape so tightly she couldn’t breathe. *And* I needed to prioritize learning how Calixta was tracking me. “I respect that he is your heir, and I understand you’re new to your throne. You’ll need the support of an heir until you can name a replacement. What is a realistic time frame for a seamless transition between Aedan and his successor?”

“A century.”

“Are you willing to postpone taking possession of the director for that long?”

“Fifty years.”

Those might be reasonable time frames. I had no idea how long a kingdom required to adapt to new leadership. Asa could make an educated guess, but his father had been in power for centuries. No one we knew had lived through a transfer of power in Hael. Let alone to an aquatic daemon. This was all uncharted territory.

Even the Haelian Seas Kingdom’s more recent upheaval wasn’t the best comparison, since a relative of Calixta’s, another Aquatae, had taken power. That had been a relatively seamless transition.

“I would be willing to consider twenty-five.”

“Thirty,” she countered, her lips snarling up on one side.

“Fifteen.”

“Twenty-six.”

Really? That was just petty. “Ten is my final offer.”

Aedan was young. He could afford to give up blocks of his life in terms of decades. Even a century.

But Arden, whose business I should know to stay out of by now, would be a grandmother by the time he walked free if I wasn’t careful. All I knew was whatever they could have been, I had cost them the chance to find out.

A decade was its own eternity to a human, but I had no illusions Calixta would go lower than that.

“Ten years?” She threw back her head and laughed at the moon. “You might as well take him now.”

Heart thumping, even though I knew she would never let go that easily, I said, “Okay.”

“Impudent child.” A growl poured out of her that caused even the sharks to circle wider. “I will not return that which is mine until I am satisfied.” She flicked her wrist. “This does not satisfy.”

“How badly do you want the director?”

She bared her teeth, and what I realized was a glamour slipped, revealing a haggard creature of skin and bone before she smoothed her illusion back into a visage worthy of a high queen.

That...thing...was more in line with the memories Dad shared with me, and again I felt sick knowing that she was the master of my cousin’s destiny.

“Had you any respect for your betters, you would have brought him to me as a sacrifice. You would have marched him into the waves and slit his throat so that I might bathe in his blood. You, who were my heir but scorned me, do not deserve my favor.”

“And Aedan doesn’t deserve your cruelty, but here we are.”

As much as I wished I had kept that comment to myself, I couldn’t take it back, and now that it was out, I didn’t want to when I meant it. It had been cruel to take him in my place. That had been the point.

“Give me the director in advance, and I will agree to your terms.”

Oh, yeah.

She wanted him under her thumb bad.

“Sign a binding contract with me, in blood, with stipulations spelling out what will happen to you if you fail to deliver my cousin *unharméd* in ten years’ time, and I will accept your bargain.”

“How long do you require to prepare the paperwork?”

“I can contact my lawyer and present you with a draft as soon as tomorrow.”

“Excellent.” Her eyes gleamed with malice. “I will expect Albert Nádasdy present for the signing as a good faith gesture.”

“Of course, Highness.”

With a flourish, she pivoted toward the open ocean and waded out until her head disappeared beneath the waves. The guards marched after her, but the sharks remained, cutting their paths ever closer to the shore. A nice deterrent should we get any ideas about going after her.

As soon as I was certain she was out of sight, I sank onto the sand, unable to stand a moment longer.

“We did it.” I dropped my face into my hands. “We got him back.”

Not how I wanted, or when I wanted—which was *rightnowthisverysecond*—but it was going to happen. I had to take the victory.

“*You* did it.” Asa sank beside me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “I’ll call Isiforos.”

“He has the director?” I managed a watery laugh. “He’s never going to let me live this down.”

At this rate, he really would become the warden over my growing collection of supernatural prisoners.

“I can call him, but...” Asa held out his phone. “Do you want the honors?”

“Don’t mind if I do.” I dialed Isiforos with my breath held. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” A door clicked shut in the background. “How did it go?”

“We struck a bargain.” I was grinning from ear to ear. “We finalize the paperwork tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” He fell silent. “Clay told me you were making the exchange today.”

“Clay?” I must not have heard him right. “Clay is in Boston.”

With Colby.

“He left here about an hour ago.” He cleared his throat. “You didn’t know?”

Had they left Boston, and they had no reason to, one or both of them would have called me. “No.”

This wasn’t right. This wasn’t the plan. This couldn’t be happening.

“Then you didn’t send him to collect the director.”

A fear so profound it stole my breath welled in me until I had one singular thought stuck on a loop.

Colby, Colby, Colby.

Bile splashed the back of my throat, and I spat on the sand to clear my mouth. “Clay has the director?”

“Yeah.” His voice grew thin and high. “Why do I get the sense I fucked up royally?”

“Clay is a golem,” I spelled it out for him, my mind racing a hundred miles an hour. “Every golem has a master.”

I couldn’t think. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t imagine Clay ever harming Colby, but he wasn’t Clay when his strings were being pulled by someone else. He was merely an extension of that person’s will.

As much as he loved her, she was in grave danger as long as he was under the director’s thrall.

“The director.” Isiforos filled in the blank then swore a blue streak. “How do I fix this?”

This whole mess was my fault. I loved Clay so much, I let him into my life fully. I couldn't bear punishing him for what he was, for what the director could make him do. He was family.

And my casual attitude toward his condition, my total and complete faith in him, had fooled everyone in our tight-knit circle into believing he was safe. Because Clay was my first friend—my *best* friend—I tricked the others into thinking he would never betray us or use any information he learned against us.

Had the choice been up to him, he would have taken our secrets to the grave. But it wasn't his call. As long as I kept him away from the director, he could make his own decisions. For the most part.

Which meant...

The director had spoken to Clay. How else could he have given him fresh orders? Someone had let the director make his one phone call—as if that was a right Black Hat had recognized even once during its entire existence—and he chose Clay. Who else? We had stolen his right-hand man when we took Bjorn into custody, and the director only trusted people under his thumb.

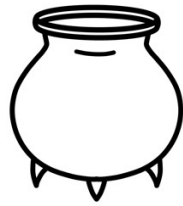
We had been betrayed.

And when I caught the person responsible, I would let Blay pop their head off their neck like a champagne cork.

Nobody hurt my family and got away with it.

Hold on, my little moth girl. I'm coming for you.

EPILOGUE



The Golem

*M*aster is safe.

The golem should have told Master. What he found in his pocket.

But it cried when he took it out. It said that name.

Clay.

Master is safe.

That is what matters.

He doesn't know. About the moth. The golem won't tell him unless he asks.

If he asks, the golem must show him.

But.

He.

Did.

Not.

Ask.

The moth is in a small jar. The golem poked holes in the lid.

She will be safe. In his pocket. Unless...

...he asks.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today best-selling author Hailey Edwards writes about questionable applications of otherwise perfectly good magic, the transformative power of love, the family you choose for yourself, and blowing stuff up. Not necessarily all at once. That could get messy.

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