

THE COMPLETE SERIES



MIDNIGHT
MAGIC

RICHARD AMOS

MIDNIGHT MAGIC

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Richard Amos

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NIGHT TRICKS

MIDNIGHT MAGIC BOOK 1



ONE



Damn this night.

Take it, scrunch it up, throw it in the fire. Let it burn away and never bother me again.

Wishful thinking—you had to love it.

I tore through the wet residential streets, running from a pack of hateful witches, never letting my speed drop. Rain came down on my head in a pesky drizzle, the October evening air a bitter bite in my chest. All I wanted to do was take a breath, find a nice bench to rest my aching feet.

To stop meant pain, and I really wasn't in the mood for having ten tons of merry hell kicked out of me tonight.

The group of arsewipes in pursuit hurled some abuse from back there. The usual warlock hate, along with the prejudice directed at a homeless guy like me. They really had no reason to assume I was homeless, even if it was true. But that was arsewipes for you, right?

Just another week in the life of Clay Christmas.

I took a sharp left down an alleyway between two houses, leaping over a terrified cat, then a pile of sick. What was this, an obstacle course? Would there be crumbling tiles and a net wall to climb next before a boulder crushed me?

Don't get squished! Mind those traps!

Erm, this wasn't an *Indiana Jones* movie.

Not yet, at least.

At the end of the alley, I crossed another quiet residential street, grateful for no moving cars to take me down, and carried on down another alleyway. This one sloped slightly at the end in a grassy bank with a metal fence telling me to stop right there. A guard between me and a railway line.

I don't think so.

I grabbed at the three-spiked metal fence, clambered up as quickly as I could. Avoiding slicing my hands on the top pointy bits. Getting a decent grip, about to get my boot on the top, do my vaulting thing. About to spring for freedom.

A train roared past and drew a mighty yelp from my throat.

“Shit!” I added for good measure as the locomotive thundered past. I lost my grip and tumbled backward. Landed on the wet grass, getting myself a soggy backside.

I instantly checked my portable cassette player in my pocket, making sure it wasn't damaged. My old-school pride and joy. Yep. All good. Safe and intact.

Thank goodness.

They always say you can never hear a train coming. So true. It doesn't matter how big and loud they are. They seem to have an amazing stealth mode to sneak up on dickheads trespassing on the railway lines. Like me, many a night running from mean witches (a.k.a. haters) or taking a shortcut. Idiotic, really. Dangerous. But then that was life on the streets, right? Fraught with the deadly.

Like these arsewipes closing in.

“There he is!” one of them yelled. The apparent head witch of my haters who’d been the most vocal outside West Hamstead Station when they’d kicked off.

Wow. Perceptive of him. He knew how to point out the obvious.

Witches loathed warlocks—people whose magic usage didn’t cut the mustard like the skills of a witch. No mega spells, no great power for warlocks. We were all about party tricks and little fizzles. Useless. The runts of the magical litter. Some would say a species in need of wiping out. Those with *that* particular attitude deserved a billion slaps for their bigotry.

Witches ran things. They were in charge, the top dogs of society. From our governing royalty to city councils, every single position of power was controlled by witches.

It hadn’t always been that way. Once upon a better time, witches and warlocks both held the power of Arcana equally. The magic of the earth. Pure magic. A magic from ancient times now lost, not seen for two hundred years. Without any explanation to this day, Arcana vanished, leaving behind a magical source called Trace.

Trace was diluted magic, the only natural essence left across the world. All magic users can draw upon the weak energy, but witches weren’t content with that. They didn’t want to be powerless and saw an opportunity to become a dominant race. So they made Synth, an unnatural and powerful magical energy geared toward witch blood, not warlock. We couldn’t use it, no matter how hard we tried. And most warlocks had tried at one point in their lives—to see if the tables were ready to turn. Even me. Nope. Definitely a witch thing and super powerful. Hence the top dog label.

Power like that created many, many arsewipes. Like this group of rich kids on my tail, stinking of daddy's money and rotten attitudes.

I sprung to my feet, ready to tackle the fence again. My already low magic wouldn't help me. Not enough to fuel my shimmer trick to hide me—my best move. I really needed Trace Fall to come. A shame it was scheduled for tomorrow night.

That's why warlocks got picked on more by the mega bigots the nights before Trace Fall. It was often when warlocks were at their weakest. Perfect. Yes, hurting us was illegal like any hunting and killing of people, but that didn't stop the warlock hate crimes from rising not just here in London but across the globe.

As soon as my fingers curled around the metal, magic fixed itself on me, pinning my arms to my sides, gluing my boots to the wet grass.

Oh, bollocks.

I was spun against my will to meet my doom.

“Well, well, well,” the leader of the pack announced. Ribbons of red Synth energy danced around his fingers as he wove his spell.

A preppy guy with short blond hair, expensive clothes, and a smirk spreading across his rosy complexion, he had the meanest green eyes I'd ever seen. Kind of serial-killer like.

“Thought you could run away after that, huh?” he added.

There were five of them, including him. All of the same preppy variety, all smirking, all thinking they owned the city.

Whenever I came in contact with haters, I sucked it up, tried to keep my head high, and not react to their crap. Yeah, well, it wasn't always as easy as that.

Being a warlock and homeless granted me the double whammy of abuse. I'd been pissed on, almost kidnapped, beaten up several times, treated like I was in the stocks in some medieval village. I cannot begin to count the amount of food thrown at me over the years—rotten food, good food. Just to prove some point that I couldn't see myself. Well, that wasn't true. I *could* see the point. I just didn't understand the hate. What had we done to witches over the years, to society at large, other than exist?

You could say that about anyone on the receiving end of bigotry. Made no sense. At all. Especially when warlocks were often hired to perform at parties, our magical tricks also enjoyed in street performances—my bread and butter.

People are so strange.

The leader approached me, exuding smug pride. The cat who got the cream.

An insult to cats.

Fizz would be furious I'd likened her to this man. If only she were here to scratch his face off. She'd certainly try her best.

“Do you think,” Leader spoke, “that it is big and clever to say *that* to me?”

I didn't answer. His magic held my jaw shut.

“I don't think it is,” he said. “I think it is disrespectful to call me an elephant testicle.”

I don't even know why I said it. I had no idea what an elephant's testicle looked like. He'd just pissed me off so much, it'd come bubbling up to the front of the queue and exploded out of my mouth.

"What do you think?" Leader asked the rest of his gang.

They all agreed.

They would, the honking idiots. Laughing earlier as Leader mocked me and my little stall outside the station. Touching my props, stopping me from working. There'd been a father and daughter waiting for me to perform a card trick seeing as I didn't have Fizz to pull out of my hat, and I was trying to save my low magic.

Yes, I should've packed up as soon as the sun started to set. It was cold and wet and miserable, but money hadn't been flowing today. I was desperate, ready to go a full twenty-four hours of performing card tricks to bank myself some cash. That dad and daughter's tip could have got me some soup, maybe even a bread roll to go with it from the café near the station.

But no. Along came the elephant testicle and his minions.

I laughed on the inside as Leader got closer. Too close.

"Disgusting creature," he said, his beer-laced breath washing over me.

Back the fuck off!

"I think you need to be taught a lesson. What do you think, guys?"

The gang agreed.

Leader lifted a finger, pointing it at me. "What to do with a dirty warlock." He sniffed the air. "Smelly fucker." The

arsewipe tapped the center of my forehead where my warlock mark sat—a glowing symbol of a white, incomplete circle with a tiny star at the center. Witches carried a mark, too—a red triangle with a star at the center.

A slimy sensation crawled over my skin from his touch. Worse than any grime, twisting my stomach into wretched knots.

“He’s quite good-looking,” a dark-haired woman from the gang said. Tanned golden from either some expensive tanning salon, an expensive holiday, or both. She lit a cigarette, releasing smoke rings after her first drag with indifferent ease.

“He is,” Leader agreed.

The woman draped herself over Leader. “Not like you, though.”

Another train thundered past as they kissed. Thank God their lip-smacking got drowned out by the noise.

Parallel to the fence were houses backing onto the grassy bank, their lights glowing against the October night. There was no one at their windows or in their back gardens from what I could see. Would they even move to help me if they were?

Bollocks to this!

“His teeth,” the woman said, sending more smoke rings into the air. “Take a few out. Slowly.”

“Only a few?” Leader asked. “Wouldn’t the better lesson be in changing that handsome face? Make him understand what it is to fuck with us?”

You fucked with me.

“Maybe a bit harsh to take them all,” she said.

What? This witch had a conscience?

“Taking a few sets as an example.”

That would be a no.

Leader nodded, looking me up and down. “What about poison? Let him puke and shit here for a few hours, minus a few teeth.”

She giggled. “I like that. Can I keep the teeth?”

“Of course, my love.”

Unfortunately, no train saved me from their gross kissing sounds. She placed her cigarette to his lips, he dragged on it, no smoke rings from him.

When they were done sucking face and smelly sticks, the woman looked down at my crotch.

“What is that?” she asked.

“What, my love?” Leader asked, groping her breasts.

She giggled, pointing. “There’s something dangling from his pocket.”

Leader got a look. “An earphone?”

He reached for me, fishing my Walkman from my pocket.

The idiot laughed. “A cassette player. Seriously?”

“What’s a cassette?” one of the haters asked.

Really?!

“Interesting,” the woman said. “You listen to tapes, warlock? How quirky. How terribly vintage.”

Cassettes had actually made a bit of a comeback five years ago in a wave of nostalgia, so they were kind of vintage, kind of not.

“I suppose you can’t afford to stream in your circumstances.” The woman flipped her dark hair, watching her lover unwrap the earphone wire I’d wrapped around the body of the yellow device.

Leader pressed the eject button, the tape rattling as it opened. He removed my precious treasure. Well, one of them.

“Kylie Minogue?” Leader questioned.

“I know her,” a hater said.

Leader’s face contorted in disgust. “Torturous. I couldn’t think of anything worse.”

I so wanted to have his nuts meet my knee for such heresy.

Kylie was a goddess. My saving grace. My ultimate joy. Her music got me through the days and nights, the bad and the good times. She was the soundtrack of my existence.

Leader tossed the cassette away, inspecting the Walkman.

I strained against the magic like a feather against a tornado. Nothing happened, but I tried anyway.

Touch my Kylie tapes and die!

“Think I’ll keep this,” Leader said of my player. “It’ll get a good laugh at the club.”

Everyone chuckled at the possibilities.

Coward. Holding me like this. Why couldn’t he face me fist to fist? I’d probably lose, sure, but I’d give it my best shot to break his nose.

Damn this night so hard. My stuff back at my stall was probably gone now, too. If it wasn’t nailed down or guarded, goodbye things.

“Okay, then,” Leader said. “How shall we do this? Take them with magic?” He snorted. “Of course. Why would we have a pair of pliers to hand?”

Was that supposed to be hilarious? His gang laughed a little too hard for that non-cracker.

Oh, laugh at me because I have so much money to buy your ‘friendship.’

Dick.

The sight of him pawing at my Walkman stirred a bloodthirsty monster inside me. It wanted out, pounding on the doors of my being, demanding to be set free upon these scumbags.

Leader moved fast, his fist coming at me. He’d flipped from his kissy-faced aura to a violent one. He drove his fist into my stomach. Due to the magic holding me down, I didn’t curl over or make a sound. But I felt it. Man, did I feel it. Sharp and aggressive pain roaring in my belly.

Gosh.

The monster stirred, wanting revenge. I was seriously pissed off with this injustice.

Footsteps. Heels clip-clopping. I spotted the female figure slowly walking down the alley. Her hips swaying, taking her time under the anemic light of the streetlights hunched above.

White eyes blazed in her dark brown face, igniting the red of her lipstick. A glamorous woman in a strapless red dress with a split up the side, jewelry sparkling at her ears, neck, and wrists. She should’ve been at some swanky party in Central London, not down here with us.

“Demon,” Leader hissed as he turned to face her.

All demons had the same white eyes. Most demons disguised them to avoid getting caught. This one did not.

“A demon,” the new addition to the alley spoke in husky tones. “That would be correct.” She stopped, the rest of the gang inching away from her and closer to me. “What are you doing down here?”

“None of your business,” the dark-haired woman snapped back. “Now fuck off.”

Brave of her to speak to a demon like that. Especially one who seemed to not be intimidated by five witches and a warlock.

At least it wasn't the button-eyed demon currently filling up the nightmares of London's residents.

“Business?” the demon said, stroking her left arm with her right hand. “Oh. I didn't think of business.”

“Get out of here,” Leader warned.

“Business,” the demon intoned, ignoring him. “Business, business, business. What is this business of witches with a warlock trapped in a spell? Horrible business. Bullying. I loathe bullies.”

Her white eyes narrowed, menace passing across her face in waves. Lips curling in a snarl.

Demons weren't stronger than witches. Nothing was. But they were scary creatures that plagued our world, and they did have the upper hand with immortality. The only thing that could kill them was Arcana, and that was long gone. Only banishment worked with the use of talismans—and you had to be a member of the Anti-Demon Unit (ADU) and trained in using the powerful objects that could blow your face off with one false move.

Demons were from a realm attached to this one. A doorway had opened between our worlds, the demons kicking off a war to get themselves some Earthly land. To spread their power. Witches and warlocks smacked them down with Arcana. When the magic was lost, witches continued to keep them in check, never letting them take over.

I worried one day they'd take over. Everyone did. They'd find a way to overthrow the power of the witches and be on top. Kick off a new war. We all knew they hid among us, always watching, pretending to be part of society. It freaked me out. The witches in charge were the much lesser of two evils, even if they did need to be taken down a peg or two. Well, witches like these dicks, at least.

Leader straightened his spine, being his namesake. "I suggest you leave right now." The red glow of Synth came to his fingers.

The demon's white eyes flicked to his hands, then back up to him. Her snarl intensified, her manicured fingers rolling in waves.

"Your magic doesn't scare me, witch."

"It should."

The entire gang were ready with the magical crimson glows.

The demon's snarl became a smirk to match Leader's. "Then give me your best shot."

As one, the unit of witches fired streams of energy at her. It cracked like thunder as it burst forth, exploding in red bursts around the demon. Smothered her in a thick, dusty cloud.

The spell holding me broke. I slipped, landing on the sodden grass. Limbs not in my control yet as they ached and

tingled.

None of the witches noticed my tumble.

An opportunity to run, yet I couldn't take it.

Typical.

The red cloud cleared. I got ready to see a bloody body. Not dead, but seriously messed up and in a world of hurt.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, able to speak at least.

Smothered in obsidian scales, her white eyes like twin fires, the demon was anything but hurt. The dress was gone, the heels too. Even her hair. A naked, humanoid monster stood in place of the glamorous creature. Both beautiful and terrifying, her hands savage talons.

She smiled, exposing rows of teeth perfect for rendering flesh.

In the distance, several streets away, a demon tower came to life. A curled structure of black metal crowned with a radiant red jewel infused with Synth. It pulsed, bright against the dark sky. A warning beacon as well as a force to weaken demons.

This demon didn't seem to notice. Yet.

“Fire again!” Leader commanded.

They did. When the dust cleared a second time, she remained the same.

I noticed silhouettes in the windows of the houses now. People watching, even one on their phone. Reporting the incident to the ADU, I presumed.

I really needed to leave.

“Now we have established you have no power here, let’s get to the business of pain,” the demon said. She sounded like a sex line operator. Her talons flexed, a black tongue burst out of her mouth like a python.

I enjoyed the panic of the haters. The glances of fear between them, their wide eyes. Now they knew how it felt to be picked on.

As one, they blasted her again and ran. Just because witches were stronger in general, it didn’t mean they always won. And witches *could* die. That was their weakness.

A clattering of plastic. Leader had dropped my Walkman.

Good.

“Must be nice to run,” I mumbled, rubbing my legs through my jeans.

The witches had left me with the demon. She smiled at me, then groaned. Clutching her stomach.

“Oh my,” she gasped.

Her onyx scales melted off her body, dripping onto the wet pavement beneath her like icing slipping off a hot cake. Returning to the woman she’d been before. Minus her clothes.

The demon tower continued to flash. Gosh. She really held steady against its power, not even flinching as she faced down Leader and his gang. Must have freaked them out good and proper.

Excellent. And really impressive.

Also worrying.

Demon towers were everywhere, covering every inch of London and the globe as a whole. Created with Synth, they

drained demon energy when a demon manifested its true nature, kept a heavy foot on their heads. Stopped demonic uprisings. Gave the ADU enough time to get to the scene and sort things out.

Unless you were the button-eyed demon who managed to give everyone the slip.

I shuddered at the thought of *that* monster.

Instinctively, I wanted to help her as she struggled to her feet. For one, she looked like a woman in need of a hand. On the other, she'd helped me. But on that third hand, she was a demon.

Third hand?

The demon got herself upright, her shoulders slumped. She didn't look well, a sickly sheen of sweat and ashen green spreading across her flesh. The demon tower had really kicked in now. I felt a buzz across my skin from it myself, seeing the demonic swam in my blood. Not enough for me to be affected completely, but enough for me to feel a little something.

"Are you..." I didn't finish. I rubbed the back of my neck, willing my limbs to snap out of their aches and tingles.

"Manifesting my true self," she said softly. "This is where it gets me." She looked down at the pool of black on the ground. "And I ruined my favorite dress." Eyes back up to me. "For you. A stranger."

She ambled forward.

Oh, shit. I slid back on the grass, desperate to get vertical.

"I'm s-sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to cause you any trouble."

And I didn't ask for your damn help!

“A curiosity,” she said, pausing before me. Too close and so naked.

“Nothing curious about me,” I responded, eyes downcast.

“Take it.”

“Take what?” I glanced up at a proffered hand.

“Take it.”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Let me help you up.”

“I’m good.”

“Take my hand, strange boy. You don’t want to spend the evening on the grass, do you?”

“N-no.”

“Then take my hand.”

I took her soft hand, praying I didn’t regret it.

But she helped me to my feet, even though she looked ready to throw up. She swayed, taking a few steps back.

At least I could stand again. Yay!

“Are you okay?” I asked properly this time.

A stupid question.

She smiled, her white eyes shimmering. “I am curious about you. Your different energy drew me here.”

“My... energy?”

She moved closer, her face near mine.

Unwelcome heat prickled up my neck. The bad kind. The kind telling me to get the hell out of there before it was too late. “What—”

“Hush now, warlock. Let me smell you.”

I remained still as she sniffed me, hobbled around me, bending to sniff every inch of me. Running wouldn't do me any favors right now. I needed to walk off the spell in a calm manner. Not panic. Not run and fall on my face and become her prey. If she was a killer demon, that is. Most of them dabbled in death.

“Interesting,” she breathed against my right arm.

Despite Leader calling out a stink, I didn't smell bad. Maybe I did now from all the running and sweaty fear, but I made sure I kept as clean as I could on the streets—body and clothes.

“I can almost taste it,” she whispered.

I knew what she meant. My skin pebbled, ants crawling across me.

She leaned ever closer, lips to my ear. “The demon blood.”

The hairs on the back of my neck saluted. “I—”

“You hide it,” she said. “With vile fairy magic.”

Fairy magic wasn't Synth or Trace, but its own entity. A thing I was grateful for.

“I—”

She backed off. “Why do you have it, curious boy?”

“I... I don't know.”

Truth. It was just there, a mystery in my veins I'd never been able to crack.

The demon sniffed me again. “You should be proud.”

Sure. So proud.

She stepped away as sirens screamed in the distance. She growled at the sky.

“Time for me to leave,” she said. Over her shoulder she added, “Until we meet again, curious boy.”

I hope not. “Thanks for your help.”

She walked away, unsteady under the pulse of the demon tower. “Curious boys get to be helped for further inspection.”

Oh, yes. I really enjoyed the sound of that.

The ADU sirens blazed through the night. A higher-pitched wail than the other emergency services. And my cue to get out of here sharpish. I didn’t want to face a grumpy agent, get grilled for hours, sweat profusely in fear of my demon blood being discovered under their scrutiny.

Grabbing my Walkman, and also spotting my Kylie cassette, I moved. My limbs still tingling with pins and needles, climbing the fence was out for now. So I moved quickly alongside it, slipping constantly on the grassy slope.

Would the demon get caught? She didn’t hurry herself.

Not my problem.

Should I go and help her?

Erm, no. She’s a demon.

Like you...

The sirens came closer, mere streets away. Scaring me into not coming off my trajectory. I had to get out of here.

Come on! I ordered my limbs, stumbling forwards.

Closer, closer, closer. Wailing, terrifying, my throat now a desert from fear. Figures in windows of the houses I passed. Back doors opening, people coming to life to see the action.

Oh, God. Don't spot me. Don't let this night be a complete disaster.

It won't be. Everything will be okay.

I came across a weak point in the fence. Three of the gray metal slats loose. Bingo!

See? It all comes together in the end.

I squeezed my slender frame through the gap, constantly checking left and right for those ninjas known as trains. No sign of one. With one big push, I got through and tumbled onto the gravel, landing on my hands and knees. Dangerously close to the rail. Immediately, I scrambled back and got to my feet.

Sweat ran down my face, pooled at my spine. What I wouldn't give to stand under a hot shower. But that wasn't practical. Moving my backside was. West Hamstead Station wasn't far away from this spot. I'd head back there, clinging to the darkness. Hope against hope I didn't get spotted and chased down by cops or ADU agents.

Or killed by a train.



I MADE it to the station and onto the platform without getting caught or hit by a train. My nerves were on the verge of giving up from the stress of the situation, and my clothes and hair were soaked with sweat.

But I'd made it.

Writing off my things up there on street level, I waited at the edge of the platform for the next train south. Checking for Leader and his gang showing up. They didn't. The open-aired

station was pretty quiet. Peaceful. I enjoyed the cool air blowing at me, opening my jacket to let it in. Trembling a little.

You're okay, Clay. You're okay.

I checked my pocket for my rail ticket. A return back to Elephant & Castle. Yep, still there. All good.

You're okay.

I popped my earphones back in, happy my pride and joy survived the haters. Fired up Kylie's *Fever* album.

Her music was so good for my soul.

The train rolled in at 19:36, due to arrive at 19:37. I climbed aboard, keeping my head down, finding a seat close to the doors.

And we were off.

A shame my stuff was lost.

It's fine. You can find more things.

“And a better performance spot,” I whispered to myself.

Central London usually held the best spots for my performances. But I didn't fancy it tonight after a run of bad income. Wanted to try something different, somewhere a bit random. West Hamstead sprang to mind first, so here I'd come.

Whoops.

Voices. Male. Trouble Part Two? Coming for me?

I glanced up and almost tumbled out of my seat at the three of them standing feet away, chatting.

The most beautiful man I'd ever seen stood there practically glowing by the door. Dressed in black, leaning against a guide pole, his arms folded. A blue cap covered his hair, but hints of obsidian tresses peaked out from the edges. Long hair under there?

Skin alabaster, his cheekbones sharp enough to cut diamonds, he was utter perfection. Beautiful Asian features, seriously pretty masculine deliciousness for my eyes to feast upon. Like an older, less boyish K-Pop star.

I wanted to lick him.

He licked at his pale lips between speaking.

Wow! I almost passed out from watching the action.

Familiar... Yes, he did seem familiar. I noticed his eyes were a vibrant green. Almost fake. Was he wearing contacts behind those glasses? Really?

A flash, a shift in his features. Skin stretching, the shape of his face filling out, his hair becoming a light brown shade on the verge of chestnut. An untrue face trying to distort reality, to convince me otherwise of the true beauty I really saw.

At least, that's what I was getting from him.

Was I the only one seeing this? I blinked, rubbed at my eyes. The weird shift thing didn't happen again, leaving the stunning face for me to gawk at.

Weird.

He pushed his glasses up his nose as he spoke to a couple of men about something. Three of them standing there as the carriage rocked gently.

His masculine beauty had distracted me from, well, everything. Fully realizing he was speaking to other people, I

removed my earphones and paused Kylie.

“Me too,” one of the other men said.

What’d happened with his face? It kept bugging me, an irritating fly in the back of my head.

Magic? Hiding himself like me?

No.

Maybe.

“I’ve always liked a bit of Johnny,” the man on his left announced loudly. “Done some great songs. ‘Ring of Fire’ is awesome.”

“His cover of ‘Hurt’ is awesome,” the other guy responded.

I waited for the beautiful one.

“‘A Boy Named Sue.’” I listened to a crisp, deep baritone slither out of those pale lips. “A great song.”

Holy shit. The tremors that passed through me were wild. This guy had really done a number on me with his hotness.

But is he hiding?

I watched him talk with the other men, discussing Johnny Cash with the same passion I did for Kylie Minogue. Well, the other two. The hot guy didn’t become animated like them, exuding an effortless cool as he listened, when he added his two cents. Definitely not a gesticulator.

I watched him the whole time. He never looked over to me to break my watching. And then he left at Blackfriars. Bid the men goodbye and stepped off onto the platform of the station that was a bridge across the Thames.

Before I could think to get up and follow him, to watch him some more, the train moved.

Where did he go? I pressed myself against the window, trying to catch sight of him. But he wasn't there.

"Damn," I muttered, slumping back in my chair.

I stuck Kylie on again, a pretty man on my mind, sweeping away thoughts of the bad side of the evening.

TWO



Elephant & Castle sat south of the River Thames, one of the damaged pockets of London left behind after a crappy event turned the world upside down.

Twenty-five years ago, non-magical humans decided they'd had enough of the rule of the witch queens and kings. They wanted a new world order where magic took a backseat and royalty was dismantled. So, in a bizarre move considering their opposition to magic, this army of humans tried to use Synth against the witches in a terrorist plot that stung the planet.

You have to be born a witch or a warlock. You're not made one later down the line. If you're not magically inclined, you shouldn't go anywhere near magic. Especially not to use it as a weapon.

This army did.

Deadly magic ripped across London first, spreading like waves of wildfire across the planet in an incident known as The Tainted Storm. Destructive magic that leveled buildings and slaughtered hundreds of thousands. Churned up the earth and concrete, bringing storms and earthquakes and messing everything up and leaving behind The Rift—a literal floating, thin scar of red storm clouds in the North Sea. A mile wide,

fifty miles tall, it hung there doing nothing, possibly waiting to unleash fresh hell upon the earth.

Needless to say, the North Sea didn't get used like it did in days of old.

The army was wiped out, no more attempts made to take down the witches.

Many parts of London, and the world, still bore the scars of that incident, the magical damage running deep both above and below ground. The London Underground's once extensive network had been cut in half as erratic magic continued to survive as luminescent green rivers of residual toxic magic. Nasty things, sealed off by magical glass domes to stop the populace from falling in, bodies liquidizing in an agonizing death. And those rivers ran through the streets, too. Wherever you found them, the area's value and livability plummeted. Buildings were abandoned or falling down, businesses not wanting to move into an area with toxic river issues. It was like living next to nuclear waste, only without the radiation.

I lived in one of those neglected areas outside a decrepit, yet still running, shopping center joined onto Elephant & Castle railway station. Technically inside it, seeing as my little home was a literal hole in the wall. My hovel. My tiny sanctuary against the city.

The sprawling shopping center was caked with black grime no power hose would ever remove. On two levels, it'd once been a hub for the community. I guess it still was, just not on its previously grand scale. Many of the shops were empty or only occupied for a brief time—a few staple businesses aside.

My favorite thing about it was the cracked blue elephant with its golden crown on the roof. Ready to topple at any

moment, it acted as a happy sign for me. Told me I was home. At least while the shopping center was my home.

Outside the station, I hurried along the pavement, traffic roaring past. The busy road and roundabout to my right, along with the train station, were the only things consistently maintained in this area. All the better for getting out of here. To my left was our river and the sprawling decay from Walworth Road and beyond.

“Hey, Clay,” Roy greeted me at the beginning of Skid Row.

Man, I hated that name for the stretch of homelessness hugging the center’s wall. I called it Golden Lane instead. It ran down the east side of the shopping center, curved around to hug the north side of the building in an L shape. A line of tents and barrel fires and shopping trolleys dotted it. An outside community, people clinging to existence the best way they knew how. Like me.

“Evening,” I said back.

Roy warmed himself on a barrel fire, the light of the flames dancing off his dark brown face. Our unofficial guard of sorts. He liked to keep watch, patrol. He’d actually been a security guard years ago, until divorce and spiraling debt sent him to the streets.

I passed several other residents, knowing most of them by name. There were a few new faces, keeping their heads low. A lot of new faces became gone faces. Moved on to God knew where. Deeper into the bowels of drugs and gang culture that crept around the edges of life like a predator on constant patrol. Waiting to snag the most vulnerable with the promise of shelter and food and a new life.

Yeah, a new life of horrors. I'd heard the tales of violence. Been approached myself to join up to a gang. Never. Even if the guy who'd asked me had been super-hot and we'd, well... I didn't want to think about that shameful night in his flat. Thankfully, neither did he. Whenever I bumped into him at the chicken shop we both seemed to love, he looked right through me and me him.

Perfect.

I padded along Golden Lane, heading over to Kelly sitting in her orange tent next to the entrance of my hovel. The flap was open, her sitting cross-legged outside on a grubby blanket smoking a cigarette. A half-empty bottle of wine sat between her legs.

"Hi, Kel," I greeted my neighbor.

"Hello, luv." She dabbed at her mouth with a handkerchief. "You alright?"

"I'm okay, thanks," I answered cheerily. "Yourself?"

"Not bad. Glad the rain's fucked off."

"Me too."

Kelly's weatherworn face betrayed her real age. She was only thirty-one but looked much, much older. Her brown skin carried lines through dry cracks, and sores constantly caused her problems. Life hadn't been kind to her. She drank a lot to numb her sorrows.

"What happened to your stuff?" Kelly asked.

"Got attacked." I explained the incident, leaving out the demon part.

"And you lost it all?" she said.

“I did.”

“You don’t seem too sad about it.”

“I am, but... well...”

“Well, what?” She took a deep drag on her cigarette.

“Where did you get the wine?” I asked.

“Trying to change the subject?”

“No. Just a quick sidebar.”

“Ashram gave me a tenner,” she said. “Just handed it over.”

He lived around the corner of Golden Lane, blatantly crushing hard on Kelly. A lovely guy. As lovely as her. Because despite her emotional pain, and her physical ones, Kelly was one of the kindest and sweetest people I’d ever met.

When I got out of this life, I was taking her with me to the better path. And I’d get her some real help.

“That was nice of him,” I answered.

“Got me a chardonnay.” She tapped the bottle. “Needed it, luv.”

I nodded. I wished she didn’t need it, but that wasn’t my wish to make. One day we could get her off it, but for now, it was her port in the endless storm.

It. Will. End.

“Anyway. Tell me the other thing,” she pressed.

“Well, there was a guy...”

She chuckled at the end of my story. “Clay, you crack me up.”

“I do?”

“Yeah. Just one look and you’re like a teenage girl after a boyband concert.”

I laughed. “I guess I am.”

She swigged her wine. “Still got Kylie, though.” She nodded at my Walkman bulging in my pocket.

“Always me and my girl. Speaking of which, how’s Fizz been?”

“She came out once for a fuss, then went back inside.”

“I’d better feed her.” I eyed my home. No sign of Fizz.

“Think she’d like that, luv.” She smacked her lips, her expression turning serious. “We need to be more careful out there.”

“You’re not wrong.”

She sniffed. “Heard today that the button-eyed demon killed four people last night. Again. They were driving a car before midnight, coming home from a party. Roy told me.” She shook her head. “When will this madness end?”

“Wish it would,” I replied.

The button-eyed demon, named for the actual buttons sewn over his eyes, had been spilling blood for weeks. Completely untouchable and untraceable, he popped up almost every night to slaughter and terrify. The ADU constantly failed to catch and banish him. God only knew how this evil bastard kept getting away with it.

“Worries me so much,” Kelly added. “But one day, he’ll be gone.”

“He really will.”

She nodded.

“Have a nice evening,” I said and offered her a big smile.

“Always full of light, ain’t ya?”

“Sorry.”

She laughed again. “Sorry for being sunny?”

I tried my best to be positive about things. Even when the world wanted to drag me down, I said nope. I let it wash over me, believing in better days. Because there had to be more than this. I wasn’t put on this earth to live in the darkness, to suffer. The better path was waiting for my feet to land on. Finding it was just proving to be a bit tricky.

I’d get there. I *had* to get there. I was twenty-four with the future ahead of me. Mine to claim. Call me naïve, call me a fool. Say that not everyone makes it. That reality is the meanest bitch of all. Tell me the world can simply be horrible for some of us. Tell me all of that, and I say bollocks. Stick that where the sun doesn’t shine. I’ll stick to the sunlight, thanks.

I never pushed my thinking on others, though. Especially not on someone like Kelly. I had no right to.

“Bye for now,” I said and climbed inside my hovel.

It was dark inside. I worked the crank on my wind-up lantern hanging on a hook above the door. For something so small, it cast a decent enough light to expose the interior. Blankets and a couple of duvets to pad the bottom of the space, a wooden plank for Fizz’s food and water bowls, and plenty of shoeboxes for my belongings, I tried to make it as cozy as I could. My three T-shirts and other pair of jeans hung on a rail I’d put up a week ago, along with a couple of towels.

I had everything I needed to get by. Even a gas stove, minus the gas right now until I got some cash. Unfortunately,

the alcove in the back of the hovel now stood empty—the place where I kept my props.

Never mind. I could still pull off some tricks without them. And I'd get more.

Things would be okay.

Fizz, my silver tabby, was curled up on her pillow next to mine. A pile of furry warmth on the floral print, lifting her head, revealing her gorgeous sapphire eyes to me. She released a tiny meow and yawned.

“Hello, you.” I shuffled up the pile of blankets and duvets to rub her head.

She stretched languidly, then pushed her head into my touch.

“Nice day?” I asked.

Another meow, some soft purrs.

“Hungry?”

I grabbed a shoebox and removed a can of cat food. One left after this.

Pulling the ring pull, I said, “Don't worry, Fizz. We'll rectify this.”

She purred, rubbing up against me as I upturned the can, fishing out the meat with her special teaspoon.

“Eat up.” I stroked her, then left her to her grub.

Relieved to be back in my hovel, I uncovered my Kylie Minogue cassettes in their shoeboxes with the glittery heart stickers. Stroked them, let them know I treasured them so much. They were safe and dry in their little nook, along with some of my battered books by Stephen King. I loved his stuff.

A lot of my belongings were found on the streets, in bins. Particularly the bins of charity shops inside the shopping center where stock had been thrown out. It happened a lot, so me and some others did bin runs to see what we could grab.

My stomach growled, reminding me I'd only had two cookies for breakfast this morning.

Snack shoebox. What did I have? A tin of beans, a block of mini Battenberg, some prawn cocktail crisps. One bottle of water. My stores were dire this month.

I opted for the out-of-date cake, wishing I had a cup of tea to go with it. Thinking about the demon, about my demon blood.

Ugh. I hated that she'd smelled it.

Was the magic that hid it fading? I needed a top up, to see Grindle for another lollipop.

After a few bites of the marzipan cake, I opened my lollipop shoebox. Two left of those. I removed one, unpeeled the pink wrapper, and sucked on the hard pink candy. Strawberries and cream flavor. A magical lollipop specially made for me at three-quid a go by Grindle the fairy. The most important item I had. Sucking on it filled me with a blend of fairy magic to hide my demon blood, to keep my wings inside me.

Two brown leathery wings constantly longed to burst out of me, to unfurl and be merry. Demon wings. The kind of body parts to get a guy on the ADU's radar. I'd no idea if they worked. I never used them. Never wanted to. Avoiding the ADU being more important.

The why, the how, and the who were big questions I wanted answered. There were so many holes in my past, with

no family around to fill them. To explain this demon blood to me.

One day.

Always one day.

Fizz finished eating. She did her grooming thing, then headed over to me. I rubbed her head. She purred, eyes closed, always grateful for a rub in her favorite spot behind her ears.

“Oh, Fizzy Whizz. What a night.”

A smile spread across my lips. Thoughts of the sexy guy on the train brightened up my mood. A lot. How did I get to see him again? That face of his was the kind to be enjoyed, to be stared at. Ugh. Creepy of me.

Ride the same train tomorrow night? The 19:37 to Brighton. I checked a folded train timetable next to my pillow to be sure. Yep. Always the same, Monday to Friday. It could be his usual route, his nightly ride home from work. A decent enough plan I'd put into action straight away. Yes. Seeing him again was my new mission. Being Wednesday night, the possibility of him facing another working day stood well. If my theory held up, then great.

I wasn't expecting to do anything other than stare at him. Spy. He wouldn't look twice at me. I mean, deep down, I'd like him to. But guys didn't see me as a catch. No package, me. I'd been with a few men. Never sold myself. Came close to it once but backed out at the last minute before I got into the guy's car. My instinct told me to run. So I did. A few weeks later, the man had been arrested for a string of murders—male and female sex workers.

Halting my fussing of Fizz, I popped my earphones into my ears. Hit play on *Rhythm of Love* by Kylie Minogue.

Rested my back against the wall, closed my eyes. Let the glorious pop music fill me as the images of the hot guy rolled through my mind.

Nice.

But what about the weirdness with his face? I kept going back to magic being the culprit. Had he been hiding himself with it?

Who are you? I thought.

Demon? Hiding his white eyes?

No. Something else.

Fizz nudged my hand, licked at my fingers. I returned to my duties.

It didn't take long for me to doze off.

THREE



The public toilets in the shopping center were free to use. So, at six the following morning, I got in there with my towel and shoebox of toiletries—half-empty roll-on deodorant, toothpaste tubes, an almost vanished bar of soap, flannel, toothbrush, and hair wax.

With no one around at this unholy hour, aside from a grumpy man buying a newspaper from the newsagent a few doors down, I stripped off my T-shirt and got to washing myself. I had my spare jeans, spare boxers, and pair of socks with me, and a fresh T-shirt carefully folded over my arm, seeing as I'd lost my rucksack. I changed and faced the mirror.

Fair, slightly beige-toned complexion, a thin and undernourished face, unremarkable brown hair, I hated looking at myself for too long. It made me think, it made me hurt. It didn't help with my quest to get out of here. Yet, looking decent helped draw in the crowds. So I added the wax to my hair, sweeping it up as best I could into something like a style. It needed a good cut, the ends split and dry.

Kelly always said she liked my eyes. Hazel on the verge of silver someday. They were alright. As long as they did their job.

I pulled on my battered brown leather jacket, feeling fresher, and returned to my hovel for some more dry Battenburg. I placed my dirty clothes in the corner and got in some more pages of *Cujo* by Stephen King before planning to set off.

Train Man would not leave my mind, getting in the way of my reading.

When midday arrived, I got moving, having only cleared ten pages of the book.

Hmmm.

“You coming today?” I asked Fizz.

I took her yawn as a no. If she fancied it, she’d follow.

Heading out, I paused at the end of Golden Lane and waited for a few minutes. Nope. Fizz wasn’t coming today. Too cold, though the sun was out and the sky a nice blue. That happy chilly-sunny combo that Autumn did so well.

“Here, take this,” Roy said, offering me an apple and a banana as I passed him.

God, I was craving something other than cake and crisps.

“I can’t take them,” I replied.

“Why? What’s wrong?” He turned them over.

“Nothing. I mean, I can’t take your food.”

He glared at me. “You’re seriously turning down free food?”

“No. I—”

“Are you shitting me, Clay?”

Wow. He was cranky this morning. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

He smirked. “Jokes. You couldn’t make me angry, mate. But take them. I insist.”

I took it, giving in to a growling stomach. Trying to be modest didn’t help hunger.

“Thanks so much.”

“You’re welcome. Have a good day.”

“You, too.”

With no cash for a train ticket yet, I decided to make the walk up to Blackfriars Bridge, aiming for the Southbank. A popular spot by the Thames, free of additional toxic rivers around it. A proper tourist hot spot, and close to where the hot guy had alighted the train last night.

Something I hadn’t considered: If he got off at Blackfriars, then why did I need to ride the train to West Hampstead and ride back? I could be a stalker outside this station. Made more sense.

Stalker? Damn. I didn’t want to be a creep. Yet, I wasn’t about to give up my plans.

Picking a spot by Gabriel’s Wharf, I took a few deep breaths and got to work, laying down a beret I’d brought with me, specifically for catching cash. Plenty of tourists were about the place now.

For my first trick... Rainbow butterflies. Gray tendrils slithered down my face as warm worms. Down the sleeves of my jacket, coiling their way to the tips of my fingers. An essence removed from inside me. Magic being spent. An emptiness like hunger, but everywhere around my body. I was

desperate for cash now, needing some decent food inside me. Waiting for Trace Fall tonight would be too painful. So, spending all of my magic on this display was the only way to go.

Fingers crossed the cash reward followed.

With deep breaths, I hesitated for a moment.

You've got this.

“I've got this,” I barely whispered the pep talk.

A to-do list formed in my mind, a piece of notepaper with each element bullet-pointed and ready to be ticked off.

- **Cat food**
- **Lollies**
- **My food**
- **Laundry**
- **New rucksack**
- **Haircut**
- **Get more props**
- **Gas for stove (maybe)**

Visualize and manifest!

Using what remained of my depleted magical energy, I wove some pretty insects of color-changing light into the air. They fluttered around me, drawing the attention of a family and a couple of office workers.

I might not be able to perform my shimmer trick, or anything else, but I could handle this. For cash, I'd always push through the shakes of my body demanding Trace.

I carried on, summoning a carousel of light, lowering it to the ground. It sparkled and changed color like the butterflies,

mini people riding the horses. I even added music. This drew a little girl from the family, braver than her taller brother. She stepped forward and reached for a butterfly. It moved toward her, landing in her hand. Within seconds it turned into a crystal. Not real crystal, but pure sugar. An edible treat.

“Mummy! Daddy! Look!”

“We can see,” the mum responded warmly.

“Make sure you eat it soon,” I said. “They only last five hours.”

The girl nodded.

“What do you say?” her dad asked.

“Thank you,” she addressed me.

“You’re welcome, sweetie.”

No hate here, only smiles and wonderment as the boy got himself a sweet to match his sister’s.

Into the beret went a two-pound coin.

These light tricks were crowd-pleasers. Summoning sweets and trinkets lasting hours on full magic. Pure frivolity, but what the hell was wrong with fun? It was worth the effort to see these smiles, to see the coins land inside that beret.

I made light balloons on cotton candy string, performed a firework display where chocolate peppermint fondant creams rained down on the crowd.

“Oh my goodness,” a woman declared.

A phoenix wreathed in flame burst to life, wings spread wide. It even cawed, an arc of rainbow shimmering above it. More chocolates fell, followed by toffees.

Bunnies and birds and insects and autumn leaves. I created them all, painting living art with my magic. This was better than a card trick or any sleight of hand. I was really bringing the special effects to this crowd.

They lapped it up.

Warmth spread through me. A happy light, a feeling of importance, of being adored. The smile on my face strained my cheeks, projected back to my spectators.

I'm the star of my show. I'm a fucking celebrity.

Gosh, the strain. Almost done, on the verge of collapse. But look at that coin! Gold and silver glinting in the sunlight, even some notes joining in.

“This is amazing!” someone said.

Some applause. The crowd several bodies deep now.

I made them a dragon shedding chocolate wrapped in purple foil, a hot air balloon with little people throwing more of them.

“Extraordinary!”

More money. Clink, chink, clink, flutter.

Yes!

Then *he* caught my eye, weaving through the crowd slowly. A malicious grin on his face, an aura of hate radiating toward me that told me it wasn't over. Last night was only the beginning.

Leader.

My smile should have dropped, my magic too. You know, the shock of looking upon that elephant ball sack again. But he

wouldn't have power over me. Never. No arsewipe like him would ever dull my sparkle.

Let him smirk and lurk.

I sent a spiral of light at him, candy spinning out. One hit him in the head. The crowd laughed. I laughed. He scowled and carried on walking until he left my sight.

That's right. Keep going.

I sent a prayer for that to *not* bite me in the arse later.



“THAT WAS BRILLIANT.” I shook the hand of a man out with his grandkids. “Thanks for making my day.”

“Thanks for watching,” I said.

He handed me money. A twenty-pound note.

Wow!

“Thank you so much,” I said. No arguing from me.

“You deserve it. All you lot deserve it.”

I nodded.

“Warlocks,” he said as if I hadn't caught what he meant. “You get the rubbish end of the stick all the time. But I've only ever met nice warlocks. No airs and graces like snotty witches.”

Not all witches are like that... I didn't say.

Always find the good amongst the rubble. Even after meeting a prick like Leader.

“Thanks for your generosity,” I said instead.

He patted me on the arm. “Will you be back here again?”

“I hope so. Maybe tomorrow if the weather’s good.”

“Supposed to be. Hope to see you. I’ll bring my wife.”

“Great.”

“Have a good one.” He walked away.

Trace Fall tonight. Top up for more of this. I couldn’t wait. My beret was heavy. God only knew how much I’d made.

Fizz and I were eating well tonight.

Cautiously, I left the Southbank, heading home as quickly as possible. Constantly scanning my surroundings for a sign of Leader.

Nothing.

Good.

I made it back to the shopping center without incident and a heavy purse, worn out and empty of magic now. The hollow sensation wouldn’t fade until tonight.

I could buy a real purse.

Double good.

Saying my hellos to Roy and Kelly, I practically dove into my hovel. Made Fizz jump.

“Sorry, honey.” Conciliatory rub of the head. “But look what Daddy brought home.”

She sniffed the beret, then licked my hand. Then licked herself.

While she did that, I counted the cash.

Eighty pounds.

What the fuck?

Giddy warmth in my belly, me almost jumping up and down. I respected my skull too much to perform *that* action in a small space.

Eighty quid. I couldn't believe it. Eighty bloody quid!

“Cross everything off that list, right, Fizz?”

Lick, lick. Too busy to listen to me.

At the back of my hovel, beyond the Kylie shoebox, was my money box. As buried as I could get it—a white box within a white shoebox, covered with a blanket. In lieu of a safe, it was the best I had to keep my horde hidden.

I counted what I needed, then stored the rest.

“Time to spend,” I told Fizz.

She meowed agreeably.

“In a few minutes.” I yawned and stretched out, falling into a happy nap.



AN HOUR LATER, nap over, Kelly appeared at the entrance of my hovel, slightly bleary-eyed. “You okay, luv? Looked like you had a rocket up your arse.”

“I’m good.”

“Did well this morning?”

I nodded. “I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“Mysterious.”

“Do you want anything from the shop?”

She quirked an eyebrow. “You *did* do well.”

“I did.”

“What about some wine?”

Aw, man. Did I really want to be getting her booze? It wasn't my business, but if I bought it, I'd be feeding her addiction.

On the flip side, it kept her from getting it herself later. Out in the night, vulnerable, doing whatever she needed to score some cash. If only for one night, I could stop her doing that. Keep her in her tent, relatively safe. Maybe even two nights if I grabbed a deal.

“Sure,” I said. “Leave it with me.”

“You're the best. Come here.”

I crawled over to her. We hugged, she kissed the side of my head.

“I'm so glad you live here,” she whispered.

I couldn't bring myself to agree to that. It wasn't true. Why would I be glad we lived like we did, no matter how much I tried to make the best of it?

No. What I was glad of was her friendship. And I told her that.

“I'm grateful to have a friend like you,” I said.

I could tell her anything—demon blood stuff aside. I knew I was lucky to have her, to have this hovel and this little community.

The hugging ended.

“I'll leave you to it,” she said. “Talk later.”

“Absolutely.”

“Right, you,” I addressed my pet cat. “I’m off to shop until I drop.”

Yeah, her grooming had become a mission. She wasn’t leaving her spot for some time.



I SAT outside the launderette inside the center, eating a cheese and pickle sandwich. Taking a break from my errands.

The shopping center was dimly lit with a white floor and yellow walls—both having lost their vibrancy years ago. A grim place, but also convenient for my list.

I got cat food and some stuff for me from the supermarket first, along with a two-for-one deal on white wine. After that, I got myself a new rucksack and a purse from one of the charity shops. I could’ve waited for a bin rummage but didn’t have to, for once. Actually had a choice to buy. And I got myself another pair of jeans and two jumpers. Yay!

I took the clothes, along with my dirty ones and towels, to the launderette and got them spinning.

A good day. Still, some of my list left, but the real essentials were almost covered. Now for Grindle. I hadn’t been expecting him to be open yet, to be honest. He didn’t keep regular hours.

His tiny shop sat in the same stretch as the launderette—the center divided into four rows on both floors. Heavy purple curtains acted as a backdrop in the window, a small display of trinkets from pocket watches to pottery resting on stands against it. All at bargain prices.

Grindle's Antiques & Collectibles was a front. I mean, he sold these things, sure, but the fairy's real business came from dodgy dealings.

Like my lollipops.

I entered through the door, then a black beaded curtain into the cramped treasure trove. Shelves and tables and cabinets of stuff were all crammed into this box of a space. None of it appealed to me.

Antique was an easy word to throw around. So was junk. My intuition leaned more toward most of this stuff applying to the latter category, though this wasn't my forte.

Dustiness and pine-scented air freshener tickled my nostrils.

"Look who it is." The gravelly tones of the fairy drifted toward me.

Grindle stood behind the counter, also acting as a display unit of mahogany and glass, gazing down at some paperwork.

"Hi, Grindle," I greeted him.

He looked up, scratching at his thick blond beard. "Got some cash?"

"I do."

Grindle stood at approximately five-foot, stocky, copper-skinned, his hair a wild mess of blond curls looking like they'd always been freshly permed. He always wore tiny, slightly wonky spectacles, tweed suits, and a musky perfume. His iridescent pink fairy wings were a serious juxtaposition to the rest of him.

"How many?" he asked, folding up the paperwork, tapping it on the counter.

“Three for now. Can the dose be increased?”

“Why?”

“I’d feel better. Had a tricky evening yesterday.”

He stared at me, scratching his beard.

I explained because he knew stuff.

“How much extra?” I asked at the end of my spiel.

“Don’t worry about it this time.”

“Thanks, Grindle.”

The lollipops tended to last a couple of days if I didn’t suck on them too much. Which was difficult seeing, as they were so delicious.

Fairy magic was like that—pretty on the outside, addictive, and tasty with hidden dangers. A pool with crocodiles, a tunnel filled with thorns. I trusted Grindle but no other fairy. He knew my dark truth. He had to in order for him to gear the magic to hide my demonic side. He’d been the one to find me crying in an alleyway when my wings burst from my back at the age of seventeen. What an awful night, ending on a positive note when he’d shown up. If he hadn’t, if someone else had come across me, that would be it. End of me. Thankfully, Grindle was cut from decent cloth and offered to help me. Even showed me the hovel, gave me his word he’d keep my secret. Never broke that word.

But everything came at a price. Thankfully, his price was cash, nothing else.

Witches regulated fairy magic heavily. If Grindle got caught, he’d be screwed. Me along with him.

Grindle was smart, though. Kept his tracks wiped clean.

He nodded. “No worries. I’ll fix them for you. Will be half an hour.”

“Great. Thanks.” I placed nine pound coins on the counter.

If I was ever lacking in funds and desperate for the lollipops, he’d let me off the charge. Had done so before.

He slid the coins toward him. “Got some new rings in. Can teleport you to anywhere that tickles your fancy.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes. Think of it. Off to some tropical island in seconds. I can do it for a tenner.”

“And the consequence of using one would be what?”

“You’re too cynical, Clay.”

I waited.

He revealed the deep lines in his forehead when he got annoyed. “So, it takes five years off you with each use.”

“There we go.”

“Obviously, I’d have warned you first.”

Truth. Fairies had to tell you the truth if you confronted them. Grindle didn’t need a prompt. He *would* have told me if I’d taken the ring. He respected me and I him.

“I know,” I said. “Thanks for the offer.”

Never push or upset a fairy.

He sniffed. “No worries.”

Grindle vanished through a hatch in the floor behind the counter. I listened to him climb down the ladder, grunting away. He mumbled down there, making no other sound. I kept to my spot, not wanting to browse the shelves. Thinking about

the demon, about the hot guy. About Leader and his reappearance.

Going back out later wasn't smart. Better to lay low, not give Leader a chance to get at me while I waited around Blackfriars. The prick was clearly on the hunt and out for revenge. Giving people like him opportunities to hurt me wasn't ever my intention.

Stay home.

Anyway, the whole stalker thing started to sit heavy with me. I mean, I wasn't a real stalker. I wouldn't follow the hot guy home and go through his rubbish. At least I hoped I wouldn't. He'd piqued my interest, gave my insides a stir. I guess pretty men did that to you.

Damn.

Nope. A night in for me. I might even have a glass of wine with Kelly. Chill. Rejoice in my success a bit, rest up. Anyway, Trace Fall at midnight. That was the most important task of the day.

Grindle returned, grunting as he climbed out of the hatch.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

Another grunt. “They're cooking.”

“Thanks.”

He leaned on the counter, catching his breath. The fairy removed a silver flask from the pocket of his tweed jacket. Swigged heartily.

“Ah, much better.” He dabbed at his mouth with a hankie from the other pocket. “Nothing like a fine brandy to cure what ails you.”

I nodded, saying nothing.

“Anyway, how’s business?” he asked.

“Not bad, thanks. Had a good one today.”

“Nice.”

“What about you?”

“Oh, you know. As fruitful as always.”

Sarcasm. He did okay, but not enough to get out of here. He’d told me once when drunk, sobbing into a brandy bottle about his failed dreams of owning shops in London, Paris, and New York.

I never pressed him on the revelation afterwards, and he never mentioned it again.

“And Fizz?” he asked.

Small talk. General catching up. I could tell by the way his green eyes kept focusing on the same point when I spoke that he wanted me gone. Sometimes he wanted me to stay and drink, play cards even. Other times, like now, my presence felt like an inconvenience.

After five minutes of small talk, he slid a pack of cards from behind the cash register.

A surprise.

“Enough of this nonsense,” he said. “We’ve got twenty-five minutes to fill. Let’s play a hand or two.”

“Of what?”

“Rummy.”

“Okay.”

Kelly taught me to play cards, Grindle giving me a deeper education.

He dealt the cards.

“What’s the bet?”

“No bets,” he said. “I don’t want to take away your earnings.”

“Only for a teleporting ring?”

“Sorry about that. I’m greedy.”

“Don’t worry.”

Grindle was my friend. I didn’t know why he gave me a pass, why he resisted fucking me over.

Better to not ask too many questions and take the blessing.

FOUR



N ight again. A cold one, but exciting.

Trace Fall was coming at midnight. Five hours to go.

I decided to not have a glass of wine with Kelly. Didn't fancy it as the night drew in. I wanted some chicken and chips, to chill with Fizz, and dance in Trace later. Okay, maybe not dance... much.

So I did just that, ate my food and listened to Kylie, and snuggled with my cat. Sucked on my new double-dosed lollipop, re-wrapping the one I'd opened last night to keep for later. Hopefully, it'd keep the demon woman away and any others like her.

When the time came for my magical recharge, I headed away from the hovel, up to one of the outdoor concrete slopes leading up to the second floor of the shopping center.

Fizz decided to join me, perched at my feet, watching the quiet of the city. Waiting. A few minutes to go.

There were a few people out in the bitter air, passing the center quickly or waiting for a night bus to whisk them away. The chicken shop was still open, as was the pub next door to it. Both quiet. The townhouses on either side of them were

dark, unoccupied still. All of them sat on the start of the bad part of the area.

Nearby, a train rattled along the bridge next to the center. I watched its lights pass over the blue bridge, listened to the screech of metal on metal from its brakes. Slowly moving deeper into South London and beyond.

Train. Hot guy. No hot guy.

Ugh.

Never mind. Better to have your teeth intact.

I leaned on the metal barrier, enjoying the point of view. A good watching point for danger. In the distance, beyond the towering blocks of flats acting as sentinels on either side of Walworth Road, was a toxic river. A radiant green in the night, surfacing in the road from underground, snaking for half a mile before vanishing into the deep again. Locked in by tempered glass tubes infused with Synth. The road was long out of use, but people still lived in the houses down there, the river practically in their front gardens. What choice did they have? Not everyone could afford to move out.

One minute to go.

I kept my eyes on the clouds, counting down from sixty. The closer to zero, the thicker the cloud became. Within the final ten seconds, the fluffballs shimmered with a pink and blue glow.

“Here we go, Fizz.”

Trace fell once a month in the form of snow, no matter the season. Not real snow. Not cold. Came down in pink and blue flakes, all glittery and Christmassy, recharging those of us who needed it.

A flake landed on my cheek. It tingled my skin, soaking into the fabric of me. Fed me power in a quick pulse, a vibration in my bones. The more flakes that fell, the more I thrummed with energy.

The best way to soak up Trace was to stand out in it, get bathed in the snow. I stretched out my arms, lifting my face to the sky. Even did a twirl because why not? Several twirls actually. Popped my earphones in as happiness hugged me with relief. Fired up some Kylie, busted some moves up there on the slope. Scooped Fizz up to spin with me, which she didn't appreciate.

I put her down before she turned me into a scratching post.

Dancing, buzzing, soaking it all up. All the natural goodness, no matter if it was way less powerful than Synth.

Screw Synth. How did it even become a legal source with its brewing process? Aside from those who were medically exempt, we were all required to donate blood every three months. Even a homeless warlock with demon blood—the latter part of me thankfully never detected even before I met Grindle. Must be something to do with the purification process blood underwent.

Once collect, harvested blood was then used to blend with elements of nature (a broad term if you asked me) to synthesize the magic.

God, if only there were a way to stop it. But the witch kings and queens would never relinquish power. Ever. And, as much as I hated to say it, they kept us safe.

Whatever. It was Trace Fall. This was better than sex and chocolate and glasses of wine.

More dancing, laughing. I felt so good, so healthy. Ready to unleash some more light tricks now, to double my income. To perform all sorts of wonders to top up my beret.

Tomorrow. Yep. I was so hitting Leicester Square, all the mega tourist hotspots. I'd make so much money not even my new rucksack would be able to hold it all.

I roared with laughter, fell into the settling Trace. Waved my arms and legs, making Trace Angels.

Fizz kept her distance.

A presence. My scalp prickling. Living on the streets finely tuned my sense of danger.

I sat up, spotting her coming up the slope slowly. A white fur coat down to her matching heels.

The demon woman.

She stuck out her tongue to catch some flakes.

Getting to my feet, I put myself between her and Fizz on instinct.

"It's you," I said.

"It is me, curious boy," she replied.

"What do you want?"

Fizz hissed, getting in front of me in a protective stance.

The demon stopped. "A lovely cat you have."

Fizz hissed a second warning.

"Thanks. What do you want?" I tried again.

She looked up at the sky. "Trace Fall again." She caught some flakes in the palm of her hand. "A blessing for you."

I didn't answer, eyeing up an escape route. The doors into the center were locked tight. The slope was pretty high, made of two parts at a perpendicular angle. If I vaulted over the barrier on my left, I'd land on the lower part. Right side meant a broken ankle or worse as Golden Lane sat deeper down there.

"I want to smell you some more," she finally answered my question. "To see your handsome face again, to understand the secret within. It is there," she sniffed deeply as she spoke, "but it is hidden."

It's only demon blood.

Fizz's tail puffed up, hissing again as the demon took a step forward.

"If only the stink of fairies didn't taint you and hide your shining blood. If only I could crack you open and scoop it out." She giggled. "A bloody mess. We don't want any bloody messes, do we?"

"Erm, no." My hands curled into fists, ready to perform my shimmer trick. Confuse her, bend the light, give me chance to get away. With Trace Fall, I could use it a dozen times without breaking a sweat.

"What do you taste like?" she said.

"Fairy?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Yes. I imagine you would. Will you walk with me?"

"I should get home."

"The streets are your home."

My chest tightened, feet itching to move. "Right. I still need to leave."

“Do not fear me, curious boy.”

“You’re—” I stopped myself immediately.

She ran the back of her fingers across her chin, up the side of her face. A coy, seductive move wasted on me.

“Because I am a demon,” she said. “And so are you.”

“I’m a warlock.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“But with extras. Why are there extras?”

If I knew that, I wouldn’t tell you. “Please, I need to go.”

“You were having so much before I came. Enjoying Trace Fall. Don’t stop on my account. Continue. I enjoyed it.”

Yeah, well, I wasn’t free street theater.

“Goodnight,” I said, going to scoop up Fizz.

“No,” she said, as commanding as a bell.

I froze. Fizz hissed and backed into my leg.

“You will not leave. You will stay and enjoy this magic, and I will try to unpeel you. Taste you.”

As I looked up, she opened her coat to expose her naked body. “You can taste me, too.”

I averted my eyes. “Erm, no thanks.”

“Am I not desirable?”

“Not interested, but thanks anyway.”

“What if I were a man?”

“I’m really not interested. I just want to be left alone.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw her close her coat.
“Alone or going home?”

I looked at her again. “Both.”

Her white eyes roamed over my body. “I see. Well, I can’t have that. I have questions.”

“We all have questions.” *Don’t engage further, idiot!*

“I want to taste you.”

“Please. I—”

“Stop talking. It irritates me. You have two choices. Come with me willingly, or I will use violence to make you comply.”

I swallowed. “I don’t want any trouble.”

Time for the shimmer trick.

“I can find you a demon male,” she said. “I can watch. I can taste you as he fucks you.”

God, she was creepy.

“Answers,” she added. “We could solve the mystery of your curiosity.”

Nope. I wanted answers, but not through the likes of her.

I grabbed Fizz and cast my ability. The light bent around me, refracting my form, blurring me to the point of confusion.

“What?” she breathed.

Surprise, bitch!

I moved. Fast. Tearing around her with Fizz in my arms, back down the slope to the main road.

“Curious boy!” she bellowed.

There was a demon tower next to the shopping center, rising over the railway bridge. Dark. Not reacting. The sooner she manifested her demon nature, the sooner she'd be screwed.

For now, *I* teetered on the edge of screwed, heading away from my home, under the bridge.

"It's okay, Fizz," I soothed as she growled.

If I went home, I'd lead her to where I lived. Which she probably already knew anyway, judging by her stalking. Dropping a demon among my friends was a big nope. I'd lead her away, shake her off.

The Gallery Housing Estate was the perfect place to lose her.

"I can still smell your fairy stink!" she bellowed, still up on the slope when I looked back.

Damn her nose!

For the second night in a row, my boots pounded the pavement in fear. Poor things. The battered brown leather was on the verge of falling apart after six months of hard labor on my feet.

I mentally added new boots to my list.

Making a left on Walworth Road just past the chicken shop, I charged through an underpass beneath tall concrete block of flats, the strip lights above me flickering. The acrid stench of piss wafted up from the damp ground, and I leaped over something that looked like a pile of shit.

Great.

Meow. Meow.

"I know, honey. It'll be over soon."

Surfacing on the other side of the underpass brought me out into the open, into the vast abandoned housing estate. Towering structures filled with flats boxed in smaller homes in the center, each with its own network of mini streets. The layout of the estate formed a maze-like area with roads and pockets of green spaces. Walkways linked the higher buildings, crisscrossing above my head.

Part of a toxic river ran mere feet away, slicing through the estate. I hated being close to the rivers, wincing when they cast their green light too close to me.

I hurried on toward the rear far side of the estate, where another exit/entrance waited. Trace kept falling, covering everything in a glittering blanket.

This had once been a bustling community. Even had its own pub, shopping precinct, and a sense of pride. Now it sat empty. Not quite abandoned as some squatters had moved in, and some of the gangs ran drug deals inside the buildings. I tried to avoid it, but for tonight it provided a chance to lose the demon.

Then what? Keep running all night? Hang around in the shadows until she gave up?

Fuck her for doing this to me.

And fuck my demon blood.

Streetlamps, miraculously still running, lit the path with sickly yellow light. I avoided them, clinging to the dark, constantly looking over my shoulder.

My heart rattled in my chest, my breaths labored and painful. I wanted my hovel and blankets and Kylie and now some wine. Definitely wine for these frayed nerves.

“We’ve got this, Fizz,” I whispered. “We’ll be okay.”

Come through, positivity.

Halfway across the housing estate, which felt like it'd never end, I heard heels.

How the—

She stepped out of the dark, blocking my path. A streetlamp lit her up.

“Shit!”

She giggled. “Why do you run from me, curious boy? Why do you want to make this difficult?”

Fizz hissed, her claws digging into my arms.

“Just leave me alone,” I countered.

“I can't do that. You're in my head. You will not leave.” She moved a few steps forward. “Blame yourself.”

“I—”

She charged at me like a bull. I moved, darting to the side. Fizz howled. I almost dropped her, slipping in the Trace.

What did I have? Shimmer trick. Some lights. I could set off some harmless yet loud fireworks around her head. Nope. Useless, really. Witch magic and a demon tower hadn't phased her. Why would my crap?

I spun to face the demon as she charged again, my boots churning up Trace. She launched herself at me. Too fast, my body not reacting in time.

“No!” I cried as she grabbed me.

Fizz went crazy, leaping out of my arms and into her face.

“Fizz!”

My cat clawed the demon's face, raking bloody gashes down her cheeks.

“Fucking pussy!” the demon woman bellowed. “Get off me!”

The demon held a fistful of my jacket, not letting go. I tried to shake the garment off, unable to get it off my right arm.

I went with the firework plan. Flowery bursts of color exploded around her head. Crackled and fizzed and whistled.

She screamed.

Poor Fizz. The constant banging scared the absolute crap out of her. I'd make it up to her later with cuddles.

I took my chance to grab my cat and made a run for it. At least, that was the plan. Instead, I got a heavy punch to my gut that sent me on my back. And poor Fizz got flung in the other direction.

“No!” I bellowed, jumping to my feet. I sent some more fireworks at her, turning them into exploding lion heads.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Roar! Roar! Roar!

The demon waved them away as if they were nothing more than flies.

“Do you think this is enough to stop me?”

“Stay away from me!”

Fizz whined somewhere in the dark.

“You hurt my cat. I'll kill you.”

Blood from the scratches on her face dripped onto her coat. “Ah, but you can’t. I’m a demon, remember? No Arcana to take my life.” She folded her arms. “I wonder... Does that apply to you? Will you live if I cut your throat?”

I didn’t know. I didn’t care. I wanted my cat. I wanted this creature to suffer.

Tears leaked, rolling hot down my cheeks. “I’ll—”

“Oh, save your threats. I’m not afraid of pathetic warlock parlor tricks. What are you going to do? Well? Unless you have a deadly secret inside you.” She grinned. “I’m going to enjoy finding out.”

She moved, I backed off. My tummy hurt from her mean punch.

“Get away. I mean it. Stay the fuck away.”

“I—” Her eyes widened, staring down...

...down at my hands.

I followed her surprise, gasping at the golden flare at my fingertips. A fire-like, golden orange energy blazed in my palms. It brightened by the second. I staggered back as the magic swirled in a dozen spirals bursting from the main bulk of the light.

“What the fuck?” I asked it.

“This cannot be,” the demon said. “It died. It does not exist.”

“What doesn’t?” I responded.

“Arcana.”

I looked at her. “Don’t be stupid.”

Her mouth dropped open, her eyes still wide. Panic spread across her face. She pulled her coat around her, gearing up to run.

This wasn't my usual magic. It thrummed with power, with a long history reaching back to ancient times. It told me in its vibrations, in the way it filled me up with a greater strength than any Trace Fall could muster.

The energy in my hands was a profound force. Connected to the earth, spreading its roots into me. Roots for the sky, for the ground and the sea and the air and the fires and the spirits of living. Greater than anything else.

Arcana.

Seriously? How? What?

“Get away from me.” Ah, how the tables had turned.

I couldn't help but smile through my shock. And, man, was my pulse a bullet train.

“Scared?” I asked her.

The magic reacted to her. Spoke of demon. It didn't like demons. Sent messages to my brain, commanded me to react.

I did, not really understanding how I did it. Kind of like a pre-loaded knowledge springing out of a drawer.

My hands moved in fast, deliberate sweeps, intensifying the magic. Within seconds, the Mark of Arcana formed between me and the demon. A blazing five-pointed star ringed by a circle. A point for each of the five elements.

A pentagram.

The demon screamed, turned, and ran.

I brought my hands together, then swept them through the air again. Reminded me of martial arts, but not as elegant. I thrust a hand forward, palm flat and facing outward. An arrow bolt fired at her, striking her in the back of the head. She dropped in a heavy thump, face-first into the Trace.

What. The. Fuck.

I sucked in air, hands still aflame. God, my heart. Everything flared with heat, sweat running down my face.

“Demon?” I spoke. “Are you really dead?”

She didn’t move.

Slowly, I walked over to her.

“You’re dead?” I asked the body.

A smoking hole in the back of her head, no inch of her moving.

“Gosh...”

The Mark of Arcana faded, the magic receding. But not gone. Waiting for me to call it back should I need it.

I swallowed, pushed a hand through my sweaty hair. Staring at the dead demon, my mind screaming at me.

An actual dead demon.

“Did this just happen?” I asked the air.

A pained meow.

“Fizz!”

I ran for my cat, bounding in the direction of her yowling.

“I’m here. Daddy’s here.”

She sat in a pool of yellow light. Hurt. Licking at her front left leg. I slid into a crouch beside her, cupping her small head.

“It’s okay, Fizz. It’ll be okay.” Her leg was twisted. Broken. Her paw bloody.

“Fucking demon,” I seethed.

How the hell was I supposed to fix her? I couldn’t afford vet bills. Selfish to have a cat when homeless.

Maybe it’s not so bad.

“I’m here.” I bent down to kiss her. “Oh, honey. I’m so sorry.”

A figure loomed over us, its shadow flooding the light. Fizz tilted her head up at—

“Oh,” I squeaked.

The hot guy from the train was here. Dressed in black again, face briefly flickering between those two images of reality and fakery, lingering more on the real, yummy one. No glasses this time.

“What an interesting turn of events,” he said.

FIVE



I froze as I focused on his face.

“You’re... You’re...”

His midnight eyes robbed me of speech. Not green eyes tonight, but dark as coal.

An inner voice told me they were his real peepers.

“I’m what?” he probed.

“You’re...” I couldn’t get any other word past my tongue.

He moved his attention to Fizz. “You poor thing.” He crouched down. She whimper-meowed, didn’t hiss. Didn’t seem afraid of him at all. She even let him pet her head.

“Her leg is hurt,” he said in smooth yet icy tones. “We’ll have to get you fixed,” he added for her.

“I... I...”

He glanced up at my feeble attempts to speak. “And we need to talk about tonight.”

“You...” I swallowed, drawing a deep breath.

Speak, damn it!

Fizz meowed as the hot guy rubbed her head some more.

Okay. I had this speaking thing down. Had done it for most of my life.

“Who are you?” I asked. Finally! Well done me.

Calling him Hot Guy wouldn't be appropriate.

“I'm here to help you and your beautiful cat.”

God! That voice. So deep, so rich. So full of elegance.

He'd seen it. He'd seen the Mark of Arcana.

“We need to go home,” I countered.

“Let me help you both,” he said. “It's not safe out here. Others may have seen what you did.”

“I... Shit.”

“Come with me.

To my horror, I noticed my hands were talons, the skin bumpy with scales.

Ohgodohgodohgodohgod!

My demon side manifesting. It'd only ever been my wings before this, and they always stayed hidden inside me. Now they were out, flapping, stretching their, erm, bits and pieces. Tore through the back of my T-shirt and jacket. Did the hot guy see?

“Are you all right?” he asked.

There was no care in his voice. Every word made of ice. Did he see my wings and scales? Was the demon tower nearby emitting its red signal? No ADU sirens in the air so far.

Shitshitshitshit!

Hot Guy's face flickered constantly, struggling to show me the other man he pretended to be. The fake man.

“I’m... No. I’m not okay.”

The flickering stopped, magic stirring in my guts. Arcana. It told me things, whispered a word. Just as it did with the demon, it read the essence of this creature before me.

Vampire...

What?

“Hello?” The hot guy waved a hand over my face.

Fizz’s meowing dragged me from my overthinking.

“I need to help her,” I said.

Nothing happened. The fairy magic inside me protected me, hid me. I was safe from discovery from the ADU. From this guy.

“Then come with me. I can help.”

“Are you a vet?” I asked.

“No. But I can get you one.”

“Huh?”

“And some new clothes.” He eyed up the damage to my T-shirt and jacket.

“Stupid demon,” I lied.

“Come with me,” he said.

“I don’t know you.” I picked up Fizz, being careful with her. “We’re going home.”

“With her being injured? After I’ve offered you help?”

“That’s right. I can help her.”

The demon’s body made a noise like paper scrunched in a fist. She broke apart into tiny shards, leaving behind nothing

but black ash.

Why was I being like this? I'd wanted to see his face again, and here he was talking to me. Actually here. Wanting to help.

But why?

"Did you see?" I blurted out.

"I saw everything. Hence the need for a discussion. But not here in this place."

I scrutinized his face as he stroked Fizz, taking him in. The Korean part of him, not the other face. That face that faded in and out was definitely fake, a disguise.

"I recognize you," I said, tilting my head. "I think."

He watched me, the dark pools of his eyes threatening to drown me.

"Seeing beyond," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"Come to my car. The longer we stand here, the longer your cat suffers."

He turned and walked away.

Quickly slamming the brakes on any pig-headed resistance, I followed him.



OUTSIDE THE ESTATE, beyond the exit I'd aimed for, sat a black car. Tinted windows, clean. Nothing flashy.

"Is that yours?" I asked stupidly.

“Yes.”

The demon part of me had gone away again. I glanced in the direction of the demon tower, now on show from this point.

Still dark. Yep. I really was safe.

Thank God for that.

The hot guy, possibly a vampire, opened the passenger door.

“Get in.”

I hesitated. What if he wanted to hurt me? Drain my blood or something? I didn't know much about vampires. They were often rich and secretive. The source of many fantasies from books to porn movies. Extremely mysterious even when they were famous blood-suckers.

Wait.

Wait.

Wait.

I cocked my head, giving him another once over as he held the door. Not an unpleasant action.

“You're... Are you Tae Frost? The billionaire?” I swallowed what felt like a heavy lump sitting in my throat. “The billionaire vampire?”

Not one iota of a reaction on his face. “Yes.”

“You're a vampire.”

“Yes.”

“Whoa.”

Vampires operated quietly. Feeding without killing, keeping hush, hush. Never leaving a mess. Creatures of the shadows. I didn't know much about them outside of fanciful stories of untruth. And they kept it that way in the public narrative.

“Please get in the car.”

Tae Frost. Businessman of the highest caliber. Always topping the most desirable bachelor lists in magazines, but also an incredibly private man. The CEO of Auto Frost—a luxury car manufacturer. That was all the information I had on him, and I guess that stood for everyone else. Okay, other than sexy vampire.

“Tae Frost,” I said, a little breathless.

“Would you please get in the car?”

“Vampire. I'm talking to a vampire.” This was so out of my usual orbit. “Never thought I'd meet one of you.”

“Please.” He gestured for me to get inside. “This is wasting time.”

The vampire was right. Fizz was hurting. He could help. As much as my nerves were a salsa class of activity, my cat needed assistance. I couldn't give her the real help that he could.

I got in the car for her.

The leather seats were heaven on my butt. It smelled of cinnamon inside. Everything as sleek as him.

Tae closed the door behind me, slinked around to the driver's side. Once seated, he fired the vehicle up and tore off into the night, the car gliding smoothly through the Trace-smothered streets.

“Why the disguise?” I blurted out.

“Straight to the core,” he said, expertly turning the wheel.

I waited.

“For when I hunt.”

“For blood?”

“Demons.”

“Oh.”

“Keeping my lives separate.”

“Oh.”

“Hunting blood is not the same thing.” He spoke with a sexual vibration in his voice. A deep thrum, a suggestion of something deeply gratifying coming my way in there.

Part of vampire charms?

I shuffled in my seat, brain catching up to the fact I shared a space with him. The hot guy. Tae Frost.

“So,” I wetted my lips, “you hunt demons?”

“I do.”

“Why?”

“I loathe them.”

“Right.” More lip-wetting. “And you don’t want anyone to know you’re doing it?”

“That’s right.”

Shit. He hunted demons. I had demon blood.

Time to bust out of this vehicle?

“What do you do if you can’t kill them?” I asked.

Were the doors locked?

“I banish them to the demon realm.”

“Oh. You have a talisman?”

“I do.”

“How?”

“I just do.”

That would not be legal, even for a billionaire. But someone like him could always get what he wanted, right?

Yikes.

I didn't speak, watching the lights of the city whizz past. His windscreen wipers swept Trace from the glass.

As he crossed Blackfriar's Bridge, he finally said, “Was that your first time summoning the Mark of Arcana?”

“Gosh...” I breathed, remembering the power at my fingertips. “I can't believe it.”

“It was your first time.”

“Y-yes. Shit. Am I in trouble? Are you some sort of witch spy? Did you know? Did you—”

“I do not deal with witches unless I really need to,” he cut me off.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To my home.”

“Where is your home?”

“Raven Tower.”

He turned right, weaving through streets away from the Thames. Strange. Raven Tower sat on the North Bank between

Blackfriar's Bridge and Millennium Bridge. Taller than The Shard, a huge glass tube clawing at the sky. I always thought it was ugly and stupid to build what looked like macaroni pasta.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Secret entrance," he replied. "If you would open the glove box."

"Why?"

"You'll find a blindfold."

Kinky. "What for?"

"To keep the entrance a secret." He slowed down and pulled over.

"You're being serious?"

"I am."

"Why can't we go in the front door?"

"Because I said so."

Hmmm. "That's not an answer."

"Are you arguing with me?"

"Erm, yeah."

"Why?"

"Because I don't agree."

"Please put on the blindfold."

If Fizz weren't in my lap, I'd be folding my arms in the huffiest way possibly. "Don't tell me what to do."

"I'm not. I only wish for you to understand."

"And obey." My pulse went up again.

"You can leave if you like."

“I’m not leaving.”

He watched me for a moment, our eyes locking together. Nothing but my trembling, labored breaths in the car. His chest barely moved, everything about him stoic and solid.

Wow.

The staring between us didn’t break until Fizz meowed.

It was about helping Fizz, not us.

“Fine,” I gave in and reached for the glovebox. Careful not to squish my cat.

As he said, there was blindfold in there. Black. I fished it out, wrapped it around my eyes.

“Happy now?” I asked. Shit. Had that been too forceful?

I felt him move closer, the scent of lime tickling my senses. I held my breath. Gosh. He was... Tae Frost was inches away from me. *The* Tae Frost. Billionaire. Vampire. Hunter of demons, apparently.

“Did you see that?” he asked, his voice a wave across my lower face.

More limes.

“N-no.”

“Good.”

He fired up the engine.

We weren’t off to a good start for our first meeting.

“Sorry,” I tried.

He didn’t answer at first as he drove.

“I have to keep my secrets.”

“I get that.”

No response.

“I’m Clay, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Clay. Is that short for Clayton?”

“No. At least, I don’t think so.” I wish I could see his face.

“What do you mean by that?” he questioned.

“Didn’t grow up with my birth parents. Kid of care homes without much of a clue about my family.”

“I see.”

Yeah, and one of those birth parents must have been a demon. Or a little bit. Those were words he wouldn’t be hearing.

“Tae and Clay,” I said. “It rhymes.” Followed it up with a nervous laugh in an attempt to change the subject.

Silence.

Right. Trying too hard.

“So, how are you going to get a vet at this time of night?” I asked in another change of course.

When he didn’t respond straight away, I continued. “I know. You’re a billionaire and can get whoever and whatever you want at any time of day. Do whoever—”

Damn! I didn’t mean to add that last part.

I blushed beneath the blindfold.

“Do whoever,” he said. “Interesting.”

“Ignore me.”

“A difficult task when you’re sitting next to me.”

“I chat shit. A lot.”

“Is that so?”

Ugh. Why did I insist on making a fool of myself?

“You are correct,” he said. “I can get anything I want.”

Like me?

Huh?

“Like a vet,” I replied carefully.

“Yes. I know many people who are always on hand to lend me their services.”

I gnawed my bottom lip, the car tilting downward as if on an incline.

Gosh, this night had really taken a twist.

SIX



“Y ou may remove your blindfold.”

I did so. We were in an underground space. A carpark, a dark cavern with a few lights on Tae’s parking spot. From what I could see, the walls were black, no door in sight. And no other vehicles around.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“Private parking.” He exited the vehicle, coming around to open my door.

Wow. Just wow.

“May I take your cat?”

Thank God he didn’t say pussy.

Ahem.

“Sure. Thanks. If she’ll go to you.”

“She will.” He gently lifted her off my lap. She whined but also purred.

I mean, she had good taste.

“Follow me,” Tae said.

I slid out of the car, following him across the cavernous space.

There was a door, after all. The edges of it lit up as we approached. It slid open, revealing a glass elevator. Tae stepped in, I followed.

My nerves were playing havoc again. This all seemed so surreal and creepy at the same time.

“You won’t hurt me, will you?” I blurted.

“Of course not,” he said, looking down at me. He must be six-something to my five-nine.

“Why would you think that?”

“I... I’m a bit seasoned in the getting hurt game.”

“Why?”

“Because...” I didn’t finish.

The vampire didn’t push me to finish.

Tae placed his thumb to a touchscreen panel. A blue light blipped, reading his print. It pinged, the doors closed, and the elevator moved upward.

Inches from me. He was inches from me.

“Penthouse?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied with zero feeling. Like he didn’t give a crap.

The hot guy was Tae Frost.

Tae. Frost.

The writer of my life loved a good old twisty turny moment. It worked in blowing my mind. Still, the underlying fear couldn’t be denied.

Vampire. I kept rolling the word around.

Blood-sucking vampire. Liked blood. Wanted blood. Did he want my blood?

Stop it!

Would it be so bad to have his lips on my neck?

Stop! Now!

The elevator came to a stop, opening out into an open-plan space.

Suddenly, my brain dropped the vampire thoughts. Replaced by wonder.

A sleek apartment of gray walls and black stone-tiled floors. Expensive. Huge. Open plan.

“Erm...” I said, jaw almost on the floor.

“Come in,” he said, carrying Fizz inside.

To my left was a kitchen of white and chrome units, all very modern and clean and clinical. Food never got cooked in there, or at least the gleaming told me so. Attached to it was a white breakfast bar and stools. Beyond that, a white, rectangle dining table with four chairs. A vase of white roses sat in the middle of it. Again, that table didn't seem like an active piece of furniture.

Tae took Fizz across the apartment to a huge black corner sofa sitting on a gray rug, angled around a glass coffee table. Made of what looked like velvet, plush as fuck.

“Clay?” he called from over there.

Gosh. How many feet away was it?

I slowly walked, passing a white staircase, each step seeming to glow with some internal light.

“Two floors?” I asked softly to myself.

“Yes,” Tae replied unexpectedly.

“Wow.”

Nothing on the walls. No mirrors, no color. Curved panoramic windows spread across the sofa side of the apartment, granting an incredible view of the twinkling London beyond.

I stepped closer to the windows. “Never seen the city like this before.” I rubbed the back of my left wrist. “Higher than The Shard.”

“I am,” Tae said.

I turned to face him, Fizz nestled in his lap. With one hand, he tapped on his phone.

“Someone is coming to help.” He put the device down.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

With some trepidation, I moved closer to him, sitting down beside him to be close to my cat. His face still flickered now and again.

I reached for Fizz, my arm brushing against his.

“Sorry.” I pulled back.

“Sorry for what?”

“I knocked your arm.”

The arching of his left eyebrow and lack of smile told me he didn’t see the problem. So I reached for my cat again, gently rubbing at her head.

“My poor girl,” I whispered, teary-eyed. “This wasn’t supposed to happen tonight.”

“Was it supposed to happen any night?” Tae countered.

I blinked at him. “What? No. I mean... Shit.” I let out a heavy sigh as a tear escaped. I caught it, then the ones that followed. “It’s Trace Fall. I’ve been waiting for it. This was supposed to be a happy evening.” I mumbled, eyes on my cat now. “Dancing in the snow. Happy night. Why can’t we have happy nights for once?”

Shit. I wobbled, sadness permeating my weak points. I hated it when it slithered in like this. Always caught me off guard, drowning my determination, loosening my hold on positivity.

This is where the flaws in my sunny logic shone through.

Nope. This wasn’t happening. I steeled myself against bullshit. Straightened my spine and got to my feet. “Tell me about this vet.”

Okay, so a million questions waited to be asked. But Fizz came first.

“Can I trust them?” I added.

“Of course.”

“No of course about it, Mr. Frost. I’m going out on a limb here. Trusting a complete stranger with my best friend. And a vampire at that.”

“Will you keep pointing out the fact I’m a vampire?”

I scratched the back of my head. “I have to. Make sure it’s real. And I’ve never met a vampire before. Or sensed one.”

“You sensed me?”

“I, erm. Yeah. Through Arcana. Seems to be part of it, as well as seeing your real face through your...”

“My disguise.”

“Yeah.”

He watched me like prey, as if he'd pounce at any moment and take every drop of blood. Give me no chance to make a sound before his pointy bits were buried inside me.

Which pointy bit?

Behave yourself!

“And you see my true face,” he added.

“Kind of.”

He checked his phone. “She will arrive in ten minutes.”

“Who?”

“Elizabeth Field. The vet.”

“That tells me nothing.”

“Be patient, Clayton.”

“Clay.”

I quivered under his regard. His eyes roamed across me, from head to toe.

“Do you have a surname?” he asked.

“Erm...” My palms were sweaty, my groin tingling pleasantly. “It's Christmas.”

He nodded.

What? No jokes about my surname? There usually were. Even Kelly had once made some Jesus quip I couldn't remember.

Man, he was so handsome. I wanted the flickering to stop interfering, for him to take that cap off his head.

“Clay Christmas. The warlock who summoned the Mark of Arcana. Who does not know why, who sees through other magic.”

A buzz within me. Arcana speaking.

Fairy...

“Fairy,” I repeated aloud.

He didn’t look surprised at all. “Successfully hides my true face on the hunts.”

Snap! Well, the hiding part.

“You deal with fairies?” I asked.

“I deal with one,” he answered. “One is enough.”

“I’ll say.”

I turned my attention back to the huge penthouse apartment. There wasn’t much inside it, everything extremely minimal. Apart from the white piano over on the other side. Hadn’t spotted that on my way in, being too awestruck. And the wooden chess set on a low table with cushiony chairs beside it.

Cool.

Clean lines everywhere. Clean everything. So much cleaner than me.

Gosh, I felt so scruffy. So dirty. Like an invading entity in this sterile haven.

I wouldn’t want a cup of tea in here.

“May I offer you anything to drink?” Tae asked.

No fucking way! “Maybe some water.”

Good idea. Clear liquid. Nothing brown or whatever.

“Anything stronger?”

Yes! “Water will be fine.”

He went to get up.

“Wait,” I said.

He paused. “What is it?”

“Don’t disturb Fizz.”

Tae looked down at her, a protective stranger. Nothing about him projected danger. Not since I met him, and not now. If anything, he might be thinking me the dangerous one after the Arcana thing.

“There’s some bottled water in the fridge,” he said. “You can help yourself.”

“Thanks.”

Arcana. Inside me.

Gosh.

“Do you want anything?” I asked.

“No, thank you.”

I went into the kitchen, opening the sleek chrome fridge. Glass bottles of water lined up in neat glistening rows greeted me. Nothing else.

Obviously. Why would a vamp need anything other than blood? Unless he did. Who the hell knew?

Grabbing a bottle, I popped the top and gulped down the cold goodness. Ah. So much better. So refreshing.

My Walkman! This whole time I’d forgotten about it. Shit. What if it’d been broken in the demon attack? I pulled it from

my pocket, giving it a ten-times over. All good. Thank goodness.

I slid it back into my pocket, turning to go rejoin Tae and my baby girl, only to come face-to-face with the vampire.

“Eek!” I cried, dropping the bottle. It smashed on the floor, splashing my legs.

Tae cocked his head, then glanced down. “The vet is here.”

“Oh...” I wiped my mouth. “Is she?”

“Yes.”

Fizz stared at me as if to chide my clumsiness.

Not my fault! I thought at her. *He crept up on me.*

Vampire... the Arcana said again.

Tae handed me Fizz and moved toward the stairs.

“Where are you going?” I asked, mouth dry despite the water.

“To wash the fairy magic off me,” he replied, not turning around. “Elizabeth knows you’re waiting.”

He vanished around the corner of the glowing stairs as the elevator moved.

I kissed Fizz’s head, my tummy in knots, still reeling from being surprised by Tae. I hadn’t heard a single movement from behind me, and it wasn’t like the apartment was noisy by any stretch. I’d have heard a pin drop, let alone footsteps.

Clearly not.

“You’ve been such a brave girl,” I told my cat. She’d not complained as much as I would from a broken leg. “So, so brave.” More kisses.

The elevator opened, spilling a woman into the penthouse.

Tall, rosy-skinned with magnificent scarlet curls, she came toward me with a bright smile, a warm aura, and a bright yellow coat. She carried two brown bags in her arms.

Human, the Arcana whispered.

“Hello there,” she greeted me in a Scottish accent. “I’m Lizzy.”

“Oh. Erm. Hi.”

“Not Elizabeth.” She shook her head. “Mr. Frost gets a pass because he can’t bring himself to shorten my name.”

“Right. Hi, Lizzy. I’m Clay. And this is Fizz.”

“The lady of the hour,” Lizzy said, coming to meet my cat. “Look at you.”

Fizz meowed weakly.

“You poor thing. Let’s get you feeling better again, shall we?”

Another soft meow.

“She got thrown,” I said. “By a demon.”

“Mr. Frost told me.” She carried her bags over to the dining table, removing the vase of roses. From one bag, she retrieved anti-bacterial wipes and cleaned the surface down. Then she retrieved a canary yellow blanket, spreading it over the table.

Did he tell you everything?

“You were both attacked,” she added, coming back over with gloves now on. “May I?”

“Oh. Yes.” I handed Fizz over.

“Aw, such a pretty girl,” Lizzy said. “And look at that leg. Don’t you worry.” She looked up at me. “That goes for you, too. Relax. She’s in good hands now.” Lizzy winked.

That wink helped. Her warmth helped.

She carried Fizz over to the dining table and got to work. I followed, then stopped at one of the breakfast bar stools. It wouldn’t help to be a helicopter parent. Getting in the way wouldn’t help the healing.

I considered the Arcana, wondering if it had some healing properties. Decided to not try or suggest such a thing. I didn’t know what was inside me, what it could do. Just because it whispered things at me, we weren’t joined at the hip. No way would I risk Fizz’s health with an unknown magic.

Leaning against the stool, biting my nails, I watched Lizzy examine her. Praying for the best.

“Good evening, Elizabeth.”

The cool tones of Tae jiggled at my knees.

Tae reappeared on the stairs, coming down in a white vest and gray sweatpants. The full Tae. Flawless, glowing alabaster skin, eyes even darker than before, his hair cascading down to his shoulders in blue-black curls. His body was toned like a swimmer’s, but slightly more muscular. A tattoo ran down his right arm, spreading to the right side of his chest—a pattern of black roses and thorns and swirls. Beautiful yet kind of fierce. As roses were, I guess.

Now he looked dangerous. And the fairy magic was gone.

The pictures I’d seen of him in the past had presented the long-haired, suited and booted billionaire. Everything polished. He still seemed polished but with rougher edges. He knew violence. He knew how to kill.

Wow.

Shit.

“Hello, you,” Lizzy returned.

Once again, my jaw sought the floor. I openly stared at him as he went into the kitchen. From the freezer compartment inside the fridge, he removed a chilled bottle of expensive-looking vodka.

“How are you?” he asked the vet, not taking his eyes off me.

I held onto the stool for support.

“All good, thanks,” she replied.

“Your family is well, I trust?”

“My dad was a bit poorly last week, but he’s back up and running.”

“I’m glad.” He retrieved two shot glasses from a cupboard. “Would you like something to drink?”

“No thanks,” Lizzy said as Fizz whined.

I spun to see what was happening. She *was* fine. The vet was injecting her with some painkillers.

“Good girl,” I called reassuringly. “Daddy’s right here.”

“I’ve had too much tea tonight,” Lizzy continued her answer to Tae.

“You can never have too much tea,” I added.

She looked up. “You’re correct there.”

As I went to face Tae again, I saw him next to me. A jolt shot through me.

“Oh,” I said.

“What about you?” he asked smoothly, resting his hip on the side of the breakfast bar. Still holding those shot glasses and vodka.

“I, erm...”

He put the glasses down, poured the clear liquid into them. Pushed one toward me and brought a finger up to his pink lips, slowly licking a drop of vodka from the tip.

Holy. Bloody. Shit.

“In case you need it,” he said.

I stared some more as he downed the drink in one. Licked his lips, poured another.

Yep. I needed it. I knocked it back, trembling all over.

The burn wasn't like the burn of other vodkas I'd had. A smoother fire, the cool liquid shifting to a delicious warmth as it slid down my throat.

“Wow,” I gasped. “That's really good.”

He nodded, pouring me another. I drank it happily.

“You drink vodka?” I said after the second shot.

“I enjoy vodka. Good vodka.”

“Does it give you a buzz?”

“Yes.”

“To the point of being wasted?”

“It can do. Would you like another?”

“I better not... Fuck it. Yes, please.”

The vampire gave me more, aura as cold as the vodka.

“Sip this one,” he said.

I paused, the rim of the glass pressed against my lips.
“Sip?”

“Enjoy it slower. That is my suggestion.”

“Oh.” I did as he suggested.

He looked past me toward Lizzy. “How is the cat?”

“Fizz,” I cut in.

Tae didn’t react.

“She’s doing good,” Lizzy said. “I’m setting the leg. She’ll need plenty of rest and cuddles. I’ll leave her some painkillers. I also have some food with me. We can see if she eats.”

“Thanks so much,” I said. “Can I pay you in installments?”

Lizzy chuckled. “No need with moneybags there.” She nodded in the direction of the vampire.

“It’s covered,” he told me.

“But—”

“It is done.”

Not being the biggest idiot on the planet, I took the win, sipping some more on the expensive vodka.”



WHEN LIZZY FINISHED, she left the food, a cat bed, and the medicine. I thanked her so many times as she tried to leave. The poor woman had to stop my onslaught of gratitude.

“My pleasure,” she’d said. “Always happy to help an animal in need.”

Now it was just me and Tae again, with Fizz on her new yellow bed by the fake fire. Asleep. Leg set. Exhausted.

We sat on the sofa, watching her in silence. The vampire didn't say anything to me, his attention on my cat. The silence felt awkward, and many times over the twenty minutes, I went to get up and leave. Only, Fizz was so cozy. I didn't want to remove her from the warmth, returning to the hovel where the cold air would bother her.

But how long was too long until your presence wore thin? I mean, we still had plenty to talk about.

It was two in the morning, Trace still falling. It wouldn't stop until dawn.

I watched the vampire, examined his profile. His jawline, the smoothness of his skin, the length of his dark lashes. How he seemed distant, smothered in a heavy cloud of complicated gloom.

Maybe the vodka had me thinking like that.

"You may stay here if you wish," Tae finally spoke.

He made me jump. "Really?"

"Yes. If you wish."

"But you don't know me."

He turned his head. "You drink with me, sit beside me, and you haven't done anything wicked. I feel confident of you not hurting me."

"Plus, you're a vampire."

"As you keep pointing out."

"You'll kill me faster than I can blink."

He didn't answer that.

“Don’t you want to eat me?” Damn vodka! My cheeks flared with heat.

“Eat you? Drinking your blood isn’t eating you, Clayton.”

“Clay. So, you don’t want to eat me?” *What the fuck is wrong with you?*

He gazed at me for several beats, me pleading for the ground to swallow me whole.

“The only eating of a human I’ve ever done is of the sexual variety.”

I knew my cheeks were a red beyond red after his sex-laced words came at me. When he licked his lips, I almost slid off the sofa.

This is where he should smirk. He didn’t. He looked away.

“Whenever you’re ready for bed, I will take you upstairs.”

Jesus! It was all in the word choice, and these were sending pulses of yum to my cock.

Take me upstairs, Mr. Frost! Oh, take me!

Recovering some composure, I shuffled forward, resting my elbows on my thighs. He sat at a safe enough distance for him to not see the bulge. Plus, my elbows helped to block the view. Unless vamps had x-ray vision.

“Can I ask you something?” I said softly.

He faced me again. “Yes?”

“If this Arcana thing is real... Do you, erm, want me to help you kill demons? Is that what you want to chat about?”

He sipped on his vodka. How many glasses was that now?
“Yes. I would like your help.”

“To kill demons.”

“Yes.”

“Why? Shouldn’t you leave it to the ADU?”

His expression darkened. I shuddered as if a biting chill drifted from him.

“Some demons deserve death.”

“Oh.” I gulped. “Were you after the one I... killed?” I asked. “The one who came after me?”

“I’ve been hunting her for a month. A killer. Responsible for murders in London and Manchester. I tracked her across the city, lost her, found her again as she stalked you.” He drank the last half of his vodka. “I didn’t expect to find what I found.”

“Me?”

“The warlock with Arcana.”

A shiver danced inside me. “I need to know why this happened,” I spoke a massive overstatement.

“Of course. I can help you find the answers if you help me. The choice is yours.”

“Really?”

He waited.

I gently cleared my throat. “I mean, you’re not going to, I don’t know, make me?”

“Why would I make you? I never force anyone to do anything. You’re not a prisoner. You can leave whenever you like now that your cat is fixed.”

Wow. This was so surreal. “You really like Fizz?”

“She is a charming animal. And I loathe suffering.”

“Yeah... Me too.”

He turned his body slightly, folding one leg over the other, an arm stretched out across the back of the sofa.

“Where is your home?” he asked.

I closed my eyes for a second, drawing in a deep breath. Then I told him.

“You’re homeless.”

I nodded. “But lucky to have my hole. I mean, erm, my hovel.” Blush, blush. “Some don’t get that luxury.”

“A hopeful angle to take.”

“Got to have hope, Tae. Mr. Frost. What should I call you? Sir?”

“Sir? No. Tae is fine.”

“Is it short for something else? Lizzy said you didn’t like to shorten names.”

“Tae is fine.”

With three words, he’d shut me down. We weren’t going deeper.

“Okay.”

He leaned forward, pouring himself another vodka. “Another for you?”

“Y-yes, please.”

He handed me the drink.

“If we’re to work together, you must be prepared. Demons are violent. Worse if they are cornered. I can train you.”

“Train me?”

“To defend yourself.”

“To fight?”

“Yes, Clayton.”

“Clay.”

“Yes, Clay. To fight. You will need some skill and a decent level of fitness for the worst of demonic kind.”

I put the shot glass down. “I’m a good runner.”

“I’m sure. Would you like to stay here tonight?”

“Yes, please,” I answered way too quickly.

“Good. There is no rush to give me an answer to my suggestion of a partnership. You will receive a salary for your help.”

An actual steady wage? Wow. “Okay.”

“But I must add, you will need to live here on a permanent basis.”

“O-okay.” Live inside an actual home? “What’s the catch?” Booze loosened my tongue a bit. That was a good thing in this instance.

“Catch?”

“Yeah.”

“There is none. I want your help to take out demons I have targeted. In exchange, I’ll open my home to you.”

“It sounds too good to be true.”

He uncrossed his legs. “This is all truth.”

“And if I say no, you’ll be cool with that?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t go blabbing my secret to the witches? Because if they find out I used Arcana... I don’t want to think what they’ll do.”

“Lock you up. Experiment on you. Try to figure you out. Never let you live in peace until they do.”

“Erm, yeah.”

Like the dead demon wanted to do to me—find out how I ticked. Oh, shit. What if Tae knew about my blood? Would he smell it at some point? Would he figure me out, tell me I was fucked, then try and banish my arse to the demon realm?

“I...” The truth sat on the edge of my tongue. “I...” Nope. I just couldn’t do it.

“You must consider my offer carefully. It is a big change, a dangerous change. Not to influence your decision, but I do have access to Arcana grimoires.”

“For real?” Talk about relics.

“Yes.” A clipped response. “Think about it. Return to your home for a while, if you wish. I will provide you with my lines of communication. You can contact me at any time.” He poured more vodka.

I sipped my booze, head spinning.

Take the offer? Get off the streets? Maybe put my feet on the better road at last?

Live with a vampire.

Find answers.

Become a demon hunter apprentice while having demon blood of my own.

Dangerous.

Gosh. Lots to think about. For now, though, I'd stay the night in what I anticipated to be an amazing bed.

If he smells your blood, you're done.

I manifested a new list in my head:

- **Figure this Arcana stuff out.**
 - **Research vampires as a priority.**
 - **Try not to freak out over demon hunting. I mean...**
- EEK!**



I FACED the huge double bed of a gray duvet cover, plump pillows, and a thick mattress. The bed was positioned in such a way beside the window to offer me a good eyeful of a London morning when I woke up.

A guest bedroom. There were three other rooms up on the second floor—one long corridor with doors along it. Each room had a private bathroom attached to it.

Tae's room sat at the far end of the corridor. Out of bounds.

The vampire placed Fizz and her bed next to the bed, getting her settled as I watched the ongoing Trace Fall.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You are welcome.”

I still kept wondering when the penny would drop. When the catch would reveal itself.

How much of a dick was I being to be so willing to sleep here?

“What is your size?” Tae asked.

I turned, blinked at him. “My what?”

“Clothing size,” he added. “I can have some clothes provided for you.”

“You don’t need to do that. It’s so late.”

He waited.

“I’m... I don’t know. It feels weird.”

He folded his arms across his chest. I saw nipples against the white fabric of his clothing.

Oh my.

“Medium, I guess. Twenty-eight waist. Regular leg. I think. Shall I check?”

“It seems correct.” He slowly looked me up and down. I remembered the eating talk and blushed.

“Everything you need is in the bathroom. I can provide you with underwear to sleep in. A T-shirt. Unless you sleep naked.”

Why did he have to sound so damn sexual?

I swallowed a heavy lump. “That would be nice.”

“Which part?”

“The, erm...” I pulled at the collar of my T-shirt. “All the clothes stuff.”

With a slight nod, he left the room. A minute later, he handed me black boxers and a T-shirt.

“Goodnight, Clayton.”

“Clay.”

“Sleep well.”

He left the room, closing the door softly behind him.



HOT SHOWER. The first one in a long time.

Oh. My. Gosh.

My body practically sang as the hot water sluiced down my body, hugged my limbs, washed away years and years of the streets. I scrubbed my skin with expensive soap, got stuck into my hair with some decent shampoo and conditioner.

Ah. Bliss to the blissy maximum.

Fluffy white towel around my waist, I padded back into the bedroom. Fizz opened her eyes, released the tiniest sound, and yawned. Then back to sleep.

I smiled at her comfort, at her being saved. What would I have done without Tae? Panic, that's what. Confused by the Arcana, the demon, and stressed by my cat in pain.

But the vampire had taken away the latter, lessened the rest to an extent. Everything still scared me. What if more demons wanted me? What if the witches got wind of me?

Could not let that happen.

Would Tae offer me protection? Was he for real? Maybe. At least until he discovered my secret.

Talk about sleeping in the hornets' nest.

Maybe he wouldn't mind me being only a little bit demon. Well, I assumed I was only a little bit demonic. I didn't really

know the full extent of my blood, did I?

I slipped on the provided underwear and vest. The boxers fit okay, seeing as Tae had pretty slender hips. But the vest was loose. And smelled of limes.

I breathed in the scent, a tingling in my groin.

Tae. Tae. Tae.

Climbing on the bed, my body did another ‘oh, yes!’ as the unbelievable softness hugged me.

The last time I’d slept on a proper bed... I couldn’t remember. Back in my childhood, surrounded by shadows. Nothing like this.

Watching the city outside the window, Trace Fall a soothing sight, I drifted off wrapped in the scent of limes and a sense of calm I’d never known before.

SEVEN



I woke up to sunlight in my face.

Sitting up, I stretched and yawned, letting my eyes adjust to the brightness. What a lovely sleep. So comfy. Didn't wake up once in the night.

My mind caught up, reminding me of the previous night's events.

"Oh, yeah." I rubbed at my eyes and rolled over. "Morning —"

Fizz wasn't in her bed.

"Fizz?"

I slid off the bed. Checked under it.

Not there.

I checked the bathroom.

Not there, either.

My heart began to race. Panic taking over.

It's okay. She's okay.

No! It's all going wrong! All a lie! Tae is a monster, and you're fucked!

Was that cooking I smelled?

My tummy rumbled.

The bedroom door was slightly ajar.

Without hesitation, I hurried downstairs to the sunlight-filled lower space of the apartment. Still immaculate in the daylight, even more sparkly and gleaming.

Fizz munched on a bowl of food next to the windows, stopping every few seconds to get a good look between mouthfuls, scared she might miss something.

She was okay, leg aside. A pile of blankets sat nearby. For her?

“Good morning,” came Tae’s cool voice.

He was in the kitchen, cooking.

“Morning,” I replied, rubbing the back of my head.

“How did you sleep?”

“Really well, thanks.”

Everything was okay. No Monster Tae, but Cooking Tae. Standing in sunlight.

“Should you, erm, be...” I didn’t know how to speak. Again.

“In the sunlight?”

“Does it hurt?”

“That’s for stories. I can enjoy the sunlight if I wish.”

“It doesn’t kill you?”

He did something with eggs in a skillet. “No. I think you should eat. I took the liberty of making you breakfast.”

“It smells really good. What is it?”

“*Gaeran tost-u*. Egg toast. A Korean breakfast sandwich with cabbage and dusted with sugar.”

“Oh, right. Sounds interesting.” Where had the ingredients to make it come from? “Are you having one?”

“No. But I do enjoy them.”

“So you can eat food?”

“Yes. For occasional pleasure. Blood for nourishment.”

“Oh.” The way he said pleasure... Phew! Pass me a fan!

“Come and sit.” He gestured to the breakfast bar.

“One sec.” I went over to pet my best friend.

She was happy. Content with her food and view.

“I gave her more painkillers,” the vampire said.

I took a pew on a stool. “Thanks. And thanks for feeding her.”

“Of course.”

I watched him cook, an effortless exercise. “Are you from Korea?”

“Seoul, South Korea. Yes.”

How old are you? I didn’t ask that. Yet.

“You’re a city boy like me,” I said instead. “I was born in London.”

He nodded, didn’t elaborate further.

“I’ve never had Korean food,” I said to fill the new silence.

“It’s delicious. I’d make you any dish you’d like to try if you lived here.”

Ah, yes. I had a decision to make.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I said. “Sorry.”

“In your own time.”

More silence until he dished up breakfast. The flavors wafted up from my plate, setting my mouth to ready.

“This smells so good.”

“Coffee? Tea? Orange juice?”

“Coffee would be great, thanks.”

He poured coffee from a percolator that wasn’t there last night, popped the mug down before me with a pot of cream and sugar. I added both. Then took my first bite.

“Oh my God,” I said with my mouth full. I chewed, swallowed, the sweet and savory flavors rolling across my tastebuds. “This is amazing.”

“A most enjoyable street food.”

He cleaned up the kitchen, not that he’d made much of a mess.

“If it was me cooking,” I said, “the place would look like a bomb site.”

Nope. No reaction. Just a look, then more wiping the surfaces.

So, I ate and drank and enjoyed the opportunity for comfort. Wanting to ask more questions about vampires, about the Arcana books. All in good time, I guess.

Done eating, I leaned back on the stool. “Thanks so much for that.”

“Would you like another?”

“You’ve just tidied up.”

“It’s not a problem.”

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll make fresh coffee.”

“Thanks.” I scanned the apartment some more. Checked on Fizz. She’d settled on the blankets, watching the city beyond.

“This is an amazing place,” I said. “Is it your only home?”

“No.” He got to work on food round number two. “I have a house in Seoul, one in Paris, another in New York, and one in Brighton. I spend most of my time here at the moment. Many of my current investigations are centered in London or within the UK.”

“London’s a good base.”

“It is.”

“Is it your favorite place?”

“No. That would be another of my homes off the coast of South Korea. On my private island.”

Wow. So many houses and an island? “Oh yeah? Cool.”

“It’s beautiful there. I haven’t been back for a year. Too much going on here.” He worked more of his culinary magic.

“A private island. So, so cool.”

He looked up, his dark eyes shimmering in the sunlight. The blue tones in his black hair were more prominent in the morning light. “And you? Do you move around the city, or do you settle in one place?”

“The shopping center at Elephant & Castle. Live in a hole in the wall—the hovel I mentioned.”

He nodded, casting his eyes back to the food.

“It’s shelter at least,” I added, sipping my coffee. “Better than being under the stars. I know some people find that amazing, but I couldn’t think of anything worse.”

He kept cooking.

“One day, I’ll get out of there. Get a place of my own. Make a home for me and Fizz. I don’t care where, just as long as it has four walls and running water. Safe. I mean, I feel pretty safe in my hovel. It’s a community of good people down there. But it’s not... It’s not right, is it?”

The vampire looked up, didn’t speak.

“Nothing’s been right about my life. Maybe for a brief period when I was twelve. I moved in with a foster family, had the best year. But then I ran away because a bad guy tried to hurt me. A guy I trusted from within my new family. When the police found me, I went back into care until I ended up on the streets at sixteen. It’s been that way ever since with the odd spell of squatting.” I shrugged. “Doesn’t stop me, though. I won’t stop aiming for the best.”

“You don’t know anything about your parents?”

“They died when I was a baby. Mum of an overdose, Dad from...”

“From what?”

“Do we have to talk about this?”

“No.”

“Good.”

Wow. I’d spilled more than I’d like. Talking about the parents I never knew hurt, even if I didn’t know who they

were. I knew they didn't die happy. Always poor, substance abuse problems. Shouldn't have had me, really. Adam and Maxine Christmas. Warlock and human respectively. Londoners. Peckham-born. Probably why I hung around Elephant & Castle. Close to my roots in the south of the city.

I vowed I'd never end up like them. Yeah, I was poor to the point of street living. A temporary problem. I stayed away from drugs, from the bad people as best I could. Slept with a few guys, never getting into anything more than sex. A relationship would be better with a more stable guy.

I'd yet to find one of those.

Grindle did find out that Adam's mum was still alive, and his sister. Maxine had a twin brother. None of them lived in London, and I never tried to contact them.

Would they want to know me?

Tae finished making me more food. I ate joyfully.

"I'm sorry for your suffering," he said as he poured more coffee for me.

Didn't expect that. I chewed, nodding, swallowing my bite. "I've got Fizz. I've got a good friend living next to me. As I said, I'm lucky."

Because his expression never seemed to change from glassy, untouchable beauty, I didn't know what he thought of that. He didn't speak, cleaning up once again.

"I should get back there after this," I said.

"I can take you."

"You don't need to do that."

"I know I don't, Clayton. But I will."

“Clay.”

A small nod. “I have clothes for you.”

“Thanks. You didn’t need to do that.”

“Is that your answer for everything?”

“Sorry.”

He put the cleaning cloth away, headed over to pet Fizz. Leaving me, well, confused. Everything about this was confusing. And I felt empty. No, not empty. More like muted. I noticed it as I drank the last inch of my coffee.

I joined Tae with Fizz. “Arcana feels like it’s sleeping.”

He turned his head, looking up at me over his shoulder from his crouched position. “Is that so?”

I nodded. “Weird, right?”

“It may wake back up.”

“Maybe.”

Fizz was purring her head off. I moved around to crouch by his side. My cat meowed at me, content as the sun bathed her fur.

“She loves the sun,” I said.

“Remember, my offer is serious,” he responded. “This can be your home.”

“Not if the Arcana doesn’t wake up.”

He stood. “Whenever you’re ready to leave, let me know. Your clothes are on the sofa.” He walked away, heading back to the kitchen.

An outfit of blue jeans and a navy T-shirt sat on the sofa, along with underwear and socks. Even a pair of dark brown

boots and a matching jacket. Every item designer.

Seriously?

I slipped them on quickly before Tae returned.

“Gosh, Fizz,” I breathed. “These are amazing.”

She meowed. I joined her at the window. “What do you think about all this?” I rubbed her head. She purred, eyes glued to the window—like her version of a TV.

“Yes or no?”

A yes would change her life too.



LATER THAT MORNING, Tae drove me back to the shopping center. We didn't talk the whole way. An uncomfortable experience in a comfy car.

He wore a cap, black clothes, and his face flickered once more. Was Arcana the reason I could see through the fairy magic? And was he a client of Grindle's, too?

Tae pulled up to a quiet spot on the station side of the building, his dark eyes roaming the surroundings.

“You live close to a toxic river,” he said.

“I do. Nothing happens with it, though. Like everywhere.”

“Until Synth cannot contain it.”

“Do you think that will happen?”

He faced me. “I think anything is possible, Clayton.”

“Clay.”

A hand on my arm. I froze, staring at his pale hand resting there.

“I can change your life,” he said, making it sound like the sexiest statement ever.

My mouth stopped working again.

“Your power can bring great change,” he added. “And I can keep you safe.”

“From...” I gulped, trying to get some moisture back to my mouth. “From the witches.”

“Yes. They must not find out your secret.”

Both secrets... “How will you do that? All it takes is one wrong move for a witch to see me.”

I couldn't tell if his hand was warm or cool through the material of my jacket. All I knew was I liked it being there.

“I'll keep you safe.”

This was becoming too much. I needed some space to think about this. Yes, thinking about living in a posh penthouse should be a no-brainer, right? But... But...

...damn the but.

“I understand you need some time,” he said. “You have my details.” He removed his hand. “I'll be waiting.” He got out of the car, walking around to open the door for me.

“Thanks.” I got out with Fizz, her chilling on her new yellow bed.

Tae grabbed the bag with her meds and food. “Remember Elizabeth would like to see her again in a week.” He rubbed my cat's head.

“I remember.”

“Your appointment will be at mine, whatever your decision.”

“Okay.”

“Would you like me to carry these for you?”

I shook my head. “Just hook it on my arm. Thanks.” He would not be coming to my hovel.

“Are you sure?”

If he kept giving me the sexy broody vibes, I’d go back to the penthouse right now. Throw caution to the wind.

A part of me wanted just that. To stop this way of living, to jump on a new train. But did I want to be a demon hunter? Did I really want to tangle with the darkness and live with a stranger? With a vampire?

A billionaire vampire. A desirable bachelor. Did he go for scrawny male warlocks?

God. Was I really going *there*?

From a mysterious slice of man candy on the train, to this. Things were moving too fast, spinning my brain like an overworked bobbin.

Arcana and demons...

“Goodbye, Clayton.”

“Clay.”

“Goodbye, Clay. Stay safe. I am only a call away.” He gave me a phone.

“Is this for me?”

“Of course. How else will you contact me?”

I had been thinking about that problem seeing as I had no phone or internet access.

“But—”

“My number is saved in there, along with the appropriate apps for the other forms of communication. Calling is best.”

“Thank you.”

He returned to the car.

“Bye,” I said softly.

I watched him go. As soon he left my sight, I hurried back to my hovel, trying not to bounce Fizz.



“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?” Kelly demanded as I arrived. “And what happened to poor Fizz?”

My heart raced. “Sorry. Been a bit of a night. Let me get Fizz inside, and we’ll talk.”

“Your clothes...”

“I know, I know. Give me a sec.”

I settled Fizz down, covering her with a blanket. She gave me big, judgmental eyes. She wanted me to get on that phone and tell Tae to come back and get us out of this hell.

But what about Kelly? I wanted to get her out too.

With my cat staring at me, I slid off the blankets and sat on the edge of my hovel. Kelly waited, sitting cross-legged outside of her tent, smoking a cigarette.

“I think we both have news.” She beamed a smile at me.

“We do?”

She nodded. “You go first.”

“You can—”

“I insist, luv. I want to know where *they* came from.” She pointed at my posh garments.

Okay, so I couldn't tell her the full truth. I knew that, alarm bells going off to warn me. No matter how much I trusted her, this was not a secret for her ears.

Some great friend I was.

I watered the story down.

“He gave me these clothes and drove me home,” I finished.

I didn't add the moving in with him part, either. Or his name. How could I explain without sounding like I'd gone all *Pretty Woman*? And she'd tell me to do it, to not be an idiot. Seize the opportunity.

But what about her?

“Really?” she said.

“Yep.” *Liar.*

“You didn't bang your head?”

“Rude!”

She laughed. “It sounds like a fairytale. So now what?”

“Erm...”

“Is there more?”

“No...” With downcast eyes, I rubbed the back of my neck, not looking sheepish at all. Ha!

“There’s more. Tell me.”

“He... He... Wants to see me again.”

Damn. The lie crawled back down my throat, a furry and grubby thing. But the truth wouldn’t work here. I had to be careful.

But you trust Kelly...

My friend’s smile almost split her face in two. “Really? Oh my God! You’re being serious?”

“I’m being serious.” *And a dirty liar.*

“Blimey.” She shook her head. “A billionaire wants to see you again. What’s his name?”

“I can’t tell you. Yet.”

“I get that. Protecting his identity.”

“Glad you understand.”

“Did you fuck him?”

“No!” I countered a little too loudly.

She frowned. “Calm your tits, luv. I was only asking. Would it be so bad if you did?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

Images of Tae flashed in my mind, every inch of my skin flushing with heat.

“You okay there?” Kelly asked with a knowing wink.

“I’m...” I cleared my throat. “I’m fine.”

“Well, good for you. Go for it, I say. Bang that billion-pound honey cake, whoever he is. You deserve happiness.”

I leaned forward. “So do you.”

“Which brings me to my news.”

I listened.

“Found myself a man too. Well to do. Not a billionaire, but the next best thing.”

“What? When?”

“Last night.”

“Here?”

“No. I went out after feeling angsty over you not being here.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” I put a hand on her shoulder. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“No worries, luv.” She patted my hand. “Anyway, I went out, walked around for a bit, came across this lovely guy. Well-dressed. A bit posh. We started talking. Got on like a house on fire. We even kissed before dawn.”

“Really?”

“Really, luv. It was lovely. And he doesn’t care about me being homeless. In fact, he said he wants to see me again tonight.”

I leaned back on my hands. “Wow. I can’t believe this.”

“Fairytale all round,” she added. “I wanted you to see my outfit choices. I’m working with what I’ve got but—”

“Nope,” I cut her off. “You’re not. We’re going in *there*.” I jammed a thumb in the direction of the shopping center. “New glad rags on me. I have the cash.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I can, and I am. Let’s do it. What time is your date?”

“Eight.”

“Then we’ve got time.”



AT SUNSET, Kelly was kitted out in her new outfit of dark jeans, glittery silver top, and matching heels, with a fab black jacket to go with them. I helped her with makeup and even bought her some accessories. All from the discount clothing store where everything was a fiver, the earrings and bracelets a pound each.

Money well spent.

“You look amazing,” I said.

“Thanks, luv. I really appreciate it.” The temperature had taken a tumble, condensation puffing out of our mouths. “I’m nervous.”

“Nerves are good, right?”

“I suppose so.” She trembled. “Poxy weather.”

He was picking her up in his car, taking her to some fancy restaurant in Central London.

“Well, this is it,” she said. “I’d better go. Can you come with me?”

“To dinner?”

“No. I mean walk me to the car.”

“You know I will. Let me just add another layer to my girl.”

“Course.”

Fizz sat under a bundle of blankets, eyes narrow slits. Purring.

“Okay in there?” I added another blanket. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Purr, purr.

Change her life. Let her live in warmth. Winter was coming again. Every year seemed to be worse, the cold bringing a harder bite each time.

“Ready,” I announced, following Kelly out of Golden Lane.

“Think I need another shit,” she said.

“No, you don’t. Stop it.”

“You’re right.”

Why did she look so pale? Even with the makeup on. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, luv.”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I do.”

“Erm, no you don’t. You do what makes you happy. Don’t ever feel pressured.”

“Steady on, Clay!”

I’d swung a leg up on my soap box to defend her honor. “I’m just saying.”

“And I love you for that.”

We passed Roy arm in arm, heading across the main road away from the shopping center.

“He’s picking you up over here?” I asked.

“Yeah, I told him to.”

“Oh. Seems a bit weird.”

“Regretting it now.” Something in her tone sent prickles across my scalp.

But I carried on, letting her lead me into a side street, stopping under a solitary tree.

The street was quiet, no parked cars, sandwiched between an abandoned office block and a high wall.

“I need a ciggie,” she said.

“Have one,” I said, glancing about me nervously.

No need. Just me and Kelly out here. For now. Leader and his gang still played on my mind. They could strike at any time. The sooner Kelly was off with this guy, the sooner I could get back to my hovel.

“Not sure if you should meet him yet,” Kelly said quietly.

“I don’t need to.”

“But then you’re here, aren’t you?”

“I’ll go at the first sign of him.”

Why did she sound so sad?

“It’s your second date,” I said. “Well, first official one. Meeting the friends comes later.” I chuckled. “Listen to me, the dating guru.”

“It’s bloody freezing.”

“Won’t lie. This seems like a really secret spot. Creepy even.”

She nodded.

“What’s the matter?” Her previous luster really had drifted away.

“Nerves.”

“Oh.”

I hated this on-edge sensation, the tenseness in my limbs.

“There’s a car now.” Headlights cut through the dark. Thank God. Hovel time in my immediate future.

She unlinked her arm from mine. “I see it.”

“You sound like a robot.”

The burgundy-colored car rolled up beside us, and my blood froze.

Leader sat in the passenger seat, driven by one of the men from the attack. His fingers were glowing red with Synth.

“Kelly?” I tried to move. The magic glued my boots to the concrete. I tried to shimmer. It failed.

“I’m sorry, luv. I had to.”

At least I still had the use of my mouth. “You had to what?” I asked calmly.

“Trade you in. I...” Her eyes were wet with tears. “I can’t stand living on the streets anymore.”

“You and everyone else.”

Leader grinned up at me. His smirk told the world he’d won.

“We’re supposed to be friends,” I added. “This guy—”

“I know. He told me everything. Offered me cash. I want the cash. Being friends doesn’t get me a flat. And he’s not

lying. I've already got the keys to a place along with the money. Move in tonight."

"All true," Leader said as the door opened. He flexed his magic-stained fingers. "I'm a very giving man."

I remained calm. "No date. No kiss."

Leader laughed, getting out of the car. "I have standards. Kelly knows her place. I must say, you look lovely tonight, though."

"T-thanks," she replied.

"We met. Came up with a story after I concluded she knew the sneaky warlock bastard who got away." Leader stepped closer. "Clay Christmas." He laughed again. "Ridiculous name. What were your parents smoking when they named you?"

I ignored him.

"Bet they were dirty junkies," he added. "I can tell."

I kept on ignoring him.

Betrayed by my friend for money and shelter. I hadn't seen that one coming.

"It didn't take much, did it?" I said to Kelly. "After everything we've been through, you fucked me over at the first chance you got."

She didn't answer, hanging her head in shame.

"Spare me the drama," Leader stepped in. "Kelly here wants to be more than a smelly homeless freak like you. She wants a chance in life. I offered her that. I'm giving her that as a man of my word. And it is worth it. Revenge is always worth it."

I was going to help her. Change things for her. My fury bubbled, inching closer to the surface. How could she do this to me? Did our time together mean nothing? Did I really mean nothing? She was always on my mind, in my plans.

And now this.

I couldn't tolerate looking at her. Not even from the corner of my eyes. I tried to block her head-hanging form out of the fringes of my sight as best I could.

"I didn't do anything to you," I addressed the elephant ball sack.

"You called me names," Leader answered.

"You started it."

"This isn't a playground."

"Then stop acting like the school bully."

Leader looked me up and down. "Steal those clothes, did you?"

"No."

"A thief as well as everything else." He sighed theatrically. "Warlocks really are scum."

I wished for Arcana to wake up.

It didn't.

"Now what?" I growled at him.

He smiled at my rising anger. "Now we take you somewhere to have some fun. For us, not you." He rustled in the pocket of his long black coat and removed some cash. "Here, Kelly. Taxi fare for your new life. It's been a pleasure."

She stepped forward and took it.

Now, I'd never normally say anything like what followed. Ever. I consider myself to have a heart, a man with a lot of empathy. But in that moment, after she'd yanked the rug out from under me, then stamped on my heart, the nasty words tumbled out.

"I hope the booze kills you."

Kelly looked up at me. "Clay—"

"Fuck you. Go live your new life and keep killing that liver."

"I—"

I closed my eyes. "Fuck off, Kelly."

Leader laughed. My eyes flew open again. My ex-friend started to walk away with slow steps, constantly looking back.

Betrayal ravaged my soul, leaving me empty and aching. I held back the tears. Leader wouldn't have them.

Oh , God. Fizz. My baby. She'd be left alone with that dodgy leg. If the cold didn't get her, the streets would. I couldn't die. I had to break free.

Should've stayed with Tae.

"Now what?" I asked the witch prick.

"Easy now," he replied. "The night is young. We have many plans ahead for—"

A scream. Kelly.

I faced her direction.

A figure came ambling down the street, dressed in a dirty green raincoat, a black beanie hat on his head, battered green jeans on his legs. The shoelaces of his black trainers dangled as he walked. There were white buttons where his eyes should

be, angry red scars across his pale features—the worst one sliced across his clearly broken nose.

The button-eyed demon.

“Oh, shit,” I whispered.

EIGHT



The demon slowed as he carried on up the street, Kelly hurrying back this way.

I quite enjoyed her being terrified, even if my bladder threatened to betray me.

In the flesh, the button-eyed demon was far more horrifying. A weird blend of man and empty zombie, but also a demon. I eyed the demon tower visible from my viewpoint. Dark still.

Leader swept past me and Kelly, flexing his fingers. His comrade got out of the car to join him. Witches ready to hurt and protect.

What a joke.

“You made a mistake coming here,” Leader said pompously. “We’ll—”

The demon lunged forward so fast I yelped. The red jewel of the demon tower flared to life as he manifested the famous spikes in his hands, bursting out of his palms. He drove the bony shards into each witches’ head between the eyes. They twitched, and he withdrew the spikes. The two bodies crumpled into dead heaps.

Magic relinquished its hold on my feet. Time to get out of here.

Kelly screamed, tried to run around the demon. He killed her the same as the witches.

The street seemed to float in a soup of strangeness. Removed from the rest of the city. Had I really watched my friend die after she'd given me over to those two dead witches?

Those button eyes turned to me. He didn't move. The tower didn't seem to bother him. It was hard to tell. He didn't hunch over or react. As ADU sirens blazed, he continued to not react.

Creepy as fuck.

His head angled to the side. Did those buttons have sight? Must do.

"I feel her," he said. "I feel her always."

A heavy thud beside me.

"Tae?"

The vampire was crouched beside me in a battle stance. "We need to go."

Yes, I bloody know that!

"Always feel her," the button-eyed beast said again, blood dripping from his spikes.

Tae grabbed me, hauling me out of a killing trajectory. I squeaked and panicked, my stomach in knots. He flung me around, so I clung to his back. Quickly, making my head spin and my tummy lurch. And then we were moving up the wall of the office block, Tae behaving like Spider-Man. Hands barely

gripping the bricks, crawling up and up and up until we were on the roof. I held on for dear life, unable to close my eyes.

He ran across the roof, keeping me on his back, to a block with a door—the roof entrance/exit. It was chained up. Not a problem for this vampire. He kicked it down, launched us into the gloomy dark, charging down a stairwell. I put my head down then, pressing the right side of my face onto his shoulder. There were possible dangling things in places like this—wires crawling out from the ceiling, light fixtures, things to bang me on the head and off the back of my savior.

Tae moved like a bat out of hell, wasting no time in getting us to the ground floor.

A door caved in to our left. Tae paused.

“I feel her,” came the voice of the demon in the dark.

The ADU were almost upon us. Their screaming sirens way too close.

My heart was set to stop from fright at the echoing, hurried footsteps coming right for us.

“Oh, shit. He won’t stop...” I said.

Tae moved again, the sudden acceleration threatening whiplash. Another door died under his boots. He burst into the street in a blur of speed as ADU cars whizzed down the main road directly before us. The vampire leaped over a vehicle in a high jump, clearing it easily.

I held back a scream.

Gosh, I felt like I was trapped in an action movie with all these moves.

The screech of breaking vehicles screamed behind me, the voice of the demon beneath that sound. Tae charged through a

side street, crawled up another building. A house this time. He leaped from its roof to another, then another. Sickening and kind of cool at the same time. Well, cool if my stomach didn't roil at every damn leap.

I caught sight of the demon tower's ruby flare again.

Had the ADU spotted us? Captured us on camera?

Shit. Shit. Shit.

When we were eventually clear of the area, approaching a tiny green space sandwiched between quiet houses with plenty of trees and shadows, Tae stopped.

I hesitated to let him go but unfurled my arms from around his solid form.

He turned to face me. "Are you okay?"

Slowly, I gathered my words. "I'm... A bit rattled." My insides had been through a blender. "I'm fine."

The vampire scanned the area with those dark eyes. "We can't stay here. We'll return to my apartment."

I bent over, hands on my thighs. Man, I needed several moments. "Not... Not without Fizz."

"We can get your cat."

I straightened. "You... You saved me."

"I followed you."

"What?"

"I followed you," he repeated. "From when you left your home."

"So you... You saw everything?"

"Yes."

“But... But why did you... You watched?”

“I did. I wanted to see what would happen. I would not have let those witches hurt you.”

“You were... testing me?”

“To see if Arcana awoke.”

He spoke so matter of fact it poked at my anger.

“I can’t believe you... You were following me and let me... let me almost...” Shit. I was really breathless with my indignance.

“Would you rather I didn’t?”

“I... I didn’t say that.”

“The button-eyed demon would have killed you.” Frosty tones. So clinical.

He had me there. “I know. I’m...” Ah, crap. “Thank you.”

He didn’t react, didn’t even blink. “Let’s get your cat.”

“One sec,” I said. “I just... You move really fast.”

“Yes.” He waited, didn’t say another word until I indicated I was ready.

I climbed on his back again, and we were off into the night, me holding on to him and the contents of my stomach.

No easy feat, that.



MERCIFULLY, his car was parked near the shopping center.

We’d grabbed Fizz, and he’d taken us back to Raven Tower. No ADU, no button-eyed demon. A safe journey, me

having to wear the blindfold again for the secret entrance moment.

The journey back to Tae's gave me time to think, to process things.

I could have died tonight. I'm sure if Leader had his way, I'd end up a corpse. Maybe not tonight, but certainly at some point after he'd done God knew what to me.

I sat on the sofa of Tae's place, watching the fake fire and nursing some more of that vodka. The wind had picked up a bit outside, blustering against the panoramic windows.

Fizz sat on her bed, gazing out at the night. Complacent, probably grateful for the warmth. It really was a bitter night out there.

Kelly was dead. That sat at the forefront of my mind, her death replaying as an unwanted horror scene. I wanted it out, to wake up from a nightmare into a reality where my friend hadn't sold me to a witch prick and was still alive.

No such ideology existed.

"I can't believe this," I whispered. "How did this happen?"

The clear liquid vibrated in the glass tumbler cradled in my shaky hands. I slowly sipped some more of it, trying to steady my jumbled nerves.

Tae returned from washing off the fairy magic, dressed in his gray jogging bottoms and a black vest. He sat on the other side of the sofa, watching me.

I wasn't mad at him for following me. He'd saved my life. Anyway, who was I to say anything when I'd planned to stalk him a little myself?

My shoulders sagged, defeat a heavy weight around my neck.

“She betrayed me,” I said softly. “I trusted her so much, and she...” I closed my eyes against the hot rise of tears. “I could be dead. Fizz left alone.”

Aching in my chest. A sob escaping, along with the tears. Everything pressed down on me. The terror, the strangeness, and the pure fucking heartbreak. The lack of real safety in that hovel with Kelly next door. Ready to be free of me whenever she got the chance.

“Did she hate me?” I breathed after a shuddering, soundless sob. I was really trying to not break down.

“I cannot answer that,” Tae said.

“I know.”

“Desperation can bring out the wicked side of a person.”

He was right. But that didn't matter. I was desperate to change my life. I'd never hurt my friends to do it. Ever. I could say that with utmost certainty.

Yet I wasn't Kelly. I didn't live in her mind and heart. Her pain—

“Making excuses,” I muttered. “I can't handle this.” More tears ran hot and fast. “I hate this. I hate this so fucking much.” I looked up at Tae, wiped at my tears. “Sorry. You don't want to see this side of me.”

“Release what you need to release.” A robotic delivery from the epitome of beauty.

His hair was tied back from his face, that alabaster skin holding a new glow. As if he'd been renewed with some magical bath. Radiant. Jawline ready to cut glass.

I closed my eyes again, needing a change of subject. “How did you climb the wall like that?”

“It is all to do with air velocity, the feel of the brickwork, or whatever the substance is, against our skin, and the lightness of vampire bodies.”

Huh? I opened one eye. “But you’re properly solid.”

“I know. However, we can change and adapt our bodies where necessary. To become light, to stay solid.”

Weird. “Can you fly?”

“No.”

Kelly is dead.

I winced against my thoughts. “Shit.” More tears. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for sorrow.” He moved, coming to sit right beside me. “You must feel the pain to get through it. This is a terrible night. Spend your tears all you want.”

To my utter surprise, he put his arm around me. This cold, scary vampire I barely knew held me. And my head fell to his shoulder, his arm triggering a switch as the pressure became too much, as I tried to claw for sunshine within an eclipse.

His solid shoulder.

I broke down. Sobbed my heart out. Ugly cried against him as everything tore into my soul. I grabbed a handful of his vest, gripping it tight against the pain. My past crept up on me. The horrors of growing up, every piece of nasty shit from then to now breaking through my fragile defenses.

He held me close until I finally stopped twenty minutes later.

I sat upright, placing my hand on his thigh for leverage. Empty. Completely drained and exhausted.

He handed me a tissue, his arm still there. Reassuring. Strange. Kind of amazing. I faced him, weak from my tears, getting lost in his pools of darkness. Gosh, his face was so close to mine. Those lips, his entire body.

“Thanks.” I took the tissue, dabbing at my eyes and nose.

Fizz meowed from her bed. Concerned.

“I’m okay, baby girl,” I told her.

She meowed again, not buying it.

I got up, Tae’s arm slipping off my shoulders. I went to Fizz, worried she might drag herself over here and make things worse for her leg. She did move around on her own, but I didn’t like it.

I fussed over her. She licked my hands, rubbed her head against me.

“Everything’s okay,” I told her. Another lie for the night. Kind of. At least she was okay, out of the hovel. Safe here with the vampire.

Until we weren’t.

My trust took the worst battering of my twenty-four years. Even worse than when that scum bag when I was twelve. Because I expected it, if I were honest. There were signs of his evil. But Kelly? I didn’t sense one hint of a traitor from her. I still didn’t. What made her want to do that to me outside of desperation? I’d never get that answer, but I’d always want it.

“Tae?”

He was already standing beside me, silently appearing there.

“Yes?”

“I’ve made my decision.”

There was no more trust out there on the streets. People you cared about only turned out to be fake.

No more thinking. No more living in *that* place. The memories would burn me. I had to leave them there, to move on. Risky to be here because of demon blood, yes, because of everything Tae wanted me to do. But what was life without risk? What if the rest of my people on Golden Lane decided to do a Kelly on me?

I wouldn’t hang around to find out. I chose the rock over the hard place.

“I’ll do it,” I said.

“Are you sure, Clayton?”

“Clay. Yes, I’m sure.”

“Good. Would you like some dinner?”

I stood up, head tilted upward to face him. “I’d love some.”

His lips parted, held in a slightly open position for half a minute. I drank them in. Their glossiness, their kissable pink hues.

I bet they’re soft...

“*Bibimbap*,” he said.

“Pa-pardon?”

“Mixed rice. A Korean dish. Vegetables, minced beef, fried egg. Rice, of course. Other things. I can make it for you.”

“That sounds nice. But...” I hesitated.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s cheeky.”

He frowned, his forehead not creasing. “You can ask for whatever you like.”

“Why?”

“Because you are my charge. You are here now.”

His charge? “Erm, thanks. But it feels weird.”

“To have someone care for you?”

“No one really has.” I scratched the back of my left wrist with my right hand.

“I see.”

What about you? What’s your story?

“Make your suggestion,” he added.

“Pizza.”

“Okay.”

“Do you like pizza?”

“I do.”

“What kind?”

“What kind do you like?”

I walked to the window, taking in the lights of London. Removed a fairy lollipop from my pocket. “It’s been ages since I’ve had pizza. Something like two years. It’s pretty expensive if you want a decent one not swimming in grease.”

Thinking about it got the saliva flowing, the tummy rumbling for good reasons rather than fear. Taking my mind off the crappy day. “I’m pretty boring, really. I love a margherita with a decent crust.”

“Then I’ll get it for you.”

I unwrapped the lollipop. “You don’t have to.” The candy went in my mouth.

My skin bristled. He was right behind me. I didn’t turn, worried about the electricity sparking up and down my spine—my groin enjoying the sensation for a fleeting moment. Then it all deflated, the crushing horror of losing a friend—

No. Fuck this. I turned around, removing the fairy concoction from my mouth. “If you don’t mind, pizza will be great. I would like to try that rice thingy someday, though.”

He nodded and got on his phone.



GOSH, he’d got two enormous pizzas from some amazing place nearby. Perfect sourdough base, perfect tomato sauce and blends of cheese. Everything perfect. I put away eight slices before my stomach gave in, along with two cans of cloudy lemonade.

“Amazing,” I said, patting my food baby.

“It was delicious.” I hadn’t seen the vampire eat more than one slice.

“Even better the next day,” I added. “For breakfast.”

Tae remained silent, his eyes on the TV. He’d put a movie on for me. My favorite film of all time—*The Birdcage*. Good

to see it again, the antics of Robin Williams and Nathan Lane helping to lift me out of the mire.

The movie reached its climax.

“Enjoyable,” Tae said.

“A real feel-good film,” I responded. “I love it.” I returned to my lollipop, which I’d re-wrapped before the pizza came. The more I sucked, the more magic in my system—imperative in my hiding from Tae.

Lying to Tae.

“Would you like to watch it again?” he asked.

“Nah. How about something different?”

“Such as?”

“Something fun and happy again.”

He didn’t react to my lollipop. But then he didn’t react to much of anything. He might be a stranger, but I’d gleaned enough to know he wasn’t huggy or running on high emotions. On the outside, at least. Maybe there was more beneath the surface.

Isn’t there always? That didn’t mean it was mine to see.

Man, he confused me with his cold vs. warm routine. Mostly cold, but the arm around me had been a super-warm gesture. Super-unexpected. Lovely. It’d shown hints at more within the ice.

At least he had a warm penthouse and pizza and a face to get lost in.

“Decide,” he said, sipping some vodka.

“Unless you want to talk.”

His head turned slightly in my direction. “Relax. We can save talking until later. You’ve been through enough.”

“Relaxing is nice,” I said, eyeing up another slice of pizza. Clearly, I’d lost my mind to think there’d be room for it. Okay, maybe a few inches to the left. Might squeeze in there.

Nope. That would mean moving.

“*Ruthless People*,” I said, really aiming for the oldies. “Bette Midler. Danny DeVito. So funny.”

He searched for it on his streaming service. He found it, clicked play.

“Dessert?” he asked.

“I couldn’t... Give me an hour.”

Was that a smile creeping upon his lips? No. Not quite.

The movie played, Fizz coming to my lap halfway through for cuddles. We snuggled up together, warm and away from the cold of the outside. For tonight, we could embrace a pocket of niceness. And I intended to enjoy every second of it, my focus on the movie slipping from the screen to Tae several times.

He caught me staring, arching an eyebrow.

Oh, bollocks!

“Did you need something?” he asked.

I swallowed, cheeks warm. “I’m good.”

“Are you ready for dessert?”

I answered that I was, just for a distraction.

My poor tummy.

Still, I managed to squeeze in some ice cream he'd ordered in. Birthday cake flavor. Holy shit. Amazing.

No more food, my stomach pleaded.

I think we were done for the night.



KELLY DREAM. A flashback of how things used to be. Summer nights drinking wine together, or her crying her pain out to me. Endless conversation, a mutual appreciation of prawn cocktail crisps and hot men. So much time spent together, a bond formed. And then it shattered, glass caught in a hurricane. Forever lost to me.

I woke up, my heart hurting. Damn reality.

Blinking the haze of sleep away, I sat up. The TV was still on, playing the news now. Almost midnight.

“Hello,” Tae said, still sitting in the same spot on the other side of the corner sofa. Fizz now slept in his lap. “How are you?” He kept his eyes on the news reporting another incident with the button-eyed demon.

I yawned, stretching. “Did they catch him?”

“No.”

I rubbed at my face. “Will they ever?”

“His time will come.”

God, he sounded so sexy and creepy at the same time.

23:59 on the news clock.

“Who do you think the *she* is he mentioned?” I asked. “We haven’t talked about that yet.”

“I’m looking into it.”

“Weird though, right?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll tell me if you find anything?”

“Of course.”

Sleepiness still held me in its grip. “I think I need to go to bed, if that’s okay.”

“Sleep when you feel the need to sleep. Would you like—”

Energy coursed through me, a fiery glow in my hands. I shot to my feet, staring down at my palms.

“Oh my God.”

Arcana woke up in a wild tide of power. I sucked in air, chest ablaze, as I darted away from the sofa to be clear of Fizz.

In the open space between the kitchen and the sofa, the Mark of Arcana appeared, the bright star burning into the floor but not really burning it. Intense power, magic connected to the ancient world, to the elements around me. Stronger this time.

“Oh. My. God.”

It shouldn’t be here in these times. Why was it here inside me?

“Gosh…”

My claws manifested, a dusting of scales across my skin. My demon blood shining. I kept the wings in, pushing against their will to be free, not wanting to explain away another T-shirt and jacket. Success! It hurt as they pressed against my skin, but they remained inside.

Loved myself a win. Go me!

But then I panicked, unable to look at Tae. Waiting for the shock, for the truth to get me injured. A blow to the head, me bound up and carried off, punished for my lie, for being a disgusting demon hybrid or whatever the hell I was.

It didn't come.

Tae was at my side again, though, scrutinizing every detail of me. Not seeing the real me.

"It's returned," he said.

Fairy magic traveled its own course away from Arcana, wrapping itself around me, weaving a shield. Doing its job and staying in its lane.

"Shit," I breathed.

The star vanished, the glow of my hands following. But the magic stayed, rich and pure in my veins. Ready to be cast in whatever way I commanded. Power at my fingertips and me with no clue of how to use it.

I wanted it out.

Not really.

Yes, really.

Ugh.

"I'm... I don't know what to say."

Tae stepped around me. "It seems to activate at midnight."

"So I'm like a magical vampire?"

"How so? Are you draining energy from somewhere?"

"Erm, no." I scratched my head, my joke failing to land. "I meant that I can only do things in the dead of night."

“And that makes you a vampire how?”

“It doesn’t. Vampires move around in the day.”

He regarded me for a moment, then changed the subject.

Why did his stare set my pulse on fire? He made me flush with embarrassment and want him to tear my clothes off at the same time.

“This is interesting,” he proclaimed.

“It’s weird, you mean.” Phew. It was so hot in here. “Why would magic only activate at night?”

“It could be to do with Trace Fall.”

“Huh?”

“Trace Fall happens at night, and Trace is linked to Arcana. Maybe that’s the connection, if at all.”

A valid explanation.

“I think tomorrow we will go to the British Library to see if we can find anything in the grimoires.”

“That’s how you have access to those books?” I asked.

“Yes. But I’ve never been able to decipher the text.”

“Oh? Why?”

“For one, I am not magical. Secondly, only those with Arcana can read what’s inside.”

“Like me”

“Like you—the first person to have read them in two centuries.”

“Gosh.”

“But that’s for tomorrow.”

Silence.

“Now what?” I asked.

He folded his arms across his chest, his skin becoming more radiant by the minute. “What would you like to do?”

I gnawed on my bottom lip for a moment, considering. “I’d like another slice of pizza.”

“Then have one.”

“I don’t really.”

“No?”

“Well, I do. But I have an idea...” A strange desire prodded at me from some unknown corner. “I don’t think it’s smart.”

“Tell me,” he said, the deepness of his voice making me quiver.

I’d like you to bang me up against the wall.

Ahem.

“Test my powers,” I said, popping my half-sucked lollipop in my mouth.

How was I going to get more of these without him knowing? Gosh, I’d be needing a lot of them. My poor teeth.

Another pause after my suggestion, me trapped in his regard. A specimen under his beautiful microscope.

“Out into the night,” he finally spoke.

I sighed with relief. “Yes.” The relief ebbed. “Erm, I think I don’t know. Probably not safe or smart after the button-eyed demon attack. ADU will be hot on the streets.”

“They always are.”

“I guess so.”

He moved an inch closer, a small glide like a cloud in a breeze. “We can certainly test your powers. I have some targets in need of neutralizing. Those who pose the smallest of threats yet requiring extermination.”

“Little fish,” I said.

“Exactly. You will require proper training before we go after the ‘big fish.’ But for now, I have the perfect demon for you. A bottom feeder to whet your appetite.”

What was his game, his reasons for being a demon hunter? Clearly, one of them had fucked him over in the past. But how? Should I ask? Yeah, because he’d take me over to the sofa for a chat and lean on my shoulder this time, right? Let it all out, get emotional, talk too much.

What am I doing here?

This whole demon manifesting thing I did. Scary. I really walked on eggshells. Living with Tae put me in the lion’s den with a steak on my back. But there were answers ahead of me. This job could be the key to discovering myself.

The vampire faced the window and slowly walked toward it. I followed him, keeping a distance. He stopped at the glass, gazing at the night.

“If you want to pull out of this, Clayton, you can.”

“Clay,” I whispered.

“But you have the power to change the world,” he continued. “To remove this demonic stain on our lives. Maybe one day, you could seize some semblance of power for yourself. Even share your gift. Change the witch political system. Shift the cruelty, cleanse the system.”

“Just me?”

“Anything is possible. Remember that a harmless penny can be a deadly weapon dropped from a great height.”

“Oh.”

“Sorry. A terrible analogy. But do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

“I do, Tae.” *But I don’t quite believe it.*

“Death for demons again.”

“The button-eyed demon up near the top of the list.”

“Yes.”

“I wish it’d been midnight when we saw him,” I said. “I could have stopped him.”

“You will. But in time. He is... Do I have to say big fish again?”

That caught me so off guard I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Use whatever you like.”

Like me.

No chuckles from him. I faced his solid, unmoving back.

“And I do expect loyalty,” he said.

Whoa. That came at me like a bullet. “Sorry?”

“If we are to work together, I demand your loyalty.”

Sure. Loyalty from a liar...

“Right.”

“Do I have it?”

I moved to stand beside him. “Do you trust me enough to believe me?”

“Trust is a strange beast.”

“It is.”

“I think I can trust you.”

Ugh. Here came the guilt. “You can...” *Apart from one tiny detail.* “I’ll do my best.”

“I want more than your best.”

I held my hands up. “This is crazy. We don’t know each other to make these declarations.”

“Yet you moved in here.”

“Yes. But you won’t show me your secret entrance.”

Oh, God. Why did that silly part of mind take it to a smutty place?

I want to see your real secret entrance, wink, wink, nudge, nudge.

He turned to face me. “These are odd circumstances, I accept that. Yet we’ve experienced a great deal together within forty-eight hours. More than most strangers ever will. We have secrets. My hunting isn’t strictly legal, seeing as I have a talisman. I have enough friends in low places to cover my operation, though. And you carry Arcana. I think that is enough to expect loyalty from each other.”

“I, erm, yeah.”

“You have my word that I will keep you safe. You will never go without. You will never have to endure the streets again for as long as you remain loyal to me.” A pause. “There will be consequences for betrayal. I’m not trying to scare you. I am simply being honest.”

“Gosh,” I said. Why couldn’t this be some kinky situation where he wanted me to be his live-in sex toy in exchange for a better life?

Okay, so now I wanted my *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Pretty Woman* moments rolled into one.

“You have my loyalty,” I said.

“Good. Before we go, we need to hide you. It is important to maintain separate identities. I have several aliases, each specific to every demon I deal with.”

“How am I going to... Oh. Fairy magic.”

“I have plenty of it to spare, but no.”

“No?”

“I would never risk giving you fairy magic without specifics. That would be an unsafe practice.”

Phew! Because I’d got to fretting about what it would do to the dosage already inside me. Make me spill the beans? Turn me into a toadstool?

A toadstool?

“I am awaiting confirmation of an appointment from my contact,” Tae added. “A trusted fairy—which is an oxymoron, I know. His loyalty is paramount, though. I just wish he would manage his time better.”

Sounds like Grindle...

Could the fairy hide Arcana, too?

“For now, I will provide you with a cap, some colored contact lenses, and some fake glasses. Not the greatest of disguises, but they will be sufficient enough.”

“Okay.”

I was really doing this. I was jumping deeper into this new life.

Fuck it. When life gives you lemons, no matter how sour, turn them into lemonade.

NINE



Back in his car, with blue contacts covering my hazel eyes and a black cap pulled down low, I sucked on a lollipop as Tae drove. And he didn't ever question why I had the candy. His disguise was barely even flickering for me now. The fairy magic flared around his face with embers, burning away as paper meeting fire. Arcana stripped him of his secret.

Good. I really, really liked his face.

Fizz was back home, safe in her bed.

Home. Ha! Getting too used to calling the penthouse my home already...

"Can I ask you a question?" I said, desperate to fill the car's silence.

"Yes."

"When were you born?"

"1751," he replied. "When Korea was a dynastic kingdom—the Joseon Dynasty."

"You're..." I did the math. "You're not too far off three hundred years old?" Short by ten years.

"Yes. Two-hundred and ninety. As of this February."

"Wow. That's... wow."

“Exhausting.”

“You’re tired of life?”

“No.”

“Oh.” I gave it a few seconds. “I guess you’ve seen so much in your lifetime to make you world-weary.”

“You could say that, Clayton.”

“Clay. Sorry, am I being nose?”

“It’s fine. You are allowed to ask questions.”

But you won’t always answer?

“My life is short compared to other vampires. Much shorter.”

He made a left, heading toward Blackwall Tunnel. We were going south again. This time to Deptford.

“Who’s the oldest vampire you know?” I asked.

Man, I was bringing the nosiness like never before.

“My sire,” he answered.

“Your who?”

“The one who made me.”

“Oh, yeah. I did actually know that. Brain fart.”

He simply drove.

“How old are they?” I pressed.

“Two-thousand years old.”

“Holy shit.”

“And she hasn’t aged a day.”

Was that humor? “I bet. Does she live in London?”

“No. I haven’t seen her in a long time. I have no wish to.”

“Oh.”

With that, I left it alone. Sucked on my lollipop some more. Got that fairy in me to cover my lies.

After passing through the Blackwall Tunnel, and more silence, we arrived at a street left to rot. So many houses with broken windows and roofs, some buildings half-collapsed. The road itself was riddled with potholes, and a toxic river cut across in a twisting green ribbon, protected by the faithful glass. At the end of the street, it forked into two streams, vanishing underground.

God, it was so sad.

The streetlights retained power, flickering in dying glows. Some of the houses even showed signs of light and life. Better to live indoors than out in the elements. Man, did I get that.

Tae parked at the beginning of the road, reversing into a spot under a tree. Easy to drive off quickly parking like this. Smart. I liked it.

He got out. I did too. He was beside me before I got both feet on the asphalt.

That would never not be creepy.

“Follow me,” he said quietly.

“Who is it we’re, erm... taking down?” I whispered.

“Mike. Demonic drug dealer.”

“Oh.”

“Be on your guard for needles, for blades. For others. He keeps a collection of followers around him. You’ll be safe with me, but it’s always good to be vigilant.”

“My life has kept me vigilant.”

“Good.”

I kept close to him as a bitter wind blew down the street, whipping up fallen leaves and rubbish. The place stank of sewage. In fact, I stepped over an open drain as we turned into a front garden of a house halfway down the street.

This house had a roof and windows. Drawn curtains, light peeking out from the edges. The best-looking building here.

The front door opened, a guard stepped out with a machete. Their face was hidden behind a clown mask, the rest of them smothered in black. No inch of skin showing.

“Fuck do you want?” A male voice.

“See Mike,” Tae replied.

“You call him?”

“Yes.”

Did he?

“Wait here,” the guard said, slamming the door.

“You have an appointment?” I asked.

“I made it earlier. I often use Mike for supplies.”

“Drugs?”

The door opened again. “Come in,” the guard said impatiently.

Tae took drugs? What the hell?

We were led through corridors of red and white wallpaper and a worn red carpet, passing closed doors until we reached a kitchen. An extremely messy kitchen. Plates and cups piled high in the sink, all manner of stuff scattered across the

worktops. A woman stood by the back door, machete in hand. Two more men hovered at the edges of the room.

The thin man sat at the kitchen table counting money caught my attention the most. Dripping in gold chains and diamonds, wearing expensive clothes, he radiated arrogance. And for my Arcana magic, he screamed *demon*.

Shit.

The demon didn't look up as he said, "Gaz, my man. What the fuck do you want this time? Can't have gone through that crack already." He shook his head. "Crackheads are the worst."

Gaz?

My guts twisted. This place was the pit of yuck.

"What can I say? I'm a whore for the stuff." Tae's tone changed, as if a new man stood there.

An act.

"Ha ha! Love it. Have a seat. Relax." He clicked his fingers. One of the men moved out of the room.

Tae didn't sit down.

"Who's your warlock friend?" Mike asked.

My warlock mark always gave me away. Not a disguisable part of me, unfortunately.

"Lee," I said, taking a leaf out of the covert operations book before Tae spoke.

"Welcome to my fucking palace, Lee. Sometimes it really is a fucking palace."

The others in the room laughed with him.

Mike watched me with fake green eyes. Could he smell me? Was this my new aroma—a blend of demon and Arcana-laced warlock?

“Fucking costs extra,” he added. “We cater to all tastes.”

“No... No, thanks,” I said.

He shrugged, bundling some cash with an elastic band. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

Silence. Waiting. My nerves on fire.

“You not taking a seat?” Mike asked Tae. “Come on. Sit. Talk to me.”

“Not tonight.”

“No? Cat got your tongue?”

“Not really. But I do have something to say.”

Mike waited.

“Things are about to change. We’re done, me and you.”

A man moved forward at Tae’s threatening tone. Mike held up a hand to keep the soldier at bay.

“What’re you saying, Gaz?”

“I’m saying the end is here.”

“The fuck you talking about?”

“Think about it.”

Mike slowly pushed his chair back and stood. “You threatening me, you crackhead cunt? Is that it?”

“No.”

“I think it is. You’re coming into my sanctuary and trying to start shit.” He pointed a long finger at the vampire. “All that

crack gone to your head? I should cut you off. I've stayed up past my bedtime for you, 'cos you're one of my best customers, and this is how you treat me? I'm hurt. Really disappointed."

Tae moved forward, his fingers curling around the top of a chair. "How terrible for you."

Mike sneered. "What the fuck is this?"

"Change, Mike. Big change. You're the first because I've got all I need from you."

The demon laughed, his white eyes showing themselves from behind those contacts. "I'm really scared, Gaz. What? You gonna take me out with this freak?" He knocked his knees together mockingly. "Help. Save me from the pussy warlock. I'm more afraid of slipping on a banana skin."

I frowned, keeping quiet.

Mike grinned his brown teeth at me and sniffed a gunky sniff. "Don't know what's changed in you, Gaz, but it's funny as fuck. You've really given me a story to spread. But you've shafted yourself and your friend here. I'm gonna use your face as a lampshade."

I called Arcana to my hands.

Mike's grin dropped like a stone. "What's this?"

"This is the greatest magic trick of them all," Tae answered.

The demon's eyes widened. He knew he was screwed now.

"It can't be," he whispered.

"I'm afraid you must face the music and die," Tae said. No smile, no irony. Just an empty comeback, as if the demon

bored him to tears.

Probably did.

“Fucking kill them!” Mike screamed, spinning to run.

Tae moved fast, picking up the chair he held, throwing it at Mike’s back. The demon went down hard, the chair breaking as it hit the ground.

The demon’s soldiers moved in. Heavy footsteps boomed from above, from the corridor.

“Kill him,” the vampire said to me and jumped into an attack.

With terrifying speed, Tae went in for the kill, taking down soldier after soldier. Screams and blood, bodies tossed across the room, it all came in a blur of violence. Broken necks and slashed throats, he slaughtered them one after another. When he paused, snapping the arm of a man, I saw him for what he was. A gorgeous monster splattered with red, the beauty of his face cracked with menace but not diminished. No. A different kind of star. The fury of a frown that left no creases in his forehead, something different in his eyes, now flushed with crimson. The points of his vampire teeth were bared, twin points of deadliness.

Oh. My. God.

Mike jumped to his feet before me, white demon eyes on full display now.

“Arcana,” he said to me. “You’ve got yourself some Arcana.”

Like my first kill, the magic became an arrow, woven into being by my gesticulating hands.

“You won’t stop me,” he said, running away. “I’ll end you.”

I released the killing bolt as he twisted mid-run and threw a blade at me. It hit me in the stomach, burying itself deep. The magic hit him in the chest, blowing a hole in his heart. He went down dead with a sickening thud.

I collapsed to my knees. Pain shot through the bone to join the hurt in my guts. I listed to the side, collapsed. My head bounced off the dirty floor, and I rolled onto my back.

Stabbed. Just my luck.

TEN



Tae landed beside me, moving me, so my head rested in his lap. I winced at the blood spattered across his face. This killing machine.

He'd torn through those humans, painted the walls with their insides.

Holy. Shit.

Thank God there were no more demons in the house.

"It's okay, Clay. I'm here." Concern crept into his voice, sounding so unreal. "I'm sorry. This wasn't supposed to happen."

His hat was gone, his dark curls falling around his face. He pushed them back with his free hand, then focused his eyes back to me.

"Wow..." I breathed, not meaning to make it loud.

My fear of him abated, a softer side of him breaking through his exterior. Peek-a-boo. He might be a bit of a marshmallow on the inside.

I wanted more of that marshmallow.

In my dreams.

Pain poked at me, reminding me why I was on the ground.

“Shit...” I sucked air through my teeth.

He grew a fingernail. His index finger on his right hand. The nail elongated to a point several inches long. He ran it across his left wrist, splitting the vein like a surgeon. Blood pooled on the surface of his pale skin.

“Gosh...”

His fangs were back out, gleaming with intent.

The veins in my neck throbbed in terror. The vampire was about to bite me.

Nope. His head didn't come down this way. His bleeding wrist did. He placed it on my lips, his skin cool to the touch at first, then giving off a strange warmth.

“Drink my blood,” he said. “It will heal you.”

Turning off my ‘But what?’ switch, I licked at the blood first. Tasting limes. Wow. Pressing my lips harder to him, I sucked and lapped at the delicious blood.

Hands on his arm, gripping tight. Needing more, drinking it down. Hot. Spreading through me, targeting my pain and wound. An army of power making it better. I felt the wound close, the pain's arse getting kicked from here to the edge of the universe.

Bye, you bastard!

Tae released a growl. It ran through me in soft vibrations, joining the heat. Swirling, becoming uber ripples of pleasure. Crashing into every corner. Making my balls tingle and my cock take notice.

I locked eyes with him. Crimson swirls swam in those obsidian orbs. Beacons. Strange. Beautiful. He was panting, staring down at me. Our bodies joined, more ripples, more...

more pleasure. Yes. They were so fucking sweet. My cock rock hard, pushing against the walls of my jeans.

Tae...

He licked his lips, running that slick pink organ across his fangs.

It triggered a spark. I released his wrist, shot up, grabbing his face. He grabbed mine back, and our lips crashed together. Hard. Bruising. His fangs nicking my flesh. I didn't care. I needed him pressed against me, to justify these ripples of pleasure and the boner aching wonderfully between my legs.

Our tongues wrestled, his fingers as rough as mine, digging into flesh. Hungry fingers.

Quick movement, my head spinning. The kiss not breaking.

Wow. I was in his arms, on him, thighs wrapped around his waist. We kissed more, forgetting the carnage around us. Until he moved, bursting out of the house and blurring through the streets, zipping through the dark until we stopped in some dark alley under the moon.

He slammed me into the wall, my back scraping brick through my clothes. The kiss broke, my feet returning to the ground.

“Tae...” I breathed, my body thrumming with wild sexual energy, the lingering taste of limes on my lips.

“Tell me you want it,” he said, cool breath washing over my face.

“Do it...”

The vampire unzipped me. One swift move, setting my cock free. His palm was warm, a perfect pocket for my dick.

“Tae...” I said again.

With his other hand, he took both of my hands, lifting my arms above my head. Pinning them there.

“Shit...” I gasped as he worked my shaft. “Oh, shit.”

An intense rhythm, no build-up. Straight in there.

I held his gaze, panting, pushing back into the wall. Completely under his control. Helpless. Hurtling toward pleasure.

His eyes were dark fires with crimson secrets. Incredible. Terrifying.

Almost there. Balls tightening.

His blood raged through me. A good kind of invading force.

So close...

So fucking close...

“Oh, God...”

I came, hot jets exploding out of me and into his hand. I strained against his hold, boots scraping the ground, knees buckling. My orgasm kept on exploding, burst after burst, until I couldn't take anymore.

He released me. I fell forward into him. He held me up, my forehead pressed against his chest. Completely spent, the fires of his blood dying out.

Healed by the best hand job ever. And vampire blood.

“Are you okay?” he asked me.

“Yes. I'm... I'm fine.”

“Can you stand?”

“Yes.”

He let me stand freely, pleasant euphoria a lovely hug.

Tae pulled out his phone.

“What are you doing?” I asked breathlessly.

“Arranging a cleanup of those bodies.” He walked away.

I staggered back into the wall, sliding down to the ground. The pleasure inside me was nothing short of overwhelming, affecting my limbs.

“What an orgasm,” I said.

Tae loomed above me. “It is my blood.”

“Your blood healed me.”

“Vampire blood has that power.”

“And the rest of it... what we did?” I drew deep, satisfied breaths. “What just happened between us?”

“A consequence,” he said.

“Oh... Oh...” He was taking some of the bloom off the sexy rose.

“Do you have to be so cold about it?” I thought I was thinking the question, but nope. There it was for him to hear.

He didn’t respond to it. “I can carry you back to the car.”

The joy ebbed. “I can walk.” I tried to get up, resisting his hand. “I’m fine.”

“Take my hand.”

“No. I can get up.” God, he annoyed me. We’d kissed, and he’d touched me, and here was Mr. Frosty again? Look at him! All brooding and tortured. What? Was my cum too nasty to spurt over his sacred fucking hands?

“Take my hand, Clayton.”

“It’s Clay!” I barked, taking his hand in defeat.

Once up, I yanked my hand back. “Lead the way.”

He watched me for a few seconds, then turned his back on me.

I followed him to the car, the shock of the night settling in. Demon slaying number two, getting stabbed. Tae saving me, giving me pleasure. But now this coldness? Why couldn’t he kiss me again and ask if I could return the favor? I mean, I’d gladly fall on my knees for him.

Shit. I sounded desperate. A complete freak of horniness.

The demon-hunting life had gotten off to a bad start.



THREE IN THE morning and wide awake in the comfy bed. Exhausted. Confused. Wanting to go talk to Tae on one hand and pack a bag on the other. Go back to the hovel and forget about this.

Never going to happen. In too deep already.

“Oh, Fizz.”

She sat with me on the bed, curled up next to me. So warm. As adorable as ever. I wanted cuddles but let her sleep.

I clicked on some Kylie. Enjoyed a few tracks, my feet twitching. Settling down was off the table. I needed help to get me to nod off.

Warm milk it was, now that there were loads of things in the fridge and cupboards to work with.

I removed my earphones and crept downstairs in the blue pajamas that'd been left on my bed. A calming silence smothered the apartment, the city just outside but far away at the same time.

I checked the fridge. Milk. Cheese. Eggs. Fully stocked with stuff. I grabbed the milk, found a mug and saucepan. Got to warming it up.

Tae must be in bed. Did vamps need sleep?

When the milk was done, I took my drink with me to the window. Sipping slowly and taking in the view, trying to relax my brain after all the drama—both hot and scary.

“Are you okay?”

I jumped at Tae's voice, almost dropping the mug.

I turned to face him, standing there in a black vest and jogging bottoms. So handsome. So unreadable.

I sighed. “I'm fine.”

“No. You're not fine. Why would you be after that?”

Was that regret I heard?

He shook his head, crossed his arms. “I'm sorry for failing. I promised to protect you.”

“But... But you don't need to make me these promises, Tae.” I held the mug tightly. Man, my nerves were spiking. It was his eyes. No, his entire presence. He made me fail at basic functions. “You don't really know me enough to make those declarations.”

He pushed a hand through his loose hair and... sighed. Actually sighed, showing some degree of emotion again. Like he'd done when he'd healed me.

“It doesn’t matter how long I’ve known you. What matters is I made you a promise. I honor my promises.” A flicker of sadness. His features twisting painfully. Only for half a second. “I want to honor them.”

I stepped forward, licking my lips. My mouth dry despite the drink. “The world doesn’t work like that. It’s hard to keep promises, no matter how hard we try.”

He fixed me with his gaze. I took another step forward.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m really sorry.”

Shit. He looked so defeated, this stoic vamp of iciness. It didn’t sit right.

“Why?” I said. “You saved me. Healed me. You did good on your promise, right?” I offered him a smile and a slice of my sunny disposition.

“But I must do better. There’s so many risks involved. Particularly from the witches. And... And I’m sorry for the other thing.”

“Oh. That.” I gnawed at my bottom lip.

“The desire becomes an overwhelming consequence of the blood gift.”

“Was it really so bad?” I asked.

A pause. “No.”

“I, erm, well.... I kind of liked it. Is that bad? I mean, it’s been a while since I did anything like that and you helped scratch an itch, and itch-scratching is never a bad thing, so thanks and don’t worry and I’m glad it’s not so bad really...” I sucked in air, blushing at my outpouring.

Less is more, Clay!

Then something happened as he stared at me, bringing more heat to my cheeks and groin. Making me squirm. Something pretty earth-shattering.

Tae's lips twitched, lifting into a tiny smile.

I almost gasped, smiling with him.

"I'm happy to have been of assistance," he said. Man, that voice.

I nodded. "See? All good."

Can I do you now?

"I behaved dreadfully," he said, smile gone. "I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. That's not my intention. And I should have explained the situation better."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I keep meaning to ask you about the drug thing. You were buying that shit off him?"

"Destroying it after."

"Well, that's good."

The vampire sighed again. "I got myself involved with Mike because he is one of many who has his finger on the pulse of demonic activity. To him, I was Gaz, to other demons, I'm someone else. All in the name of research. I have spent countless hours in Mike's company, seeing what intel I can gather. His kitchen is a hive of activity. Sometimes I hear things, but his usefulness had run dry by the time I met you."

"So he had to die," I said.

"Yes." His eyes seemed to take on a faraway look as if he were gazing at something else.

"What sort of intel?" I asked.

Eyes back to me. “Information on some of the more dangerous demons I’ve been tracking. Those playing at the top of society. I need to...” He paused. “They must be stopped.”

He’d gone to reveal something key, pulled it back.

“I need to stop them before they do more harm,” he added.

What’d happened between Tae and demons?

“The button-eyed demon is the worst of them all,” I said.

His stoic demeanor snapped back into place, his focus sharp. “Indeed he is. But he is proving difficult to track down.”

“So annoying.”

“Difficult doesn’t mean impossible.”

“That’s good.”

“We’ll get him. His murder spree will end. But we must be smart. You must train up.”

“When will training start?”

“It has.”

“Oh. I suppose you’re right.”

“In the meantime, I really want you to think of this as your home. To be comfortable with me, with this place.”

I buzzed all over, hearing him speak that way. “Must be weird having someone living here when you’re used to being alone. I get it’s a tricky one.” I quickly scrambled to recover from my assumption. “I mean, I’m guessing you’ve lived alone for a while because the press call you a major bachelor and I hate assuming because of the making an arse out of you and me thing but... yeah... shit... And it’s ass, erm...”

What the hell was wrong with me?

Another smile. “You’re funny, Clayton.”

Clay... “I try.”

“I think I’m going to enjoy having you here.”

“Good to know,” I replied, sipping some milk. “I made a late-night beverage. Hope you don’t mind. Warm milk always helped me sleep as a kid.”

“This is your home. Have whatever you like.”

“Thanks. I’ll do that.”

“Let me know of any favorite foods you require.”

“I will. When did you get all the stuff in?”

“I have people to help with that.”

“Oh. Well, thanks to you and them.”

“You’re welcome. Sleep well, Clay.” Another smile and he went upstairs.

I returned to the window and drank my milk. Content, for now, relieved we’d had a chat, and things wouldn’t be painfully awkward.

For now.

ELEVEN



The next morning, after a breakfast of eggs and toast and mind-blowing coffee, Tae drove us to his favorite barbershop in Piccadilly before we hit the British Library. We stopped at a red light halfway there—a temporary red light synonymous with roadworks.

Sigh.

I'd asked him if it were possible for me to get a haircut. He'd sprang into action with my request, suggesting his favorite place.

Another item scratched off my list.

"Traffic looks bad," I mentioned. "Nothing new there, eh?"

He smiled. He'd smiled a lot this morning, even if they were tiny little lip movements. They lit up his face, made him even more stunning. Turned me into a silly mess of hot flushes and tangled words. I tried my best to remain cool, to not melt like a Tae fanboy. Yet sometimes, he made it so damn hard.

Hard being the key word. I thought about a second dip into his sexy waters. In fact, I'd pleased myself in the shower before this trip. I couldn't help it.

"You have staff, right?" I asked.

"I do."

“Then where are they?”

“My staff are utilized as and when I need them.”

“I’m shocked.”

He glanced at me. “Why?”

“All your money and no servants to get you dressed and bring you tea in the morning.”

“Why would I require servants? I’m capable of dressing myself and making my own tea.”

I sunk into the seat, feeling small. “Isn’t that the dream?”

“To lose yourself?”

Sinky sink some more... “I didn’t think of it like that. It’s just you see and read this stuff and think, wow, it must be nice to not have to lift a finger.”

The light switched to green, and he drove on, leaving me hanging for a few minutes.

“I understand what you mean, but I don’t want to be waited on. My staff helps me with my business, with my demon hunting. Yes, I have people to help with my shopping, which I do feel guilty about.”

“Really? Now *that* I don’t get.”

“Neither do I.” He smiled. “Shopping isn’t exactly a pleasant activity.”

“Depends on what you’re shopping for. New clothes and music? Sign me up.”

“Do you want to shop for those things? I can take you.”

“No, no. I’m good. Really. That’s not what I meant.”

“I see.” Another traffic light.

“You don’t have a driver?” I enquired.

“I like to drive myself.”

“Nobody likes driving in London.”

“I like it.”

“But why?”

“Why do you eat so many lollipops?” he countered.

Shit. My stomach almost dropped out of me. “I, erm—”

“Because they give you pleasure. I don’t understand that pleasure, but that’s your business.”

Phew. I think I just dodged a bullet. “Sorry, you’re right. If you like driving through the chaotic streets of the capital, that’s up to you.” I punctuated my statement with a shrug.

A soft yet deep laugh. “Isn’t that a backhanded compliment?”

“No compliments here. More like agreeing to disagree, with me being right.”

“Funny.”



I’D BEEN EXPECTING to sit in a posh barbershop and wait my turn, as was the rule with barbershops. Nope. I got myself a private room, even avoided the main entrance of the place, whisked around the back.

Offers of champagne and various beverages followed. Peter, the salon owner, cut my hair within the room of worn wooden flooring and bare brick walls. All very rustic chic—deliberately shabby. Trendy, Peter giving me hipster vibes, the

whole thing alien to me. But I embraced being in the seat of Tae's barber, enjoying the haircut and listening to the vampire and the barber discussing business and Johnny Cash.

"There we go, sir," Peter said in his East London accent, holding up a hand mirror to show me the back.

"Gosh. That looks really good."

Short back and sides, the top trimmed and swept back. Looking sharp, looking tidy, and even rested.

I scrub up well.

"Thanks so much," I added

"You're welcome, mate." He fiddled with my new do, adding a bit more hair cream, perfecting it to his liking before whipping the gown away. "You sure you don't want that champagne?"

"Oh, go on then." Why the hell not?

"Nice one. Be right back." Off Peter went.

I slid off the barber's chair, stepping closer to the mirror to inspect the new me. "What do you think?" I asked, catching Tae staring at me in the mirror. I'd once read a book where vamps didn't give a reflection in mirrors. Not true in the real world, especially when your new vamp friend had been in magazines before.

"You look wonderful," he answered.

That seemed a bit much. "Thanks." I broke eye contact, bashful.

Wonderful? Did he really say that?

If anyone gave wonder a face, it was him. No fairy magic today. Official Tae Frost face on, complete with white shirt

and gray trousers, his hair tied back. So sharp, so expensive looking. Effortless. Sexy, his shirt open at the right point to expose a yummy amount of his pale flesh.

Is anyone from Vogue Magazine in the building to snap this up?

Being on his arm without some form of disguise worried me at first. But he told me this was the public face, the hiding in plain sight move. If we were seen together as ourselves, doing our other *thing* on the down-low, then it helped cover our tracks.

I guess it made sense, yet I couldn't help but wonder how long it'd last—as much as I hated to give anything a negative glaze.

“That’s the second time I’ve heard you talk about Johnny Cash,” I said, then blushed to crimson and beyond.

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I suppose it is.”

“Do you, erm...” I cleared my throat. “Did you see me on the train that night?”

“I remember your eyes on me very well.” Softly sexual, resembling a flirt. Was the vampire flirting with me?

We stared at one another through the mirror, my hands clammy with nerves. Anticipation shuddered in my chest, sucking the air out of my lungs. I froze before the mirror, waiting for him to make his move, if there was a move he wanted to make as we dwelled in this cocoon of crackling energy.

Was this all in my head, though?

Take me. Slam me into the barber's worktable, press my face up against that mirror. Tear my clothes off, give me—

Peter returned with expensive champagne, breaking through the cocoon. I straightened, willing the swelling between my legs to ease off.

“Thank you, Peter,” Tae said, not taking a glass.

I did and gulped it too fast. Bubbles and alcohol hit my tongue and the back of my throat. Smooth and fizzy—a weird paradox in my mouth.

“Yum,” I said after. “That’s good stuff.”

Peter laughed. “He’s a warlock after my own heart.” He slapped me on the back. “Got no time for fancy frills. Just get the booze in, eh?”

I laughed. Peter laughed. Tae cocked a tiny smile.

If we didn’t have plans after this, I’d neck a few more glasses to steady my nerves some more. But then it’d probably loosen me up, get me asking Tae for a shag right here.

No second glass for me.



WITH A MORE BALANCED energy in place, we arrived at the British Library. A first for me, only ever walking past it or performing some warlock tricks outside.

We ignored the main entrance, the piazza busy with Saturday tourists, driving into an underground carpark instead. This time I didn’t need the blindfold I had to wear in and out of Tae’s secret place.

We didn’t use the black car, but some fancy red thing. Expensive. A statement car I didn’t like. I suppose it separates the billionaire Tae from the demon hunter.

“You have your own entrance?” I asked, sucking on a lolly.

“Not my own, but a route to avoid the public.”

“Right.”

He parked up, reaching for a black briefcase in the back seat.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He led me through the brightly lit space to an elevator. It reminded me of his place.

“I will introduce you as an acquaintance,” he said. “James Herbert.”

“Like the author?”

He considered this for a moment. “James Butler.”

“What happened to Herbert?”

“Forget it. I wasn’t thinking.”

“You reading a James Herbert novel?”

“*Haunted*,” he replied. “I’m quite partial to horror fiction.”

A detail about himself. Gosh. “What are your favorites?”

“A discussion for another time, Clayton.”

“Clay.”

“You are James Butler. Warlock. I have made you an identity card.” He handed it to me, complete with mugshot.

“I look awful. Where the hell did you get this picture from?”

“I took it this morning.

“I can tell by my face.” I winced. “You could’ve air-brushed it. Plus, I didn’t see you take any picture. That’s kind of invasive and weird that you got me looking at you without me knowing you were snapping away.”

“I move fast,” he said. “I apologize. Next time I’ll inform you of my actions.”

“Erm, thanks.” I pocketed the card. “How accepting of warlocks are the British Library?”

“There will be no display of prejudice here.”

“Makes a change.”

“Do you often face bigotry?”

“What do you think?”

“I think yes.”

“Not everyone’s an arsewipe, and not everywhere turns my kind away. But I’ve been kicked out of shops and cafes and smaller libraries. Mainly businesses with witches working there.”

“Ridiculous,” the vampire said.

Seeing as warlocks were unable to use Synth, the hate was usually rooted in us being sinful, useless, somehow defective for our failure. Some even blamed us for the loss of Arcana, which was ridiculous. The whole thing was. But that’s bigotry—completely baseless. If you really wanted to find the root, it was down there marked **Greedy Witches**. They wanted to be the true power, and that’s what they’d scored.

We entered the elevator. Up we went, meeting a perky woman at the top with red hair, fair skin, and the most on-point makeup I’d ever seen. She was immaculate in a black skirt and white blouse. For once, I didn’t feel scruffy in

comparison, dressed in my new clothes. A black polo shirt and black jeans, with black boots and a tunic-style leather jacket. It all fitted my slim frame perfectly.

Tae outdid everyone in the wow department.

My lips tingled as I watched him talk to the woman, remembering his kiss. The roughness of it, how he'd touched me, how his blood coursed through me as a delicious invader.

Gosh.

“Of course, Mr. Frost. We always have time for you,” the librarian said. Obviously taken with the vampire.

She pushed a lock of hair behind her ear, batting her eyelashes. Would she be the one to tame the bachelor? Get her rom-com moment with him? Her brown eyes told me she wanted him to whisk her away.

“Thank you, Melanie,” Tae said. “You are always so kind and accommodating.”

I think me and Melanie had it bad for *that* voice.

She blushed, waved a hand coyly. “Never too much trouble.” She chuckled, glanced at me, and told us to follow her to the appropriate vault.

Melanie had greeted me, not too bothered by who I was or what I was doing with Tae. The irrelevant sidekick. Did she even notice my warlock mark?

As we walked, me trailing them, Melanie flirted. Tae remained cool, yet charming. Even offered her plenty of beaming smiles, their wattage of supermodel proportions. This was a different side to the vampire again. Mr. Charming. The businessman, the smooth operator.

He laughed at a joke she told. A clear, deep laugh. Not too loud, not too dirty. A perfect laugh. No snorts at the end like what happened with me sometimes.

“What perfume are you wearing?” he asked her.

She sniffed her wrists, held one out to him. “Do you really like it? It’s new?”

Really? Did I have to suffer this? And the best part was, none of it seemed false at all. As if Tae enjoyed every moment.

Did he? Was this how he got his real kicks? Did he kiss guys often? Did he prefer women? A bit of both?

None of my business. He could do what he wanted. Just because he made me come, it didn’t mean anything.

“Here you go.” Melanie handed Tae a keycard. We stood outside a black door in a white corridor.

“Thank you so much,” he said, beaming down at her.

She played with a top button on her blouse. “You’re very welcome. Call me with the intercom inside if you need anything.”

“I will,” Tae replied seductively, gently removing the card from her fingers.

The librarian gazed up at him, her lips parted. Quivering. Gosh, even I was getting hot under my collar, wishing we could swap positions.

She licked her lips, backed off. Completely flustered. “Well, I will... I will leave you to it.”

He nodded.

With a smile on my face, I stepped forward and offered her my hand. “It was really nice meeting you.”

After a few seconds, her sweaty hand met mine. “N-nice to meet you too.” She glanced between us, face crimson. “I need to get back.”

“Goodbye, Melanie.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Frost.” Her eyes roamed up and down his body. I expected her to bust out a fan and proclaim, ‘Damn. I’d tap that.’

She left, repeatedly glancing over her shoulder before the elevator swallowed her.

“Interesting,” I said.

“Sweeten the pot at all times,” Tae responded.

I faced him. “Nice sweetening.”

“I like to make sure all of my relationships, no matter the context, are beneficial.”

“And you’ll flirt your bum off to do it?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Is there something wrong with that?”

“God, no. Do what you’ve got to do.”

“As long as you set certain parameters,” he said, swiping the keycard. The door clicked open.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets, following him through the door into heavy darkness.

Seconds later, light chasing the dark away.

I’d been expecting a modern vault. Something with lots of white and chrome—like Tae’s kitchen. Nope. This was old,

more like a cave but with exposed brick and a shed load of shelving units and cabinets jammed together.

We stood together at the beginning of the towering dark wooden shelves and rolling stacks, as if we were facing a labyrinth.

“Follow me,” the vampire said.

He knew his way around this place, weaving through the overwhelming maze of texts without looking at the signs. No indexes for this vamp.

Tae opened a rolling stack by flipping a switch. Though it was wooden and old-looking, it also operated digitally and slid open to reveal a new selection of texts within. My new vampire friend got what he needed from inside, me hovering outside.

“Here,” he said, stepping out with two leather-bound books, black with the Mark of Arcana on the front covers in embossed, fiery gold. “These are the grimoires that used to be commonplace among witches and warlocks.”

Nearby was an alcove and a table with two chairs. He popped the books and his briefcase down, taking a seat. I parked my backside opposite him.

“The grimoires were always presented in these two volumes,” he said, “containing details on the art of magic.” He pushed them toward me. “Have a look.”

Hesitantly, I pressed my fingers to the battered leather. The page edges were rough-cut, a trail of sooty spots across the yellow paper.

“These are so old,” I said. The leather was surprisingly smooth to touch.

“Many of the grimoires were destroyed or lost after the fall of Arcana. They are considered collector’s items.”

I stroked the embossed symbol. “Why would anyone destroy a magical text?”

“Anger. A new start.”

“What do you mean?”

Tae leaned back in his chair. “The loss of such a great magic sparked many movements, all with the same ethos—a new beginning. In destroying the books, when efforts to reclaim Arcana failed repeatedly, grimoire burning took favor.”

Not being up on Arcana history, I never knew that slice of bullshit. “That’s terrible.”

“Indeed. There are a hundred copies left in the world. At least those accounted for.”

I opened the grimoire, a sense of belonging caressing the tips of my fingers. The book welcomed me, encouraged me to turn the pages. Blank at first, letters manifesting as ink soaking the parchment. Words for me and me alone. The one and only in the whole world to understand the text. And there was so much of it.

“It’ll take me a while to read these,” I said. “Don’t read many epics.”

He nodded. “In your own time.”

“Can we take these out of here?”

“No. It’s forbidden.”

He reached inside the briefcase, removing a mobile phone. Not the same device he normally called his invisible staff on.

For one, it was rose gold, not black. He pushed a few buttons as if dialing someone, then slipped it back into his briefcase.

“We have half an hour,” he said. Next from the briefcase came two grimoires, identical to the two before me.

“What... Huh?”

“Hand me the books, please.”

“What’s happening?”

“A simple switch,” he said.

“Won’t the staff know you’ve switched them?”

“I manipulated the cameras before we got here, giving us time to do what we need to do. We have forty-five minutes to get this done.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve replicated the grimoires to exact copies, as you can see.”

“But what about.... Won’t they notice the book isn’t right inside? Oh... yeah. Silly me. Blank to everyone else.”

“The grimoires require study,” he said. “We can’t keep coming here when you need to reference them. So, we’re using the essence of a library—borrowing.”

“With a super-extended loan period,” I contributed.

“Exactly.”

“Gosh...” I pushed the books toward him. He popped the new ones before me, slipping the real books into his briefcase. “Couldn’t you have done this without me?”

“I could have, but I want you to be part of the process. For full disclosure.”

A lurch in my stomach. Guilt. Fear of being found out.

“I have many tools at my disposal,” he added. “The disguises, other things you will see over time.”

“You’re kind of like Batman,” I returned.

“I’m sorry?”

“Batman. Billionaire with gadgets and stuff. Secret identity.”

“Let’s put these back,” he said, picking up the fakes.

“Don’t you like Batman?”

“I enjoyed the one with Michelle Pfeiffer. Wait there.”

“Michelle’s Catwoman is the greatest,” I whispered to myself.

It didn’t take him long to return. “Yes, she is one of the best. I loved Eartha Kitt, too.”

“Oh. You heard me?”

“I did.”

“Question,” I said, standing up. “Are there no other records of these words? Like microfiche or something? An online archive?”

“No, Clayton. It is impossible to copy the inside.”

Clay... “Obviously,” I said, nodding. “Sorry, another brain fart.”

“We’re done here.”

Back out in the corridor, meeting a different member of staff—an older man who gave me a funny look. A witch symbol sat on his head. He exchanged pleasantries with Tae, saw us out, and that was that. No glares for me. Nice.

We'd robbed some grimoires from a special vault without breaking a sweat.

Well, only Tae. My palms were positively slick from fear.



BACK AT THE APARTMENT, no longer sweaty, I got to reading on the sofa while Tae worked on his laptop at the dining room table.

Man, there was a lot to process. From basic spells advancing to a greater magical level in the second volume to a specific detail on how to channel the magic.

The Mark of Arcana allows a witch or warlock to channel magic. It must be summoned before any spells or magical activity are undertaken. If not, the magic will not work.

Summoning the Mark is different for each magically blessed creature. There are no rules as to how, only that it must be.

Mediation, lots of inner exploration—that was the key to finding what made your summoning happen. So said the book. I guess I'd better get reflecting because mine came whenever it felt like it. Well, at midnight.

Nothing so far on the midnight thing, the contents and index pages giving no indication of those details. This might be a 'me only' mystery.

I got twenty pages into volume one, making notes on some spells. All existing Arcana spells were inside the grimoires, which made the destruction of them so ridiculous. Why would you want to lose this information forever?

To cast spells, there were two options. Thought/incantation or mixing ingredients to make a potion or magic energy. Thoughts and incantations conjured the magic into being. Definitely the method I preferred. If Arcana accepted that visualization or speech, it became reality. Such as the demon-killing strike. The grimoires mentioned weapons of light, like my arrow, when killing demons.

Arcana adapted to the presence of this invading demonic force, additional pages appearing to deal with them. The same applied to new spells being discovered, magically updating and fattening up to this hefty volume. Would I discover new spells?

There were two spells I wanted to try out later when I got the courage to do so, maybe three. I noted them down and closed the book. For the rest of this Saturday, I'd focus on exploring my inner self to try and find out more about summoning the Mark.

How to kick things off?

“Are you done with your studies?” the vampire asked.

“Not sure. Need to think.”

He didn't follow up on my response.

Switching on the TV wasn't the best action to clear the mind. But on it went, straight to a news channel. A report on the button-eyed demon. He'd slaughtered some people in their beds in Hackney. Six people dead in the early hours of the morning. Got away again, ever the uncatchable nightmare.

Gosh. He so needed to die. Hard.

I changed channels, opening the streaming service. Fizz came over, rubbing against my leg. I scooped her up into my lap. She got to padding, settled herself down. Her leg was

coming along leaps and bounds. Whatever Lizzy had done was its own special magic.

My search for something to watch when I should be meditating brought me to a Boys' Love series from the Philippines. Oooh. Looked super-sweet. I played it, kicked back, and tried to relax a bit. The show might help me reset my brain a bit—still dealing with Kelly's death and last night and everything that'd gone down.

It didn't help. I couldn't focus on the screen, on anything, my foot tapping the carpet. Bounce. Bounce. Bounce. A pissed off Fizz demanded to be let off the bouncing lap. I carried her to her bed by the window, where she got back to watching the world without the irritating motions of her owner.

I yelped when Tae appeared before me.

“Holybloodyshit!” I cried dramatically.

“What have you learned?” he asked.

“My bloody heart.”

“What's wrong with it?”

“You scared me.”

“Not for the first time.” A smile followed.

“Oh, it's like that, is it?”

He held that smile.

Dialing back the theatrics, I chuckled and shuffled about to get comfy again. “I'm trying to discover things about myself.” I explained the thing about the Mark.

“I see.”

“Going to be tricky.”

“Take a break.”

“I’m trying. It’s not helping.”

“TV is distracting.”

“I know. I thought I could chill, and that would open mental passages. I guess I’ll have to meditate.”

The last thing I wanted was silence.

“Talk to me about vampires,” I said.

So, in lieu of Arcana studies came the vampire studies.

Vampires were made by swapping human and vampire blood in a ceremony he didn’t elaborate on. A rare thing to happen nowadays, apparently. Vampires weren’t exactly a dominant race.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Vampires moved around in the night and day and could be killed by beheading only. They were fast, could climb walls, and boasted great eyesight, a sense of smell and hearing, and they were strong as hell but soft when they needed to be. And they didn’t need food but could eat it, the food absorbing into their blood without any consequence on the body. Drinking blood was the only nourishment they required, which also sped up the healing process, and it had to be human blood. Lack of blood slowed a vamp down to the point of a coma if they were left unfed. Tae gave no details on the feeding process. Told me it was private, an intimate experience between the vampire and the blood giver.

Yet again, he made his words drip with sex as he gave me the lowdown.

Gosh.

I excused myself after our chat, getting hard from a combination of his voice and the memory of his touch, my body hungry for more. Wanting another taste of him, for him to taste me and show me how intimate him drinking blood could be.

Did he want more? How many hand jobs had gone down in alleyways after vampire healing? Was that part of the mythos?

Back in my bedroom, determined to get exploring but still distracted, I played some Kylie, sucked on my lollipop. Anxious to get out there and visit Grindle to score some more sugary lumps on sticks.

Intel. The thought popped out of nowhere. Tae hadn't elaborated on what he'd got from Mike. Stuff about the button-eyed demon? A different demon?

I should really ask these things out loud.

I stretched, rolling my shoulders. Should I go out? The fresh air might do me good in getting to my inner exploration.

Was I allowed outside?

Not a prisoner.

It wasn't safe to go strolling around out there.

I checked the time on the phone Tae had given me. 17:30. Grindle might be open. He might not be.

Wait. He had a phone number, and I had a phone to call it on.

Woo hoo!

I looked up his shop, clicked on the linked phone number, and ring, ring it went. That's what happens when you're not

used to having these things. You forget technology is amazing and simple when you don't have it at your disposal every day.

"Grindle's Antiques & Collectibles."

"Hi. It's Clay," I said quietly.

"You can call me now?" he responded gruffly.

"Landed myself a phone."

"Good for you. Make sure to look after it. Decent ones are pricey."

Condescending much? "Will do. Listen, my circumstances have changed. I'm not at the shopping center anymore."

"Is that so?" He didn't grill me. *"Probably for the best. Things are tense in Skid Row. I gather you heard about—"*

Golden Lane... "Kelly," I cut him off.

"That's her. Terrible. I know she was your friend. You have my condolences."

"Thanks." I moved the conversation away from *her*. "I need some more stuff, but things are... different. Can we arrange a delivery?"

"To your new location?"

"Maybe nearby. I can't disclose my new place yet."

"I see. Where would you like to arrange delivery for?"

"Let me get back to you on that one. For now, can I order a month's worth of the new blend you made me?"

"Yes." I heard him make a note. *"Anything else?"*

"That's all, cheers."

"Call me when you want them," he said.

“I will. Thanks.”

“*Bye, Clay.*” He hung up.

Phew. Another weight off my shoulders. My secret still safe.

Thank God for Grindle.

Now to figure out a collection point. I knew this area well, having performed my tricks and shows here a few times. There was a church nearby, tucked between two glass monoliths. A quiet spot away from prying eyes.

I called Grindle back with the intention of giving him the location, then realized I hadn't worked out how to pull it off. What if Tae followed me? For my own protection, he'd say.

Shit. I'd figure it out.

I fired up my cassette of *Light Years* by Kylie Minogue. Hearing my other best girl would help my head massively. She always made things better. As soon as ‘Spinning Around’ kicked off, so did my feet. I got down to the beat, twirling around the bedroom. Even started singing, which isn't particularly pleasant for anyone nearby. But I was alone, so I could wail to my heart's content.

I jumped on the bed, feeling the rhythm, all the pop goodness. Rolled off the mattress, writhed around on the floor as if I were the pop star playing to the masses, the bedroom an arena.

When I leaped to my feet, finishing with a twirl, I screamed.

“You again!” I bellowed at Tae, yanking the earphones out. “Please stop trying to kill me.”

Had he heard my chat with Grindle?

Oh, God.

“Apologies.”

I panted, a breathless, sweaty mess. “What’s that you’ve got?”

“A bookmark. For the grimoires.”

“You scared me half to death to give me a bookmark?”

“I did, Clayton.”

“Clay. My name is Clay.”

“Old habits die hard, Clay.”

“It’s fine.” I placed the Walkman on the bed.

“I will make more of an effort *to* shorten your name.”

“Clay *is* my name. No Clayton at all.”

“I know. I’ll do better.”

“Thanks.” I scratched at my neck.

He handed me the bookmark. A Kylie Minogue bookmark. A collage of her album covers.

I took it, hand trembling. “This is... This is amazing.”

“I’ve heard you listen to her music and thought you might like it.”

“This is so sweet!” I yelled. “Oh my God! Thank you!” I charged forward, crashing into him. “Thank you so, so much.”

With my hands wrapped around him, my cheek pressed against his chest, my brain caught up with my overreaction.

I quickly backed off. “Shit. Sorry.”

His hands firmly by his sides, he said, “I’m pleased you like it.”

Tae left the room.

Why did I have to act like such a knob? Yes, it was a cute bookmark, but did it warrant such a major declaration of gratitude?

I sat on the bed, cursing myself. Well, only a little. A naughty side of me enjoyed being that close to him again.



IN THE DEPTHS of Raven Tower, was Tae's private gym, swimming pool, and spa. The same facilities were offered to the other wealthy residents on a shared basis. Not for the richest guy in the building, though. He got his own, along with the private parking and the private elevator. And for that I was glad.

It was seven in the evening. Tae wanted us to start our physical training before we went out again. Made total sense to me, and I guess it helped avoid any more of *those* encounters.

Dressed in shorts, a vest, and suitable trainers, I waited in the middle of the gym floor. Rubbing the back of my left arm, gnawing my bottom lip. The very idea of gyms made me nauseous. Actually being in one almost floored me. But the vampire was right. Improving my physical strength was imperative to my new job. I could move fast, running from beatings and haters plenty of times. But the trick was to now funnel that energy into a more refined form. Or as refined as possible. I wasn't ever going to be Bruce Lee or move with the terrifying speed and killing precision of Tae. But I'd take a decent level of arse-kicking over my current skills.

The gym was big, filled with various equipment around a large square mat at the heart of it—where I stood. A square to wrestle on.

Wrestle with a vampire. Oooh...

The blood-sucker in question appeared, as yummy as ever in his gym clothes.

“Okay, let’s get started with some basic defense skills.”

He showed me blocking moves, came at me to test them, got a fake blow in each time. He showed me breathing techniques, some attacks, and then we did some weights. The vampire worked me hard, intense with his commands, striving for me to get it right. I was a hungry student aiming to please. Doing better would come with practice, and I resolved to impress him, to be the apple of this teacher’s eye.

I hadn’t worked up such a satisfying sweat in a long time.

When the first session was over, we showered, returning to the apartment where I proceeded to flop on the sofa with Fizz in my lap.

Tae joined us, sitting pretty close to me. Closer than I’d expect him to be. “You did well in that session.”

“I probably looked a right idiot,” I responded.

He shook his head. “Not at all. You did well.”

“Thanks. How long before you think I’m properly ready?”

His loose hair framed his handsome face, a rogue curl falling across his eyes. He brushed it aside. “I suppose there is no such thing as being truly ready for a demonic situation, only better prepared.”

“Unless I meet the wrong kind of demon where prep means nothing,” I said.

When he didn’t respond, I quickly added, “That’s not me being defeatist. I’m not one of *those* people. I’m agreeing with you. No such thing as flawless, right? Only better. I like to learn, to grow.”

Why did I let my mouth run wild with talking absolute bollocks? I licked my lips, hot and bothered once again. I wanted to come across cooler than I projected. To not sound so try-hard.

Here came some more. “Not that you’re not flawless. I’ve seen you move. Wow. Amazing stuff. I can only wish to be like you. So, you aside, there’s no such thing as—”

“Clay?”

“Yes?”

“Enough.” His lips gently formed an image of amusement.

“Oh. Erm. Sorry.”

Thank you, Tae, for stopping the runaway train.

He shook his head. “You are right. Perfection isn’t real. It cannot exist. I stopped believing in perfection many years ago.”

“You did? Why?”

“Experience.” He didn’t explain.

“Like what?”

“It doesn’t matter now. The point is, do not compare yourself to me, to anyone, or any idea of perfection. I will always be better in combat than you. It is part of vampire nature. For you, it is more about adding an extra layer of

defense to keep yourself alive, to use a power I'll never match." He sat forward, eyes focused ahead. "I think you're doing extremely well, considering."

I studied him, wanting to counter his perfect argument. He was wrong about perfection because I was looking at it.

"You are a survivor, an extraordinary man," he said.

"Erm, thanks." I shuffled in my seat.

"To retain optimism in the face of so much adversity is admirable. Many would break."

"I've come close plenty of times. It's not easy out there by any stretch. But I don't want to die. I don't want to get swept up in addiction or gang culture or any other bad thing waiting to snare me. Trust me, I've been tempted. Giving up is easy. Less painful. Smiling through a hurricane is a struggle, and my whole life has been one windy bastard. But if I'd quit on myself, I wouldn't be here now." I smiled. He didn't, his attention still ahead.

After a couple of nervous swallows, I carried on. "I've been thinking about this gig a lot, especially with the button-eyed demon still on the rampage. I can definitely make a difference, maybe save some lives. That's better than nothing. And if I can bring about bigger change, then yay to that. Life hurts so much as it is, let alone demons adding to the pain. I was on board before, but every hour I'm here, I'm adding more glue to this place. You know, sticking myself to the ship." I frowned. "Sorry. Anyway, yeah."

Slowly, he turned his head to face me, his obsidian eyes on me once again. They glistened as polished jewels, his head slightly angled to the side. "That was some speech."

"I'm a runaway train."

“Beautiful,” he said.

Did he mean me?

“Your soul is beautiful,” he added. “I have never seen such light.”

“Erm, thanks.” I winced at the aching in my limbs. The kind of ache from intense working out—kind of satisfying in its way.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Everything aches.”

“Would you like a massage?”

For real? “I’m good. Thanks.”

“It helps.”

“Are you the, erm, masseur?”

“Yes.” I watched him consider, an almost frown on his face. “A strictly chaste massage.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Of course.”

“Then we must have dinner. I can cook. I can order something in. The choice is yours. And I can get you a masseur if you would feel more comfortable.”

“I... I’d... I’d like you to do it.”

A pause, more of *that* staring. “Now?”

“N-now.”

“Come with me.”



THE SPA next to the gym was all soft pinks and peaches, like a dreamy sunset. So relaxing, so warm. Everything was on offer here—massages, facials, mud bath treatments, a sauna. The complete works.

“You have staff for this place, right?” I asked him as he prepared a white massage table for me.

“Yes. When I need them.”

He placed a smaller table next to the massage one. Various bottles of oils sat atop it, complete with fluffy white towels on a shelf below them.

I swallowed, nerves jumping again. “What about you?”

“Not tonight,” he said, getting the gist of my question.

“Cool. I mean, I wouldn’t know the first thing about massages and would probably break a knot or do more damage than good because that happens, doesn’t it?” A sharp intake of breath.

I’d rambled again.

Nice to see his slight smile return. “Relax, Clay.”

“O-okay.”

“Take off your clothes.”

“Oh.”

He turned his back.

“All of them?”

“Leave your underwear on. Lay flat on the table when you’re done.”

I stripped to my boxers, got on the table. I gasped as he draped a towel over my backside.

His hands met my flesh, and I almost passed out. Gosh. Oh, gosh. His hands were on me once again.

“What about my magical training?” I asked nervously, trying to not get too lost in his touch. “I want to practice some spells.”

“Whenever you’re up to it, I’ll arrange it.”

I’m up for many things. Hee hee! “Is tonight too soon?”

“As long as it isn’t too soon for you.”

“I just want to get to it, start using the magic.”

“I understand.” He kneaded my lower back. “I have a place we can use safely.”

“Cool.” He really knew his way around a body. “Shame it’s got to be midnight.”

“I know. May I suggest you find a spell for light?”

“Why?”

“It will be useful for later. I have a place for you to train.”

“Going somewhere dark?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Sure. I can do that.” Three spells to play with first.

The vampire carried on with his massage. Gosh, his hands were so overwhelming. So magical. Every muscle, every skin cell enjoyed his touch. My eyes were about to roll into the back of my head.

I moaned, relaxing. “This is sooooo good.” His hands moved around me, working hard to keep me in this state of pleasure. My cock remained as hard as stone.

Inside my blood, hot particles pulsed. His blood, my blood. Swirling together, colliding in a yummy ride.

As Tae pushed and kneaded my flesh, the rhythm caused a slight friction between my hardness in my underwear and the bed. Nothing frantic, but enough to add to the, well, pleasure.

I moaned some more, jumping into the rhythm. Before long, my hips were rocking back and forth, my hands gripping the side of the bed as I humped it. The vampire kept his hands on me, and I kept moaning, eyes closed. Aware of what I was doing and not giving a shit. I'd crossed the point of no return. I required a finale. No blue balls here, please.

"Yes..." I breathed, grinding myself harder into the bed. "Yes, yes..."

Harder rubs, pushing into muscle. My skin slick with oil, his hands... Oh, his hands. It'd be perfect if he whipped the towel away, tore off the boxers, mounted me right here. Pounded me into the mattress until the bed collapsed under so much fucking.

"Clay..." he whispered.

"Don't stop," I begged.

We both continued until my balls tightened, and I climaxed inside my underwear, fingers digging into the bed painfully.

"Oh gosh!" I cried. "Oh, my bloody gosh!"

Realization slapped me with an embarrassing wallop.

"Are you okay?" Tae asked.

The answer was a bit fat yes. I felt amazing, aside from the mortification. I'd humped the massage bed, so turned on by his touch I'd not been able to resist.

“I’m... I’m good.”

“I can see that.

“Oh, God. I’m an idiot.”

“We all need a release, Clay.”

“I humped the bed.”

“It’ll wipe clean.”

Did he think he was funny?

I remained glued to the bed, scared to move. “Your blood... I felt it moving.”

“I thought as much.”

“It’s still inside me?”

“It will be for a month.”

“Seriously? Well, it has a lot to answer for.”

A slight, breathy laugh. “It really does. Don’t be embarrassed, Clay.”

“Kind of hard not to be.”

“I’m not.”

“Easy for the vampire not on the bed with sticky knickers to say.” I groaned, no pleasure in this one. “I’m so unsophisticated.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true.”

A hand on my lower back. “Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Did he want me to jizz again? Okay, it’d take a bit more than that. I wasn’t a one-minute guy. Still, he had the power to

send my body into wild fits of naughtiness with *those* hands. Oh, and his blood.

You literally have a sexy hold over me.

“I’ll leave you to sort yourself out,” he said.

“T-thanks.”

As soon as I determined it was safe to move, I unpeeled myself from the bed. My clothes were nearby, as were two shower cubicles.

I got to cleaning.



RATHER THAN CHAT when I returned to the penthouse, I hurried upstairs to grab fresh boxers, not liking my current commando moment. Problem solved, I went back downstairs to the window, still embarrassed by my porn scene in the spa.

Maybe that was a bit dramatic.

I watched the night along with Fizz, a million miles away from focusing on finding my inner whatever. Nope. Definitely not getting anywhere with that today.

As much as embarrassment lingered, I also felt good. The massage worked to ease my aches, and orgasms are always fun. Me being me, I tried to give it a perkier spin. Either that or spend the rest of the night blushing to high heaven.

“I have something for you.”

I spun in surprise, holding back a yelp. “What is it?”

There was a turquoise box in Tae’s hands. “A gift.”

“What kind of gift?”

“Take it. See for yourself.”

Before I approached him, Fizz meowed softly behind me. I turned, crouching down to her.

“What’s up, sugar pie?” I scratched her head, let her lick me.

Nothing was wrong. She clearly wanted a bit of a fuss. Fizz really, really enjoyed her head rubs.

“Won’t be a minute, Tae,” I said.

“Take your time.”

Five minutes later, Fizz having her fill, I stood back up, shaking my legs out. All that good work the massage did on my muscles, and now I had pins and needles.

Tae remained where I’d left him, holding the box like a statue.

“You’re still here?” I asked.

“Yes. I have a gift for you.”

“You didn’t have to literally wait there. You could’ve gone off to do something else.”

He watched me intently. “I enjoy seeing you with your cat.”

I blinked, taken aback. “Oh.”

“It’s sweet how you are with her.”

“She’s my best girl.”

“I can see.” A smile. “More of your beautiful soul shining through.”

Gosh. He knew the right words to bring on the bashful. “You’re kind.” I scratched both palms in alternating, nervous

actions. “So, what’s inside the box?”

“Have a look. Be surprised.”

I took the box. My fingers brushed against his cool ones, sending a frantic elevator of shivers racing up and down my spine.

A white ribbon tied the box together. I carried it over to the dining table and sat down. Knowing me, I’d drop it and ruin the moment. The House of Sugar was printed in silver on the lid.

He’d got me some sweets. Expensive ones. Sweets a guy like me could only dream of landing on my tastebuds.

“You didn’t need to buy me a pressie,” I said.

He didn’t answer.

I pulled the silk ribbon. It slid undone with ease. Opening the lid, a massive grin parted my lips.

“Lollipops?”

Nestled in silver tissue paper were a collection of finely made lollipops, complete with their own branded turquoise ribbons on the sticks. Rainbow swirls, animals, keys, even a house in the winter—artisan, hand-crafted, finer than fine.

I picked up the house. “Gosh. Look at the craftsmanship on this.”

“Amazing, aren’t they?”

He was behind me, leaning over my shoulder. His dark hair fell onto my shoulder, brushing the side of my neck and cheek. The scent of limes overwhelmed me, his hair as silky as the ribbon.

Refraining from burying my face into that black silkiness, I shuffled to the right, freeing myself from its power.

“You’re really kind,” I said. “Thanks so much for this.”

“I know how much you enjoy lollipops, so thought you might enjoy these.”

Man, do you have it wrong... Lollipops were fine, sure, but I wasn’t an obsessive by any stretch.

He’s misread me. Not his fault I was a liar. “Thanks so much.” I got up on auto, wrapped my arms around him, then realized I’d done it again. Hugged the vampire. Pressed up against him.

Oh my...

I patted his muscular back and broke away. “Yeah, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Was that another smile I saw lingering on those lips?

He stepped forward, gazing down at me. “You’re always welcome.” He cupped my chin, lifting it gently, lowering his head. My breath escaped in wobbly expectation, ready for his lips to meet mine again.

“Your smell,” whispered, his voice a seductive wind across my face. “Your taste.”

Lips inching closer, ready to land. I closed my eyes, braced for the exquisite contact. Somewhat confused, but onboard for more of his kiss.

“I want more...” he breathed. “I—”

“You want me?”

He released my chin, backing off. “No, Clay. No.” More backing off. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

The vampire looked about the apartment as if trying to find something. A distraction.

“What would you like for dinner?” he asked, distraction found.

I wrapped my arms around my body, even more confused. He obviously wanted to, well, do things with me. So why not? And why was I being so cavalier about things? Maybe I needed to display a bit more of the same unease he did.

But it just feels like we’re dancing around each other...

If only we could reset to the pre-healing-blood time. I blamed the blood. I blamed my apparently rampant hormones unable to control themselves in the glare of a handsome man.

I guess I’d found my Achilles heel. Tae would be any male-lover’s weakness.

Huh. I thought he’d said there was nothing wrong with release? He clearly wanted a little something, and I was now two favors in debt to him. Should I offer him my services? Let him know it was all good. We could be roommates and demon hunters with benefits. Helping hands were the best hands. As were helping holes.

Oh, God.

Time to cool your jets...

I suppose the sensible me was right.

“I don’t mind,” I answered, fanning my face with my hand.

“Are you too hot?”

You've no idea, vampy boy. "I'm good. I'll eat whatever you feel like making."

"Sure." He got to cooking, pointedly keeping his head down.

Okay. Tae didn't want to talk about his, to go *there* with me again. Fine. There was enough going on to stop me from falling down a smitten rabbit hole.

I took a seat at the breakfast bar to watch him. "Are you okay?" I offered him the same question he constantly asked me.

He looked up. "I'm fine, thank you."

I don't believe you. "I'm... I'm sorry if I make you uncomfortable. And I'm really sorry for spunking on your massage bed." I winched. "Ejaculated sounds better, right? Less yucky. And it wasn't on the bed, but in my—"

Please shut up!

Here came a smile. "There's no need to apologize, Clayton."

"Clay."

"Clay. I... I'm happy you enjoyed yourself."

Right. "Bit weird of me. Got carried away."

Tae looked down at his cooking, saying nothing more. I waited, but when he didn't carry on, I took the cue to move on.

"Anyway..." I squeaked. "How safe is this place you have in mind for magical tests?"

"As safe as a place can be," he answered. "Not foolproof, but the best option we have."

“Maybe we should wait for your fairy contact,” I said.
“You know, to hide me better first.”

He tossed some ingredients into a wok. “I’m not convinced Arcana can be hidden.”

“Oh?”

“I may be wrong, but I cannot see how a powerful magic can be disguised. My contact might be able to spare you from detection, but actually hiding the magic completely is different. At least, that’s my theory.”

My demon blood is hidden from you...

“That makes sense,” I said with as much casualness as I could muster.

“We’ll see what he says. Until then, we have to rely on our own intuition, be smart. This job requires a lot of patience.”

“You’ve had centuries of practice,” I added.

“I know this isn’t fair.”

“Oh no. I wasn’t complaining. Did it sound bad? Shit. Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound like a bitch because it’s no one’s fault you’re as old as you are, and neither is being old your fault, and I’ve just called you old and insulted you and...”
Pause for breath. “...and I’ll shut the fuck up now.”

He cocked his head, smiling. Gosh. It tightened my chest in a good way. “Clay, you really are sweet when you ramble.”

Gosh. If he kept on calling me beautiful and sweet, I’d melt all over his expensive floors. “I call it annoying.”

He shook his head and chuckled. The sound was a deep, lovely melody.

God, I wanted him.

I slid off the stool, returning to sit with Fizz.

If this was how things would be, maybe I should leave. I couldn't keep acting like a randy teenager, going all silly and rambling. Yes, maybe it was just the blood doing things to me, but what about him? He kept... Man, I couldn't figure it out. Did his blood inside me drive him crazy, too? I mean, he'd mentioned my smell, my taste.

It'd pass. A month. We only had to wait a month.

"Dinner's almost ready," he called.

"Okay."

Did I want it to pass, though? I certainly wouldn't be leaving. Not now.

I stood up, stretching.

Well, then the answer to this silliness would be better communication. No dancing around each other. Get things out in the open. Being tangled up wouldn't help the demon hunting. I'd have a chat with him about all of this, get to the root of this attraction—vampire blood or otherwise.

Just not right now.

TWELVE



Fifteen minutes to midnight.

An abandoned sugar factory in Silvertown, East London, on the edge of the River Thames. Not where I'd been expecting. Neither had I expected to go blindfold-free. Just like that, he showed he trusted me with his secret entrance, hidden within an empty concrete building a few streets behind Raven Tower.

I didn't know how to feel. Pleased that he put trust in me, yes. Guilty because of my demonic secret.

"Why here?" I asked as he parked up outside the factory.

"It's out of the way. We won't be bothered here."

I got out of the car, Tae holding the door open for me because he couldn't bloody help himself. There was zero visual of fairy magic on him now, even though it was there.

We both wore black from head to toe, complete with sturdy yet comfortable boots.

"This is creepy," I said, condensation wafting out of my mouth in the cold air.

The tall, monolithic building looked over a vast patch of land on its east side, the Thames to its north, an abandoned warehouse to the west, and a railway to its south—above our

heads on a viaduct. The tracks up there used to be called the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) before most of it collapsed after The Tainted Storm, toxic rivers springing up all over this area. Like the one cutting through the subsiding warehouse, curling around the sugar factory, and forming a small green lake in the patch of land. A glowing, frightening mess beneath dirty glass.

The cold wind licked its icy tongue at me. I pulled my jacket around me, wishing we were back in the apartment with warmth and non-creepy vibes. Dark husks of distant buildings on the other side of the Thames told a thousand stories of death and destruction, more green fissures cutting through them.

Debris rustled around my feet—general rubbish and fallen leaves from a residential area’s trees nearby. More toxic rivers cut through those houses, all of them dark. Someone would live in the ones that weren’t half-sunken or flat-out destroyed. Silvertown and most of the surrounding area had been hit hard in the Tainted Storm. Worse than around my neck of the woods, and things were bad enough over there. Here the death toll had been highest, with earthquakes and rivers so wide houses were swallowed up with people still in their beds.

Horrible. This place was like the sight of a nuclear disaster. Only the toxins were contained for the time being.

“Gosh,” I whispered.

“Not the most pleasant of places,” Tae responded.

“You can say that again.”

Tae scanned the surroundings, taking a protective position between me and the factory. Then he turned and scanned behind me, above. Listening. Seeing. Smelling.

“There’s no one here.”

“Good to know,” I said with a shudder. “It’s so cold.”

“Come on, let’s go inside.”

We left the black car in the dark, stepping over fallen stone from a long-crumbled wall, aiming for the sugar factory.

Every entrance was boarded up, but Tae took me to something different. A crack in the eastern wall so hidden in shadows I wasn’t sure I saw it, even when I slipped through.

Cloying darkness engulfed me, the air thick with damp and decay. A light came to life in Tae’s hand. A tube like a glow stick, but better. For my benefit, not his. A blue light illuminating a small circle around us.

“Light spell makes sense,” I said. “Want me to try it?”

“Not yet. But it will save lugging lighting equipment here in the future.”

“Right.” He could’ve just told me straight up. Ah, never mind. Not point in nitpicking. Tae’s whole vibe was being mysterious with a side of broody. I mean, he’d been smiling, even laughed a couple of times. He had to claw something back and keep the brand in check.

You’re a dick.

“Watch your step,” he warned. “I promise you the structure is sound despite the damage. But there is more debris than you imagine throughout the factory.”

Man, was he right. I followed him down corridors, metal gratings and pipes above my head, stepping over so much crap and broken floors. Even had to clamber over a series of filing cabinets.

“Is this a barricade?” I asked, getting worried. “Do you need to tell me something? I’m having visions of zombies.”

“Don’t worry, Clay. Zombies don’t exist in this part of the world.”

A mound of debris met me—concrete from a collapsed ceiling. I started to climb after him. My boots slipped, rocks and dust sliding toward me.

“What does that mean?” I asked, frowning at the mound.

“Here.” He offered me his hand. I took it, a gentle spark between his skin and mine. Possibly only in my head.

Tae helped me up the mound. “Zombies are a rare species found in France. Paris, to be exact. They live in the tunnels beneath the city, in the darkest places. Contrary to the movies and books I gather you’ve enjoyed and been terrified by, zombies are capable of thought and do not eat brains to survive. They eat rats instead and cannot endure sunlight.”

My mouth opened, moving with no words. Mind officially blown. “Are you serious?” He kept hold of my hand as we came down the other side of the mound. A gaping hole above my head showed me empty, drafty darkness.

“I am serious,” he said. “I’ve met one. Spent a pleasant two hours with him down there.”

I swallowed, sick at the thought of being deep underground in the dark. You’d never catch me caving.

“What could’ve possibly been pleasant about it?”

“We discussed Marcel Proust. He is my favorite writer and was also my—” He didn’t finish.

“He was also what?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh.”

We turned a corner, stepping over a small hole in the floor big enough to swallow a foot.

“My favorite author is Stephen King.” I ducked under a veil of cobwebs, mirroring him.

“I’ve enjoyed his work over the years.”

“What’s your favorite?”

“*The Long Walk.*”

“Good choice. Mine’s *Salem’s Lot*. Scared the crap out of me. Not the kind of vampires I’d like to meet down a dark alley.”

No, you tangle with a different breed and score yourself a hand job in dark alleyways.

Oh, dear. Here came the radiant heat to the cheeks. Why couldn’t I have said *Misery* or something?

He stopped, looking over his shoulder as if he’d read my mind, his skin luminous in the shadows. I waited, but he didn’t speak. Instead, he carried on, me the skippy puppy behind—minus the skipping and, well, the puppy.

With no more book talk, and me still processing the zombie revelation, we came to an open space. At least, it felt like it in the air, and because Tae told me when he halted me with an outstretched arm.

“No windows,” I said. “Was hoping for some moonlight.”

“This is where your light spell comes into play,” he replied and checked his watch. “Ten seconds until midnight.”

I counted them down.

Arcana burst forth as it'd done before, the symbol summoned to the ground. My fingers became claws, demonic scales rippled up my arms. Once again, I managed to stop my wings erupting from my back.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Could he see the real me? Could he smell the demon?

Nope.

Phew.

Guilt twisted my soul harder.

The claws and the scales faded. Good. The terror of being found out lessened when they left.

Licking my lips and shaking, I retrieved my phone from my pocket and opened my notes on the spells. Photos didn't work on the grimoires, as if copyright protection covered the pages against photography—even for an actual Arcana wielder like me.

“Give me a sec,” I said, bringing the screen closer to my face.

“Take your time.”

Ball of Light

A ball of light can be created and wielded however the caster wishes to use it using the following two methods:

- 1. Use of the correct words—within or without.***
- 2. Making light with the ingredients listed overleaf. Be sure to follow instructions carefully. This method may start a fire. Extinguish the light by stomping it out or commanding it to leave.***

Every spell came like this, aside from demon-killing and Mark-summoning, always reminding you of the two threads of making magic, the list of ingredients, and the correct words—always a simple rhyme. Oh, and a reminder to swish the hands around. Hand and arm flourishes churned the magic and often helped guide it along.

No chance of me using the second method. I'd been reading some of the ingredients-based spells again, my head hurting at the prospect of mixing things together, measuring, being careful. Kind of like baking, which left me cold. Baking and me didn't mix. I'd tried a few times, once almost burning the kitchen of a care home down trying to make cupcakes. After that, I shut down any dreams of being good at it.

The right choice to make.

I read the correct words from my notes, going for within first, visualizing the word, a ball of light.

Ball of light. A spark in the night. Yep, simple rhyme.

Nothing happened.

I tried again.

Nope.

“Ball of light. A spark in the night.” A small puff of light about the size of a cherry appeared before me.

“I did it.” It went away. “I didn't do it.”

“Relax, Clay. Don't rush it.”

“That's what the grimoires say, too. But what happens when a situation requires more kick-arse action? I can't take my time if someone's coming for my head.”

“Practice will make you better.”

Thank you for pointing that nugget out!

Okay, no getting sassy with the vampire. Time to focus. To nail this.

“I can do this,” I said aloud, determination as bright as the ball I was focused on making.

Arcana was the original magic, the ultimate power never to be replaced. Respect it. Be at one with it. Don't try and force a peg into a... Never mind that. Just don't push. Ease into it. Learn. Practice.

A deep breath and I tried another internal attempt at the spell.

It worked. The cherry ball came back, floating before me.

“Hello there,” I greeted it.

Now I had it here, time to do things with the pretty thing. It was cute, the yellowish-white of a lightbulb. It flickered, awaiting its orders. Connected to me, its existence linked with mine, casting its light on Tae's boots.

The vampire kept quiet.

The grimoires said that once a spell was used once, it would remain in place in the mind. The words stored up in an internal index of spells to scroll through. Cool. As simple as the rhymes were, remembering them all after going deeper into the repertoire wouldn't be a stroll in the park without this backup memory.

I wanted to shine the ball's light on the room, light up every corner. Moving my hands in a sweeping motion, the ball flickered and grew and shot forward. It spun, shedding light from itself that splattered the ground and walls like paint. Less than half a minute later, the ball's job was done, revealing an

empty, dirty room. Huge with high ceilings and heavily boarded-up windows. Patches of water pooled in the corners from leaking pipes, and a heavy metal door sat directly ahead of me.

“Once a bustling part of the factory packed with workers and machinery,” Tae said.

“Right.” The ball floated back to me, small again, hovering like a firefly.

“That was impressive, Clay.”

“Thanks. But won’t this light be a beacon for the outside?”

“No windows, remember?”

I pointed at the boarded-up windows. “But there *are* windows. And what about cracks?”

“I put those boards up in preparation for this. Have no fear of cracks.”

“Being that prepared is impressive,” I said. “You actually made a training ground.”

“Didn’t I say that?”

“You said you had a place. You didn’t say much else other than it’s dark.”

“I see.”

“Thank you, Tae.”

“We can use this facility as much you like.”

“Cool.”

Staring at each other in the damp silence. I found my breathing hitched, my chest tingling. My pulse raged, my nerves standing to attention. His blood flared in my blood.

No. Not again. This was serious training time, not another round of Clay and Tae: The Crazy Attraction Series.

I broke the staring, opening the *push* spell.

“What is your next spell?” he asked from the side.

I cleared my throat, mentally easing myself out of the flurry of lust. “Push. It’s a telekinetic force to, erm, push. You know, a ‘Get away from me!’ kind of thing. Fling things around. A handy spell for tossing demons. Oh, gosh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Tossing demons sounds so wrong.”

“Your mind is in the gutter, Clay.”

I laughed at his small grin. “More than you think.”

“I’m sure.”

No, no, no. Spell time!



SPELLS CAME RELATIVELY easy to me. I spent hours in the sugar factory practicing the light ball, and the push spell, and one called *mist*. The latter turned me into a temporary figure of mist for five seconds, leaving me invulnerable to harm. Greater concentration sustained it for longer.

I’d work on it.

We left the factory at three in the morning, returning to the penthouse with my stomach growling.

Tae made me an egg sandwich and fries, and we sat together watching the movie version of Stephen King’s *Misery*. It’d been a while since I’d seen it, access to TV not

really forthcoming until now. My portable DVD player I'd been given a few years ago was busted. Annoying. But now, I had a streaming service to explore. And an amazing penthouse to live in.

Lucky, lucky me.

Until it all falls down.

I killed the negative thought. It wasn't welcome. It could go hug a pylon.

Fizz curled up in his lap as we watched, another silence between us. This one lacked awkwardness, possessing an easy comfort. Just two guys chilling on the sofa and watching a movie.

Tae sipped his vodka, his attention completely on the screen. Now and again, I'd glance over to get myself an eyeful, enjoying seeing him get so into the movie. A cozy warmth spread through me. I curled up next to him, getting way too comfy to stay awake much longer.

The next thing I knew, my head was resting on his shoulder, an arm and leg wrapped around him. I woke up with my mouth open, aware I'd been snoring my head off.

"Oh no," I groaned, unpeeling myself from him. "I'm so sorry."

He smiled. "You slept so soundly."

"Did I drool?" I touched my mouth, rubbed an eye with my other hand. "What a mess."

"It was cute you found me so comfortable."

"I didn't mean to."

"Don't worry, Clay."

“And I missed the movie.”

Sunlight illuminated the apartment, my eyes taking their time to adjust. Fizz groomed herself over by her favorite window spot, her silver fur dappled in the morning light.

“What’s the time?” I asked wearily.

“Ten o’clock.”

“Shit. I need to feed her.”

“I already did.”

“Oh. How if I was on you?”

“You were too deep in sleep to notice me move.”

Wait... “You got up and then came back?”

“I did.”

“Oh.” Oh, my. He actually enjoyed having me sleeping on him.

I rubbed the back of my neck, watching him get up.

“My contact will be here today,” he said. “At one.”

“O-okay.”

He stood with such poise, making gray sweatpants and a white vest look chic.

Gray trackies... They were, erm, quite revealing. I kept my eyes off *it*.

Kind of.

“Would you like breakfast?”

Yeah! Sausage! “Y-yes, please.”



GRINDLE STEPPED into the apartment in a tweed suit carrying a black leather bag in one hand, a silver cane in the other. I froze, mouth dropping open. I quickly closed it.

Honestly, I wasn't really that surprised to see his face.

"Hello, Grindle," Tae greeted him, dressed now in white jeans and a baby blue jumper. The vampire and the fairy shook hands. "This is Clay Christmas."

I stepped forward, unsure of how Grindle wanted to play this. I waited to follow his lead, trying to suppress the fear desperately seeking to show itself.

"The man in question," the fairy said. "At last, we meet." He came forward to *meet* me. "The warlock with Arcana. I've heard much about you." He offered me his hand. "It's nice to finally put a name to a face."

Handshake. Keeping casual. "Nice to meet you, too."

"Well, I have the stuff," the fairy said, turning to Tae. "Sorry for the delay. It's been a busy time."

"It's fine."

Grindle opened the leather bag, placing it on the floor. Inside were a shed load of glass pots filled with what looked like white face cream.

"With this magic, you will see each other's true faces, but the rest of the world will see what you tell the magic to project. As before, Mr. Frost. Unfortunately, I cannot hide Arcana. It is too powerful." He looked to me. "You've got a

serious weapon inside you, Clay. But keep away from witches.”

I kept it cool. “Scary.”

“Don’t be scared. Arcana is the greatest magic. You’re very lucky, even if it’s strange to have it back.”

Tae nodded. “Indeed.”

Grindle took his phone out, checking something. “But we shouldn’t look gift horses in the mouth, should we?”

“True,” I agreed. “Be nice to know why it’s in me, though.”

The fairy put his phone away. “Right, well, I’d better be going.”

“Thank you so much, Grindle,” Tae said. The men shook hands again, Tae walking him out.

Grindle looked back at me. “Good luck with the hunting and everything. I’m always on hand if you need help. I’ll try to make a point of prioritizing such special clients.”

“I appreciate it,” the vampire said, stepping into the elevator with him. “I won’t be a moment,” he added to me.

I waited. Numb. How was I supposed to feel about this? I trusted Grindle. It was nice to have him on board with this. Yet he stood between me and Tae with my demon secret. As much as I trusted him, it frightened me. Maybe it shouldn’t, and maybe that said a lot about the potency of my trust.

More lying. This time about me and the fairy not knowing each other.

Clay Christmas: Grade A Wanker.

Tae returned.

“That was a quickie,” I said.

“He doesn’t stand on ceremony. And you can trust him.”

“If you trust him, so do I.”

How could I treat this kind, generous man like this? The truth clambered up my throat, ready to jump off the cliff. But it chickened out at the last minute.

“I need to head into The City,” he said. “An issue at Auto Frost I must deal with.”

“On a Sunday?”

“Business never sleeps.”

“Oh.”

“Will you be okay here?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about me. My study head’s firmly on.”

“That’s good.” He went upstairs.

I received a text.

Grindle: Download the Whisper app and delete this message.

I did as he asked. Whisper was encrypted software.

I saved his number into the contacts section and messaged him: **I’m here. That was weird, right?**

Him: I knew it was you he talked about. You could have told me.

Me: I was scared.

Him: Understandable. I’ve picked us a location for the lollipops. There’s a post box behind Raven Tower. It’ll be for your eyes only. Open the hatch and take what you need.

I've also added a layer of demon-hiding to the cream to give you a boost.

Me: Thanks. A demon sensed me. I don't get how she did. Will others?

Him: I don't know for sure, but you should be okay. There are dark creatures in this world with greater power than me. Be careful. And be so careful to not get seen by witches.

Was I one of those dark creatures with my new great power?

Him: Keep up with the lollipops.

Me: Thanks. I will.

Him: If you need me, talk to me on here.

Me: Will do.

Him: Make sure you delete every message, though. Here and in your texting app.

Me: I will.

Him: Good. Speak soon.

Me: Okay. Thanks again.

I deleted the messages.

Yep. I was playing with fire, but it was too late to turn back now. And, honestly, I didn't want to. As much of a lying bastard I grew into by the day, leaving Tae's side did not compute.

It would hurt.

THIRTEEN



I continued my grimoire studies throughout the day and into the evening.

Tae was still out, dealing with whatever problem had reared its annoying head at the office. Auto Frost HQ sat in the heart of The City, in place of where The Gherkin once stood before it fell down—one of the few casualties of The Tainted Storm in the financial district of London. And not too far from here.

I ate salted popcorn as the sun went down. The clocks would be going back soon for the winter, the end of October approaching. Another year drawing to a close.

How to tame a busy brain? How to figure out this summoning the Mark thing without running on auto?

I sat cross-legged by the window with Fizz, who was munching on some dry food merrily. When her splint and bandages came off, I'd relax. I hated seeing her like this, watching her limp around whenever she got up to move. She didn't much, resting her leg, being a good patient.

Spots of rain appeared on the glass, dark clouds rolling in across the new night sky.

Okay. More Kylie required.

With the music in my ears, I swayed to ‘Put Yourself in My Place,’ thinking, thinking, thinking, enjoying the song, thinking about the post box with my lollipops, about Tae’s hands, about death, about sex, about life, loving this song so much.

Until a different song replaced it. Not Kylie, not the next track on the album.

Something else. A male voice with an amazing tone. No words, beautiful humming instead. Packed with allure as it rolled around my skull. I closed my eyes, embracing it.

“This is so nice,” I breathed.

As the minutes passed, its beauty grew, the melody swelling deliciously, bathing me in a blanket of wonder.

Stand up, the humming told me.

I got to my feet obediently, arms outstretched at my sides. Rocking side to side, smiling with my eyes firmly closed. I could almost see the colors of the song. Oceans of radiance, their waves calling to me.

I laughed and walked around the sofas, twirling about the apartment.

Come out and play...

I froze. “Huh?”

A rise in the crescendo.

“Gosh, this is amazing.” Back to twirling.

Come out and play.

“Huh?”

Come, come, come. Dance with me.

“Who are you?” I asked, still dancing.

A man who loves to dance.

“I can’t go outside.”

Yes, you can.

“It’s raining.”

So? We can dance in the rain. Sing in the rain. Like the movie.

“I shouldn’t.”

You should.

More song. Sweet, sweet song. How could I say no to such loveliness?

“I might get in trouble.”

You’re not a prisoner! My inner voice this time.

Rising melody, wrapping me up in the warmest hug. So magical, so special. So irresistible.

Come and play.

I gathered my boots and jacket. “Out to play.”

Yes... Yes... Yes... I can’t wait.

I paused as I pulled on my second boot. “Huh? What am I doing?”

The music killed my question.

Not a time for questions when there was fun to be had.

Finsbury Park...



I SKIPPED through the busy streets in the rain, getting myself some strange looks. Someone shouted at me from across the road, but I blocked him out. No negativity for me, please.

Packed full of joy and melody, I kept on twirling and skipping until I arrived at Blackfriars Station, soaking wet with no care in the world.

Damn. No money for a ticket, seeing as no allowance had come my way yet. I couldn't walk all the way to Finsbury Park from here. I mean, I could, but it'd take me ages to get there. And I wanted to dance in sloping green fields right now.

Jump the barrier. It wasn't too busy, and the guard was focused on his phone.

Could I slip through unnoticed? Yes. Definitely. With my shimmer trick.

Moving to the far side of the barriers, away from the guard, I called upon my warlock power and shimmered, vaulting the barriers to the other side.

Blink, and you miss me, I said to myself.

I hurried down to the appropriate platform—needing the train to take me to Kings Cross St. Pancras. From there, the Piccadilly or Victoria Line to Finsbury Park, then off to the park itself.

To dance!

I boarded the next train, tapping my foot to the song in my head, happy to be on my way. Nothing would bring me down from this high.

When the train arrived at Kings Cross, I staggered onto the platform, confused as hell. I bumped into a muscular woman, who asked me if I was okay.

“I’m... I’m not sure.”

She held me by the shoulders, unbothered by my warlock mark. “You sure, mate? Do you need me to call someone?”

A melody waited on the fringes of my mind. Strange. Had I been listening to something new? My earphones weren’t in.

“I’m good. Thanks.”

She patted my left shoulder and said, “If anyone’s giving you shit, call me.” She handed me a business card. Green with a phone number printed in white. Nothing else.

“I solve many, many problems.” She cracked her knuckles. “If you catch my drift.”

“I do. Oh.” I noticed her warlock mark.

“Just like you,” she said, tapping it. “Name’s Victoria. Not Vicky. Ever.”

Reminds me of a certain vampire.

We shook hands. “Nice to meet you, Victoria. I’m Clay.”

“Seriously, you need help, you call that number. I don’t suffer wankers.”

“Good to know.” Pain in my temples. “Where am I?” I spotted the sign. “Kings Cross? What am I doing here?”

“Maybe you should sit down for a bit.”

“I was... I was... I don’t know where... I was at home, and then I wasn’t because I’m here. Shit...”

“Seriously, have a seat. Take it easy.”

Song. Male humming. Crashing into me.

Oh, yeah. Let me get back on track.

Come and play!

“I’d better be going,” I sang at her. “Thanks for your kindness. I need to get away and dance.”

She laughed. “Sounds fun. As long as you’re sure.” She nodded at my hand. “Put that card somewhere safe, just in case.”

I slid it into my pocket, saluting her. “Toodles for now!”

She chuckled, saluting me back. “See you, Clay.”

What a nice person.

I skipped through the tunnels, finding my next train. Full of song again. Happy as Larry.

Who was Larry? Never met a Larry...



I BOUNCED along the streets after alighting the Victoria Line train. That was two Victorias in one night. Along the way, I grabbed a lamppost and spun around on it. Living in a Hollywood moment in the rain, some drivers clogging up the road beside me, honking, shouting. I laughed and blew kisses. Losing my inhibitions, so fucking happy to be outside.

The rain made it better.

I love the rain, the humming voice said to me.

Arriving at the park, I ran across the fields, dancing under the trees.

I’m over here...

I followed the voice, its weird pull a rope around my waist dragging me closer. Over there, in a dark pocket beneath trees.

Is that where we'd dance? Or could we get down somewhere with lights? I didn't like the look of the darkness.

Still, I skipped toward it. Desperate to see him. Anyone who made sounds like him needed a big hug and a dancing buddy. Man, could I be the best dancing buddy when I wanted to. I loved to dance, especially to the tunes of Queen Minogue.

I slowed down as I approached the fringes looking for the man of the hour.

“Where are you?”

The night shifted, a light switched on. Finsbury Park ignited into a sea of candy colors. Confection for the eyes in pinks and oranges and purples and yellows, a cacophony of melodies swirling around me.

“Oh my God!” I cried, laughing.

A chorus line of people appeared, dressed as colorful as the rest of the park. They hummed in a blend of male and female vocals. Snapping their fingers, bopping along.

More people. Dancers with ribbons and glitter, leaping and twerking and having the best time of their life.

And then *him*. The singer. Not just any him, but Orlando Bloom. The actual Orlando Bloom, plucked straight out of his days on *The Lord of the Rings*, his blond Legolas wig billowing behind him. He came to me, took me by the hand, and laughed.

“About time,” he said.

“Sorry, I'm late.”

He spun me. We danced and laughed and felt every fiber of the music, rode every single beat with our bodies and voices.

Until the cracks appeared.

This man... This wasn't right. This wasn't Orlando Bloom now. This was him from many years ago. He was someone else, someone...

Someone...

Someone...

Someone...

The song broke, the candy colors melting. We weren't dancing anymore. I watched the scenery melt over his shoulder, the dancers and singers becoming stubbed and melted candles.

"What..." Pain in my head. "I... Where am I? What the hell am I doing outside?"

Rain and cold and darkness.

Outside? Why?

A song...

A song?

Something brought me here...

"You're here to dance with me," a male voice said.

A tremor through my core. My joy crashed like a meteor.

"Oh, shit."

Icy terror licked at me with glacier tongues.

The button-eyed demon had spoken.

FOURTEEN



He grabbed me by the throat with his icy hands, fingernails biting into my skin, his grip vicious.

Fuckfuckfuckfuck!

“Did you like my song?” he asked, his face way too close to mine. His breath stank of sour milk. “Many do. Many come to dance if I ask them to.”

Some sort of trick to lure me out?

Great, so this demon aspired to be a siren.

“I sensed something in you,” he continued. “Beyond your diluted blood. A radiance. You’re special. I’m special. I know I can be special. I know I deserve a chance to be incredible. And I hear her asking me to show her, to find it, to lay it at her feet.”

“Wh-who is she?” I couldn’t help but ask through my pain. It came out pathetic and squeaky.

Where was I? A park. Hilly... Finsbury Park? Yes. I remembered the... dancing. What the hell?

There was a demon tower at the heart of the park, looming high above the trees and greenery. Dark. How was it dark if this demon used his scary siren-like skills? Where was the red jewel when you needed it? He hadn’t manifested visible

demonic parts, but surely him using that song would set off the alerts.

The demon rolled his neck. “She is my queen. I long to please my queen. And you will not take it away from me. It is mine.”

“What—”

He applied pressure to my windpipe, cutting me off. “Don’t try and lie to me. I smell it. I smell the brightness. You want to steal it, to usurp me. But you are not me. You are weak. I hear her. You... You can’t...” His lips quivered, black tears escaping from behind those white buttons.

In desperation, I kicked out, landing some blows to his shins. The fucker squeezed harder, unbothered by my attempts to get free.

“Eliminate the competition.” He sniffed me. “No competition. Only me. Why are you here?” He continued to weep those onyx rivulets. “It isn’t fair. You’re not fair. This. Is. Mine!”

The button-eyed demon threw me. I sailed through the air, landing hard on my back, sliding across the sodden grass. My insides rattled, and I bit my tongue. Hot, metallic blood filled my mouth.

Squelching, hurried footsteps coming at me. The gushing well of adrenaline inside me got me to my feet, summoning my warlock magic. I rolled out of his trajectory as he tried to grab me again, gray tendrils of magic coiling around my fingers.

“Death for you, usurper.”

Usurper of what?

I unleashed a flurry of fireworks in his face. They'd hurt as much as taking a bubble to the head, but the brightness and the crackling worked to startle him. He swatted at the colors as if they were bugs, which then got me sending a swarm of rainbow flies at the prick. I added some extremely loud buzzing to the colorful cloud and ran, taking advantage of the window.

“Usurper!” he bellowed.

My head pounded, my chest constricted by iron gauntlets. But my feet didn't falter. They carried me across the grass. I shimmered, willed my legs to work their hardest. This insane, horrible demon wasn't going to bring me down.

He roared from behind me, loud enough to be thunder complementing the rain.

Red light spilled across the ground before me. Yes! Thank you, demon tower.

Sirens followed seconds later.

He'd manifested.

Why is it, when you want to get away from something, the point of freedom seems so far away? Like the busy high street I aimed for. With every yard covered, another was added. I know that wasn't true, but desperation liked to be cruel and make the brain think you were never getting out of the dark and rainy park.

People screamed, dog walkers and crazy joggers. Who the hell would want to jog in the rain? This demon had come to bring terror to their Friday night.

A firmness on my left leg. A pull. I went down, hands breaking my fall before my face planted into the wet.

“Fuck!” I cried.

The thing on my leg pulled again, dragging me across the ground. I tried to grab hold of something, dig my fingers into mud, snag on anything. There was nothing there. I went sliding along a slippery slide, straight back to the button-eyed demon. Between his legs.

He bent over me, rain dripping off his chin. “You can’t run. Thieves must pay. Always pay for these bad things. For stealing things.”

“I haven’t stolen anything,” I protested, noticing the leg-snagging culprit. A pulsating tentacle of black scales had burst from his right hand.

Spikes and tentacles. Great.

Where were the damn ADU?

“You will steal, though,” he said.

The edges of his body shimmered like heat on a road. He lifted his head to the sky, his mouth lax.

“Yes... Come to me. Smother him.”

A pop like a bursting white head. Wet and gross, followed by a gooey slither. Then another, then another. Parts of his clothing split open, more of those tentacles sliding out of him. Even the middle of his forehead. The skin popped, the black monstrosity tumbling out like a snake, smearing black ooze across his face. He licked it as it moved past his lips, down to slide across my legs, then up to my chest.

“Oh, no...” I breathed.

It curled around me, pushing my back off the ground to get underneath me, then back around. Locking me tight.

The rest of them joined it, taking limbs, more of my torso, my neck, and the top of my head. Manhandling me, slimy abominations behaving like pythons—a wet, nightmare version. Trapping me good. I tried to move. No good. I wasn't going anywhere.

The button-eyed prick made a point of reiterating my predicament.

Yeah, thanks so much for that.

“You will not take, thief. *I* will take. There is no room for fifty-fifty. Only a hundred percent of me.”

What the hell?

A shriek of tires, commotion halting the demon. He looked up, head tilted inquisitively as his button eyes faced the distance.

“They come to spoil,” he whispered.

Moments later, ADU agents arrived, charging forward with their guns and talismans. Thank God.

What a twist to be thankful to see them for once.

The demon laughed at their presence, his tentacles releasing me. They slid back inside as he twitched, holding up his claws.

I clambered to my feet, everywhere hurting from the tentacle grips, from his horrible grip on my throat. Agents circled us, a whole army of men and women in white and red uniforms. Some of them pointed their guns. All of their talismans, dangling on necklaces or held in hands, flared red with Synth.

For a moment, I panicked. Would they send me packing to the demon realm with him? I'd never been in the position of

facing a talisman.

Oh. Shit.

Once, I'd seen a banishment go down live on a TV in a shop window. A collection of TVs, actually, all for sale and playing the news on a loop. Spotting a report of some demon activity outside Buckingham Palace, I'd stayed to watch it play out—which was a nice break from the roasting summer heat. The shop had a canopy. Yay to shade. Anyway, the drama unfolded before me. The flaring talismans, the red flames bursting to life around the demon's feet. The demon screaming, the flames becoming a vortex of red. More screaming, the demon truly done for. After a flash of red light, the demon was gone. No trace of her left.

Banished.

That same process began again in real life. The button-eyed creep laughed as the red vortex kicked in. Continued to laugh after the flash, when he was supposed to be gone.

He remained in place.

So did I, feeling a tingle across my skin, queasiness at my core.

Oh, God.

“Your pathetic magic cannot touch me,” the demon boasted.

Mine could... If it were midnight.

Stupid midnight rule...

... How to break it?

“Again!” some agent barked.

They all tried again. I covered my eyes against the magic. It was bright stuff.

No banishment here.

The agents tried a different approach, opening fire on the demon. A spray of bullets pummeling him in a deafening assault. The demon howled with laughter laced with pain. At least it sounded like it to me.

Hands over my ears, I returned to getting the hell out of there, only to be stopped by a non-firing agent.

“Where do you think you’re going, warlock?” He grabbed my arm, dragging me across the park. Man, I was fed up with arsewipes thinking they could touch me.

“I just want to go home,” I protested, boots sliding on the slick grass. “I—”

He stopped and spun me around. The crisp white of his uniform illuminated his dark brown face, the witch symbol on his forehead. His lips curled up in a snarl, his nostrils flaring.

“I know you didn’t just resist me,” he said, venom dripping off every word.

His gun was so close.

“I... I didn’t...”

“Don’t speak. Don’t make a fucking sound unless I say so. Bad enough I’ve been charged with dealing with your arse.”

I bit my lip, letting myself get dragged off. This could be the end. They were going to grill me. One slip up and goodbye to me. Off to the demon realm or locked in a cage or worse.

Where was Tae? I expected him to drop in on me like the first time I’d encountered the button-eyed demon, who still

laughed behind me. Still not banished.

What had the creepy demon bastard meant? So much to unpick. A woman, me stealing something. And he'd been the second demon to sense my blood. Mike hadn't, though. Like Grindle had said, there were darker creatures out there, those he couldn't hide me from. And I'd met two of them.

The ADU agent hauled me over to a van where a female colleague of his snarled at me and threw open the side door. Also a witch—the majority of ADU agents were, bar the odd regular human. She didn't say a word. The guy tossed me inside. My knees banged on the metal floor, my side hitting the side of the seats.

More grabbing, getting dragged and dumped into one of six side-facing seats. The witch strapped me in, then handcuffed me tightly. Not asking if it hurt, which it did. He pushed a button above my head, a red light coming on. A magical light. Synth filled the car in a weak mist, seizing up my limbs. Cold magic in my bones.

So the handcuffs weren't needed, were they? He just wanted to be a piece of shit. Billy Big Bollocks, as my friend Lina used to say back in the days of care home living. We'd been besties from the age of fourteen until she died at fifteen. Threw herself in front of a train after finding her real mother and getting... Well, she got hurt really bad. Emotionally destroyed by a woman who'd bettered her life, made a new family, tossing her first daughter out like a wet paper towel.

It broke my heart losing Lina. I tried not to think of the sad end but the happy times. We had many, like the day out to Clacton where we ate too much ice cream and embraced the hell out of the beach.

Where are you, Tae? Ha. Cut to me desperate for a telepathic connection between the vampire and me. There were telepathy spells in the grimoires. Hadn't got there yet.

Study harder.

I breathed deeply, exhaled slowly. Staying calm. That would keep me out of cells or whatever. Answer their questions, take the inevitable abuse, do as they asked. Get out, go home, cry into my pillow and hug my cat until she batted me on the head for going too far with the snuggles.

The van's engine purred, and we were off, driving away from the scene. And it still was very much an active scene. The button-eyed demon was still howling, going nowhere.

I smell it. I smell the brightness. You want to steal it, to usurp me. But you are not me.

What was I supposed to steal from him? His life with Arcana? The magic must be the brightness. But the usurping? I'd no plans to pop some buttons over my eye sockets and get my serial killer on. And who was this woman?

Focus... Concentrate on getting out of this predicament first, then examine the weird details with Tae.

His centuries-old brain would be better than mine.



THE ADU HEADQUARTERS sat in West London in a tall concrete structure on the Uxbridge Road side of Shepherd's Bush Green. Imposing, ugly, gray, it towered over everything, permanently floodlit. It'd withstood many demonic attacks over the years, its hard shell impenetrable.

From my position in the back of the van, I stretched my eyes far enough to take it in as we drove past, heading for the back of the building. Rain fell hard again, splashing the widows. The outside lights lit up the droplets, turning them to orange-tinged smears. We went into a smaller concrete block affixed to the rear of the building, a massive door grinding up and open. The witches drove in, the door closing behind us.

The pair of arsewipes removed me from the van, positioning me upright. As soon as they did, I was free of the Synth, the feeling returning to my limbs. I stretched my legs, flexed my toes. Didn't get told off for it or have my handcuffs removed.

Gosh, they really rubbed the skin on my wrists raw.

“Ready?” the guy asked me.

“Yes.”

“Then move.”

We walked, surrounded by more gray concrete, no windows, only one door at the top of a small metal staircase. The door fed into a concrete corridor with cells double layered with bars and thick glass panels with airholes. The witches removed my handcuffs and opened one of them.

“Interview coming up,” the woman finally said.

They took my phone and shoved me inside.

Thank God there was no fairy lollipop on me.

The man checked me over. “Need medical attention?”

“I think I'm okay. Just sore.”

He scanned me with a device he pulled from his pocket. The shape of a phone emitting Synth in the form of three laser

beams. He waved the device up and down my body, checking the screen.

“All good,” he said. “No damage. But you need something for the soreness. Wait.”

Yeah, because I had a choice of not waiting.

He locked me in the cell, disappearing. I was pleased to be free of his face for a bit.

As gray as everything else, the cell had no windows but did have a bed, a sink, and a toilet. I sat on the incredibly hard bed, leaning forward. Hands on my thighs, aching all over. Now the adrenaline wore off, the pain flourished to mix with the icy terror slithering inside me as an army of mean serpents.

Slow and steady breaths. Keep breathing. It'll be okay.

The male witch returned five minutes after dumping me here with a bottle of water, a small pack of biscuits, and some painkillers. He fed them through the panel cut into the glass and bars.

“Take them.”

I got up and claimed them. “Thank you.”

He grunted, closing up the panel.

I returned to the bed and took the pills, gulping down half the water. Good water. Much needed after that experience. I ignored the biscuits, rubbing at my sore wrists. The flesh there flushed an angry red, itchy as much as it was sore.

Minutes ticked by. At least, I thought so. With no clock and nothing else to do, there was only waiting. Minutes could feel like hours, boredom and fear a right pair of shit bags to contend with.

Weak, still shaking from my ordeal, I decided to lie down. The hard mattress didn't bother me. I'd slept on benches before, even the cold hard ground. This was luxury by comparison, my back not yet adjusted to the extreme comfort of my bed at Tae's apartment.

Closing my eyes, I tried to relax. For the time being, I was safe. For all intents and purposes, the ADU agents had saved me from the button-eyed demon before the bastard turned me into pulled pork with his tentacles.

As much prejudice as there was toward my kind, the ADU was required to operate within the law when dealing with me. Feed and water me, make sure I was cared for. Handcuff tightness aside, they'd done that. The law, drawn up by witches with human counsel, protected life. Gave everyone a string of rights, even warlocks. That didn't stop bigotry, and to be honest, the law liked to look the other way if a witch whispered the right words to dig their way out of a hate crime. I guess it depended on the 'law enforcers' in any given case. Laws didn't make me feel safe, not even now, but anything was better than facing the demon again.

I let my mind empty, actually doing it this time. A million thoughts a minute were taking their toll. My poor brain needed a respite, especially with the new button-eyed details. When the ADU sat me down to conduct their interview, I'd be cool enough to answer without waffling or tripping myself up.

A fire in the dark of my mind, sitting at the heart of a campfire of elements. A pond by my feet, a patch of turned soil with vibrant flowers beside it. Next to that, a funnel of wind. An actual tornado twisting up into the dark above, sucking at the grass. I didn't feel or hear any of it. Not even the fire. There was no heat or cold here. No sense of anything.

Next to the tornado was a ball of white light, mist dripping off it like dry ice. Spirit. One of the five elements. All of them accounted for here.

I spotted a star at the center of the fire. It twinkled in there. Where the flames were orange and white-tipped, the tiny star reflected the color of Arcana. I moved closer to the fire to get a look, mindful of the other elements around me. Just because sound and feeling were missing, it didn't mean I couldn't get sucked up by a tornado or drown in a pond.

Beside the fire was a log. Handy. I took a pew, eyes focused on the star in the flames.

I spoke, my body absorbing a sudden understanding. Taking on the role of storyteller. I didn't know what was about to come out of my mouth but also did on a deeper level.

"Arcana comes at night," I said. "It is limited in this new guise."

The elements seemed to move in closer, even the fire, as if listening to my story.

"The summoning of the Mark is new, is not as it was in the old days. Arcana is the same, yet not the same. Arcana is unusual inside me. It requires the strike of midnight, for it is tied to the new ways where it is new itself."

Like Trace? Is that what I, erm, yeah me, meant? Just as Tae had suggested.

"Adapted to a different time. Tainted with a different blood."

I took that as a yes. My demonic blood gave it a twist. That made sense, I guess. A connection to Trace, blended with my blood, making it a midnight magic.

“Still the same power,” I said.

I continued. “Control the Mark. It does not have to control me. I am the master of the power. It links to mind and heart, whispers to me. Waits for me. Not its own mind. I run the show. It comes, it waits, I draw it to use its power.”

Me saying this was super weird, but I guess I reached my inner solution. I now knew how to summon the Mark of Arcana without it coming out on its own at the strike of twelve. It would rise to let me know it was ready, wait for me to set it free so I could then get my magic on. Just like that, we were better connected. Ready for the next stage.

Everything slotted into place. Well, not everything.

“The Mark *must* come first for the magic to work,” I reiterated.

Yeah, yeah. I get it.

Why did my voice sound like I was rehearsing for a Shakespeare play? Hamlet or something?

“But I should not be.”

Why? I wanted to ask.

Nothing.

Was I not supposed to be here? Hold Arcana? What did it mean?

Nothing again. No more revelations.

With *some* answers in hand, I remained with the elements. Not talking, lingering in silence until my eyes opened, putting me back in the ADU cell. I blinked, glanced about me. Yep, definitely back in the cell.

Ugh. I liked the campfire place better.

FIFTEEN



It wasn't long before I found myself in an interview room. Dumped in here unceremoniously by the witch guy, who lingered by the door. Waiting.

White walls, gray carpet, drab pine table between me and an opposite chair, it was the cheeriest room I'd seen in this building yet. Said a lot about this place.

A man joined me and the witch. Dressed in white, of course, but not the ADU uniform. Much smarter in a tailored suit, a fair-skinned guy with perfectly quiffed silver hair. He took a seat in the other chair, all smiles. He held a brown paper folder.

“Hello, Mr. Christmas. I'm Brad Smith. I'm one of the chief ADU investigators here in the London HQ.” He tapped the witch symbol on his forehead. “And a witch. How are you feeling?”

What a pleasant man. I trusted him as much as I trusted hugging a cobra.

“Better after the painkillers,” I answered.

His megawatt smile lit up the room. “Good. I'm pleased to hear you were looked after. I trust you have been treated with as much kindness as can be extended to you. After all, you

have suffered a terrible ordeal.” His eyes flicked to the other witch. “And you are our star witness to this latest incident.”

Did I answer now? Did I give him my full review of my encounter with his ADU? Bad service, appalling manners, a couple of arsewipes manhandling me.

“I’m fine,” I replied. “The painkillers really, really help.”

“Are they enough?”

“Yes. Them and a good night’s sleep.”

He nodded, grinning. “Sleep is the best medicine, along with laughter.” He opened his folder, thumbing his way through some paperwork. “The button-eyed menace,” he said as he closed the folder again after a few seconds, pushing it aside. “Now, are you ready for the interview? I will try to keep it as brief as possible.”

“O-okay.”

The head guy brushed the lapels of his jacket, folding his hands in his lap. “Agent?”

The witch moved across the room. Pushed a button.

“This is High Agent Brad Smith conducting an interview with Mr. Clay Christmas on Sunday the twenty-fourth of October. The time is nineteen forty-three. Agent Drew Wills witnessing.” A pause. “Now, Mr. Christmas, why don’t you start at the beginning.”

Here came some porkies... “I was out and about, thinking about food and money. I always think about food and money. I’m homeless, you see, so they’re my top priorities along with shelter. Anyway, I went up to Finsbury Park to work.” I explained my magic tricks, how I performed them around various parts of the city. “Rain upset the apple cart.”

“As rain does,” Brad said. “Witnesses say you were dancing in the streets.”

I nodded. “That’s just me. Keeping on the bright side.”

“Some also said you appeared intoxicated.”

I laughed. “I wish I could afford to be drunk.”

Man, these lies were dirty things, leaving behind rotten patches. I remained in line with them, though. Calm. Hungry for freedom. They were my tools to get out of here.

“I see,” Brad responded.

What did he see?

“What possessed you to enter the park in the dark?”

“I wasn’t really thinking about it,” I said. “Being in such a good mood kind of blocked my senses. And the only thing I was high on was joy.”

Brad nodded. “What put you in such a good mood?”

“Nothing special. Was just feeling a rush of happy vibes.”

“I see.” He smiled.

“That’s how I am. I like to be happy.”

His smile tapered off a little. “Even living as you do?”

“It’s what gets me through the days. Keeps me keeping on. Dream big. All of that stuff.”

“I admire you, Mr. Christmas.”

“Thanks.”

His brown eyes seemed to bore into me, digging for untruths, gems to scoop out and shaft me with. There were plenty in there to harvest.

He brought his hands up to rest on the table. “So, after your joyful stroll or dance, whatever you want to call it, you ended up in the park where you encountered the demon.”

“I did.”

“What happened?”

I told him, leaving out the words the demon said to me.

“Did he say anything?” he asked.

“Threatened me. Nothing more than that.”

“How did he threaten you?” he pressed further.

Spin a lie, make it fly... “Told me I’d suffer. Then he attacked me.”

No way was the ADU getting the truth out of me. They’d keep me here for hours if they did. Helping their investigation wasn’t a priority—helping my own was.

I went on to explain the tentacles, finishing up with when the ADU had come to save the day.

“Is that everything, Mr. Christmas?”

“Yes. Wish there was more. Think I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Unfortunate.”

I nodded.

More smiles. “Thank you for your help, Mr. Christmas.”

“Happy to do what I can,” I answered, being the good citizen.

“I am pleased you escaped safely. It could have ended badly for you. I would suggest paying more attention when

you walk through the city from now on. Try to rein in that joy a bit.”

He didn't believe me. I could tell. He might smile and act the friendly witch, but his eyes didn't lie. They glinted with distrust, drilling for my core some more. He'd marked me for a later encounter.

Damn.

“Well, I suppose that brings this questioning to a close,” Brad said.

For now...

He got up and left me alone with the witch.

“Time for you to go,” he said.

Words I'd been waiting to hear.



I WASN'T OFFERED a lift home. Cast out of the HQ and sent on my merry way. Goodbye, thanks for your time. We'll get you on something later because we know you know more, and you're a lying warlock shithead.

I hurried away from the big building, finding shelter under a closed shop with a canopy. The cold air bit at my skin. Shivers hindered me opening my phone screen, every inch of me a trembling, wet mess. Eventually, I called the vampire.

“I'm a minute away,” Tae answered on the first ring.

“How... How did you know?”

“Stay where you are.”

I did as he ordered, arms wrapped around my body, counting down the seconds.

Precisely sixty seconds later, his black car pulled up outside the shop. I moved, climbing into the passenger seat. Delicious heat enveloped me. Much needed heat.

Tae leaned over to inspect me. “Are you okay?”

“Cold. Sore.” I was still shaking.

“Did the demon hurt you?”

“Y-yes. But I’m alright.”

“Did the ADU hurt you?”

“Some... some of the agents were a b-bit rough w-with me. Nothing a hot shower and b-bed won’t heal.”

He drove. “Let’s get you home.”

“How... How did you know where I was?”

“Your phone. It has a tracker.”

I wasn’t sure how to react to that. “Oh.”

“Most phones have this feature,” he said. “Yours is switched on as a safety measure. I need to be able to find you.”

Made sense, if a bit, I don’t know, controlling. Was that too harsh? Never mind. In this instance, I was grateful for it being switched on.

“This isn’t about control,” he added. “As I’ve said to you before, you are not my prisoner. But there have to be protections in place.” A beat, the car coming to a stop at a red light. “I’m sorry for the delay.”

“What?” I asked, my shakes easing off in the heat.

“I didn’t know you’d left the apartment straight away. Because of my meeting. Normally, I receive an alert of any such activity. However, I was playing mediator in a board meeting, neglecting to see the alert. I’m sorry.”

I rubbed my hands together over the heater. “Don’t be sorry. You haven’t heard the best bit yet.” I liked that he didn’t immediately grill me on why I was out of the apartment. Made me regret thinking ‘control.’ If he’d been a controlling prick, he’d be ripping me a new asshole.

Right?

“I got myself a brain fuck,” I said, and explained what’d happened from the weird musical to what the button-eyed demon had said.

The vampire was silent for a good five minutes, weaving through the rainy streets of West London, skirting the edges of Kensington where The Tainted Storm had done more horrible damage. We passed rundown area after rundown area, the glow of toxic rivers in the distance of this quiet collection of streets and broken buildings.

“I’m as confused as you are,” he said. “Although I agree the brightness must refer to Arcana.”

“Yeah, I—”

He slammed on the brakes. I lurched forward with a yelp, hands on the dashboard.

“Help me!” a woman screamed outside. Tae had missed her by inches. She stood there sobbing, covered in blood. Drenched. “Please... Help... Me...”

She flopped forward onto the bonnet, smacked her head off the metal, and rolled to the ground.

Tae flung his door open, outside in a blink. I followed, drenched by the rain again within seconds.

The vampire crouched beside the woman, checking her over, examining her with eyes, not hands. She wore shredded red pajamas, her body covered in awful slashes and gouges. The side of her head was scoured with three deep scratches.

She was dead.

“Demon?” I asked, looking around. I didn’t see any sign of an active demon tower. Heard no sirens.

“I don’t think so.” He stood, eyeing the area. His eyes focused on the direction of the green glow of the toxic rivers. “Down there. Something moves.”

“Is it a demon?”

“No.” Tae glanced at the woman. “We should call the emergency services and leave.”

“But... but shouldn’t we investigate?”

“Only fools rush in,” he countered, his tone an arctic blast.

“Sorry.”

The vampire remained fixated on the dark. “Clayton?”

I didn’t correct him. “Yes?”

“Get in the car. Now.”

“W—”

Before any word came out, two green orbs flared in the distance.

Eyes.

Two green eyes.

Green veins spread across a dark shape in jagged fissures. From head to foot on a humanoid figure. A muscular shadow, hunched, poised to charge forward as a predator going for the kill. Its hands were swollen-looking, the tips of its fingers glistening jade.

“What the fuck is that?” I said.

“Get in the car,” Tae repeated.

“Only if you do.”

“Clayton—”

“I’m not leaving you out here with this thing.” Even if I wanted to pass out, my tummy in a thousand knots.

“Get—”

The thing charged, the darkness of its body breaking away to reveal a luminous green thing. Those twin orbs blended in with the rest of its metallic-like body, making an entire wall of shimmering green.

“Bloody hell!” I cried.

Yep, it looked mostly like a man, missing a cock between its legs. No hair, no mouth. It bounded toward us. This would be a perfect time for Arcana to show me it operated before midnight, really. I mean, it did its sensing thing, kept telling me Tae was a vampire at random moments throughout the day. Why couldn’t the rest of it follow suit and let me start using the push spell?

Tae charged forward in a dazzling burst of speed. He clashed with the creature, swinging punches, his fangs bared. The thing matched his aggression, blocking his strikes. Tae blocked his, too, thank God.

What to do. Jump in? Yeah, and get killed. Fucking Arcana! What was the use of having all this power when you —

Moaning solved nothing.

I needed a weapon. Something to give me leverage. I looked around the empty street, finding nothing. The street was empty of things and life. Wait. Scratch that. I found a rock beside a lamppost.

It was the best I could do. Now how to use it effectively?

Tae held his own, the green thing holding its own, too. It didn't make a sound, other than the metallic clang of Tae's fists landing on it.

Man, that had to hurt the vamp.

I watched helplessly, waiting for a window. If I caught Tae's attention, he'd be distracted. But maybe the rock would help deliver a killing blow.

Twin green orbs behind the brawling.

Oh, shit.

The new creature burst into greenness and ran at me, its head lowered as it charged.

I yelped, bracing myself—not wanting to turn my back on it.

Tae roared, delivering a backflip kick to his adversary. A heavy clang and the creature flew backward. A loud bang echoed in the street as it landed. It didn't stay down, immediately springing back to its feet and coming after Tae as he put himself between me and the new prick.

“Oh, gosh. Oh, gosh.” I gripped the rock, trembling, bladder ready to fail me.

This wasn't happening. This wasn't happening.

Oh, it really, really was.

Tae tangled with them both, driving them away for a brief moment. The new one got past him as the original headbutted his beautiful face. Tae tumbled backward into a roll, jumping to his feet.

The new green thing came at me. I leaped out of the way of its swing twice. On the third, I lost my footing, my turn to hit the ground. I tried to scramble, but the thing stood over me, feet planted on either side of my torso.

“Fuck you!” I cried up at it.

“Clay!” Tae roared, the sounds of fighting and clanging mingling with his voice.

The creature crouched down, almost planting its shiny arse on my chest. I held my breath as it brought its face close to mine.

A heavy clang, Tae growling.

My fingers dug into the rock, the rest of my body too scared to move. Concrete replaced my muscles, leaving me a heavy, useless lump.

The lower part of the creature's face opened where the mouth should be. A half-moon split in the green, revealing a void of white. No teeth. No tongue. Almost too ridiculous to be real.

My eyes fixed onto the whiteness. Stuck there. The more I looked, the more fixated I became. The white expanse, another world inside that mouth. Seductive. Riddled with death, sure,

but that was the price to pay for unlocking the secrets of the white.

Take me there...

I want to see...

I want to die and see...

My body relaxed, my vision filling with the white. So much white waiting for me. Ready for me to tumble and fall.

Danger, Arcana whispered.

I blinked, eyes narrowing against the white.

Hold on a damn second. This wasn't right. Mental seduction number two?

"I don't fucking think so," I growled up that prick.

It hissed, the sound riding on acrid, acidic air as it hit my face. It leaned closer, the white brightening.

Limbs back to working form, I swung the rock up and into its head with every inch of strength I could muster. The clang hurt my ears, but the fucker rolled to the side. I scrambled back, got to my feet.

So did the creature.

I glanced at Tae, who had the other one in a headlock.

My attacker's mouth had gone. Its hand moved to its stomach, gunshot fast, coming back with a curved green blade.

"What the fuck?" It'd pulled that from its belly? Gosh!

It spun the blade and came at me. I jumped back, ducking a swing. The air between my scalp and the weapon crackled. An almost slice.

The creature kicked at me, missing me. Another lucky dodge, if you ignored me falling on my backside again. I rolled to the side to avoid a downward stab. Check me out with the dodging. I put it down to not wanting to be a kebab rather than being a master after one day of physical training. I so wasn't up to Tae's standards yet.

I kicked at the green bastard, hitting him in the groin—another cock-less male. My move failed to do anything, and gosh, did it hurt to strike its metal body. But it gave me enough time to get back on my feet and put some distance between us.

My heart jolted as Tae snapped the neck of the first wanker. It went down. He launched himself at the other. It spun on him, driving its blade into his stomach.

If my heart jolted before, it leaped up into my throat this time, choking off a scream, my hands over my mouth.

Tae didn't stop tangling with the creature, snapping its neck quicker than the last one. He snatched the blade from its dead hand, driving it into the green horror's head three times. Green liquid oozed out of its skull, pooling on the concrete.

The vampire looked at me, his eyes crimson fires, rain sluicing down his face. Panting. Blood leaking through his black jacket. He touched his new wound and collapsed.

SIXTEEN



I fell beside him, his hair falling around his head as gathered raven ribbons. “Tae. Oh, shit. It’ll be okay. Shit.” I touched his face with a shaking hand, meeting icy skin.

His eyes were fading back to black, his fangs no longer bared.

He blinked up at me, his forehead creased with pain. “Take... take my phone...”

Immediately, I went to his pocket, retrieving the device. He told me the passcode.

“Call Archie.”

I found Archie.

“Tell him I require immediate assistance.”

I held back a question and dialed.

“*Tae?*” a man answered on the second ring.

“He needs help,” I said.

“*I’m tracking him now. Hang tight.*” The call ended.

I kept hold of the phone, worried out of my mind. The vampire shouldn’t be on the ground like this, bleeding. It didn’t look or sit right.

“He’s coming,” I said.

“Archie is the best,” he responded softly. “But don’t... mention Arcana. He doesn’t know.”

“Okay.”

“You’re about...” he winced.

“Don’t speak. It’s okay.”

But he spoke anyway. “You’re about to meet a key member of my staff.”



ARCHIE. Bodybuilder physique, scarred, dark brown skin, bald head, and an aura of safety. He greeted me with so much warmth in his voice to counteract his alarmingly hard demeanor.

He arrived in a different car, the unseen driver shooting off seconds after dropping Archie off.

The big guy scooped Tae into his arms, carrying him to the vampire’s car. Tae appeared so fragile in that moment, limp in those big arms. Pain raked at my insides seeing it. Not Tae. He wasn’t fragile. He was a vampire, built for strength and hunting.

Archie placed him in the back of the car, hurrying around to the driver’s side.

I got in the passenger door.

We took off.

“What’s the score on the blindfold?” Archie asked Tae.

“No blindfold,” he replied.

“That was fast,” Archie said, accelerating through the streets with expert ease.

I didn’t say anything, twisted in my seat to keep an eye on my... on my friend.

“He’ll be fine. Just need to get him home.” Archie’s tone was full of reassurance.

Tae’s eyes were closed, his hands over his wound.

“He won’t die?” I asked, knowing he wouldn’t because it wasn’t a beheading.

Tae opened an eye. “No.”

Archie chuckled. “You can’t keep Tae Frost down, mate. Relax a bit. It’ll all come out in the wash.”

I got into a better position in the seat, facing ahead. “Thanks for coming.”

“Always. Whenever Tae needs me, I’m there. No questions asked. I’m his pickup master.”

“Thank God,” I said, my stomach hollow from all the fear.

What were those green things?

He turned right, taking us onto an A road. “Life’s one big elastic band ball of mystery.”

“Spot on.” I couldn’t help but smile at that.

The windscreen wipers moved back and forth in a soothing rhythm against the rain. I clung to the calming movement, taking the moment to gather myself. We were safe in this car, going home. Tae would be okay. He would heal.

Heal quicker by drinking human blood.

“What now?” I asked, my voice dry.

“Tae’s going to be needing your blood,” Archie said.

“No. Not him,” Tae protested.

“You have to,” Archie countered. “Don’t be too proud. And don’t you be scared.” He directed the last part at me. “It’s nothing.”

“I’m not... I’m not drinking his blood.”

Archie sighed. “Stop being difficult.”

“Let me... let me remind you—”

“Who pays my wages? Try a different one, Tae. I’m not taking bullshit. Okay?”

The vampire groaned, not arguing.

“You can’t afford to be out of action for a week,” Archie added.

Seven days of recovery for a vamp not feeding to heal. Archie was so right.

“Order a feeder,” Tae said.

“If that’s what you want.” He glanced at me. “Never had a feeder in his home before.”

“Ordering a feeder?” I questioned. “That’s a thing?”

Archie nodded. “Feeders specialize in feeding vampires. They can be hired to come to a house, or the vampire can attend a designated feeding club. Matey boy in the back there isn’t one for having feeders over.”

“So...” So he went to a club? “What’re the clubs like?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been in one.”

I looked back at Tae, who was watching me, refraining from grilling him on the subject. For now, I asked, “How are

you holding up?”

“I’m not drinking your blood, Clay.”

“You can’t drink mine,” Archie said. “I’ve got all sorts of medical problems,” he clarified.

“Oh. Mine’s fine. I think.” Minus the demon blood.

Shit. Why did I let that slip my mind? I had to get out of this.

“Call in a feeder,” Tae insisted. “Arrange it for the Orchid Hotel.”

“Are you sure?” Archie responded.

“Yes. Make it happen.”



So, rather than hit home, we arrived at Orchid Hotel in Soho. Low key, a decadent with its baroque styles and so much gold. It looked like it belonged in a different time on the inside, the outside a nondescript building of dark stone. The place was geared for vampires, apparently. I followed Archie through the building, greeted by friendly and discreet staff, led into a ground floor suite.

Duck egg blue walls, a white carpet, lots of baroque furniture, and luxury. A living room with three sofas, a TV, a coffee table, and blue drapes closed against the night.

“Wait in the bedroom,” Tae ordered from Archie’s arms.

“O-okay.” I went into the bedroom, taking a seat on the four-poster bed. The room matched the living room’s colors.

I waited in the glow of a freestanding lamp, literally twiddling my thumbs, sore from my tangle with the creature, wanting to go home, to be with Tae.

At least I'd avoided him feeding on me. Sure, it would've been hot as fuck, but also a major problem. Thank God for sidestepping the bullet again.

The rain came down harder outside, battering the window. It seemed too dark out there beyond the open drapes. A world that wasn't London but some horrible void of nightmares.

I got up and closed the drapes, returning to the bed.

What the hell were those green things? Something to do with the toxic rivers? Did that mean the glass in that area had been breached?

I waited and waited and waited. Heard a female voice, the door to the living room part of the suite opening. Then more long silence aside from the downpour.

Eventually, the door opened, Tae stepping into the bedroom. His eyes were rubies, no more bleeding, his skin practically glittering marble.

“We can leave now.”

His deep, melodious tone drifted over me as a delicious wind. I gasped, almost sliding off the bed.

“Okay...” I breathed.

SEVENTEEN



Tae bristled with unsettling energy, his aura almost visible. If it were, it'd be red and chaotic, like the ruby of his eyes.

He didn't say a word as he drove us home—Archie having managed to get his car back without incident. And the silence continued as we entered the private elevator.

Eventually, pausing at the foot of the stairs to the second floor, he spoke. “Goodnight, Clay.”

And he was gone, leaving me breathless and alone in the living room. No discussing the green things, the button-eyed demon. Nothing. Just nothing.

Fizz meowed from her bed by the window. I fussed over her, then made myself a cup of sweet tea to try and curb my shakes.

The night rattled me, locked me in a jar, and handed it to a temperamental toddler to shake.

I drank the tea, hitting the shower afterward to scrub the night off me. The hot water beat down on me, doing its job. But I couldn't fully embrace its relaxing power. Nowhere or nothing would settle me down, too wired, too deep in the terrifying aftermath.

In the upstairs corridor, I lingered at the edge of the stairs, staring at Tae's bedroom door. Waiting for him to come out, to show me some sign of life. Tae made zero sound. That door remained firmly closed.

Back downstairs, my hair damp and combed back, dressed in a pair of silky navy PJs—heaven against my skin—I took a pew at the dining table with the first grimoires. Searching for something I'd seen before. There. Page 267. Mind wards. Protection against mind manipulation, mind reading, and anything else under that umbrella.

I'd have to wait until midnight. As soon as the clock hit twelve, I was owning the hell out of this spell.



MUCH LIKE MY CAT, now fast asleep downstairs, I spent most the night at the window—my bedroom one, not downstairs. I needed the change of scenery.

The rain still fell in heavy sheets. Soothing when inside a warm space and not my hovel where it crept in no matter how many tarpaulins you put up to battle it.

Waiting for midnight. An hour and a half to go.

“Clay...”

I jumped, spinning around with a sharp intake of breath.

Tae stood in the already open doorway, luminescent, shirtless, and clad in familiar gray sweatpants. My eyes feasted on the toned flesh, explored the planes of his muscular swimmer's body, roaming across his washboard abs for any sign of injury. He was healed.

The v-cut at his hips promised more delights beyond, within that gray material. Well, would have if I didn't already see the outline of his very firm, very generous cock straining under the gray material.

Oh, gosh.

His hair spilled across his shoulder in obsidian waves, brushing the top of his rose and thorns tattoo, his eyes still ruby storms. His arms were firmly by his sides. In his left hand, he held a rainbow swirl lollipop—one he'd got me from House of Sugar.

"Tae?" I moved forward, coming to the center of the big bedroom. Pausing before him, I reached out with a trembling hand.

"Clayton," he whispered, his vibrating baritone oozing sex.

My cock responded with a happy twinge.

"Clay..." I said.

"That's right," he said. "Clay."

Gosh. The predatory vibes were hot with this guy.

He moved, circling me like a panther, those crimson-pricked eyes locking me in. To look away would be dangerous. To look away would hurt. I wanted to keep them on me, to be the prey for his hungry attention.

"When was the last time you were touched, Clay?" he breathed his deep tones at me.

Electricity traveled across my skin, summoning gooseflesh to the surface. "What... What do you mean?" I was breathless, a little scared, riddled with erotic anticipation.

Heat pooled in my belly, immediately spreading to my groin. Tingling me there, generating more of that exciting electricity.

“When were you last touched? I mean *really* touched?”

“Touched? I, erm... Well, you were the last one. You know, the, erm, massage... The other time...”

“Before then?” he asked.

I licked my lips. “I’d rather not say. Not a good memory.”

He didn’t respond.

The gang guy inside his grotty flat, and there hadn’t been much in the touching department. One messy kiss when he’d cum, but the rest had been a grunting, frantic mess. And not in a fun, animalistic way. More of a pump, pump, squirt, kiss, now fuck off.

Tae continued to circle me. Scarlet flames seemed to lick at the corners of his eyes. Hungry fires to consume me. To burn their marks into my flesh.

The fingernail on his right index finger extended into that sharp, pointed instrument.

“This is how I feed,” he said. “Teeth or nail to make an incision.”

“Oh. Are... are you going to feed on me now?”

“No. I’ve fed.” He licked his lips. My dick loved seeing it.

Gosh. Gosh. Gosh.

“Can I touch you, Clayton?”

Clay... “Y-yes...”

My skin sang with the need to be touched by this man. It craved those hands, those lips, his skin on mine.

“Are you sure?”

My nerves were an inferno. “I-I’m sure.”

He continued to circle me a while longer, the appetite in his eyes glinting clearly in those ruby depths. I was his target, his to claim, to devour.

Claim me...

Tae stopped his prowling, pausing before me. I gazed up at him, fingers twitching to touch him.

What was he doing with that lollipop?

He hooked the left shoulder of my PJs with his elongated nail. It slid through the material like a hot knife through butter. The silk parted, exposing my skin and part of my chest.

A pleasant shudder raced up my spine, goosebumps manifesting across the uncovered skin.

He smiled wickedly, my hardness rubbing against the silk. Wet hardness, aching to be free.

The vampire cut the other shoulder, exposing more of me to his hungry gaze. But he didn’t touch me yet.

Tae moved to the back of me, slicing up the lingering remains of my pajama top. It came free, fluttering to the carpet. Now all of my skinny top half met the warmth of the bedroom, more goosebumps joining the party. More shivers, more expectation making my toes curl.

And he wasn’t done.

“More?” he said.

A shaky intake of breath, dick so hard and throbbing.
“More...”

He fingered the waistband of my PJ bottoms, the back of his finger rubbing against the skin of my lower spine. His touch was warm, teasing. So close to me *there*, his breath caressing me in soft breezes.

Gosh. This was too much. I was dangling on the edge of coming in my PJs, and that would be that.

Not yet. Not yet.

He cut up the legs of the bottoms slowly, not touching, just exposing more of me. At once, I was terrified, embarrassed by my skinniness, but so fucking excited. Vulnerable with every slice of the silk. Fully submitted to his whims.

I liked it.

Tae cut the waistband, and my entire nakedness met his eyes. He prowled around me in a circle once again, bringing the lollipop to his lips. His pale pink tongue traced the rainbow swirls, then the candy vanished inside his mouth. He sucked delicately, seductively. Teasingly.

My cock jumped, my balls electric.

Before me again, his eyes lowered to my erection. Back up to me, the same wicked, hungry grin around the lollipop.

He placed the sugary thing to my lips. I licked it, a little hesitant at first. Until he licked his lips as he watched me with it. My turn to display the powers of my mouth. I teased the rainbow thing, running my lips around it, taking it all in, taking half.

I can do that to you...

I can take all of you...

He took the lollipop away from my mouth, placing it on my chest. He drew the slick yet sticky thing across my smooth skin, drawing circles, making his way down to my navel. As he bowed his head to follow his progress, some of that hair fell forward into my face. I leaned forward into it, burying my face in the softness. Drinking in the ever-present scent of limes.

Mmmm...

Tae surprised me, lowering himself to place his lips at the first part of my chest the lollipop had touched. The vampire kissed the sticky marks, lapped them up, following the candy road down to my stomach.

I watched, my hands sliding into that gorgeous hair, my body a chorus of pleasures.

“Oh, Tae...” I breathed.

He stopped, looking up. More of that grin.

I shuddered again. “Tae...”

“Clayton...”

He cupped my balls, giving them a tug. Licked at the tip of my cock, then proceeded to slick up the lollipop again with his mouth.

Oh, God. I wanted my cock to be that thing.

He painted my hardness with it, sugaring me up. Dropping the candy to the carpet, his hands found my buttocks, gripping delicate handfuls.

And then...

And then...

Oh, and then...

He took me in his mouth. My sugary, throbbing cock.

Holy. Shit.

Tae worked me, hands-free, his grip on my buttocks moving from gentle to firm. No fingernail out now, his normal fingertips digging into my flesh as he rocked his head back and forth, taking every inch. I hit the back of his throat, and he didn't so much as hint at gagging.

I felt the urge to thrust, but his mouth's dominance didn't allow for it. He reversed face-fucked me, doing all the work, intensifying to a furious speed and friction, my hands buried in his hair, my head tilted back as I surged toward the glorious summit.

“Fuck... Oh, fuck...”

An explosive orgasm ripped out of me. Hot jets gushed down his throat in endless bursts.

“Shit, Tae. That was... amazing.”

He stood up to face me, cupping my chin. He licked his lips in that amazingly hot way again. “I...”

“Yes?”

“I...”

“Can I touch you now?” I asked huskily.

“I... I... I'm sorry. I have to go.” He hurried away, breaking the mood as quickly as a boulder through ice.

“Huh? Tae?”

I heard him run downstairs.

Post-climax, I felt very, very exposed. The vampire's mood-killing didn't help. I grabbed a pair of boxers and a vest from my drawer, dressed as I moved, and hurried down the stairs.

“Wait, Tae.”

Dressing while trying to follow someone downstairs was precarious to say the least. My feet tangled up as I pulled the vest over my head. I fell down the last two stairs, landing on my hands. “Fuck!” I barked.

Tae came running back, skidding to his knees beside me. His dick still hard through his sweatpants. “What happened?”

“You happened. Turned my knees to jelly after *that*.”

“Did you hurt yourself?” His eyes were returning to onyx.

“No.”

“I’m sorry I did that.”

I grabbed his face, his skin warm to the touch. “Don’t say sorry. I liked it, Tae.”

“This isn’t professional.”

“I don’t care.” Bravely, I traced the pad of my left thumb across his left eyebrow. “Who made that rule?”

“Business and pleasure must be separate.”

God, his lashes were so dark, so lovely when this close. “Again, who made that rule?”

“It is common practice,” he said quietly.

“And is that what this is? Strictly a business partnership?”

“I asked you to join me... I didn’t mean for...” He put his hands over mine. “I can’t do this. Not again.”

“Can’t do what again?”

Gently, he removed my hands and got to his feet. “I can’t be here.”

“Tae? Don’t walk away. Please. Talk to me.”

But he kept moving, heading out of the apartment, not up to his room.

Scrambling to my feet, I ran after him. I built up to a dash, leaping through the closing doors at the right moment. I barreled into him, the doors opening at my presence. Rather than fall down, he caught me, spun me around super quick, and placed me in a vertical position beside him.

The doors closed again, the elevator descending.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

I lifted a finger, steadying myself against the dizziness assaulting my senses. “Shit.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Give me a sec.”

“Clay... Please go back upstairs. You’re naked.”

“And?”

“It’s a cold night.”

“It *was* heating up.”

“I shouldn’t have done that.” He shook his head, his eyes darkening again. “I let the feeding get the better of me.”

“You make it sound like it was a one-way thing. I was enjoying myself. It wasn’t all about you.” I folded my arms. “There’s no harm done.”

“That doesn’t matter. I’ve crossed a line twice.”

“Then so have I.”

“You don’t understand, Clay.”

The elevator came to a stop at the underground carpark.

“You’re right. I don’t.” The air was chillier down here. My balls shrank, my body in need of more clothes and possibly a blanket. But I wasn’t letting him run off like this. Things didn’t have to be this way. There didn’t have to be guilt or shame. We were grown, consenting adults who were having a good time. What the hell was so wrong with that?”

“You’re cold, Clay. Go back upstairs.”

“Don’t be like this.”

“I need to... I need to clear my head. Please.”

“You’re not dressed for that. Please don’t do this. Talk to me.”

“I can’t.” He strode off, shirtless and barefooted.

“You can’t drive like that!” I called.

He didn’t so much as glance back as he vanished into the shadows. I started to follow, the concrete freezing on my bare skin. But headlights stopped me, and I helplessly watched his car drive away into the night.

Damn.



I CALLED the Mark of Arcana myself at midnight for the first time. It blazed on the apartment ceiling as soon as I set it free, fading away minutes later.

Now that I was magically active, I could stop staring at the front door and trying to call Tae. And I could concentrate on the mind wards. The last thing I wanted was that damn button-eyed prick in my head again, or for a green metal creature to

use its white mouth on me to make me think dying would be fun.

Fuckers.

“No one can find the maze that is my mind,” I spoke the rhyme.

What a stupid rhyme.

I repeated it within and without, determined as always. I’d get this down. I’d put up the mental defenses.

After an hour, I got the hang of it. Saw the walls inside me—bright pink and loaded with glitter. Made me chuckle. Had to love some sparkle with your psychic protections. They wrapped around me, piling on layer upon layer. Another hour passed before it was done, and lots of repeating of the glittery wall.

According to the grimoire, topping up the layers was required every ten days. I set some reminders in my phone and wrote them down in a notepad to make sure I kept on top of that.

Two in the morning, and still no sign of Tae.

I spread out on my bed, exhausted from the spell, from the magnificent orgasm and the drama that’d followed.

As soon as my head hit the pillow, I was gone to sleep.



I WOKE up to moonlight and the sounds of music.

A piano.

The piano downstairs.

I slid off the bed, going from drowsy to wide awake in seconds. The rain had stopped, the sky clearing to let more of the moon inside the apartment.

Tae sat at the piano, spot lit in more of the moonlight. Playing a sad song. A soft, lamenting melody that poked at my emotional barriers. Every stroke of the keys hinted at heartbreak.

I listened from the bottom step.

He was still shirtless, still as he looked when he'd touched me. My body still tingled in the memory of him, still carried the stickiness and the sweet scents of the lollipop.

I thought about a shower but wanted to revel in these remnants a while longer.

“Hello, Clay,” he said, not looking up.

I padded over to him, taking my time until I hovered behind him, facing the tapered muscles of his back.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“Okay. That's fine. You don't have to.”

My hand hovered above him, ready to place a hand on his shoulder, even stroke his back. But I held off, unsure of how he'd react. Which was a joke seeing as we'd touched in far more intimate ways than this.

“But maybe we should talk,” I added, irritation spiking. “This keeps happening and confusing me and—”

He stopped playing. “I'm sorry.”

“How many times are you going to say that? It's exhausting.”

“I didn’t mean to wear you down.”

“You haven’t worn me down. I’m just confused. Did I do something wrong?”

He angled his head, watching me from the corner of his eye. “Never. It’s me, not you.”

My hands were on my hips as if I meant business. “Like I’ve never heard that one before.”

“It *is* me, Clay. I’m the problem. I wanted to touch you. To please you. I enjoyed it. I enjoy you. Your company. Your...” He sighed. “I just can’t.”

His shoulders slumped. He pressed the keys, releasing a series of sharp notes blended into one. “I’m an idiot.”

In a bold move, I reacted to his sadness. I lifted a leg and maneuvered onto his lap, straddling him. My butt made a brief piece of music as I shuffled into position.

I frowned, wiggling some more with the piano digging into me. “Sorry, let me just—”

“If you keep moving like that...” he whispered.

Firmness beneath me. Solid excitement. I stopped moving, looking into his eyes. “Oh.” With further boldness, I took his face in my hands. “Oh.”

But he sighed, his hands on my biceps. “Clay. This can’t happen.”

I pressed the top of my nose to his. “If you want me, take me.” I removed my vest.

“Clay...”

“Take me.”

He buried his face into my skin, breathing in deep. His hands stroked my biceps, sliding up to my neck.

“Clay...”

“Tae...”

“I can’t...”

“You can...”

“No...”

“Yes... Do what you want.”

“I want to kiss you again.”

“Then kiss me, Tae Frost.”

“I want to... I want to...”

“What?”

“I want to tear off these clothes and fuck you right here, right now.”

Wow. My cock stood to attention at the thought, at the vibrations his voice sent through me.

“Then fuck me,” I said, stroking his cheeks with the pads of my thumbs.

“Clay, please.” Our eyes met. Crimson dots were inside his coal orbs. “Don’t.”

“Take me, Tae.” Our lips inched closer. “Just take me. Use me. We can do whatever we want. There are no rules.”

“What if I said yes? What if I did what I wanted?”

“I’d enjoy the shit out of it.”

He moved fast, getting me off his lap, rendering both of us vertical.

“No, Clay.”

“But—”

“I’m sorry. I can’t do this. We can’t.”

“But why? If you want these things, why are you rejecting me?” Anger stirred. “This is ridiculous.”

I expected a cold, angry response. It didn’t come. Instead, he watched me, pain etched on his flawless features. In the droop of his eyes, in the slight twisting of his brow—the twist of anguish.

A twist I so understood.

“I want to show you something.”

“O-okay.”

“Follow me.”

I followed him into the kitchen. He crouched down in front of the oven and opened a hatch. Now, there’d been zero hint of any hatch, anything other than regular flooring. But there it was, revealing a downward spiral staircase.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Come.”

I followed him down the black metal stairs, down into an amber walled room with plush brown carpet, a writing bureau, a lamp, and a sofa. On either side of the bureau were three sets of filing cabinets, the bureau itself piled with paperwork.

On the wall facing the sofa was a board with papers and red string—an evidence board fresh out of a TV crime series.

“What is this place?” I questioned.

“My study,” he said.

I approached the board, seeing images of men and women, scribblings of locations, questions about where these people were.

“Demons,” he said. “On that board, in these files, stored digitally.”

“Gosh...” I faced him. “Everything?”

“Everything. Including the button-eyed demon. Though his file is lighter, seeing as I can’t get a lock on him. I’m trying to rectify that.”

Did he have a file on me?

“Your secret study,” I said. “Wow.”

“I’ve been meaning to show it to you, to share these files with you.”

“Thank you for showing me.”

“I had to if we’re to hunt properly.”

I moved toward the bureau, mind blown by the prospect of all this information waiting to be devoured.

“Who’s at the top of your list?” I asked. “Button-eyed fucker aside.”

A pause. “Have a seat, Clay.”

“Sorry?”

“Please. Sit down.”

I took the two-seated sofa. He sat next to me, sitting sideways with one leg resting on the cushion.

“We have to move forward now.”

“We do.”

“I have to tell you something.” He didn’t look at me. “I’ve been wanting to tell you, but it... it’s difficult.”

“O-okay.”

A long pause, a sigh. “The reason I hunt demons, why I’m hunting one in particular...” He paused again. “A demon killed my wife and son.”

The world dropped out from under me, shock grabbing me by the throat in a cold iron grip. Refusing to let go.

My mouth moved soundlessly, trying to grasp his words.

Eventually, I said, “Your wife? Your son?”

“Murdered in cold blood. Fifteen years ago. My son was six, my wife twenty-seven. They were my world. A demon burned my world down.”

Shit. Holy shit. What did I say?

“I’m... I’m so sorry,” I said, the shock an endless bomb dropped. “Your wife... your son.”

He stood up, crossing his arms as he faced the demon board. “I’ll take out as many as I can along the way to finding *him*, but he is my prize. And he is trickier to hunt than the button-eyed demon. Hiding in the deepest levels of the demon realm.”

“Levels?”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean? Were you part of the Doomed Expedition?”

“No. I did my own work.”

“Through the demon gate? It’s like Fort Knox.”

“I used an alternate route.”

There was only one known access point into the demon realm. A gate in Richmond Park, West London. The Doomed Expedition, comprised of witches, humans, and some warlocks, failed to get far into the mysterious realm, most of them slaughtered aside from three women who never spoke again until they all died a year later. The whole of Richmond Park had been sealed off since then, heavily guarded and warded with layer upon layer of magical and non-magical protections. Any attempts of finding a new entry route were strictly forbidden under punishment of fifty years incarceration or possibly death.

“Where?” I asked.

“Another gate in Barking,” he answered. “I have a key.”

Leaning back in the seat, confusion slapping me in the face. “Bloody hell.”

He looked back at me, the soft light of the lamps playing across his body. “The demon realm is made of levels and false turns. A vast and confusing network. A hive if you like. I’m not sure how deep it goes. Yet. I’ve managed to get to the second level.”

“With...” Shit. “With your key?”

“Yes. I got it from a demon I banished, met him again on the second level. Had to retreat. I need the third level key.”

“Wait, wait, wait. So there are keys into the demon realm, another gate, and... and what?”

“I can show you what I’ve learned so far.”

“Wow.”

“I know. Along with everything else, it’s a lot to take in.”

“You’re telling me.”

His wife and son. Fuck.

I stood up this time, pacing. Kill for him. Go to the demon realm with him. Possibly. If the demon who’d destroyed his world was there and not here.

Gosh.

“Do you know what he looks like?” I asked.

He shook his head. “But I know he is male. I heard him...”

I didn’t press him for further details. All in his time. “Okay.”

“There is a demon who will know. I received information from various demons I’ve dealt with, and one name keeps popping up. Quentin Dawn. According to my sources, he has keys. Maybe even a master key. I’m not clear on that yet.”

I blew out my exasperation through pursed lips. “Bloody hell. So, where is he?”

“I have no idea.”

“Oh.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Another tricky demon to find.”

“There are plenty of them, Clay.”

I stopped pacing. “This is crazy. I’m so fucking sorry this happened to you. To them.”

If he ever found out about my blood, he’d... I didn’t want to think about him hating me.

I really, really wanted to help him. No one should get away with such an atrocious thing and live to draw further breath.

“Thank you, Clay. First, though, we need to investigate these green creatures and try to put a stop to the button-eyed demon. He is a threat this city doesn’t deserve.”

I nodded. “Okay. I’ll follow you, Tae. I promise. Whatever you need. I wanted to help before but now...”

I trailed off, thinking things I shouldn’t. Like his sexuality and how it wasn’t my business and so inappropriate after his revelation.

My heart ached for him. “I can’t even begin to understand how you’ve carried on with your life.”

He didn’t answer.

Fifteen years of pain. It explained a lot about his demeanor, his icy vibes.

His frozen heart?

An endless future ahead of him, empty of his family. Vampires lived forever... forever with their pain.

I’d seen no pictures of his family, no hint at that kind of life. Why would there be? Why would he want reminders around his home of what he’d lost?

Unless... Unless his bedroom...

Tears welled hot in my eyes. They’d no right to be there, but they ran free in sympathy. I caught them, trying to quell the rivers.

He came to me, so close. “Clay? What’s the matter?”

“I just... fuck. Sorry.”

He nodded and backed off, facing the board again. “Fifteen years, and I still feel as if I’m betraying her.”

“With me?”

His eyes moved back my way. “When I feed, I take my pleasures. That’s the nature of feeding. It is sexual for a vampire, for the feeder. But it is hollow. It is without emotion. It is for the flesh, for the dulling of pain. And then you happened.”

My chest constricted. “What do you mean?”

“You’re different. You make it different.”

“How?” More emotional? Is that what he meant?

“You just do, Clayton.”

“Clay.”

He smiled. “The last thing I want is for you to feel bad, for you to be led down a road I’ll only destroy.”

“Tae...”

“I won’t behave this way again. I don’t want to hurt you or make you uncomfortable. I want you to be the best. To be amazing. Because I know you will be. And I know we’ll make the world better together.”

“One demon at a time,” I said.

Wipe them all out? I didn’t think so. But killing the killer of his world would make his life better. Was that right to say? Not better. Give him some degree of peace?

I didn’t know. Oh, God, I really didn’t know. Pain like that... I stopped speculating, trying to dig into it.

You make it different...

I made it different.

I left it alone, as much as it frustrated me. Whatever had been happening between us was over. It had to be. This man

was too hurt, too broken. Even if a part of me called from within, wanting to be more for him.

But he didn't need me for that.

He needed me to back off.

You make it different...

I swallowed, shaking yet again. "Show me these files."

"Do you want to sleep?"

"I'm miles away from sleep now."

"I'll make us some coffee."

"Sounds great."

While he went off to get caffeine, I sat on the sofa and shed some tears, my brain swimming in a heady soup it wouldn't be climbing out of anytime soon.



AT EIGHT O'CLOCK that Monday morning, I sat cross-legged on the sofa with a bowl of frosted cornflakes—my favorite cereal—watching a morning news show. Well, not really watching. It was on for the sake of being on as I ate and thought about everything that'd transpired over the past few hours. Tae and his lost family, his demon research, the file on the killer of his loved ones, and the file on the button-eyed demon. The latter was now our top priority after the attack on me, after another murder last night.

The news screamed its headlines of the slaughter of a man and woman on their way home from a night out. Lambasting the ADU on their failed capture of the demon.

No surprise there.

As for why the demon said the things he'd said to me, neither Tae nor I could put anything together. One thing we agreed on, though, was a deeper meaning. These weren't the ramblings of a crazy killer. Within those words, he offered a coded explanation. And he knew about Arcana, worried I was coming to kill him and stop his bloody campaign across the city.

Yeah. He was so right.

I crunched my breakfast, Tae worked in his study, leaving the hatch open. I'd left him alone for the past couple of hours, studying my grimoires, hanging out with Fizz, boxing up my frustrations.

Cereal gone, I lifted the bowl to drink the residual milk. Some habits never changed from childhood. Gulping down the milk was the best bit. As I did, the sweet liquid slipping down my throat, the news broadcast changed.

I choked on the milk, spluttered, spraying sugary whiteness over the coffee table. I coughed, wiping my mouth.

"T—" *Try again...* "Tae? You need to see this," I called.

He was on the sofa beside me within seconds, eyes on the screen.

I turned up the volume as Witch Queen Margarite of the United Kingdom, and her husband, Witch King Lawrence, began speaking. They stood in the decadent royal press room of silver and purple, dressed in the formal royal attire of red and gold robes.

Even watching them set my instincts to flee. I never wanted to register my Arcana arse on their radar.

“Good morning,” the queen began, always the main speaker in royal addresses. “A terrible situation has come to the attention of my husband and me over the past few hours. There have been no reports on this incident as of yet.” Her soft voice counteracted urgency. “There has been a breach at River 38 in Kensington. The glass was broken, and a series of creatures escaped the water. Metallic, green.” Photographs appeared on the screen, showing the things that’d attacked us. “Three people were killed, seven others taken to hospital with serious injuries. Rest assured, these creatures have all been terminated and the glass restored. We will get to the bottom of this, find out what these creatures are. As I speak to you now, a project is underway to inspect and boost all protective glass on every single river across the four nations. The situation *is* under control. There is no need to panic. I will keep you safe. Our best witches are working hard to do so.” She waited a few seconds before continuing. “I know these are dark times, especially on the streets of London, where this dreadful demon continues to terrorize citizens and murder innocent people. But I want you to know, his reign of terror will come to an end. His destruction is coming. It will soon be over, and he will be banished. I promise.” She smiled, and it creeped me out. “I promise I will endeavor to protect you until my dying breath. My heart is yours. My magic is yours. We *will* see better days.”

Hmmm... *Okay, Your Majesty. Whatever.*

As her speech went on some positive political spin journey, I turned her down.

“Looks like we’ve got river monsters on our hands,” I said. “Demons have some competition. Well, if more river glass breaks.”

Tae nodded, eyes still on the screen. “I’ve found a demon who might be able to help us with the button-eyed demon.”

I eyed his profile. “Oh?”

“I’ve been watching her for a while.” His lips curled into a snarl, ever so briefly. Then it was gone. “She operates in the black market, harvesting human organs for profit.”

“Oh my God.”

“I received word one of her people was spotted at the morgue of Button’s most recent victims. There seems to be some sort of deal between them. Possibly.”

Buttons now, was it? “Okay. When do we move in on her?”

“Tonight. We pay a visit to this minion of hers.” Man, his tone was steel encased in ice. “Today, we train you some more. Nothing too much to tire you out. More a loosening up. If you’re ready. I know this is happening so fast, but we have to act now. We have to stop Buttons before he gets word out about you or comes after you again.”

I stood up. “I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

EIGHTEEN



The push spell worked like a dream on the red-faced, burly human who tried to brain me with a hammer. He performed his best tumbleweed impression across the warehouse floor, the hammer flying from his hand and out of sight.

His comrade came at me, sans hammer. A skinnier guy, teeth bared with a mad expression on his pointed face. He reached for me with gnarled fingers, hissing like Fizz when something stoked her fires.

“Get the fuck away from me!” I punched the bastard in the face.

His nose burst in a spray of blood. He dropped his rusty-edged knife with a shriek. For good measure, I delivered a kick between his legs.

Down he went.

Good. Stupid demon-loving wanker.

It took until Friday before we could strike at the right time. More days than Tae wanted to spend. More killing from the button-eyed demon, but no more river monsters. I got in some more training on the punchbag, more spell practice at the sugar factory, and further grimoire studies across the week. Then the

time came to hit the streets at midnight, coming to this warehouse in North London. A late-night shipment of human organs had arrived, these arsewipes dealing with the delivery. This was our window of opportunity.

Evil bloody creeps.

Poppy Love ran the show, not here doing grunt work tonight. She posed as this grand philanthropist, a high roller with a big heart who helped the homeless, which really boiled my blood. For as many donations she made to various homeless charities, she kidnapped others and raided morgues for organs in the name of profit.

The humans who followed her groaned on the ground. I rejoiced in their hurt. Idiots. Apparently, a lot of humans hung out with demons, helped them, even got behind their cause. There was even an underground cult worshipping them as a species. I mean, why?

“Stay down,” I seethed, pushing the humans across the ground together until they hit a wall. Every time they moved, down they went.

Tae crushed his boot into Zake’s chest—the demon we wanted. A lean, mean-looking thug with a gray complexion and sunglasses practically glued to his face, he’d sauntered around the warehouse, barking orders at the two humans. Acting the big deal in his back leather duster coat.

Not such a big shot at the mercy of the vampire.

“I won’t ask you again,” Tae warned. “Where is Poppy?”

“She’s... Shit! That hurts.”

“Speak. Now.” Tae leaned on his leg, pushing down harder.

The demon squeaked, his sunglasses still on. “O-okay. Please... She’s out of town. Wait! Wait! She’ll be back tomorrow night for some Halloween party she’s having at her house.”

“As in Saturday tomorrow or the real tomorrow?”

“Saturday.”

“Are you telling me the truth?”

“Y-yes. For real.”

“Shocking to see such ease betraying a master,” the vampire said, tilting his head.

“You gave me no fucking choice.”

“And the button-eyed demon?”

The demon grit his teeth. “Please... I don’t know where he is.”

“But Poppy does.”

He winced. “Y-yes... Please let me go.”

Tae removed his boot, standing off to the side.

The demon eyed him up, slowly getting to his feet. “Who are you?”

Fairy magic hid Tae and myself—me with my usual double dosage. I couldn’t see what disguise the cream gave the vampire, only his handsome face.

Zake stood up, rubbing at his chest. “Fucking dick.” He pulled a gun and fired, howling with laughter. “Surprises.”

I yelped, the gun turning to me. Tae disarmed him, breaking his arm before getting him back on the ground. Where the fuck had that come from?

“You fucking cunts!” Zake barked. “Kill them!”

The humans didn't try to get up, their angry focus on me.

“We can't!” one of them barked back.

“Interesting play,” Tae said, picking up the gun.

Zake whimpered, holding his twisted arm. “She'll fucking kill you. You won't get away with this.”

Tae smiled, examining the gun. Then, so damn fast, he fired off two shots. I jumped out of my skin at the crack of thunder echoing around us.

A direct shot between the eyes of each human, now slumped corpses.

Oh, shit. My stomach lurched at the brutal speed Tae acted with.

He was one scary guy.

The vampire pocketed the gun.

Zake sobbed. “You'll pay... You'll fucking pay.”

Tae looked to me, gesturing with his eyes.

My cue to come forward and do my thing.

Zake spat, tears streaming down his face. That broken arm of his must really bloody hurt.

“What's this fucker gonna do?” His eyes narrowed. “Warlock trash!”

He didn't mention my demon blood, which was a good sign. Hopefully my first kill and Buttons, as we now called him, were exceptions.

I didn't speak. Instead, I moved my hands in sweeps, calling forth the blazing arrow that'd take this demon's life.

His eyes went from narrow to wide, surprise and fear stretching his features.

“No... Arcana...”

“Yes,” Tae said as I let the arrow fly.

It struck him in the heart.

Another one bites the dust.

“Good,” I said aloud. “Serves you right.”

Harvesting organs. Man, I wanted to puke every time I thought about it.

Zake’s corpse crumbled to black dust.

“He gave in super-fast,” I said.

“Pathetic,” Tae said, red dots in his eyes.

“What about these two?”

“Archie will clean this up.” He adjusted his black gloves, pulling them down over his fingers. He looked amazing in his black military coat and jeans.

“Did he clean up the Mike mess?” I asked.

“He did.”

“Got to love Archie.”

“Indeed. I’m sorry I missed the gun.”

“What? Don’t be daft.”

He didn’t look at me. “Nice work, Clay. Let’s go. We have to prepare for our next move.”

This Halloween party.

I followed him out into the night as he put in a call to Archie.

That all felt way too easy.

NINETEEN



Saturday training, a lot of lingering eye contact in the gym, me sweating my arse off. We didn't speak about the lollipop moment since that night or about his family. About nothing other than the work.

The plan was this: Wait it out, let the guests drift away. Get in there, grill Poppy Love, get answers. Kill her.

“What if a guest stays over?” I asked. “If they don't know what she is, they're innocent. Right?”

“We will deal with the problem should it arise,” Tae replied.

Tae sent Archie out to plant secret cameras around the property on a leafy street in Islington, covering every window and door. They fed back to his laptop, which sat on the dining table with a constant live feed. I watched it now as the sun began to set on a clear and bright day I missed by staying indoors training, learning, working to be better and better and better.

I sucked a fairy lollipop, not much activity going on in Poppy's house. The odd member of what looked like catering staff turning up or someone checking the spectacular Halloween decorations at the front and back of the house. No expense spared.

Zake had been telling the truth about the party.

A ten o'clock spy session awaited us. As sunny as it'd been today, the temperature was slowly falling to low single figures. Thank God for my new gloves, coat, and all the appropriate attire provided by my vampire buddy.

The surrealness of my situation had faded somewhat, though when I sat and considered the shift in my life, I could hardly believe it sometimes. Just by looking at my surroundings, at the luxury I'd been dropped into, I knew I wasn't in Kanas anymore. Well, Elephant & Castle.

Amazing.

Scary.

I popped upstairs to grab a Kylie tape from my dedicated shelf, resistant to using the streaming stuff set up with the awesome speakers Tae suggested I use. Back downstairs, I sat with Fizz, giving her a good old fuss.

She'd settled herself into her new routine here, doing so well in the healing department. I was happy to see her so content.

"Queen Fizz," I said to the sounds of 'Finer Feelings.'

We sat together before the evening view. If I could, I'd let her share an earphone. Yeah, I wouldn't do that to my cat, but it'd be cool if we could vibe and sing together with the music.

A couple of cool cats just—

I stopped myself after the cool cats part.

A tap on my shoulder.

I only jumped a little bit, Fizz's eyes blinking up at the presence beside me.

I popped out an earphone. “What’s up?”

“Would you like some dinner before we leave?” the vampire asked.

“I’m good. Too nervous to eat.”

“I have granola bars. You’ll need the energy.”

“Think I can handle one of them.” Handmade by him. Bloody amazing squares of goodness.

He got me one and left me to it.

The colder Tae was back. Fewer smiles, a regression I loathed. But what could I do? He’d made his feelings clear, gave me an answer I’d searched for. I maintained my resolve to back off, to not attempt to claw back the smiles that heated my soul.

I missed them already.

Back to Kylie, back to Fizz and chilling and...

“What is that?” I asked, removing my earphones.

Something moved behind the glass outside. A red light from a building on the other side of the Thames. It flashed, flickered. Kind of like a laser.

“Tae?”

“Yes?”

The red light sat on my chest now, a tiny speck right in the middle of my ribcage.

My scalp prickled with realization.

Tae yanked me and Fizz out of the way as the bullets hit the glass. He flung me onto his back, dashing toward the emergency stairs hidden beside the elevator.

A chorus of breaking glass, the roar of it collapsing in a shattering wave, the bullets layered over the top. They shredded through the ceiling, never-ending in their onslaught. But we were through the secret door I actually knew about beside the elevator, getting the hell out of there down emergency stairs.

“Hold on,” Tae said, his speed making my stomach lurch.

“How the fuck did they get up so high?” I gasped.

“Synth guns.”

“What the fuck?” I wanted to pass out. “Witches?”

“Let’s get out of here first.”

Fizz cried, but Tae moved too fast for me to try and reach out and comfort her.

“It’ll be okay,” I said, voice jittery as Tae made short work of the stairs.

He burst through a door into his private carpark, charging for the black car.

“Get in,” he ordered, coming to a stop beside it.

He slowed down, putting me down and handing me my cat.

“It’s okay,” I told her, cradling her in my arms.

Tae had the passenger door open and was in the driver’s seat super quick. I got in, nothing on my feet but socks, thankfully wearing some jeans and a jumper.

I slammed the door, and he took off into the city, merciless as he tore into the traffic.

“Who are they?” I asked stupidly. How would he know?

“I don’t know,” he answered as expected.

“Witches? Has someone found out about us?”

“I don’t know, Clay.”

“Sorry. I know. I’m just...”

“I’ll protect you.”

As he said that, turning left into an empty street, the rear window blew out.

I screamed.

A bang, the car lurching, spinning, Tae trying to get control.

“Fuck!” he roared.

Another bang. The tires?

I held tightly to my cat, closing my eyes.

A crash, the car shaking, and then...

...and then we were rolling.

My body jerked, my neck snapping back. My head hit the side of my window, plunging me into darkness before the pain got in a proper greeting.

TWENTY



I woke up facing a pumpkin with a surprised expression. A candle flickered inside the carved squash. I blinked at it, my head a bag of rocks inside bumper cars, spotting more of the orange blobs, each one with a different face.

Halloween decorations.

Huh?

I sat up, wincing at the pain in my head, at the taste of blood in my mouth. Had I bitten my tongue? Felt like it.

What happened?

Car crash. Bullets. Attack.

Oh, shit! Tae! Fizz!

I tried to get up, only managing to come to my knees. “Tae? Fizz?”

As my senses crept back to me, I took in my surroundings. It looked like a basement filled with things needing to be out of the way, toolboxes and broomsticks, a Hoover. From what I could make out, at least. I knelt on exposed floorboards below a bulb-less light fixture, the glow of the pumpkins the only illumination.

“Hello?” I whispered, eyeing the shadowy fringes. “Tae? Fizz?”

No answer.

I managed to get myself onto unsteady feet, the ceiling low. The top of my scalp skimmed it as I took a few steps, too wobbly to walk.

“Tae?” I asked again.

Sounds from upstairs. Laughter. Music. A party?

Where was the exit in this place?

After an attempt at more walking, I went down, landing hard on my knees. I moaned, the pain in my head spiking.

“Shit...” I hissed, fingers catching some splinters from the wood.

A presence nearby, in the dark. Stirring, moving.

“Tae?”

I rubbed my eyes, trying to make out the shadow. He was on his back, not really moving much.

I crawled over to the presence, getting myself some more splinters along the way.

It was the shape of Tae, hidden by shadows.

“Are you okay?” I shuffled next to him, keeping myself up on my hands. “Tae?”

He didn’t make a sound, only sort of twitched from what I could see. His skin usually emitted a glow in the dark. Not now.

Something was wrong.

I touched his face. Hot. Feverishly hot.

“Oh, God. What’s going on?”

I needed to find a decent light source.

“Where’s Fizz?”

I knew he wouldn’t answer, couldn’t with whatever was happening to him. But I heard nothing of Fizz, and that set my panic alight. She had to be in here, had to be okay.

Oh, God. Oh, God. “It’ll be okay,” I said, setting off on another crawl to find better light.

The pumpkins seemed to mock me, deliberately put there to set a mood. To taunt me. They wouldn’t be enough to show me things clearly.

“There has to be something in here,” I said, holding back the tears.

My fear was a monster in my guts. Sweat drenched my hair, the back of my neck. In all the places it usually did when terror got its hands on me.

It would not defeat me. I would make this better.

The lack of Arcana told me it wasn’t midnight yet.

As I crawled and searched, the sounds of the party went on upstairs. Seeing as we were planning to spy on a party, I came to the rapid conclusion that this had something to do with Poppy Love.

That opened up a whole can of nasty worms.

Has to be a light, has to be a light... I hurt, I wanted to scream, but I battled on, able to get up and walk again. Feeling the shelves, even trying to utilize the pumpkins on my search. I found tools and spiders and jam jars filled with nuts and bolts. No flashlight.

A light came on above my head. A strip light previously hidden in the dark. A bright daylight bulb revealed all. More shelves and boxes and dust, stairs over where Tae lay. No Fizz in sight, but Tae... Oh, Tae.

On his back, his eyes wide and staring upward. Twitching as if trying to move. His skin took on a pallid hue, purple lines across it. Veins. His arms were covered in cuts, a nasty slice across his chin.

I went to him, my hand over my face. "Oh my God."

It was then I noticed the sounds of the party had stopped.

A door at the top of the stairs opened, a woman coming down them leisurely. Dressed in a pointed hat and purple dress, like a cartoon version of a witch. Her tanned face was painted in glittery greens and blues, her lips purple. A glamorous witch, and a real one. I recognized her. She'd been part of Leader's crew when they first attacked me. The woman who'd snogged him.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "We meet again." She lit a cigarette, blowing the smoke my way. "I've been desperate to see you."

"Wha—"

"Don't speak, warlock."

"I'll—"

She rushed at me and slapped me hard across the face.

"I said, don't speak."

I rubbed my cheek, keeping my mouth shut.

The witch drew on her cigarette, magic curling around her fingers. My hand dropped, arms following to be pinned to my

sides. My feet became concrete, mouth closed down for business.

Fixed by Synth yet again.

She came closer, blowing smoke in my face. “I hold you entirely responsible for the death of my lover.” The witch placed a purple-nailed finger on my lips, flicking them. She smirked, then grabbed me by the hair, her pull adding to my pain levels.

Get off me!

“I don’t blame the button-eyed demon for delivering the final blow. He is misunderstood. You confused him. You drove him into a frenzy, pushed him to kill my dear, dear lover.”

Still no name for Leader, eh?

Maybe it really was Leader...

Her tone was proper snooty.

I made the wanker kill him and the other guy? Ha! Delusional freak!

She spat in my face, the saliva dripping off my nose. Then she flicked my ears and stubbed her cigarette out on my neck.

If only I could move...

“Well, it’s time to meet your maker, warlock. If it were up to me, I’d gut you right here and now. But it’s not.” She smirked, lighting another cigarette. “At least I get to watch.”

Heavy footsteps, two men in jeans and T-shirts, not in fancy dress, came downstairs. Heavysset and brutish. One of them grabbed me under the arms and dragged me up the stairs backward, the backs of my legs smacking the steps.

The other scooped up Tae, following behind.

Gosh, Tae was so limp, so ill-looking. His head lolled to the side, his limbs completely boneless.

What was wrong with him?

The men dragged us through a kitchen, a corridor smothered in fake spiderwebs and various Halloween ceiling decorations, coming to a stop on a beige-walled living room. They stood me up on the polished wooden floor, facing a crowd of people in fancy dress—seven of them, including the witch.

Tae's jacket and T-shirt were removed before he was tied to a rack over by the TV facing a different door to the one we'd come through. Leather straps fixed tightly to his limbs, his stomach, and his throat. The only part of him moving now were his eyes. The strap at his neck kept his head upright, if not angled to the side a little.

Tae...

Still no sign of Fizz.

Each person held a drink of some sort. There were more elaborate Halloween decorations around me, a table laden with food and drink. They seemed pleased with themselves, not startled by the scene before them.

At the forefront of the partygoers stood a woman in a pirate costume. A painted gold skull glistened on her brown left cheek, a white braided wig under her big hat.

Her demonic white eyes locked me in their sights, her glossy lips spread into a devilish grin. The winning kind.

“Well, hello there,” she said, her voice a very posh English accent. Posher than the witch's. “Welcome to my home.” She nodded at the witch.

I got the use of my mouth back.

Demons. Witch. Humans.

Thank you, Arcana sensing gift. Now can it be midnight?

Drawing in a couple of deep breaths, I replied to the demon with, “Poppy Love.”

She curtsied. Her drink glistened as liquid diamonds in her tumbler. “The one and only.”

The Synth on the other parts of me held firm. “I—”

“I know who you are. At least, I know what you’ve done.” She took a small sip of her drink. “You attacked my warehouse. You murdered two of my best humans. I can only presume you’ve banished Zake or locked him up somewhere. Do you care to explain his absence?”

I didn’t care to explain because she was missing the most crucial point.

Zake was dead. By my hand. A win here. She had no idea about Arcana. But what about the demon blood?

I had to figure this out, get us out of here. I scanned the room for a clock, finding one.

23:47.

Thirteen minutes to go until I pulled out my special night trick. No treats to be had here.

Unless we don’t make it.

Shut it!

Poppy Love tapped the side of her glass. “What I don’t understand is why,” she said. “Why anyone would take it upon themselves to attack me, to behave in such a terrible manner. I’ve never crossed your paths. I’ve wanted to, though.” She winked

at Tae. “A chance to meet the scrummy, mysterious Tae Frost? Who wouldn’t?” She sighed. “But he turns out to be a meddling piece of shit, like most men.”

“You sell human organs,” I returned. “I think you’re the bigger piece of shit.”

Don’t clap back, idiot!

She laughed, the others joining in. “Right. If you say so.” She turned to her guests, rolling her eyes theatrically. “Try to goad me, warlock. It won’t work. Nothing will work now. You’re screwed, putting it bluntly. You mess with me, you forfeit your life. I don’t care who you are. A billionaire vampire or the warlock he’s fucking.”

“We’re not—”

“Doesn’t matter. No more nookie for you two.”

More laughter.

“I find it an odd pairing,” she continued. “I wouldn’t ever put you together, but who am I to judge? I’m perpetually single. Always the bridesmaid, you know?” She drank the rest of her drink. “Never mind. Not your concern.”

What the hell was wrong with Tae? Why couldn’t he break out of this weird funk? What had they given him? I was clearly missing a crucial part of the vampire lore.

Poppy held her glass out, a guest filling it up with gin. “Thank you. Well, let’s get down to business, shall we? Before you die, you’re going to tell me who you are, and why you and Tae are here.” Another sip. “Now, for every refusal to comply, the more Tae suffers. As you must know, vampires only die through decapitation. I can make his pain hurt for a long, long time. His suffering lies in your hands. Whether you’re fucking him or not, I can sense a bond here. Therefore, if you want a

quick death for your friend and yourself, when I'm satisfied you've earned one, you'll do as I say. You will tell me the truth." She smiled at the witch. "Dee here can tell."

23:50.

"How did you know?" I asked amid the laughter.

"Sorry?" Poppy questioned, gesturing for silence. "How did I know about your attack? How did I see through your fairy deceit? Well, I have to big up my friend again. She saw the veil on your faces. Thank goodness she saw you leaving. And thank goodness for *all* of my friends." She winked at me.

Yeah, good to have friends with magical guns.

"You were there?" I asked the witch, trying to buy time.

"For a shag," Dee replied, lighting up another cigarette. "Zake and I... That's none of your business. All I know is you've been responsible for loss in my life, and now here you are."

She didn't seem upset, but really pleased instead.

How much did she know about me? About Tae?

"The button-eyed demon killed your lover, your friend," I countered.

"Because of you."

"Nothing to do with me."

23:52.

Poppy stepped forward. "Don't blame others for your crimes, Clay Christmas." She grinned. "I love that name, by the way. But anyway, the button-eyed demon is a misunderstood man. He needs kindness and understanding."

“And he provides a direct link to fresh organs for you,” I said.

Her smile dropped, and she threw her drink in my face. “Don’t talk about things you don’t understand.”

I licked at the gin. “Nice. You’ve got taste.”

She came close, too close. Pressed her nose up to mine. “You’re such a brave warlock, aren’t you? Facing down your impending death with such courage.” The demon licked at my mouth. I squeezed it closed, horrified as she ran her tongue across my lips, down my chin, around the edges of my mouth.

“Yum,” she purred. “You taste special, and it’s not the gin. What’s going on in there?”

Shit. Shit. Shit. I didn’t open my mouth, too scared she’d stick her tongue in it. The gross bitch.

23:56.

“I’m going to enjoy taking you apart.”

“And we’re going to enjoy watching,” Dee added.

Poppy came at me again.

“He is bright.” A familiar, creepy voice stopped her in her tracks.

The button-eyed demon stepped into the doorway, a hand resting on the frame.

Poppy spun. “What are you doing here?”

“To discuss our deal.”

“I didn’t invite you. I said we’d talk tomorrow.”

He ignored her, walking farther into the living room. The two men who’d dragged us up here blocked his path.

The guests tensed in his presence.

“You have the bright one,” he said, leaning to see me.
“Why?”

“Bright?” Poppy questioned. “What do you mean?”

“He is bright.”

“In what way?” the demon tried again.

“He burns. He kills.”

“Yes, he does. I’m dealing with him.”

Buttons leaned to the other side, peering over the shoulder of a man he’d easily kill. “Undo him?”

23:59.

“Yes. Exactly that. But you have to go. This is a private party.”

He looked to the guests. “They are afraid of me.”

“The entire city is.”

“Yes...” He examined the decorations with his button eyes.

“Please leave. I will speak to you in the morning.”

Midnight.

Game over.

I summoned Arcana. The blazing five-pointed star burned its form on the ground. Poppy screamed, jumping to the side. Her crummy guests did the same.

“Arcana!” Dee cried.

The presence of my magic out in its full glory broke through Synth. It didn’t require a spell. It just melted the fake

crap off me in flickering red showers.

“Trick or treat,” I said, unable to help myself.

I hit them with the push spell, the magic coming out in a ferocious, almost instant wave. Buttons and the men were out of range, and the men came for me after I threw the others. I reacted with the mist spell at the right moment as the words roared in my mind, my body losing its weight and form. I became air, untouchable. The men ran through me, tripping over themselves in surprise. Five seconds and it was done. I hit them with a dose of push, and then the guests trying to get up.

“Stay the fuck down!” I yelled. Raging adrenaline took care of my fear, channeling it into action.

Rather than dwell on things, I brought out my demon arrows. Four for every one of them in the room.

“No!” Poppy screamed. “Kill him! Kill—”

The arrows soared, killing her and the other demons in the room. But not Buttons. He wasn't in the room anymore, his arrow breaking apart.

Dee screamed, firing her magic at me. It struck me in the chest, shoving me back. But not to the floor. Enough to hurt my ribs, not take me down.

I sent her into the wall.

“Kill him!” she cried to the humans, taking up the torch of her fallen demonic comrade now dust at my feet.

What? She didn't want to kidnap me again and ship me off to her fellow witches for study or whatever?

Tae still didn't move. Still fixed to the rack.

I plotted my next move. These people weren't leaving here alive. But how to take them down?

"I told you he was bright." Buttons reentered the room. "So, so bright."

Immediately, I brought an arrow to life. He froze, facing me.

"You will not—"

The arrow went for him, struck him in the heart. Only, it didn't react as it had the other times. It exploded, a mighty burst of Arcana-colored fire engulfing him, sending shockwaves through the house. I went down on my arse as the blaze became a vortex, twisting around the demon.

What the hell?

The magical inferno faded, leaving no trace behind.

Buttons, however, *was* left behind. Standing there panting, unscathed save for the edge of his buttons being a little melted. His demon side was out, the red glare of a nearby demon tower catching my eye out of the living room window.

Shit. He wasn't dead. How was that possible?

He laughed. "She will rejoice in the blood I spill. She will take me to her side. She is for me, not you. No matter how bright you are, you cannot stop me." He laughed the sound of chilling madness, facing the guests. His tentacles burst forth, the spikes joining them. "More blood. More blood."

I didn't stop him as he charged at the humans. Didn't react as I watched him slaughter them with empty abandon. Another day at the office.

He still lived.

His killing spree over, he turned to me. I fired another arrow at him. The same thing happened, the fire and him alive.

“I will not be stopped,” he said breathlessly, holding his side.

I’d hurt him, at least.

“You should be dead,” I whispered.

“I will be glorious.”

Sirens screamed outside.

The ADU.

“I will shine brighter than you.”

I braced myself for a fight. Instead, his demon side retracted, and he ran out of the door and into the night.

“I failed,” I said, completely dumbfounded.

It lasted a second. The confusion and the processing could come later. First, we had to get the hell out of here.

Where was my cat? How was I going to carry Tae away in time?

Oh, God. I couldn’t do this.

“Yes, you bloody can!”

I checked Tae’s pockets. His phone wasn’t there, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t in this house. It had to be. I checked the dead men, the other humans, Dee, the drawers in the kitchen, the living room, keeping an ear and eye out for Fizz as well. Had to call Archie and get help. If the ADU got to us, this gig could say goodbye, and I’d be on some watch list if I wasn’t already.

The tears ran free. What if I couldn't find it or Fizz? What if they'd hurt my best girl? Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.

I ran upstairs in my frantic search, practically kicking the first door down. I burst into the bedroom, a box on the bed. The muffled sounds of Fizz's keening came from inside it. I tore the cardboard open.

"Fizz!" I scooped her up, kissing the top of her head, sobbing into her fur. "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry." I held her to my face, shaking like a leaf in the wind.

You have to find that phone.

As much as I wanted to keep up with the sobbing, I returned to my task. Time was my enemy. I had to—

"What the fuck?"

Archie! He was downstairs.

I ran down to the living room, hoping my imagination wasn't playing sounds to make me feel better. Nope. There he was, breaking Tae's straps, carrying him in a fireman's lift.

"You're here," I said. "You're actually here."

"Come on," he replied, charging out of the house without asking questions.

I followed him to his car, holding my breath until we were speeding away from the nightmare.

I hugged my cat, completely drained and ready to scream.

"I received an anonymous tip Tae was in trouble," I said. "He's got a tracker on his phone. I followed it here."

"His... his phone."

"Inside a flowerpot in the downstairs toilet."

“Oh.”

“What happened here?”

“I... I can't...”

“Take your time.”

“I... Who was your tip?”

“I told you, anonymous. Which is strange. Never happens. Have to find that one out as that's, well, fucked up. But helpful. Thank God for that tracker.” He frowned. “Worried about the lack of cleanup. Didn't have time with the ADU hot to land.”

“Gosh...”

“Talk to me, Clay.”

“I... I...”

“You're shaken up. You know what? Don't worry for now. I'll talk to Tae once the vervain's out of his system.”

“The what?” I managed, my mouth dry.

“Vervain. Poisonous for vampires. Often made into a liquid. He's been injected with it. Won't kill him, but he's paralyzed until he's bled clean. He'll also need to feed again.”

“He won't die?”

“No. Don't worry. And I'm assuming he won't feed on you this time either. We'll hit Orchid Hotel.” He shook his head. “What the fuck happened in that house?”

TWENTY-ONE



It took three hours for Tae to be bled and to feed. Three hours of me curled up on the hotel bed with Fizz, scared to move, to even put a light on.

“Clay?”

The bedroom door opened.

I didn’t answer.

The mattress sagged on my left side. “Clay? Are you okay?”

Fizz meowed up at the vampire. He was beside me, above me. I saw his hand meet her head. She purred, super pleased to see him.

Slowly, I turned to face him, sitting there, glowing with health, his eyes crimson. Back to his radiant self. I sat up, keeping Fizz in my lap.

“Are you okay?”

“Much better, thank you.”

“Thank God.”

“Thank Archie. Thank *you*.”

I shook my head, eyes hot with fresh tears. “I thought I’d lose you.”

He reached out and switched on the bedside lamp. “You’re crying.” He caught my tears with his fingers.

“What if...” Deep breath. “What if she’d killed you or Fizz? What if I’d failed to stop her? What if... Oh, God. I hate what ifs. I really, really hate them. But I can’t shake this. I’m so scared, Tae. She found us so easily, she used that vervain stuff on you, she shoved Fizz in a box. And... and I failed to kill Buttons. I don’t... I don’t know what to do or to think, and I’m making it about me when you were the one poisoned and ___”

“Clay. It’s okay.”

“But it’s not. I can’t... Oh, Tae.”

I broke down into sobs, and he pulled me into his arms. My face buried into the crook of his neck, his arms a strong and much-needed embrace. I grabbed handfuls of his jumper and drenched him with my sorrow.

“Sorry,” I sniffled after a good few minutes, sitting up. “Not what you want to see.”

He touched my face, stroking it with the back of his warm hand. “I’m sorry I brought this into your life.” He got me a tissue from the bedside table.

I dabbed at my eyes, sorted out my nose. Fizz nuzzled me, giving me a soft meow. “I chose this.”

“And I promised to take care of you.”

For all his post-feeding and crimson eyes, there was no sexual energy this time. Good. The last thing I wanted.

“What do we do now? Did Archie manage to clean up?”

“Unfortunately, no,” he replied softly, his hand off my face. “However, neither the ADU nor the police found my

cameras. Archie is studying the live footage now. But we must lie low, leave the city for a few days. My apartment is a wreck.”

“Leave London?”

“Yes. If you want to come with me.”

“Of... of course I do.”

“If you want to turn away now, you can. I’ve—”

“Don’t say you’ve failed me. And I’m not walking away. Ignore this messy me. I want to help you. I want to know why Buttons didn’t die. I mean, what the hell is he? Is he even a demon?”

“An answer I’d like to have.”

I nodded. “Along with many others. So, yeah. Count me in, still. I’ll be okay.”

He smiled. “You’re very brave, Clay.”

“Not really. And I didn’t kill that prick, did I?”

“Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Erm... Thanks,” I said bashfully.

Our eyes met. I lowered my gaze. Not again. No more confusion, no more of *that*.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To my house in Brighton.”

I rubbed under Fizz’s chin. “Always wanted to visit Brighton.”

I want to kiss you again...

“We leave tonight.” He got off the bed. I looked up, watching him watch the window. “I have made arrangements

for our things to be moved. Everything you own, including your lollipops, have been boxed up by my staff.”

That made my tummy hurt. “Oh?”

“My research, too. Clothes. Everything we require.” He faced me again. “Be ready to leave in thirty minutes. Okay?”

I nodded slowly, butterflies on a rollercoaster in my belly. “How are you going to explain your apartment?”

“The press already have their hands on a false story about a building failure at Raven Tower.”

“Really? What about witnesses?”

“There weren’t any.”

“What? For real? No one saw or heard any gunfire?”

“There were some reports of gunfire being heard, yes. But no one saw anything. Archie is tweaking the details and cleaning up the mess.”

“Alone?”

“With other members of my staff.”

“That’s... amazing.”

“It’s lucky, Clay. And we aren’t out of the woods yet with Poppy’s house. We have to hope no trace of us is found there.”

“Shit. Demon ashes.”

“I know.”

“Oh, God.”

A pause before he said, “I need to be better than this for you.” He shook his head. “Too much chaos.”

“You don’t owe me anything. We’re in this together.”

He held my gaze for long seconds. “We need to reset, to let things calm down. I’ve taken too many risks.”

“You mean *we*.”

“You’re my charge, Clay. This is on me.”

“Don’t say that.”

“You’re more than these night tricks I’ve put you through.”

“Tae... Please don’t speak like that.”

He didn’t respond, watched me, held me in his orbit. A dozen electrified fingers traced my spine.

You make it different.

He broke our staring. “Thirty minutes, Clay.”

“Got it,” I whispered, voice on the verge of a squeak.

He left.

It took me fifteen minutes to get off the bed and pee and splash my face with cold water. I faced myself in the bathroom mirror, bloodshot hazel eyes staring back at me. Man, I looked so worn out. No chance of sleep, though. Too wired to rest—at least until my body took the choice away and gave out.

“Well,” I said to myself. “Well, well, well. What a fine mess we’ve got ourselves into.”

Half an hour later, we were well on the move, heading to the south coast with Kylie Minogue on the vampire’s car stereo. My Walkman sat in my lap, but he insisted on streaming the music through his fancy contraption.

“I have to admit, she sounds amazing on this thing,” I said.

“She does.”

I smiled as the *Body Language* album played, heading to the next stage of my complicated future.

I'd always wanted a better road to travel. For all intents and purposes, I'd found one at last. A seriously bumpy one with the button-eyed demon still at large, invulnerable to my magic. Did he still see me as a threat, as a usurper to his mysterious cause? And who was this *she*?

Man, what a headache.

Still, anything was better than my old life, no matter the dangers... Right?

Fizz licked my hand to offer her reassurance.

NIGHT TROUBLES

MIDNIGHT MAGIC BOOK 2



ONE



I kissed my cat on the head. She was my rock, my universe, my unparalleled bestie. A soft meow of approval, and lots of purring, followed. All the good sounds that made me happy.

“You okay, honey?” I asked.

Yeah, she was okay, curled up in my lap on this journey down to Brighton.

“Almost there,” Tae, our vampire driver, announced.

A few minutes later, Tae’s car turned into a lane at the top of a cliff along the coast. I glanced at the dark sea, not seeing much as the rain lashed at the vehicle, the outside world smothered in darkness. I heard the waves, though, all angry and scary below.

I just wanted to get inside. Gosh, it was so cold in these early morning hours, the new November air really showing its Arctic side.

We passed a few detached houses along the lane, all with views of the sea. Four in total, the fifth one at the end being our final stop.

The big reset. Starting this demon-hunting thing again. Getting away from some majorly dodgy drama that’d gone down.

A two-story brick house with balconies on the upper rooms, it wasn't what I'd been expecting. In my head, we were set to pull up at some gothic mansion in the middle of nowhere, passing through iron gates, making our way up a long driveway through woodland or something until we reached the house itself. You know, like Batman's mansion.

I was glad that wasn't a reality. I liked the look of this house. It spoke of shelter, of warmth. Somewhere that wasn't the cold outdoors, but a haven. The lights were on in the windows, like jewels amongst the brick, really selling the place.

Sign me up, I thought.

"We're here," Tae said, his deep tones comforting.

I sighed with relief as the engine died. We'd made it to Brighton without incident. No one had followed or attacked us.

Thank the bloody heavens for that.

Fizz meowed at him, wanting some Tae time. He accepted her request, scooping her up and cradling her against his chest. He kissed the top of her head and sheltered her under his jacket as he slid out of the car.

Within seconds, he opened my door, standing under an umbrella.

How the hell did he move so fast and get a broolly up?

"Thanks," I said, getting under the big umbrella with him.

We walked together through a small gate and a small garden, stepping into the house. Its warmth welcomed me with toasty arms.

I came face to face with a silver Marilyn Monroe.

“Wow. Is this a real Andy Warhol?” I asked the billionaire vampire, immediately blushing and hanging my head in shame. “Course it’s real. Stupid me. You’re loaded and can afford loads of them and, you know, I...” I stopped before I went deeper into one of my humiliating rambles.

“It is a real Andy Warhol,” Tae answered. Fizz stared up at him, so content in his presence. “My wife was a big fan of pop art, particularly Warhol’s work.”

I looked up, heat still in my cheeks. “Oh?”

His wife. His murdered wife. Killed by a demon along with their six-year-old son fifteen years ago.

The vampire gazed at the painting for what felt like an eternity, his hands by his sides. I stood with him in the small entrance hall of his Brighton home, my eyes on his alabaster profile.

Gosh. He took my breath away. His black hair hung in curls to his shoulders, the blue tones shimmering. His brooding expression was enough to get my clothes off and break my heart.

“Tae...” I went to reach for him, then paused.

No. After he’d told me about his family, I’d decided to back off after our couple of, erm, *moments*. As much I wanted more of him, for his hands to be back on me, for my body to surrender to his will, I couldn’t go there. Not now. We both wanted to keep things professional as demon hunters. Him my trainer, me his charge with the lost power of Arcana that could kill demons and get me in trouble if the wrong people found out.

Like the witches.

We were still trying to figure out why this long-gone magic had returned inside me. So far, we'd come up cold.

We'd come down to the Brighton house to hide out. To let things blow over after a demon tried to kill us last night, after his London penthouse took a serious battering. And after the button-eyed demon didn't die from me hitting him with Arcana. Demons were supposed to be killed by the ancient magic—the only thing that could do so.

Not him. Oh, not him. He still terrorized London, still stalked the streets, probably killing some people as we spoke. He'd terrorized the city for too long. And here I was without a clue of how to stop him.

Yet. Nothing was impossible. Tae and I would figure this out. Just like we'd figure out who killed his family. That was my task in working with him, in being a demon-hunting warlock. To bring justice to that murdering scumbag who'd killed his wife and son, and to other pieces of demon shit along the way. So many demons hid in plain sight, up to all sorts of no good. A plague on our world I wanted to help sort out.

Tae looked at me and smiled gently. It beefed up his already startling masculine beauty.

Before my knees were completely jelly, I tore my eyes away. Back to the Warhol.

“Impressive,” I said, clearing my throat after. “A guy like me can only dream of having one of those.”

Until recently, I'd been homeless, trying to find a better road to drag my life down. And I'd ended up in this situation. Scary, yes, but interesting. Better than being out on the streets trying to make a living with my warlock tricks, shivering in

my hovel. As much as I tried to spin things into sunshine, life was tough. Always had been.

Now I lived with Tae, worked for him, and tried not to stare too much at the delicious piece of man-candy I wanted in my mouth at all times.

Ahem.

Rain battered the front door and the strips of window either side of it. There were stained-glass white roses in those windows and real white roses in a vase on a table in the hall—just like there'd been back at the penthouse. His attention was now on that vase, silence falling between us. Well, aside from Fizz purring in his arms and the rain.

“It’s November,” I said, not really expecting an answer but unable to stand the quiet. I don’t know why I felt so awkward.

But he did answer. “It is. Again.” He spoke so sullenly.

It’d been Halloween yesterday, now three in the morning of Sunday, November 1st, with me miles from sleep. I mean, who could sleep after what we’d just been through?

“Glad we’re indoors,” I added, wrapping my arms around myself.

“Are you cold?” he asked, moving closer to me.

I looked up into his dark eyes—his six-something height to my five-nine making me do that. “I, erm, I’m fine. It’s nice and warm in here.”

This house stood as the complete opposite of his London penthouse. Small and packing a colorful punch bordering on gaudy. Man, I loved that. Give me all the colors—the brighter, the better.

The carpet was a vibrant royal purple with a silver rose pattern woven into it, the walls striped white and gold. Nothing like the minimalist grays, whites, and blacks of the Raven Tower penthouse.

“Come with me,” the vampire said.

I followed him, passing a living room of blue and yellow décor, the color so rich and popping. More expensive pop art hung on the walls inside that room—Warhol, other stuff. I didn’t know much about art, only bits and pieces.

“This house is not what I expected from the outside,” I said. “Or from you. Not that I really know your taste and I’m not being judgmental or—”

“Clay?”

“Yes?” I sucked in a breath.

“It’s okay. This house is to my wife’s tastes. She liked to make a statement in every room.”

“Good for her. I love it.”

He didn’t respond.

The purple carpet continued up the staircase and into the upstairs level—the stripey walls, too. And there were more white roses in vases sat on tables beside each of the five doors in this corridor.

“This was my wife’s favorite place,” he said, pausing.

“Did she like the seaside?”

“She did.”

It surprised me to hear him mention her again. He’d gone from never even acknowledging she’d existed to this. Not exactly opening up to me, but more than I’d ever expected him

to say. Would he pull back the curtain on his past? Reveal her name and their son's? Go into deeper details?

I doubted it.

I wanted him to, being greedy for more from the vampire. Wanting to explore him within and without, to be... I don't know. Be something extra.

Yeah, I needed to get a grip.

You make it different. He'd said that. The words replayed in my mind, me analyzing them almost hourly. He'd said that whenever he fed, he didn't feel like he'd been unfaithful to his wife. Vampire feeding was a sexual experience, apparently, but nothing more than that. But with me, he did feel unfaithful? Because I made it different?

I so didn't want to make him feel that way. Ever. Hence the backing off.

He took me to a door at the end of the corridor. He opened it, allowing me to step inside the room first.

The bedroom was a combination of canary yellow and orange wallpaper, the carpet the same with the orange part a rose pattern. What a sunny room, bright and full of warmth. It housed a huge bed with yellow sheets, and a large teddy bear sat between the pillows. There was a small gold sofa, a desk, TV, laptop, and closed gold curtains. There were also paintings of beach scenes and meadows on the walls—a far cry from the pop art downstairs. These were cute and twee, and I was so here for them.

“Sunny statement,” I said, smiling at the room.

He moved past me, nodding at a closed door next to the bed. “Your bathroom.”

“Is this room for me?” I asked.

“Yes. I think it matches you perfectly.” He smiled at me again.

After everything we’d just been through, he still gave me his version of warmth when he smiled. It made those obsidian eyes kind of shimmer.

“T-thanks,” I answered nervously.

Now kindly take me on the bed, please!

Bloody behave!

His smile dropped. “I can show you other rooms if you like. There’s no need to settle on the first one I show you.”

“No. It’s great. Thanks.”

“Good. I’ll bring your things up to you.”

“I can do that.”

“It’s fine. Get yourself settled.”

“O-okay.” I licked my lips. “Are there staff here?” I asked the question because someone looked after those roses, kept the carpets and surfaces clean.

“Not at the moment,” he said.

“Right.” A billionaire with barely any staff. Yes, he did have people working for him, but not in the whole *Downton Abbey* kind of way. More like Archie for cleaning up tricky messes or mysterious employees doing his shopping for him. No butlers and maids or any of that stuff.

“Those who tend to the house have been given time off while we’re here,” he added.

“Oh.”

“Do you need anything?” he asked.

I need you. “Some warm milk? I can come down and make it.”

“I’ll bring it to you.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“It’s fine, Clay. Settle in. Relax. Archie is due to arrive shortly.”

“Oh, cool.” I liked Archie. He seemed like a nice guy. “Am I...” I rubbed the back of my left arm nervously. “Am I allowed out of my room?”

“Of course, you are.”

“Really?”

“Why would you think you can’t leave your room?”

“Well, erm, I’m getting *Beauty and the Beast* vibes.”

“Sorry?”

I licked my lips. “You know, not allowed in the west wing and all that jazz. You ever seen the Disney cartoon?”

“No. I have the read the original fairy tale, *La Belle et la Bête*, by Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve. And the Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont version, which is the most famous version of the tale.”

Okay then. “Well, erm, you should watch it.” Why was I talking about this?

He handed me Fizz rather than deep-dive anymore *Beauty and the Beast*, our fingers brushing in the exchange. Our eyes met, me ready to dive into those mesmerizing pools of obsidian. Heat flushed in the back of my neck, a shudder spiraling up my spine.

“I’ll get you that milk.” He turned away, heading for the door.

“T-thanks.”

He closed the door gently behind him. I sat on the bed, released a long breath, my body a riot of trembles and tingles.

“This guy, Fizz,” I said to my silver tabby, gently rubbing her head.

She meowed, so in sync with me.

Her front left leg was still recovering from a break after a demon literally threw her through the air. But she was getting better quickly, thanks to the amazing skills and meds of her vet, Elizabeth. Tae had called her to fix my honey pie.

The demon who’d hurt my best girl now pushed up the daisies or whatever demons pushed up when they died.

Did ashes push up daisies?

Fizz’s curiosity piqued for the bedroom. She wanted off my lap to get her exploring on. I put her down on the plush carpet, letting her limp around.

“Are you sure you don’t want to snuggle on this bed?” I asked, bouncing on the thick softness.

Nope. She sniffed. She studied her new surroundings. I kept an eye on her, constantly in concern mode. I would be until she fully recovered. I needed her. She kept me warm at night, kept my soul strong with a simple meow, with a purr, with one look from her lovely blue eyes. She was my family, my ride or die.

I blew her a kiss. She didn’t notice, too busy sniffing the golden sofa.

I explored too, taking in the paintings, having a peek in the bathroom—a yellow and white concoction with a huge bath and shower. Wow, the shower head was a massive square. Weren't they called rain showerheads or something? Because it would be like standing in the rain, I guess. Man, I thought the shower at the penthouse was divine. This would blow it out of the water.

Fizz still examined the sofa when I stepped out of the bathroom, the shower definitely taking the crown as the best one ever. I went over to the window, fingering the curtains, hesitant to open them. After the attack on the penthouse, magical guns destroying the windows and almost making us Swiss cheese, the trauma anchored my temptation to peek. As much as I wanted to see the sea, the world could stay out there with its cold night and rain and pain.

The morning would be different after I slept my anguish off. What would I see anyway? Nothing but shadows is what. The moon was blocked by rain clouds, for starters. Watching a dark sea wasn't my idea of a good time right now.

I released another sigh.

I'd been betrayed by my friend, Kelly, seen so much death in a short space of time, got kidnapped by a demon, and failed to kill Buttons (A.K.A the button-eyed demon). I really needed some R and R before facing drama again.

Fizz meowed. I looked down to see her looking up at me as if to assure me things would be fine when the sun came up.

“I love you,” I told her.

Meow, meow.

I sat down on the sofa she enjoyed rubbing against so much, a bookcase to my right catching my attention. No

Stephen King on there—my favorite author—but plenty of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and a shed load of Dickens. And some Proust.

Not my cup of tea, though I did quite like *A Tale of Two Cities*.

I stretched my legs out, slumping into the squishy golden softness. Less than a minute later, I dozed off, sleep a lot closer than I thought.



A THRONE of twisted black vines sat on an outcrop a few feet away from me.

Huh?

I stood inside a cavern of dark stone, a ring of fire circling me. No, not fire. Lava. An actual river of lava trapping me and cutting me off from that throne.

Oh, shit.

There was no one in here but me and no sign of an exit or a bridge over that scary river. I certainly wouldn't be attempting a jump over the damn thing. Only the throne provided a landing spot anyway.

Yeah, sod that.

The heat from the lava felt deadly, sweat running free from every corner of me. I slowly walked toward the throne, a bag of frightened nerves, hands opening and closing, wondering if something would happen if I got closer to it.

“Where am I?” I asked the vines.

They moved, slithering against each other like a ball of snakes.

I stopped. “Hello?”

The vines continued to move.

“Where am I?”

But there was no one around. And the vines didn’t speak. I mean, why would they?



I WOKE up to movement on my lap. A repetitive thing. What was it? I yawned, let the haze clear from my eyes and mind, then looked at the thing causing all the motion.

Fizz. Grooming herself. She stopped, glancing up with a meow before getting back to work.

Daylight lingered at the edges of the gold curtains.

“Morning, honey,” I officially greeted my cat after another yawn. “Happy Sunday proper.”

I gently removed her from my lap, which she wasn’t too offended by. Once on the spot next to me, she carried on with the grand old licking. I got up and stretched my limbs, getting off another yawn.

What the hell had that dream been about?

“Weird, Fizz. So weird.”

A digital clock over by the bed told me it was nine in the morning at the Brighton house. Shit. I never did get that warm milk. I hoped Tae didn’t take offense at me nodding off.

“Oh.” There were bags at the foot of the bed. I went through them, finding all the clothes Tae had bought me, my Kylie Minogue cassettes, and my yellow Walkman. Most importantly, though Kylie was totally important, were my lollipops filled with fairy magic. Made by Grindle, my fairy friend, the pink candies with a strawberries and cream flavor hid my demon blood. Kept my secret from Tae. A really, really bad secret to hide from a vampire who loathed demons and trusted me.

Lies, lies, and more lies.

Guilt held my hand with an iron grip. I’d tried to tell him a few times about my weird blood, always chickening out at the last minute. And now I knew his true reasons for hunting demons. There was no way he could know the truth. That would be the end of us. Forever.

Not wanting to make myself feel lower than shit on a boot, I fished out some clothes and underwear and hit the shower. Cleaned last night off me, the hot water refreshing and so welcome.

That showerhead. Wow. Just wow.

That dream, though. Seriously? What the hell? A cavern of lava and a weird throne? What’d my mind been smoking?

Ah, that was dreams for you. I’d experienced plenty of crazy ones in my time. Once I’d been a banana on a roller coaster getting a blowjob from a robot with great abs.

Hmmm.

Done with cleaning myself, I combed my hair, pulled on a white jumper and blue jeans, slipped on some socks, and thought about food. I rolled my shoulders and opened the curtains, picturing pancakes and fried eggs for some reason.

Sunlight bathed my face, spilling into the room as the heavy gold curtains parted. What a contrast to the gloomy night. The sky was a clear blue, the sun warm through the glass of the French windows.

This caught Fizz's attention. I picked her up, showing her the outside.

“Shall we try going on the balcony?”

I tried the window. Locked. Then I noticed a tiny key in the lock. I turned it and pushed the window outward. With Fizz in my arms, I stepped onto the balcony with its white metal balustrade and chairs covered with tarpaulin.

“Wow, Fizz,” I said. “Look at this.”

Meow.

What a lovely spot for the summer months. I could see why Tae's wife loved it here. The view was breathtaking, an azure sea reflecting the clear sky, a few ships on the horizon. The water glittered in the sun, looking super inviting if it weren't so cold.

“Pretty,” I said

From this point of view, I got to see the Marina in the distance to my right, with the main seafront beyond it. I wanted to get out there and explore it, but that might not be possible. It all depended on, well, how things went down.

Fingers crossed for a little visit to the pier, maybe grab a stick of rock or twelve. Have a paddle in the shallows. All of it.

My stomach growled, and I knew Fizz would be wanting some grub like five minutes ago.

Returning inside, because as nice as it was outside, the temperature set my nipples to *hello*, I carried Fizz to the bedroom door.

“Come on, you. Let’s get some food.”

She meowed her approval.

I headed downstairs, finding the open-plan dining room and kitchen. Another yellow-walled room, with a more understated vibe, the floor made up of brown stone tiles. In fact, the space reminded me of sunshine on hay rather than an ordinary yellow kitchen/dining room. It just had such a warm feeling to it.

Tae’s wife really knew how to create a vibe in a room.

The vampire looked up as I entered. He sat at the dining table with Archie, a man with a bodybuilder’s physique, bald head, and scarred, dark brown skin. Despite his hard exterior, Archie had such a pleasant nature to him. He plastered some butter on toast, giving me a beaming grin.

“Hello, you. How’s things?” He spoke before Tae did.

Paperwork piled on the large pine table, two laptops open. Sunlight backlit the vampire, making him even more supermodel-like than usual. So perfect, so striking.

“I’m, erm, okay. You?”

“I’m good, mate,” Archie said.

My attention was on the vampire. Tae had the power to make me squirm with just one look, let alone the touch of his hand and mouth. Oh, man. The way he’d worked my body, how he’d used the non-fairy lollipop to—

Nope. *That* was over now.

I cleared my throat, stroking a purring Fizz. “Can we... can we grab some breakfast?”

Tae pushed himself back in his chair, getting to his feet with liquid grace. “What can I get you?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find something. You carry on with what you’re doing.”

“This concerns you, too,” the vampire said.

“Okay.”

“Gotta have a chat,” Archie chimed in through a mouthful of toast.

“But eat first,” Tae added. “What would you like?”

I could argue again, but Tae’s skills in the kitchen were light years beyond mine. “Pancakes and fried eggs?”

Archie pulled a disgusted face. “Fuck. That sounds gross.”

Tae ignored him, not reacting either way. “Is that what you want?”

“Please. I don’t know why, but I have a craving.”

“What sort of pancakes?”

“American Style?”

“Of course. Syrup?”

“Please.”

“I’m gonna puke,” Archie cut in.

“Don’t be facetious,” Tae countered.

“I’m not. I’m pointing out facts.”

“It’s none of your business what anyone eats, Archie,” Tae said as smooth as silk. “May I remind you of your penchant

for pork pies. Now they are revolting.”

He shrugged, snorting a laugh. “Touché.”

I chuckled. There was nothing malicious in Archie’s comments. All of it was said in jest.

“I love a pork pie,” I added. “With a side of pickle.”

Archie offered his fist for a bump. “Good man.”

We fist-bumped.

Tae got to work on the breakfast, adding no more fuel to our fire, and I got to fixing Fizz some food. The cupboards were stocked with so much stuff, including a posh gourmet range of cat food Fizz loved so much, thanks to Tae.

“Tuna and salmon today?” I asked her.

She purred in my arms, sniffing the silver can as I brought it close.

Two bowls were already laid out for her, both white, one filled with water.

Speaking of white, there was another vase of white roses on the windowsill, framed by a view of the sea beyond.

I emptied the contents of the can into Fizz’s bowl, let her get to munching, and stood by the sink, staring out at the morning as Tae made pancake batter. So blue out there, so crisp. Winter was almost here, and I didn’t have to face another on the streets this year. No having to prep the hovel for the worst of the cold snaps. Lucky me. Not like the rest of my people on Golden Lane at the shopping center in Elephant & Castle. Or the countless other homeless people that didn’t have a Golden Lane or friends or family or anywhere halfway decent to escape the cold. The ones who fell into the black pits, died from winter’s deadly grip, lost in so much despair.

I'd seen them, found them dead, or on the brink of it. Broken. Long gone before death came knocking.

“Are you okay?” Tae asked.

I blinked my way out of the dark spiral, not one to get caught up in a sorrowful undertow much. That never helped with my aspirations.

“I'm fine.” I looked at him. “Thanks.”

“Are you sure?”

Don't know. “I'm sure. Really.” I smiled to gloss over any cracks. “I see someone went shopping this morning. There's so much stuff here.”

He poured the batter into a frying pan. “The invisible staff.”

“Really?”

“No. Archie went.”

I faced the human—my Arcana magic had read him as such.

He gave me the thumbs up. “Got to have the goods in.”

“Thanks, Archie.”

“Always happy to help, mate.”

Back to Tae. “How long do you think we'll stay here?”

Gosh, his pancakes looked so perfect.

“Eat first,” he said. “Then we can discuss the next steps.”

“Okay.”

I left him to it before any lingering eye contact commenced, aiming for the coffee pot.

Two



After an amazing breakfast of fried eggs on pancakes with maple syrup, Archie having to leave the room during my munching, I sipped coffee and listened to Tae's briefing.

Archie returned, filling up his coffee mug.

"The Raven Tower story seems to have been sold well to the press," the vampire said. "The official line is a building fault, as you know, and that I'm safe and well. The witnesses who heard gunfire are not linked to us now. The sounds linked to some possible, and fake, criminal activity nearby."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, Clay."

"I can't believe no one saw the Synth guns go off. What about the other residents in the building?"

"They saw nothing."

"Really?"

"What about the car crash?" My head twinged with the memory of the pain from smacking my head on the side of the window.

"No record of it," he said.

"How?"

“I have a great spin team.”

“Oh.”

“I’m Batman, remember?”

I burst into laughter just before I went to sip my coffee. A lucky dodge. “Oh my God!”

A tiny smile on those pale lips of his.

Yum.

“As aggressive as the attack on us was, it did slip under the radar,” Tae continued.

“Because of the Synth?”

“Yes. The attack was mostly cloaked by magic, thus resulting in no real witnesses. Which is, morbidly, lucky for us. It has helped my team to weave the lies.”

Synth was witch magic, a synthetic power made in factories using the blood of the population, which we all had to donate, along with other ‘natural’ ingredients. Only witches could use it, warlocks limited to using Trace magic—a weak remnant of Arcana, the ancient magic having died out two-hundred years ago.

Until now...

Thankfully, my demon blood hadn’t been detected after my donations/obligatory handing over sessions. It must have been something to do with all the processing blood went through before becoming Synth.

Phew!

“Crazy,” I said. “Really crazy. But good. Well, the attack wasn’t good. No way. What I mean is, us not having to deal with having to explain—” I cut myself off.

A ghost of a smirk crept to Tae's lips. "We're trying to see if we can track anyone else linked to Poppy Love's Halloween party. To be safe and sure. Being who she was, there is the risk of a counterattack."

"Which brings us to window number two," Archie said, stirring four sugars into his coffee.

"Indeed," Tae agreed. "Clay, there is a major problem we have to contend with. A story is about to leak regarding demon ashes—Poppy's, the other demons you've killed."

"Oh shit."

"The story is that Poppy's house is a murder scene, with all the victims slain in the same manner Buttons kills his victims."

"He did kill," I said. "Apart from the demons."

He nodded. "The big twist will be demon ashes, or at least what looks like demon ashes. I don't know who got hold of this information, but there is enough there to whip some hysteria."

"Shit."

"The ashes are in the hands of the ADU," he added. "Which points to some idiot agent leaking these details for quick cash."

The Anti Demon Unit (ADU) dealt with demon banishing, the only people licensed to carry talismans to perform the rituals (Tae excluded as he illegally had one). They packed guns and attitude and protected us from demons, alongside the demon towers clustered across the globe. Those Synth-loaded towers reacted when demons manifested their true forms, also suppressing them from causing too much shit.

Unfortunately, the towers hadn't stopped Buttons, and the ADU couldn't seem to banish him or track him down.

Same here. Tae and his team couldn't get a lock on him.

"What about any sign of us being at the house?" I asked.

"There doesn't seem to be anything, but it hasn't been twenty-four hours yet. I want to give it at least seventy-two hours."

"What if they... Oh, shit. The ADU report to the witches. Oh, God. What if—"

Tae leaned across the table, taking my hand. "Try not to worry. Archie managed to remove the cameras."

The ones he'd put there to watch the party action.

"Thank God for that!"

"All should be good, mate," Archie said. "At least for now."

"This is why we're resetting," Tae added. "To refocus and be better at this."

Yeah, I knew that. Didn't stop me teetering over a freak-out.

I sighed, pushing a hand through my damp hair. "Wow. This is a lot."

The vampire's dark gaze bore into me. "I wish I could say we've avoided a catastrophe, but I can't. Nothing is certain."

I straightened, taking some deep breaths. "You know what? It could be worse. So much worse." *We could be dead, me forced to watch them slowly torture you before taking your head.*

I kept that last part to myself.

Vampires only died from decapitation but could be seriously messed up by vervain poisoning—the latter fact I’d learned the hard way through Poppy Love. She’d poisoned Tae, licked my face, been a creepy, evil bitch. Had a night of torturing planned. God knows how long it would’ve gone on for if my magic hadn’t woken up at midnight. Arcana only activated at the strike of twelve, going back to sleep at dawn—we put that down to Trace behaving the same way. It was the only theory we had.

Gosh. If Poppy Love had got her way and... and killed him...

I snapped out of it. He was fine. We were fine.

Take the win.

“Looking on the bright side, eh?” Archie responded to me.

“Huh?”

“You said it could be worse.”

“Oh. Yeah.” I rubbed the back of my neck.

“Don’t look at the bright side too much, mate. It can make you blind to the badness. Good to be balanced.”

I guess he was right. Trying to find the good parts didn’t always work and ventured close to naivety. But it’d kept me alive for the past twenty-four years.

“We’ll stay here for the time being,” Tae said. “We’re close enough to London should we need to go into the city, which I’m sure we will. It shouldn’t take long for the penthouse to be restored.”

I sipped my coffee. “Cool. I really don’t mind being out of London. Doesn’t happen very often.”

“Nice to be beside the seaside,” Archie contributed, then whistled some of the song *I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside*.

I joined him, giggling after a few bars.

Tae, as always, didn’t react.

“So, what next?” I asked. “What’s the plan for our demon hunting?”

At first, Archie didn’t know about our hunts or of Arcana, Tae wanting it kept on the down-low. Now he knew it all.

Tae stood and moved his chair closer to mine, bringing his laptop with him.

Energy bristled between us, his lime-tinged scent tickling my senses.

So close...

“I’m currently working on this,” he said, his deep tones a pulse in the air.

“Oh?” I looked at the screen. “Tasmin Vacquier?”

“Demon,” he said. “Banished by the ADU.”

“Wait. Do you have access to ADU files?”

“I do.”

Of course, he did. Why did I even have to ask?

“She got banished five years ago in Lille, France. She posed as a florist for many years, living a quiet life.”

“What happened to change that?”

“She unleashed slaughter upon a flower market.”

“For a minute there, I thought you were going to say she only wanted to be a florist.”

“Afraid not, Clay. She just wanted death and chaos. And that wasn’t her only crime. She’d murdered before.”

“Sometimes a spade is just a spade,” Archie said.

“Okay.”

Was that true? Were all demons bad news? Were things really that black and white? I mean, people were messy and complicated—a blend of good and bad no matter which side we veered toward more. Nobody was perfect. Well, that’s how I saw it anyway. I guess my encounters with demons so far were all, well, nasty, which pointed more to one clear conclusion.

Bad guys. But what did that make me?

Tae spoke. “Tasmin knew a lot of demons in high and low places. One of those demons is this man.” He clicked on the laptop’s touch screen, bringing up an image of a hot guy, dragging a gasp out of me.

“Jarod Woods?” I said.

Super-famous actor and heartthrob. Late-twenties, blond, golden sun-kissed skin, Jarod was the wet dream of many, a complete hunk with a body and smile to die for. He had the level of fame that went beyond fame and into a global obsession. It all began with a hit teen soap which led to a crazily successful movie career, turning him into a major star and sex symbol. I’d been guilty of knocking one out to him on a cold night before. And he could act his socks off—from independent films to mega-blockbusters. He’d just completed a trilogy of action films starring as a monster hunter, playing a broody character much like Tae. I’d seen the first one but never got a chance to see the others.

“What does he have to do with anything?”

“Jarod’s a demon,” Archie said.

“No. He can’t be.”

“He is, Clay,” Tae said.

“But he’s Jarod Woods,” I protested. “He’s... he’s, well, *him*.”

“Demons hide in many corners of society,” the vampire countered. “You know that.”

Cue a flustered me. “I know, but this is different. This is Jarod Woods. He can’t be a demon.”

“How is it different?” Tae wondered.

“It just is.”

“Poppy Love was famous for her charity work but harvested human organs for profit.”

“Yeah, because she was an evil scumbag.”

“And so is Jarod Woods.” Another click of the screen and up came some horrendous details of crimes against women. Buried crimes, cold cases spread across the world.

I wanted to puke.

“This isn’t public knowledge,” Tae said. “This is part of a confidential investigation my people and I have conducted.”

The image of Hollywood’s golden boy fractured, cracked wide open, came crashing down. Rape and murder so vicious, the details so awful I looked away from the screen. Not in a denial way, but in pure disgust.

“That evil bastard,” I said.

“We discovered this information a week ago,” Tae said softly. “His crimes have been covered up for years.”

“How...” I swallowed. “How can someone...” Another sigh. “How has he kept his hands clean for so long?”

“Money. Power. With the help of corrupt humans covering his tracks or demons in powerful positions, lending a hand. This is how they operate. But I have money and power, too.” He leaned closer to me. “And you have the ultimate power.”

I shuddered at his baritone.

Kill Jarod Woods? Kill the number one Hollywood heartthrob?

“I’ll end the bastard,” I said. Of course, I would. Anyone would.

“Not yet,” Tae countered. “First, I need to speak with him.”

“Oh?”

“Would you like something else to eat?”

I frowned. “Erm, nope. I want you to keep talking.”

He nodded. “Jarod was one of Tasmin’s lovers. Their relationship was yet another secret, mainly because of the proclivities they shared.”

“Oh, God.”

“Sex parties turned into snuff movies.”

My stomach lurched. I threw myself off the chair, landing hard on my hands and knees. I wanted to make it to the bathroom, not fall over. Pain sang in my palms and knees as my breakfast came up, splattering across the floor.

I’d seen some horrible stuff in my life, been the victim of some nastiness. Hell, I’d read some fucked up stories, seen some gruesome movies. But that was fiction. This was real,

had actually happened to characters living in the same world. And at the hands of demons, one of them a famous movie star. That hard dose of reality, the crumbling of celebrity magic, the terrible injustice, it all kicked me in the heart.

“Clay!” Tae arrived beside me, his hand on my back. Rubbing.

“I’m okay,” I wheezed, wiping the back of my mouth with my sleeve. “Just being dramatic.”

“Think you speak for all of us,” Archie said. “It’s rotten to the core.”

“I’m sorry I have to show you these things,” Tae soothed.

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for,” I countered. “This is the real world, and I have to face the hard truths because this is part of my job. I don’t want it sugar-coated. If I’m going to make a fool of myself by puking on your floor, then I’m the sorry one.”

“A valid response,” he said.

I turned to face the vampire, his smile catching me off guard.

“You really are an amazing person, Clay.”

I almost collapsed, my cheeks flaring with heat. “Don’t be daft.”

He helped me to my feet, examining me. “Go and freshen up. We’ll continue this shortly.”

Gosh, I felt so embarrassed by my little scene. “I’ll try not to be so theatrical next time.”

“Now don’t *you* be daft,” Archie responded.



CLEANED up and no longer ashamed, I sat back at the table with more coffee, not wanting any replacement breakfast.

“Tasmin has connections to Quentin Dawn,” Tae continued. “I’m still trying to figure out those connections properly, and I think Jarod Woods will be able to tell us what we need to know.”

I shuffled in my seat. “What’s the plan?”

“We’re going to take him in for questioning. Unofficially, of course.”

Archie chuckled.

“When?” I asked.

“I’m working on it.”

Kidnapping Jarod Woods? The idea made my nerves meet a cheese grater.

“That’s why you need the third level key,” I said. “To speak to Tasmin?”

Tae’s search to find his family’s killer had taken him into the demon realm. There he’d discovered it was comprised of many levels. He didn’t know how many levels yet, but he’d got as far as the second. Now he needed the key to the third level.

According to his research, all fingers pointed to a demon by the name of Quentin Dawn. He might have loads of keys or even a master key. Though he wasn’t the only one to have keys, he seemed to be a top dog in the demon hierarchy. But the details on Quentin and the keys were sketchy. A total

mystery man. Information had come from Tae's torturing of demons or from posing as one of many aliases to gather bits and pieces of intel.

Tae was the master of disguises.

Was Quentin Dawn his family's killer?

"I'm hoping Jarod has a key or knows a demon with access to one," Tae said. "We will see. I'll extract as much information as I can from him, but Tasmin is the one I want."

Which meant him going into the demon realm.

Yikes.

"Eventually, once we untangle this messy web, we will find..." The vampire hesitated. "We will find what we're looking for."

The killer of his family.

Tae poured Archie a coffee, then topped up my mug.

"Thanks," I said. "So, the plan is to get to Jarod, get info from him, and hopefully get a key to reach Tasmin."

"That's right."

"Just clearing it up in my head."

A small smile on his pale lips, as brief as one breath. "In the meantime, we stay here. We continue with your training."

"Oh? Where?"

"I have a gym for us to work in."

"And my spells?"

Tae looked to Archie.

"I'm working on that for you," Archie said.

“Oh.”

Tae'd delegated *that* task, then?



I STUDIED the Arcana grimoires in my room, sat cross-legged on the bed. Fizz joined me, curled up beside me like a little hot water bottle.

Being the only person in the entire world to have the power of Arcana, the grimoire's pages were for my eyes only. For everyone else, they were old, leather-bound tomes of blank pages.

I'd already been using three spells from the grimoires. Actually, there were four. The push spell came easily, and so did the ball of light spell. As for the mist one, which turned me into mist for five seconds, I wanted to try and extend my hold on it. The more I practiced and focused, the longer I could be a misty form and safe from harm when in a scrap.

Gosh. There'd be plenty of scraps to come in my future.

The fourth spell was my mind wards. I had to keep topping them up every ten days. After Buttons had lured me to Finsbury Park with a song he put in my head, and after a river monster tried to convince me death was better than life, I'd put them up. I didn't want anything getting in my brain again. It was my space, my sanctuary and sometimes my torture chamber. But mine. It was not a gallery open for the world to stroll around in.

As I read the first book, my attention landed on a beefed-up version of the push spell. This one acted with the same principle of telekinesis but worked as circular energy. With

pushing, I had to face the target I wanted to hit. This version of the spell, *Round Push*, sent a burst of energy from my core in an outward circle, hitting everything within a range I could muster. It could be mere feet or even wider. It all lay with the caster, according to the book.

Might be tricky to practice indoors. Tae had made a makeshift training ground for spells out of an old sugar factory back in London. Even that space might pose a problem, though. If I cast the spell with a heavy hand, that dilapidated factory might come down on our heads. The grimoire warned of heavy hands, advising outdoor practice for this spell. Outside practice posed the problem of being spotted by witches.

Not fun.

Hmmm. I'd have to talk to Tae about that one.

I unwrapped a half-eaten fairy lollipop and sucked away, getting doses of fairy magic into me. Hiding my lie, protecting me, making me feel guilty. You know, all the fun stuff.

Earmarking that spell, I moved on to others. There were so many across the two volumes, and I became overwhelmed. Still, I had to master them all eventually. Well, that's how I saw it. If I wanted to be a bad-arse Arcana warlock, I'd have to go all in. I wanted to go all in.

Healing touch.

Ooo. Now this one I could work with, and it wouldn't break things.

As with all Arcana spells, there were two methods to casting—a thought or incantation, and mixing ingredients to make a potion. I avoided the latter, going for the former, which worked by speaking or thinking a simple rhyme.

What could it heal? Not a vampire, it said. Not a demon, and not any magic-user with magical defenses halting the process. It healed minor wounds, acted as a temporary fix to major wounds. Strictly temporary. Medical attention was still required if shit got bad. This wasn't some video game where my hands would make everything better and recharge the health bar. Nope. Would've been cool, though.

Having a healing booster was better than a kick between the legs, so I decided to practice it later, whenever Archie came up with a place. I didn't want to do anything around Fizz, no matter if it was a healing spell. Anything could go wrong, and my best girl wasn't getting in the crossfire. Once had been more than enough.

I rubbed her sleeping head and slid off the bed. Grabbing my yellow Walkman, I popped in *X* by Kylie Minogue, my other best girl, and danced around the room. The music washed over me, helping me think, putting my nerves on ice for a bit. Her music filled me with so much joy, a great comfort in dark times.

Man, I was so lucky to have two best girls to keep me going.

I smiled at that thought, launching myself at the sofa. I draped myself over it, posing like I was inside a music video. Sunlight bathed me, warmed me. Ah, you had to love these moments of nice.

Closing my eyes, I lay and listened to the music. Lost in myself, lost in Kylie. Nothing but melodic colors and me.

A tap on my shoulder had me screaming. I shot upward, rolling off the sofa.

"Holy shit!" I cried, scrambling to my feet.

Tae stood beside the sofa, an eyebrow arched.

“You scared me!” I declared loudly before removing my earphones.

“You’re incredibly jumpy, aren’t you?”

“Are you mocking me?” I demanded through some serious panting. “Bloody hell. Stop creeping up on me.”

“I knocked on the door. You didn’t answer.”

Kylie still emitted from the earphones. I clicked her off, placing the Walkman on the sofa, gesturing at it. “And you can see why.”

“Sorry for making you jump.” Was he trying to hide a smirk?

“It’s your gift, right?” I asked. “You love to scare the crap out of me.”

“Clay,” he said, crossing his arms. “There are many things in this world I enjoy, and that is *not* one of them.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Maybe you have corrupted your disposition with too many scary stories.”

Hmmm. “Maybe *you* need to wear a bell.”

“As long as it’s silver.”

I laughed, not expecting that response. “With a pink ribbon.”

“I like pink.”

“Really? Don’t see you as a pink guy.”

“Why?”

“Pegged you as a more gray, black, and white guy. You know, muted colors.”

“Pink can be muted.”

I laughed again. “Not my kind of pink.”

“The louder, the better?”

I gave him a sassy finger snap. “You know it.”

A smile, eye contact, his eyes mesmerizing galaxies of shadows.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, breaking our locked gaze. “After yesterday’s events, we should take the day off.”

“Really? You don’t want to train?”

He went to the window, his hands by his sides. “Not today.”

“I’m always up for a lazy day. Erm, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s exactly what I mean, Clay.”

Another period of silence.

“Isn’t the sea beautiful?” he asked almost whimsically. And I mean *almost*.

“Yep. I love it.”

“My wife used to paint it.”

“She did?”

He glanced over his shoulder. Not at me, his eyes roaming around the room. “She painted all of these hanging pieces.”

“She did?”

“Yes. She was a keen artist.”

What was her name? “They’re lovely.”

“I think so, too. She was never confident enough to approach galleries. I tried to encourage her, but her art was for herself.”

“That’s a shame. I mean, it’s not a shame.” I took a deep breath. “They’re just so good, and I think they would’ve been a hit.”

Gosh, I really had no right to comment on this stuff.

Keep your lips zipped!

Silence followed until he turned around. “How about a walk tonight?”

“That...” I swallowed. “That’d be great.”

“We should avoid the seafront for the time being, keep near to the house. It’s nice to walk the cliffs.” He looked to Fizz and smiled. “Clears the mind.”

“I could do with that.”

“I know it’s not the same thing, but we have to be sensible. I want to avoid crowds for a few days.”

“Makes sense to me.”

No more wife talk came.

“Maybe in a few days, we can venture down there,” he said.

“Cool.”

“It’ll be cold out,” he added. “Make sure you bundle up.”

“What time do you want to go out?” I asked.

“Say seven? After dinner. There’s something I’d like to make you.”

“Something Korean?”

“Yes. *Jjajangmyeon*—noodles topped with a sweet bean sauce and pork.”

“Sounds great. Can’t wait.”

“Dinner at six, then?”

“Perfect.” He walked over to an awake Fizz, fussing her plenty. Sitting on the bed with her, all casual, his stoic aura breaking. She rubbed her head against his touch, and I wished it was me there, his hand in my hair.

He got up. “I’ll leave you to your business. Until dinner.”

“Cool.”

He left the room, leaving behind a crackling energy that went straight to my core.

“Wow, Fizz.”

Meow.

I’d found out more about his wife. Piece by piece, he was opening up.

As amazing as his trust was, it hurt my heart. Pain for his sorrow, and pain for the dirty fucking secret I didn’t have the balls to tell him.

I’m sorry, Tae...

THREE



“Y our shirt.”

He wore a dusky rose-pink shirt, open at the collar, and black trousers. As elegant and model-like as always, not looking at all like he'd just been cooking.

He smiled. “Muted pink.”

A warm sensation filled my chest. “You're funny. And I didn't dress for dinner.” Jumper and jeans for me, anemic compared to him. At least I'd combed my hair.

“This is just to make a point,” he said.

“There's such a thing outside of loud pink?”

“Exactly.”

I shrugged, hovering beside the set table. White tablecloth, tapered candles, fancy silverware, and crockery.

“This is posh,” I said, examining the silver-edged plates. “How much do these set you back?”

“Does it matter?”

“Depends who you're asking.”

Gosh, the gleam on these instruments. Like we were in a mega fancy restaurant. Thank goodness there wasn't an

endless parade of knives and forks to confuse the hell out of me.

What was that rule? Go from the outside in?

“They’re decent enough plates,” he answered.

“I can see that. I’m scared to sit my scruffy arse at them.”

“You look nice, Clay,” he said, each word oozing with sex in that way of his.

Easy now... “T-thanks. Where’s, erm, where’s Archie?”

“He’s out on an errand.”

“Finding a place for me to practice my spells?”

“Yes. It’s proving to be difficult. We may have to commute to London.”

“How long will that take?”

“It’s approximately an hour and a half drive from here.”

“Not too bad. And I’ve got to get my hours in, right?”

“You have,” he said.

“Anyway, you fortified that sugar factory specially. Got to make use of it.”

“Indeed. Let’s see what happens. For now, you eat.”

Vampires only required human blood for nourishment. They could eat food for fun but didn’t need to. If they didn’t drink blood now and again, though, it would slow them down to the point of being in a coma.

“You eating too?” I asked.

“Yes. Please sit.” He gestured to the chair.

I checked out his backside as he went to the oven. My eyes were greedy for him.

He brought over the Korean noodle dish.

“This looks and smells amazing,” I said.

“Enjoy, Clay.”



I RUBBED my belly like a total cliché after the food. “That was so good.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Tae responded.

I dabbed at my mouth with my napkin, content in being fed and watered. Actually feeling relaxed, even with so many clouds hanging over my head.

“Have you ever thought about being a chef?” I asked.

“Once, in a Paris restaurant before the Second World War.”

“Wow. What was that like?” He was two hundred ninety years old, born in the 1700s, turned into a vampire then, too. I think. He hadn’t gone into detail about his turning.

“A different time. A fraught time. One of many I’ve lived through.”

I took a sip of water. “So, can you cook all sorts of dishes?”

He nodded. “I would say I’m a chef of the world. There are many dishes I’ve picked up over the years.”

“That’s awesome.”

“Varied dinners.”

With his wife and child? “I bet.”

“Korean food is my favorite to cook. It’s like going home every time I make it.”

“What a nice way of putting it.”

He took away my plate, started to clean up without a word.

I sat for a bit, watching his back, wondering if I should probe his past some more. Thought better of it—he could talk when he wanted to talk.

I checked the time. 18:40.

“I’ll be back down here at seven,” I said.

“Okay, Clay.” He didn’t turn around as he washed dishes.

Resisting the potent urge to wrap my arms around him, I headed upstairs to get myself ready for our walk.

As I stepped through the bedroom door, dizziness overcame me. I staggered forward, hands on my head.

“Gosh...”

The room lurched, rocked from side to side as if I were on a boat in choppy waters. Or paying the price after too many tequilas. My shins struck the side of the bed. I bent over, hands planting on the duvet.

“Fizz?” I said, looking around for her.

She meowed over from the window.

“You’re not on the bed,” I said more to myself, crawling onto the mattress. “Oh, God. Oh, God.” I rolled onto my back, the room a spinning wheel with me trapped in its spokes.

What was happening to me? Something in the food? No. Ridiculous. Why would Tae put anything other than

deliciousness in my food? He wanted to keep me safe, to help him kill.

Unless...

Unless...

Unless...

Unless he'd found out about me. Any minute now, he'd be coming through that door and looming over me. Telling me my time was up, the demon out of the bag.

The door didn't open, but my mind did. It carried me to the strange campfire where I'd discovered how to summon the Mark of Arcana to use my magic. Learned to tell the magic to not perform the action itself.

I'd sat before a heatless fire on that last 'visit,' surrounded by the other elements of Arcana magic—earth, water, air, spirit. Silent elements, symbols of the essence of Arcana.

But something was wrong.

"What happened?" I spoke, my voice filling this strange void.

A tornado scattered as shattered glass at my feet, a fire nothing but fading embers. A dried-up pond, a dry patch of earth, and a wisp of white smoke fading like the fire.

"What happened here?" I tried again.

The elements didn't answer. I kept to my position, standing by the log seat.

"Something's wrong," I added, speaking on behalf of me and this place. So weird. "You are wrong. I am wrong. Should not be here. Arcana is gone. The magic is dead."

The strange place flickered like a TV screen.

“Arcana is not the same.”

The elements returned to how they’d been before; healthy, creepy, silent, and as if they were in a separate world. A fire, a tornado, a patch of soil with vibrant flowers, a pond, and a ball of white light. At the center of the fire was a five-pointed star—the Mark of Arcana.

“Arcana is not the same,” I repeated.

Not the same...

I snapped back to reality, lying in a star shape on my bed. I sat up panting, clutching my chest as my heart raced a million miles an hour.

“Fuck...” I wheezed.

What the hell had that been about? Worrying words, a worrying vision. I’m not supposed to be here? I’m not the same? So now what? What was I supposed to do about it?

Shitshitshit.

I calmed down, breathing deep and easy.

A knock at the door.

“Come in,” I called in response.

“Are you ready?” Tae asked, filling the doorway. He wore a black puffer jacket, his hair tied up under a cap. His real face on.

Grindle not only provided me with the lollipops but also magical face creams for Tae and me to disguise ourselves with. When we applied the cream, it changed our faces for everyone else but each other. Perfect for hunting demons with, but not always required. Sometimes Tae had to be Tae Frost—billionaire owner of the huge car manufacturing company

Auto Frost. Tonight, he'd be himself. If some strange men were spotted by neighbors going in and out of the house, question marks would be on our heads.

Apparently, Tae's neighbors respected privacy for the most part. But he didn't fully trust them. He didn't trust anyone really—or so I gathered. Apart from me.

Misplaced trust...

He was always careful when moving around London or wherever, showing the appropriate face for the appropriate moment. Never raising suspicion, never mixing his famous bachelor and demon hunting personas. Dealing with Poppy Love had almost blown that apart. Talk about a close call. We'd been discovered, sort of. At least on the verge of it. My magic, and Buttons' slaughter of Poppy's non-demon guests, had put a stop to that. Talk about an act of gross teamwork.

I had to kill that demon.

“Clay?” Tae said.

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

“I'm... I'm...” I told him what I'd just seen.

The vampire considered my tale for a moment. “Do you feel anything unusual within yourself? Within the power? Anything new?”

“No. I don't think so.”

More considering. “We'll look into this.”

“How?”

“Leave it with me.”

“Erm, I'd like to be involved.”

“You will be. Let me think on this, and I’ll get back to you. For now, keep studying. It may simply be because the power is a new version of itself.”

“Kind of scary.”

Arcana ended two hundred years ago. There wasn’t anyone alive to remember that particular past to help. A vampire like him would’ve been around, but vampires weren’t magical, so they didn’t understand.

I double-checked that with him.

Tae shook his head. “As far as I’m aware, there have been no spell-casting vampires.”

“Thought so. Maybe something will show up in the grimoires. They used to update with additional pages back in the day, didn’t they? That’s how demon-killing became a thing for Arcana users.”

“Maybe the same thing will happen again,” he said.

“I hope so.”

He nodded. “I’ll leave you to finish getting ready.”

“Okay. Be down in a minute.”

He left me alone with my fear, with my confusion. With five minutes to go until seven, I opened the two volumes of grimoires, trying to find any sign of an update.

Nothing yet. Not that I could see. It didn’t mean one wasn’t coming.

“Later,” I whispered, closing the books, in need of some fresh air.



“GOOD EVENING, TAE,” an older man greeted the vampire on the cliffs.

“Hello, Charles. How are you?” The two men shook hands. “Where’s Marjorie?”

The white-haired, rosy-skinned Charles walked a chilled-out poodle by the name of Phillipa. Her white fur was immaculate, almost gleaming like Tae’s skin. I immediately bent to stroke her. She sniffed me, licked my hand, probably picked up on Fizz’ scent.

“I’m fine, thank you. Marjorie’s on the phone to her sister.” He groaned. “When those two start with their gossiping, Phillipa and I escape.” He looked to me. “She’ll be hours yet. Hello. And who are you?” he addressed me pleasantly.

I stood up, extending my hand. “I’m...” Shit. Should I use my real name. “I’m...” This didn’t look good. I coughed, backing off. A distraction, not a real cough.

“Oh dear,” Charles said. “Are you alright?”

I held up a hand to say yes.

“Are you sure, Clay?” Tae asked.

Bingo. I got my answer. I mean, obviously, I should use my real. I just, well, couldn’t help but get flustered like a complete idiot.

I pretended to gather myself, finally saying, “Sorry about that.”

“Are you unwell?” Charles wondered.

I shook my head. "I'm good. Don't worry."

He nodded. "As long as you're not contagious." He laughed.

"Promise I'm not."

We shook hands this time.

"Nice to meet you, Clay," Charles said.

"Likewise."

Back to Tae. "And how are things with you? We haven't seen you up here in such a long time."

As smooth as silk, Tae responded with, "Business keeps me in the capital."

"I remember the rat race."

The two of them engaged in business talk, me back to Philippa. Gosh, Charles thought his wife gossiping with her sister was bad, did he? Ha! He didn't have to suffer through this snooze fest like Phillipa and me.

Kind of rude of me.

Appearing as Tae and Clay up here helped with the story of him doing well after the incident at Raven Tower. But what about me? What would people say about his new warlock friend? Would they really give a crap?

Finally, they finished their chat.

"Well, I'm glad to see you again," Charles said.

"You too. Say hello to Marjorie for me."

"I will, whenever she comes up for air. I have no idea what they find to talk about every two days."

"It must be a gift," Tae quipped.

Charles laughed. “Feel free to pop over if you get a chance. She’d love to see you.”

“I’ll do that,” Tae said. “Thank you.”

“That goes for you, too,” he said to me as I stood up from dog fussing.

Gosh, Fizz would not be happy with me when she smelled this canine on me.

What a traitor.

“Thanks.” I shook his hand.

Charles and Phillipa left as Tae and I carried on with a walk along the cliff path.

The stars were out in force within the blanket of inky darkness above, the moon round and bright. The sea rolled calmly against the shore, nothing in the air to stir its wrath. Lights from ships twinkled in the distance. Everything seemed much brighter in the dark than last night. I paused to take it in.

“Are you okay?” the vampire asked.

“I’m good. This feels nice. Like I’m on top of the world.” I sighed with contentment. “And what fine sea air.” I laughed at myself, an appreciative audience of one.

He stood beside me, silent, watching the water. Sometimes, when you stopped to look at it, the world showed you its beautiful side. That things weren’t always ugly and rolling in the dirt. I mean, for me, at least. I searched for those moments, dug them out wherever I could. I *had* to.

“Charles seems nice,” I said.

“He is. At a distance.”

“Oh?”

“He and his wife live at the top of the lane and are a friendly couple. When my wife and I kept our base here for a while, they were always at the door with cakes and cookies and smiles. But they like to gossip.”

“Ah. Right.”

“Maintaining a distance is key.”

“Neighbors can be a minefield,” I said.

“They can indeed.”

We continued our walk, the path taking a small dip past an empty bench.

“Tae?”

“Yes?”

“Do you, erm, want to be seen hanging around with a warlock? Isn’t it bad for your image?”

He stopped. “What image is that?”

I lowered my head, scraping my shoe on the ground. “You know what I mean.”

“Look at me, Clay.”

“No, thanks. I feel like an idiot.”

“Look at me.”

I looked.

“I value you for who you are, not some ridiculous label. You are Clay Christmas. You are wonderful as you are.”

I blushed. “You don’t know me that well.”

“We’ve been through a lot together in a small space of time. I know enough. I’ve seen plenty of your sweet nature.”

Sweet... “That’s really kind.”

He stepped closer. “It’s true. And I’m not ashamed of being seen with you.”

“What if we’re pictured—”

“Then that’s a story for the press.”

“Oh.” My picture online? In a magazine?

“Are you uncomfortable with that?” he asked.

“I... I don’t know. Kind of.”

“Then we can stay out of the public eye.”

“No. It’s fine. I’m just processing this stuff. My life has gone from zero to wild.”

“I know it has,” he said softly, moving in closer.

I swallowed. “But I’ll be fine.” I backed off a little, chuckling nervously. “Never thought I’d make the gossip columns.”

“You might not.”

“As long as it helps keep the attention off the demon-hunting, right? Thank God you’re not like Jarod—” I stopped, remembering all I’d learned from that piece of shit.

“My level of fame isn’t like his,” he answered.

I nodded, done with this for now. “Shall we carry on?”

“Yes.”



AFTER OUR WALK, we sat in the quiet of the living room, him in an armchair, me on the three-seater sofa. Books in hand, a

hot chocolate and a plate of French Fancies on the table beside me—the pink, yellow, and brown variety. I'd already devoured the two pink, about to start on a yellow. Basically eating them in order of preference.

A real fire crackled before us, filling the space with warmth. The sofa faced it directly, and I embraced every moment of its awesomeness as I read *The Stand* by my number one author. A re-read because why not?

Fizz languished before the fire, fully in her element.

A large vase filled with more white roses sat by the window. The spirit of Tae's wife came through in every corner of this house. I presumed the roses played a big part in her life, on display both here and back at Raven Tower. And like the penthouse, there were no photos of his family anywhere.

Now and again, my happiness at being before a fireplace wobbled. This was her space, her favorite place, and here I was with her husband. Here I was after having done things with him, weaseling my way into her space. Grabbing the first opportunity to not be homeless, no matter the dangers or the muddiness of the situation. Pining over Tae, whether I liked to admit it or not. Because every time I looked at him, I wanted more of him, to be under him, on top of him. To feel his kisses and his touch and everything he could offer me. I'd had my taste of Tae Frost. He would never leave my system.

Tae had wanted to do those things with me, at least before his regret. He'd given me so much pleasure, enjoyed me and—

Desperate. Pathetic.

Liar.

The truth of my demonic blood hovered on the rim of a black hole, me chained to it. Any day now, it'd drag me into

the dark. I'd never find my way out, lose everything.

Gosh. So much for my sunny disposition. There seemed to be so many clouds waiting to mess it up.

"White roses were her favorites," Tae said.

He startled me, my book slipping from my hand. It landed on my foot. "Fuck. Sorry." I scooped it up, Fizz giving me a 'seriously?' look from her position by the fire. "Not the Stephen King book you want landing on your foot. What did you say?" I twisted to face him.

He stared into the flames, his Proust book in his lap. "My beautiful Tae Ae-Jung."

Her name.

Tae. His last name was Tae. I knew Korean names were family/last name first, then the given name.

What about the rest of his name?

"Always keep the white roses fresh." Tae's voice took on a dreamy, almost vacant quality. "Never let her down."

Gosh. "Tae? Do you need to be alone?"

He didn't react to me, keeping his eyes on the fire. "Always roses."

On his right arm, which spread to the right side of his chest, was a tattoo of black roses, thorns, and swirls.

Roses. For her.

"Do you, erm..." My mouth was a sandpit. "Do you want to talk?"

"Roses. Keep the roses fresh. Do you love the smell? Isn't it the best?"

“Tae?”

He switched to a different language. Korean. Muttering to himself, eyes focused on the fire. I watched him, studying his features, lost in him. My heart ached for him, my fingers twitching with the need to reach out and touch him, to hug him like a friend should. Like he'd hugged me before. But an awkward fear kept my backside on the sofa.

“Tae?” I tried again.

He kept muttering, lost in a trance.

“Tae?”

Definitely lost.

Unable to stand being a spectator to this, I got up and went over. Held out a hand, let it hover over his shoulder.

“Tae?”

I touched him.

Tae moved with whiplash speed, grabbing me, spinning me into his lap. My legs flung over the arm of the chair. I stared up at him with a ball of heat in my chest. It pulsed, sending rivers of heat to the rest of me.

“Tae...” I said once again.

Crimson stars burst in his dark eyes. He devoured me with his gaze, with a powerful hunger I was ready to yield to.

“Tae...”

“Clay,” he responded. “Clay Christmas.”

“Tae. This can't happen.”

A growl vibrated in his chest. “What can't happen?”

“This.”

“This can’t happen,” he said.

“Tae. This is too much. You don’t want this.”

“You make it different.”

Whoa. *That* line again. “Tae...”

“Can I kiss you, Clay?”

I licked my lips. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“I know.”

“What about... What about these things not happening again?” I felt his hardness push against me.

Oh. My. God. I so wanted this, but...

But...

But...

But...

Gosh.

“Clay...” he whispered, running the back of his fingers down my cheek. His touch was warm, sending licks of electricity to my cock.

“Tae...”

“I want to kiss you.”

Wrong. This was wrong. But why? Because of guilt? Because we worked together? Because his trauma had brought this on? Yeah, they were all valid. But so were my fucking desires.

I crushed my lips to his, curling my fingers into his loose hair. He kissed me back just as hard, wrapping his arms around me.

Oh. Gosh.

Without breaking contact, I moved myself into a straddling position, his hands sliding to my hips. Our lips wrestled, our tongues escaping to explore.

I lost myself in his kiss, throwing caution to the wind. And I didn't stop there, grinding myself into his crotch, opening my eyes to meet his.

I stopped the kiss, holding his face in my hands. Lips still close, his breath joining with mine. We stared. We were silent. His hands moved from my hips to my backside. He gently squeezed, then licked at my lips. I kissed his tongue. He moved in for my neck, sucking at the tender flesh, nipping and licking and grabbing harder handfuls of my arse. Kneading me through the denim.

My head tilted back, fingers still within the black velvet of his hair.

“Tae,” I whispered, cock crying for release.

One hand broke free of my backside for a second, then came to a rest between my legs. Rubbing at me through the denim. Teasing my zipper.

Oh, God. I had to stop this before it turned into another one of those guilt-ridden afterthoughts after the cumming. I couldn't do it again. Wouldn't do it again. It was unfair to him and to me. A merry-go-round in need of burning down.

Who would burn down something so delicious, though? Who in their right mind would build walls against this pleasure? Against this man? Why should I feel guilty for being wanted?

He unzipped me, sliding his hand in to touch me. Slow. Teasing. Moving his mouth to the other side of my neck. He

fingered the back of my jeans, generating sparks across my skin there.

Was this about to happen? Would he rip off my clothes and fuck me in this chair?

Please...

Oh, God...

Reason took a hike, my body's desires in charge now.

He popped the button of my jeans.

"Tae..." I whispered again.

He pulled them down past my hips a little. They wouldn't go down further with my legs straddling him like this. I should position myself so he could remove them, but that would mean moving. I liked it here, bearing down onto his excitement, his tongue lapping at my flesh. I could stay like this for hours.

"Rip them off," I begged.

He nipped at my neck after a growl.

"Do it, Tae. Rip them. Fucking rip them off and fuck me."

He stopped working my neck, took hold of my chin, and angled me to face him. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," I whispered. "Fuck me. Just fuck me."

Eyes locked. A growl from him. Energy crackling and palpable and ready to smother us in endless pleasure. Any common sense gone from the menu, only sex available. A magic spell not even Arcana could brew up churned between us.

There wasn't a spell for this.

He stroked my face again, tracing his finger down to my jumper. “I—”

The doorbell rang. The magic shattered in an instant under that shrill cry. Reason came flooding back, and so did the stupid guilt.

“Oh, shit,” I said.

The doorbell screamed again, followed by a heavy pounding.

“Archie?” I whispered the first thing that sprang to mind.

“He has a key.” Tae lifted me off him with liquid grace and moved for the door.

I gasped, looking down at my open jeans and the hardness there. A shitty feeling crept over me. I’d broken my rule of not letting this stuff happen.

Go me.

Not.

I zipped up, buttoned up, and glanced at Fizz. She had her back to me, curled in a ball.

“You’re loving that heat, aren’t you?”

“Clay? Please come here,” Tae called.

Oh, yeah. The doorbell. I heard a male voice.

I hurried into the hall, blood turning to ice as I came face to face with Brad Smith—head of the ADU’s London HQ.

What the hell?

FOUR



The fair-skinned witch in his tailored white suit, his silver hair styled into a quiff, smiled at me.

Brad Smith.

Shit.

Men and women dressed in white surrounded him, witches armed with weapons, looking as if empathy had been plucked from their heads a long time ago. Their vehicles waited in the lane, blue lights flashing.

Charles and Marjorie would be in their element, twitching their curtains.

I knew one day I'd see Brad again. I knew he didn't believe a word that'd come out my mouth when he'd interviewed me. Okay, so I'd lied my arse off, with no choice but to for my own survival. A demon-blooded, Arcana-wielding warlock wasn't exactly the perfect mix to present to the ADU.

"Hello again, Mr. Christmas," Brad said smoothly. His smile lit up his face, exposing the danger that lay beneath.

At least to me. Probably Tae, too.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, stomach a washcloth wringed out by a malevolent giant.

His witch mark, a red triangle with a star at its center, seemed to flare. “I’d like you and Mr. Frost to come with me to the Brighton and Hove ADU Headquarters. If you would be so kind. We need to have a chat.”

Tae pulled out his phone. A few of the witches tensed.

Not Brad. “What are you doing, Mr. Frost?”

“Calling my lawyer. Please excuse me.”

Brad’s stupid smile waivered as the vampire spoke a few sentences into the device.

“As is my legal right,” Tae added after the call.

“It is, Mr. Frost.”

Brad Smith clearly wasn’t a fan of that particular rule.

“But there is no need to panic,” the witch prick said. “I am simply requesting—”

The vampire raised a hand, silencing him.

Wow. There was me crapping myself over Brad’s presence, and there was Tae showing this arsewipe the middle finger.

“This is not a request. This an ambush,” Tae said. “A simple request could have been carried out by phone or email, maybe even a letter if you were so inclined. When you show up at my door with an army in tow and a smug attitude, then it’s an ambush. You’re using intimidation. And that’s fine.”

“I—”

Tae shut him up again. “If this is the card you’d like to play, Mr. Smith, that’s your prerogative.”

Brad opened and closed his mouth, losing his cool.

“We will follow you to headquarters,” Tae added.

Brad straightened his spine. “I would prefer you come with us in our vehicles.”

“I’d prefer not to. And seeing as we’re willing to comply with your request, I am telling you I will drive myself and Mr. Christmas to the location. Under your escort, of course.”

Was it his money and power that allowed Tae to speak to the witch like this? Because if I tried it, the words would fall on deaf ears. I’d get manhandled and bundled into the back of a van like last time, with Synth to bind me.

Brad waited, cold blue eyes fixed on the vampire, occasionally flicking to me. Then he smiled again, as fake as a plastic flamingo. I’d always wanted a plastic flamingo in my non-existent back garden. One that lit up nice and pink at night.

I hid a smile, thinking of pink, of Tae’s shirt, of that nugget of his humor.

“We will wait in our vehicles,” Brad said. “You can follow us.”

“Fine,” Tae said. “We won’t be a moment.” He closed the door in Brad’s face.

I suppressed a satisfied laugh.

“What now?” I asked.

“We go with them.” He tapped his phone. “I’ve alerted Archie and my lawyer.”

“I’m scared. He didn’t believe me last time. What if he tries some nasty stuff on me?”

“He won’t. Don’t worry.”

“Until he gets me on my own.”

“He won’t get you alone. I’ll make sure of it.”

“How?”

“With the best lawyer in existence.” He threw on a long charcoal coat and ran a hand through his hair. “Time for you to meet another key member of my staff.”

I swallowed, laying my trust at his feet. “She lives in Brighton?”

“She’s here on standby.”

“Oh.”

My lips thrummed, my skin still electric from his touch. From what’d *almost* happened.

“Get your coat, Clay.”

“But Fizz...”

“She’ll be okay. Archie will be back shortly. He’ll take care of her.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I really didn’t want to leave her, but I grabbed my coat.

What choice did I have?



THE ADU BUILDING was on New England Street, not too far north of Brighton railway station. It looked the same as the London one—a tall, concrete monstrosity built to be resistant to attacks. ADU buildings across the globe were hot targets for demons and demon-lovers.

A convoy of ADU vehicles led us to it, Tae following calmly. He drove inside the building via a side entrance for vehicles, pulling into a wide area fit for deliveries. In fact, there were crates piled up by a closed door where a woman waited.

A woman I recognized.

“Oh,” I said.

“That woman. I know her.”

“Victoria Jenkins,” he answered.

“Victoria from the Victoria Line.”

He switched off the engine.

“I’ve met her,” I continued. “When I was lured out of the penthouse by Buttons.”

He checked his phone. “I know. She told me.”

“She knew it was me on the Underground?”

“Only later,” he said.

“Oh. Does she know everything now?”

“I tell my staff what they need to know at the appropriate times. Don’t tell her anything unless I say so.”

No Arcana talk. No demon hunting. I’d keep my gob firmly shut.

“O-okay. Erm, she offered me her services when I met her. Didn’t realize she was a lawyer.”

“Victoria likes to help.”

He opened the car door, saying no more about it. Brad waited a few feet away, focused on me as Tae opened the car door for me. I slid out of the vehicle and followed Tae to the

waiting witches. Even if we wanted to turn and run, they'd snare us in Synth, though Tae might be able to kick all of their arses before they did. I mean, his speed was super scary.

"Tae," Victoria said loudly and shook his hand, then spotted me. "Hello again." The greeting wasn't friendly but aggressive. She stood tall, a muscular woman with rich, dark brown skin and short black hair. She looked ready to draw blood in her Tina Turner jumper—a print of some past concert tour on the front.

I guessed she was about forty or so.

Brad tried to speak.

Victoria cut him off. "Don't talk to my clients."

Clients?

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

"Can we go inside and speak?" the witch tried.

"Tell me what for first?"

"I need to speak with your *clients* about a couple of incidents that took place in London."

"What incidents?" she questioned. "Speak now, or we're leaving. My clients aren't under arrest."

"No, they're not."

"I *know* they're not."

Brad tried to retain some degree of cool. I could see the irritation twitching in his eyes. "Why not come inside where we can sit and have coffee or tea?"

"Like a café?" the lawyer mocked. "Don't condescend me, Brad. I'll bring a sack of bricks down on your head faster than you can say 'mama'. Don't fuck with me."

“I’m not, Miss—”

“Victoria.”

“Miss. Victoria.”

“Just Victoria.” She leaned in to talk to Tae out of earshot. She nodded, then said, “Lead the way. And it better be good coffee.”

Brad didn’t show off his bright crocodile smile this time. “This way, please.”

He led the way into the building, all gray stone and dullness. If I didn’t know I was in Brighton, I’d just think I was in the London branch—everything the same cold, soulless décor.

We were taken through corridors, up stairwells, me expecting to be tossed into a cell at any moment. Like last time. Separated from Tae despite what he’d said, left to stew on some new lies Brad wouldn’t believe.

Oh, God.

That didn’t happen. Instead, we were taken to a corridor of two interrogation rooms—both labeled as such.

There were other signs on the wall. One, in particular, caught my eye.

Synth Lab Level B2.

They had a Synth lab here? Usually, they were far out in the countryside, away from everything. You rarely saw one in a city or town.

It creeped me out knowing a place of magical crafting sat beneath my feet.

“Now, if you—”

Victoria cut the witch off as he tried to speak. “My clients will be seen together.” Gosh, she’d preempted the arsewipe.

“No. I wish to speak with them separately.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“I’m afraid—”

“Then we’re done.”

“I can have them arrested if you prefer.”

“On what grounds?”

He took a moment to answer.

“You’ve no grounds for arrest,” the lawyer said. “Do you really want to fuck with me? My clients are coming to speak to you willingly on this cold November evening, and you’re behaving like this?”

“I’m not—”

“I can make this difficult if you like.”

How did she get to mouth off at him like that? Wow.

“So can I, Victoria. The ADU has the right to question and arrest citizens they suspect of foul play.”

“And what foul play would that be?” she asked.

“Demonic.”

A shiver ran up and down my spine. He knew about my demon blood. This was it. I was fucked.

Victoria stepped forward, squaring up to Brad. Weird. Brad was a witch. An ADU witch at that. Witches were top dogs, running the world—kings and queens the cream of the crop. Witches were the wielders and makers of Synth magic, keeping the boot on demon uprisings. But Victoria exuded

greater boss energy than Brad, even though she was a human. Brad even backed off a little as the other witches closed in.

“Demonic? Have you smacked your head on a wall?” she said.

He straightened. “I want to know what happened with the button-eyed demon and Mr. Christmas at Finsbury Park. I also want to know what happened at Raven Tower and with the river monsters. And don’t give me the spin. I can smell the stink of bullshit from miles away.”

Gosh. He knew we’d been attacked by the river monsters. How? Witnesses? Tae hadn’t mentioned anything about that.

I wanted to look at the vampire for a clue but kept my attention on the witch. Don’t give enemies a nugget to throw back at you.

Man, now I fancied chicken nuggets and a coke.

Priorities!

“Are you calling my clients liars?” Victoria countered. “Be careful.”

Brad drew a deep breath. “I simply want to understand these events. Why your clients were embroiled in them. For three incidents to happen so close together raises red flags. I’d like to put those flags to bed.”

“Unless you continue to be dissatisfied with the answers,” Victoria said.

“I retract my comment about bullshit.”

“Is that so?”

“I do. I apologize.”

“Then why are we here?”

“For further investigation,” he said.

“We’ll help with it,” Tae stepped in. “If it ends any further hounding. What you know already is the truth, not spin.”

At least I wasn’t the only liar in the corridor.

“Please. Come and sit. Let’s talk.”

I looked to Tae then. And Victoria. They nodded at each other, then Tae at me. He placed his hand on my back and guided me into Interrogation Room 1.

A white room with a gray carpet, a pine table, and only two chairs. A witch lackey went off to fetch more, another ordered to go grab some hot beverages.

Minutes later, everything was in place.

I took a pew on our side of the table, refusing a flimsy plastic cup filled with murky coffee.

Once we were settled, Brad began.

“Mr. Christmas? I’ll begin with you. Take me back to the night you were attacked.”

I licked my lips, conscious of the two witches guarding the only exit out of here. I recited my lie about my jolly stroll to Finsbury Park, keeping it beat for beat.

“There is nothing else?”

“No,” I said.

He steepled his fingers under his chin. “I just don’t understand the reasons behind you walking the streets with such glee. I know you claim to be a happy person, despite your circumstances, but something is missing.”

“Be careful,” Victoria warned him.

“It’s okay, Clay,” Tae said. “You can tell him. I know you’re scared, but he should know about the mind control.”

What. The. Hell. For real? He wanted me to tell Brad *that?*

I faced the vampire, my mouth dry.

“Mr. Christmas?” Brad pushed.

I couldn’t speak, words failing me. “I... I...”

“The demon got into his mind,” Tae answered for me. “Tricked him as I imagine he has with other victims.”

No other details, then. “I got lucky,” I added. “He wanted to kill me.”

“Why?” Brad responded.

“I don’t know. Because he’s a monster?”

Brad looked between us for a few seconds. “ADU agents on the scene reported he mentioned pleasing someone. A woman, it sounded like. Do you know anything about that?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“He said nothing like that to you?”

“No. Only that he wanted to kill me.”

“I see. Tell me about the mental trickery.”

I told him.

“You danced with Orlando Bloom?” Brad said after.

“In the vision, yes.”

“I see.” Brad held me in silence for a moment. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this on our first meeting?”

“I was scared you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Warlock,” I responded.

“What does that have to with anything?”

I sighed. “Because warlock prejudice is a real thing.”

“Not within the ADU.”

What bollocks!

“You put him in a cell,” Victoria said. “I’d call that prejudice.”

Brad was rattled. “We were taking appropriate precautions.”

“You were being arseholes.”

The witch snarled at her. “I don’t appreciate your tone.”

“And I don’t appreciate your denial of prejudice. I could have you written up on that. There are still rules in place to protect everyone. Clay wasn’t arrested the first time, either, yet your people manhandled him. Is that how you treat victims of demon attacks?”

“No.”

“Is that so? How about we file a complaint to the standards and practice board, then?”

He smiled again. “They won’t look twice at it.”

“So you admit to mistreatment?”

“No. I—”

“You might think you can get it swept under the carpet, laugh about a warlock trying to complain. But I know people. You know I know people.”

He wasn’t happy. “You lied to me, Mr. Christmas.”

“My client was scared of further aggressive treatment.”

“I treated him well.”

“Shame your staff didn’t.”

It was like watching a tennis match between the two of them.

“Fine,” Brad said. “I apologize for scaring you, Mr. Christmas. Wholeheartedly.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

“You should have told me what happened. I want to help you.”

“Sorry I didn’t.”

He smiled. “Your information helps. It is further insight into the button-eyed demon’s powers and could help with banishing him once and for all.”

Brad’s tone shifted to kindness, but I could tell he still didn’t believe me. What else could he do, though?

“You’re not homeless now?” he asked.

“No. Tae’s given me a place to crash while I figure my stuff out.”

“Lucky you.”

“I know.” I kept still, resisting shuffling in my seat. My cheeks needed a break from the hard plastic.

Brad turned to Tae. “Did you report the river monster attack?”

“I did. Anonymously.”

He did? He never told me.

“Why anonymously?” Brad asked.

“That’s my choice,” Tae replied.

“I see. It wasn’t to hide something?”

“Accusatory,” Victoria snapped.

“What would I possibly want to hide?” Tae asked.

“You tell me.”

Tae leaned forward, giving off a dark energy. It crackled in the room, lashing out as a dozen barbed whips. “Why don’t you tell me why the protective glass securing the rivers failed?”

Brad blinked at him. “I... I have nothing to do with the glass maintenance.”

“And I have nothing to do with river monsters. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. We both were. In fact, it happened on the way home from your London office, didn’t it? When you left Clay out in the rain alone after you scared him. I came to pick him up. We were attacked.”

That told Brad. He stared at Tae, coming up with zero response.

“Anything else?” Victoria inquired.

Brad went on to question Tae about the Raven Tower attack, Tae giving him the details the rest of the country had. Flawlessly.

The witch was at the end of his road.

At least the Poppy Love thing wasn’t mentioned at all.

“I think we’re done here,” Victoria said. “Unless you have any more rabbits in your hat?”

“I do not,” the witch replied.

“Then we’re out of here.”

Brad had no choice but to yield to that. “Very well. Thank you for your time.”

That thank you was as genuine as a spider being besties with a fly.

Tae got to his feet, Victoria scraping her chair back to join him.

As I stood, relief flooding my corners, an alarm went off. A shrill bell. From behind Brad, a red light lowered from a hatch in the ceiling, spinning crimson beams.

Witches burst into the room, the two on guard leaping out of the way.

“Sir!” a woman cried. “The Synth labs are under attack!”

FIVE



“Get them out of here,” Brad barked as he pushed past us.

“Do you need help?” Tae asked over the sound of the bell.

“This is no concern of yours, Mr. Frost. Thank you for your time.”

“Fine.” Tae moved behind me, guiding me out of the room. Protective. A wall of solid steel.

Victoria followed.

“This way,” a woman said. “Back to your vehicle.” She took point and led us down the corridor.

I glanced over my shoulder. Brad was gone.

Another bullet dodged.

A rumble from beneath. I froze, Tae looming over me.

“What was that?” the witch leading us asked.

“Shouldn’t we be asking you?” Victoria returned.

The witch glanced around, her bronze features paling. She lifted her wrist to her mouth, a red light flashing on a white bracelet.

“Agent Jones requesting a report on possible tremors.”

Possible? The next wave shook the bloody corridor.

The witch's bracelet crackled, but no voice came back. With her free hand, she gripped her gun tightly, her knuckles turning white.

She caught me looking and frowned, turning her back. "What's going on down there?"

"Come on," Tae said. "Let's move."

The witch blocked us. "Wait."

"I'd rather not," the vampire said. "I've had my fill of surprises for one evening."

He moved around her.

She pointed her gun at him. "I said wait."

Slowly, he turned around to face her. "Are you going to shoot me?"

"Yes! If you don't listen to me!" she yelled, her voice rising a few octaves. "Stay where you are."

The corridor shook again, spidery cracks dancing along the floor.

"What the fuck?" Victoria said.

"What's happening?" the witch spoke into her wrist device again. "Someone answer me!"

"The best thing to do is leave this corridor," Tae said. "Which we're all going to do right now."

"Amen," Victoria agreed.

"No one's going anywhere until I say so."

The lawyer groaned. "Have a word with yourself. The fucking building's shaking. We need to get out."

“I’ll say when we—”

The next tremor shook the building violently, the cracks spreading to the walls. Widening. Another shake followed seconds later, the ceiling taking a hit. Pieces of plaster rained down on our heads.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Tae said. “Come on.”

“Stay the fuck where you are!” the witch screamed, aiming her gun at his head.

Tae moved on her in a terrifying blur, disarming her, shoving her down the corridor.

“Move. Now.”

“You can’t—” she tried.

“I said move. With your hands in the air, please. Quickly.”

She obeyed, hands up.

Shit. This was bad.

More shaking, all of us listing to the side. The ground actually wobbled, the corridor moving like a rickety train. And those cracks were bad. Really bad.

We quickened the pace, getting closer to the exit.

“I need to help my people,” the witch complained.

“Just move,” Tae replied.

“I have to—”

A boom hit me. Dust and heat and powerful energy shoving into me, sending me hurtling back down the corridor. My brain took a moment to register the impact, to understand that I was flying through the air.

Shit!

I landed on the floor, spinning painfully across it. My clothes protected me for the most part, though parts of my outfit were shredded at my elbows. My left side had got a scraping too. At least I avoided smacking my head on stone.

Small blessings.

Cracking from above had my arms up, ready to protect myself from falling debris.

Bollocks to this!

Nothing fell on me.

Another rumble shook the ground under my back.

I coughed and choked on the dust, the corridor smothered in it. The bell continued to scream. Red lights tried their best to shine through the dust clouds in dull glows. I sat up, taking in another lungful of dust. I hacked and tried to stand as the corridor shook again.

“Clay!” Tae’s voice boomed in the dusty mist.

“I—” I choked as I tried to call out.

“I’m coming, Clay!”

“I—”

The floor gave out from beneath me. I screamed and choked and landed on something solid—collapsed concrete becoming a slide. Whizzing past pipes and jagged concrete, I screamed at the universe to get me the hell off this ride.

The slide threw me off into brightness and dust. I tumbled forward in an awkward roll, ending up on my back again.

Damn this.

I got up, ready to puke. Trying not to breathe in too heavily. My eyes were stinging from the dust, watery and

blurry as hell. I saw more of the red lights, the bell still screaming.

Man, the heat. There didn't seem to be fire around, but this was one hot room.

What to do? Feel my way to an exit? What if the floor gave out on me again without a slide to carry me this time? It'd be a real pain to fall to my death in this shit hole, end up impaled on some loose pipe.

I remained still, which wasn't productive. Fear taunted me, kept me fixed to the spot. Moving meant possible pain. Not moving meant possible pain. Doing nothing kept me in here. And calling for Tae left me a choking mess.

What a crap evening.

Movement. Footsteps. Slow and carefree—or was that just my imagination? Glass broke underneath them.

Who's there? I thought, not wanting to open my mouth.

Machinery kicked in, a heavy gust of hot wind swirling around me. Ventilation? Sounded like fans or turbines or whatever were humming away.

The dust began to clear, sucked away. Thank God! I breathed in the cloying hot air without hacking my lungs up. Managed to blink and rub at my eyes, to see something other than murk. There was no fire in here. Phew. The lack of smoke really clarified that.

With the dust gone, I got to see where I'd landed. A white room with a broken window attached to another. Debris was scattered across the floor, chrome tables upturned. I'd come to a lab with equipment thrown everywhere, the place a total mess. The concrete slide had taken out most of the ceiling and damaged the ground.

The Synth labs? What'd happened here? An accident with Synth? I didn't see any traces of magic anywhere. Only the ruined equipment.

I rubbed my eyes again. "Hello?"

Who'd been the owner of those footsteps? They'd stopped now.

There was no one else here.

"Hello?" I called over the endless bell.

Yep. No one.

I'd definitely heard footsteps. "Is anyone here?"

I took a hesitant step forward on the cracked floor. No collapsing. Safe. Another step? With a deep breath, I did just that until one step became another and another. Before I knew it, I'd passed through a door into the next room. This one was a bit larger and bare aside from the debris. These couldn't be the main parts of the Synth labs, but outlier rooms for storage or something.

I didn't care. I just wanted out.

I aimed for another door beside another broken window which fed into a corridor. I moved quickly yet cautiously, braver now.

As I reached for the door handle, footsteps echoed outside. Close. Just beyond the window.

"Hello? Tae?"

The vampire wouldn't move that slow. And he'd be calling out to me. Right?

"Hello," a voice returned.

Familiar, with the power to fill my veins with ice.

“Oh, no.”

He stepped into view, clad in his dirty green raincoat, grubby green jeans, and beanie hat, dusty smears across his pallid face. His white button eyes were misshapen still after I'd hit him with Arcana, failing to kill him. His coat was torn, even burned in places.

The button-eyed demon held a glowing red orb in his hand, no bigger than a Christmas bauble.

An orb of Synth magic.

SIX



I stepped back as he walked toward me.

Shit.

If I went for the door, he'd go for me.

If I turned to head back to the slide, he'd follow me.

Why the hell would I want the slide again anyway? It was a one-way tool of scariness.

My heart rattled inside my rib cage, my stomach lurching at the sight of him. Everything about the demon freaked me out. Demons, in general, terrified me, but this one sat at the top of the fear list.

Unkillable. Couldn't be banished.

A psycho murdering arsewipe.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, cursing myself for engaging.

He stopped at the broken window, holding the orb to his face. Its red light shimmered on his buttons as he moved his head from side to side.

"Magic," he said. "This is magic."

No shit, arsewipe. "What are you doing with it?"

“Isn’t it pretty?” He didn’t look at me, hypnotized by the orb.

“Did you cause this explosion?” I asked.

“I did.”

Well, that was easy.

“Bang...” he whispered into the orb.

For a moment, I thought another explosion would follow. Thank God nothing happened.

Okay. Shimmer trick time—my useful warlock skill. Blur out of sight, run like crazy, and hope for no dead ends.

“Magic is interesting, isn’t it?”

I didn’t answer, planning my escape.

“Bright One?” He was looking at me.

I swallowed. “What do you want?” *Other than to kill me...*

“I want to impress *her*.”

“Who?”

“The greatest.”

“Who is she?” I tried. I might as well try and get some intel.

“The greatest.”

“Does she have a name?” I wondered.

His button eyes were back on the orb. “She speaks to me. She wants me to please her.”

“Is she your girlfriend?” I asked.

“She is the power that binds us all. She is the one we treasure most. And she wants me to be by her side. If, and only

if, I can show her how much I want it.”

Would I get away from him if I shimmer tricked past him? My skill blurred me by bending the light around me, giving me a short window to run away from dodgy situations.

“By killing people?” I asked, getting ready to move.

He looked up again. “A blood price.”

“Oh?”

“She wants me. Not you.”

“I don’t know even know who you’re talking about.” I eyed the corridor. Let the countdown commence.

“Are you trying to flee, Bright One?”

“I don’t want to be here,” I replied.

“I wanted to see you again.”

I shuddered, wavering in my escape. “Why?”

“You can’t kill me.”

“I know.”

“I wonder why Arcana doesn’t touch me like it did Poppy Love and the others.”

“I’d like to know that, too.”

I held back on the escaping. Something in my gut told me he’d stop me shimmering away. But should I go for it anyway? The last thing I wanted was to stand here and chat with this demon.

On the flip side, I wanted to get to the bottom of this. I should let him talk about this mystery woman. Get some answers.

“You are the Bright One,” he said. “You shine with the light of Arcana. It hurts to look at you.”

Good.

“You make me think I don’t want you dead,” he added, “even if you hurt me. That there is more I want to see. I know you are special. I can feel it. And... and she tells me to leave you alone.” He licked his cracked lips, his last words clearly difficult for him to say.

This was taking some weird turns. “What do you mean?”

“She wants you.”

“She does?”

He shook his head. “Why does she want you? Why won’t she let me kill you? Why do I second guess your death? Because of her, yes, but more. More. More. More. I want you alive and dead and breathing and drowning in your own blood. You tried to kill me, and I should kill you because she is at risk.” He lowered the orb from his face, cocking his head at me. “If you hurt her, I will hurt you. I should hurt you now. Remove the threat. Take down this usurper.”

Sometimes it sounded like he wasn’t talking to me but to himself.

“Hurt her?” I said. “Is she a demon?”

“Yes. Demon. Greatest. Must stop you... Usurper.”

“I’m still the usurper?” I asked.

“Always. The Bright One is...” Streams of black tears ran down his cheeks. “The Bright One comes for me. He haunts me. He haunts her. He muddies the waters when they should be pure. The blood I spill keeps the water pure. It proves my worth. *He* does not prove worth. He pollutes. He is polluted.”

My head spun. “I don’t... I don’t understand.”

He lifted the orb again, examining it. “You cannot live to understand. No matter what, I must take charge of the wheel.”

Cryptic upon cryptic.

“Clay!”

Tae! He was coming. Somewhere out there in the corridor.

“The vampire,” Buttons said. “He comes for you.” He sniffed the air. “I smell him on you. Does he touch you?”

I kept quiet, my heart practically singing as I heard my friend come running.

Tae crashed through the door in a blur of speed, coming to a stop before me. His long coat billowed behind him, his hair and face speckled with dust.

“Are you okay?” he asked, spinning to face the demon. Putting himself between me and it.

“The vampire,” Buttons said again.

“Stay away from him,” Tae growled.

“You smell of him,” the demon responded. “Both smelling of each other.” He grinned.

“We’re leaving,” Tae said.

“I am torn,” the demon said. “Torn over your life. What if she hates me? I *should* leave you alone.”

Tae took my hand, his skin cool against mine.

Buttons held the orb out. The magic flashed, a wave of nausea crashing into me. I slipped from Tae’s grip, landing on my knees. The vampire lunged at Buttons as the demon swung the orb.

I yelped, waiting for Tae to be hit by Synth, maybe even blown apart. My imagination went crazy with the horrific scenarios.

Tae ducked, avoiding the demon's swing. He swept-kicked, tripping the prick. He went down on his arse, crying out some word I didn't understand.

Again, my mind went to dark places. Had that word been a nasty Synth spell or some Buttons specific trick?

Tae took hold of the orb, kicking the demon in the face as he snarled and tried to grapple the vampire. With one hand, Tae clicked something on the magical instrument. The red power faded, the orb nothing but dark, cloudy glass.

Buttons hissed, black blood dripping from his split lips. He went for the vampire again. Got a second kick to the face.

Ooof!

"You bastards!" the demon bellowed.

"Feeling's mutual," Tae countered, then came to me.

"You... You turned it off," I breathed, "The orb."

"There's always an off switch to these things."

I knew about Synth orbs—instruments of concentrated magic for greater effect. Expensive, not common on the streets. More an ADU thing, or for those in powerful positions. Certainly not tools for the unhinged or non-witches.

"You could've been hurt," I said.

"I'm fine, Clay."

"But..."

"Come on," he said. "I'm getting you out of here."

“Shouldn’t...” I paused for a few seconds, slightly lightheaded. “Shouldn’t you smash that thing?”

“That wouldn’t be smart. There’s still magic in there.” He picked it up.

“Oh.”

Fucking with magic is what caused the drama in the world in the first place—namely, humans sick of witches using Synth and being in charge. As a result, we had The Rift in the North Sea and toxic rivers everywhere.

Buttons tried to gain the upper hand again. Tae grabbed him by the back of the head and slammed him into the wall. My own head rattled in solidarity. Man, that would’ve hurt.

He flung the demon to the ground. Buttons didn’t get back up, completely knocked out with a bloody face, broken nose, and split lips.

The vampire took my hand and hauled me to my feet. The nausea had passed, but my breath took its time to catch up.

“What if you’d been hurt?” I said. “You touched the orb...”

“I wouldn’t have touched it if I didn’t know what it was.”

Back on my feet, I looked over to the knocked-out demon. “A nausea-inducing Synth orb.”

“Yes. I’ve encountered them before.”

“Did the magic wave hit you?” I asked.

“Yes. A little bit. I pushed through it. The dose wasn’t that high.”

“It was for me,” I protested.

“You’re not me, Clay. Vampires have a degree of resistance to some magic.”

“Show off.”

“It doesn’t always work so well.”

“Yeah, okay. Bloody showoff.”

He smiled. “Let’s get out of here.

“What about him?”

“We’ll find something to bind him with. There’s got to be plenty of tools in these labs.” He glanced around. “Then the ADU can do their job and lock him up. Finally. Figure out how to banish him. Maybe his immunity is temporary.”

God, I hope so. “I think I’m ready to faint now,” I said.

The alarm still rang, but less intense.

“Are you okay?” Tae asked.

“Are you?”

“No.”

“Neither am I. Not what I signed up to for tonight’s activities.”

“Indeed.”

Sweat pooled at the base of my spine from the stifling heat, decorated my face in what felt like messy beads. Drops fell from my nose, even from the back of my head.

Tae looked around for a rope or whatever, then searched Buttons for any more surprises.

There were none.

Gosh. What’d the demon done down here to cause such damage? Another orb with big bang properties? I looked up at

the place I'd fallen from. Thank God for that makeshift slide taking away the possibility of me being a pancake.

"There's nothing here," Tae said. "Useless place. Let's go."

"But—"

"Clay. We're not staying here any longer."

"I mean, I won't complain at that. But we can't leave him here."

"We'll find someone to come down and deal with him."

Reality seeped in. "How many... Have you seen... Erm..."

"There were fatalities. Plenty of injured."

"Shit."

"There are bodies in the corridor, just to warn you."

"Oh, no."

"Close your eyes. It will soon be over." He took my hand again, sending pulses of comfort through me. He was here and taking care of things and being a mega rock for me to cling to.

I felt relieved and weak at the same time. If he hadn't turned up—

Nope. Wasn't going *there*.

As we went to leave, the demon shot upright.

"Stop!" he cried, blood streaming between his stained teeth.

Tae hefted me onto his back with the ease of a light rucksack. Yeah, he wasn't about to stop for this prick. And he still had hold of the orb, thank God.

We were so done here.

“You’re not leaving!” Buttons screamed, manifesting his full demon side.

His infamous spikes burst from his hands—the main things he slaughtered his victims with. The super-fun tentacles appeared too. I’d had the pleasure of encountering those in Finsbury Park when he’d tried to kill me the first time. They exploded from, well, everywhere with the sound of a load of whiteheads popping at once.

My stomach roiled, ready to release my dinner.

Tae moved with me on his back, avoiding the tentacles and Buttons’ advances with expert ease.

“No! No! No!” the demon wailed, lashing at us. He really didn’t want us to go.

But Tae’s determination got us out of there. He charged through a network of corridors, broken and bloody bodies lining the ground. Some were slumped against the walls, grim heaps at the end of smeared crimson rainbows. There were cracks and holes in the floor and walls, parts of the ceiling collapsed.

Again, what the hell had Buttons done here?

Tae dashed up some stairs, leaping over a gap where they’d collapsed. My insides lurched at that hole, at the speed, at the screams following us.

“Stop!” Buttons cried from somewhere back there. With every yell, he sounded further away.

“We’re almost there,” Tae said.

I didn’t answer for fear of puking.

He slowed down, ducking under an arch of rubble. I winced, jagged stone inches from my scalp.

“Are you good?” he asked.

“I’m good.”

On the other side, he broke into a run again. Here there were survivors and less damage. Men and women in white coats and white ADU uniforms aided the injured, made phone calls, or sobbed.

Tae stopped again to speak to a shaken ADU agent I remembered from the convoy that brought us here. She’d had a nasty energy about her then. I expected her to point her gun at the vampire or wax aggressive. She didn’t, which made a nice change. I guess an event like this helped tone down arsewipe behavior in some, well, arsewipes.

“The button-eyed demon is coming,” Tae said. “Warn everyone. Now.”

“He’s coming? He did this?” She wiped some dust from her cheek.

The demon screamed again to tie Tae’s warning up in a macabre bow.

“Yes,” he replied and got on with getting us out of there.

I listened to the agent rally the troops as we wove through people, reaching an exit. The vampire kicked the heavy metal door open, carrying me out into the cold November air. I sucked in the crispness in heavy gasps, my lungs thanking me for the dust-free freshness.

Tae got us a decent distance away, coming to a stop on the corner of a sloped road. A block of flats stood close by, the

residents out to gawk at the lights of the emergency services choking the street leading back to the ADU building.

They didn't notice us by the tree circled by a low wall, the light of the streetlamps not quite touching us.

Tae put me down, let me gather myself. I bent with my hands on my knees, coughing some more.

"Let's take a pause," he said, checking me over. I straightened to let him.

"I'm okay, Tae. Nothing that bed and paracetamol won't fix."

"You're lucky," he said, his eyes setting tiny fires on my skin wherever they lingered.

"I-I know."

His eyes on mine. "I'm glad you're okay." Soft yet deep, a rumble of air between us.

"D-ditto."

A tiny smile, then his gaze yanked away from me.

Oh, gosh. I sucked in a shaky breath

Silence fell. Not awkward, just there as a break.

After a heavy sigh, I said, "*He* followed us here."

Tae nodded, his attention on the street and the ADU building.

"He said more," I added.

He faced me. "What?"

I told him.

"A demon wants you left alone?" he said afterwards.

“I know. It makes no sense.”

“And it seems this demon knows about Arcana.”

“That’s what I got from it.”

“Why would a demon want an Arcana-wielder alive?”

I parked my butt on the cold wall. “Just when you think things can’t get any weirder, right?”

He said nothing, his brows coming together—an action that seemed to twist his beauty into something darker but still boxer-shorts-dropping.

I rubbed the back of my neck, my body riddled with aches. “I could do with a hot bath and a massage.”

Amazingly, the mention of a massage didn’t trigger the memory of Tae and me in his private spa in Raven Tower. Didn’t so much as bring a tiny flush of embarrassment over that massage with a happy ending for me. There were important things to worry about. Confusing things, dark things, completely messed up things.

“What now?” I asked. “I mean, I know what now. I know we’ve got to investigate and research and see where the threads lead because getting anything extra from that prick won’t happen, will it?” Deep breath. “Sorry. Venting.” Then a thought hit me. Hard. I sprang from the wall. “What about Victoria? Oh, God. Is she okay? I didn’t even ask. I’m such a ___”

“Stop, Clay.”

“Sorry, but... Oh, shit. Where is she?”

“She’s fine, cuts and bruises aside.”

“Thank God for that.” I sat back on the wall, relief making me dizzy.

She was okay. His lawyer was okay. Despite only meeting her twice, I liked Victoria. She seemed loyal, a complete lioness in life, not taking any bullshit. How she spoke to Brad Smith set off all the awe. I only hoped one day I could put an ADU agent in their place like that. Bonus points if the agent was Brad Smith.

Was he dead?

Tae checked his phone. “She’s coming now. The car is a bust.”

“It got destroyed?” I questioned.

“No. There’s no route to drive it out. We’ll walk, then grab a taxi.”

“Oh. Makes sense.” It wasn’t just this street packed with vehicles, but more surrounding the base of the building.

“Not the Brighton experience I had on my to-do list,” I said.

Tae didn’t react, gazing at the ADU building more. I watched his eyes, so still yet so calculating. What could he see? How much detail did his awesome vamp eyesight take in? What was he analyzing?

Give me a spoon to crack open that lovely head and scoop out the details. Only, cracking that head would rob the world of its yumminess, and why was I even going down this gross road?

My way of coping with stress, I guess. Because the magnitude of what’d happened really walloped me over and over again.

“Brad Smith,” Tae said.

“What?”

“Brad Smith.” He nodded to a figure weaving through the cars.

“Oh, shit.”

The witch walked alone. The closer he got, the more of him was revealed. His white suit was grubby with dust and dirt, bloodstains smeared across it. An angry cut sliced across his left cheek, his silver hair a disheveled mess.

“Should we walk away?” I asked.

“No,” Tae replied.

The witch came to a stop a few feet away. He kept his arms at his sides, every inch of him rigid.

“I see you survived,” he said.

“Thankfully.” The vampire folded his arms, his posture sturdy and unbothered by this man of authority. “How did the demon get inside the labs?”

“I... I don’t know.” Wow. Didn’t expect to hear loaded defeat in his tone. “There are so many...” He didn’t finish, his eyes narrowing. “The better question to ask is what your part in this is.”

“No part,” Tae answered. “Other than surviving.”

“And him?” he nodded at me, glancing at me briefly.

“What about Clay?”

“What about him indeed.”

“Erm, I’m standing right here,” I chimed in. “You can speak to me.”

Brad faced me properly. “This is on you. Somehow there is a link between you and him. I know there is.”

“That’s bollocks,” I countered bravely. “He wants me dead.”

“You encountered him,” he said, not a question. “An agent spread the warning you gave her.” He directed the latter part at Tae. “What did he say to you, Mr. Christmas?”

“That he wanted to kill me.” Which was basically a truth skirting the meaty middle.

“Again? There must be something about you that bothers him.”

“I wish I knew.”

“I think you do.”

“No. I don’t.”

“Liar.” Oof. So much vitriol.

“I’m not lying,” I lied.

The witch looked between us, his expression still pure mean. “I think you are. I think there is much more going on here. Something evil.”

“Evil?” Tae interjected. “Are you serious?”

“I’m very serious, Mr. Frost. None of this sits right with me. Your relationship with this warlock is bizarre.”

“His name is Clay,” Tae countered with a tone of solid ice. “And our friendship is none of your business.”

Brad stood taller. “It is if I say it is.”

“It really isn’t.”

“Are you telling me you cannot see the red flag you’ve put up here?”

“I see no red flag,” Tae said.

“Then you’re a fool.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, Mr. Frost. A blind fool, unable to see what he’s doing to your reputation.”

“I’d be careful,” the vampire warned.

“A billionaire such as you doesn’t suddenly become friends with a homeless warlock for any given reason.”

“Is that a global rule?”

“We’re friends,” I jumped in. “What’s wrong with us being friends?”

“It isn’t normal.”

“What is normal?” Tae asked. “Enlighten us.”

Brad crossed his arms. “You come from different worlds.”

“So do many friends.”

“But this is different. You can have your pick of anyone to be your friend, to even be your lover. The only reason you’ve ended up stuck together is for nefarious reasons. I have a great instinct for these things. I can sniff it out. You may as well come clean with me because I won’t stop. I’m like that often spoke of dog with a bone.”

Okay, so he was mostly on to us. His sniffing wasn’t entirely off but was also muddled. Tae and I weren’t just stuck together, not after what’d gone down between us so far. We’d become friends, albeit with complications. But the rest of Brad’s crap was just him being a dick. A bigot. As if two

different worlds couldn't come together. As if a rich vampire and a poverty-stricken warlock couldn't be friends.

What a limited viewpoint on life.

Typical witch. Let him say what he wanted.

Stick it up your arse!

"I'm a dog with a bone, too," Tae responded. "And I'd stop where you are, Mr. Smith before you fall through the ice."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Yes. Be warned."

"You'd threaten me?" Brad said, incensed.

"I'd threaten anyone with a tongue as vicious as yours. Save your bigotry and mind your own business."

Brad's complexion flushed scarlet. "I—"

"If you continue to harass Clay or myself, I'll be forced to take legal action."

"And I'll have you arrested."

"Then arrest us. Because there will be no more visits to ADU buildings from this moment on without handcuffs at my wrists and the appropriate warrants. You have wasted our time. You have put us in danger, allowing the button-eyed demon into what is supposed to be a secure location."

"He wasn't allowed inside, Mr. Frost. How ridiculous."

Tae ignored his protest. "And why were we there in the first place? Ah, yes. Because of some odd notion of sniffing out lies." Tae shook his head. "How far your organization has sunk of late."

Brad's mouth opened and closed.

“Leave us alone,” Tae added.

The witch was not happy. “You’re stomping on eggshells now.”

“I don’t care. As soon as my lawyer arrives, we’re gone.”

“No. I’m not done with you.”

Tae stepped forward. “We’re done, Mr. Smith. So, so done.”

Brad sank before me, a snail slithering back into his shell in the face of a hungry bird with eyes of deadly midnight. But he didn’t let up.

“I’ll say when we’re done.”

A stalemate. Silence. Neither of them moving to act or react or do anything but stare at each other. The tension was as thick as ten blocks of butter.

But Tae was a hot knife.

Footsteps. My heart jumped, expecting to see Buttons. Victoria appeared, a complete mess of dust and blood like the rest of us. Her clothes were torn, but she seemed fine. Her briefcase was gone.

“What’s happening here?” she asked, then sneered at the witch. “Get away from my clients, Brad.”

The witch turned to her with a face like a storm. “Back off. I’m about to arrest your fucking clients.”

“You think so? I don’t. Get out of here.”

Brad snapped. “Enough! You need to know your place. All of you. I’m in charge here, not you.” He pointed at each of us in turn with an angry finger. “The hierarchy of power starts

with me.” He tapped his witch mark. “Not the likes of you.” Red energy came to his fingers, the Synth swirling.

Victoria rolled her eyes. “Someone save us from the big bad witch. Put your hand away, Brad. It’s boring, and we want to go home. We’ve had enough of this shit for one Sunday night.”

Brad did not put his hand away. “*I haven’t* had enough. I’m just getting started.”

“Arrest away, then,” the lawyer countered.

“I will.”

Was Victoria trying to call his bluff?

“Mr. Tae Frost. Mr. Clay Christmas. I am placing you under arrest in the name of their majesties, from the power vested in me.” His magic snared me, locking me down. Tae too.

I guess this was a case of a vampire’s magical resistance *not* working.

Bollocks!

“You have the right to remain silent...” Brad reeled off the rest of the spiel about anything we said being used as evidence later on, about how he now had us for forty-eight hours of questioning. He added the reason for the arrest at the end.

Whenever the ADU arrested anyone, as well as the police, they had to give a reason. This was suspicion of colluding with a demon and terrorist activity.

For real?

“You are pathetic,” Tae said from beside me, his body still and trapped like mine.

“I could say the same for you.”

“Get as cocky as you like, Brad,” Victoria said. “You have zero grounds for this crap. Say goodbye to your job, to your reputation. I’m about to tear you apart.”

“Try your best,” the witch replied snootily. He lifted his hand to speak into his wrist comm. “This is Brad Smith, requesting backup. I have two detainees in need of processing.” He gave our location and smirked. “We’re going for a drive back to London.”

“Are we now?” Tae said. “Wonderful.”

Brad’s smirk waivered. “Yes. You are. And we’re getting to the bottom of this.”

Victoria laughed. “Can’t wait to see your face in the morning.” She was on her phone, tapping away. “Can’t bloody wait.”

“It’ll be okay, Clay,” Tae said.

Brad glanced between us and smiled, saying nothing.

Arsewipe.

How could it be okay? What did this witch have planned for us now? What kind of torture methods would he apply to me? Because torture was legal if the right sort of paperwork got filed. And you just know Brad could get whatever paperwork he needed.

This is why I tried to avoid the ADU. Had done so successfully until now. If they got the chance to poke and probe me, they’d see I was a pinata of treats. God, they’d lap it up. Arcana and demon blood? Merry Fucking Christmas to them.

I just had to be strong. To put faith in myself, to not rely on Tae and Victoria to get me out of his. I'd survived twenty-four shit-filled years with a spring still in my step. I could survive this. I *would* survive this. No arsewipe ADU agent was getting the better of me. I had a life to live, answers to find, and a cat to smother in endless love.

I smiled on the inside, refusing to let Brad see anything other than a blank canvas. My inner light helped me as it always did. Ride the storm, get to the sunny shores. Always aim for those shores because what else was there to do? Drown? Get eaten by sharks? Nope. Not me.

We waited in silence for the backup to arrive. Nothing was happening. Brad spoke into his wrist a few more times, demanding to know what the holdup was. Rattled. Losing his cool again and again. Good. I liked seeing it. Made him completely unscary. Well, for the most part.

Victoria walked off a few meters, talking into her phone. Putting things in place. Law things. I really hoped she was about to hand him his backside in a picnic basket for this.

Suspicion of colluding with a demon and terrorism? What the hell? He needed a nasal spray for that not-so-amazing nose for truth of his.

Time ticked by, and no help came. The atmosphere took on a weird vibe as if we weren't part of the world anymore. I squinted at the distance, seeing no one, not even any of the emergency service crew. People from the flats still hung around outside their building or stood at their windows. But where was everyone else?

“Something's wrong,” I said.

Brad turned on me, coming into my space. “Care to explain?”

“How would I know? I’m not what you think I am.”

“And what’s that?”

“Erm, you called me a terrorist.”

A rumble, the ground vibrating under my feet.

Victoria lowered her phone, hurrying back. “What was that?”

“The situation is still not under control,” Tae responded.

Brad snarled at the vampire. “My agents are dealing with ___”

Rumble...

“You were saying?” Tae pressed.

“That’s not *him*,” Brad said, eyes on the building. “It can’t be him.”

“It is him,” the vampire said. “Of course, it’s him.”

“No...”

“Yes. You’ve failed to stop him time and time again. The regular methods are wasted here. I hoped you could at least contain him. Stupid me.”

“We can... We will...”

The rumble became a shake, setting off car alarms. A few residents screamed and hurried inside.

“Release us,” Tae said. “Right now.”

“No. You’re my prisoners.”

A few of the parked cars audibly bounced on the next wave. Things were getting worse. Like before.

“We have to run,” I threw in.

“I will not—”

The ADU building went up in an explosion of smoke, a dirty cloud of red Synth burping into the night sky. The noise ravaged my eardrums, a wicked force crashing into us all. Brad’s magic broke, the four of us were sent hurtling through the air.

Oh, God. Oh, God.

Tae grabbed me mid-air, wrapping his arms around me before crashing on top of a car. He took the brunt of the impact, my bones rattling as the metal and glass crunched. The wind got knocked out of me, but nothing snapped. At least, I didn’t think so.

Vampires could switch between heavy and soft—the former for things like this, the latter for scaling buildings like *Spider-Man*.

My ears rang from the boom. Tae crushed me to his chest, hands covering the back of my head. I stayed there for a few seconds, happy to linger for as long as he liked. Because the moment I looked up at the world beyond his chest, I’d see the horror, the pain, the fucking drama.

He moved me into an upright position, checked me, then hurried over to Victoria. I was fine, save for the pain in my head and ears. Another lucky escape from serious injury.

I followed him.

Victoria sat on the ground, back resting against a car. Her forehead was bleeding.

“I’m okay,” she said as the vampire ripped off some of his pink shirt. He applied the fabric to her head.

“You’re not okay,” he said. “Stay still.”

The ground tremored again. I looked back for the first time since the explosion.

Smoke. So much smoke billowing from the ADU building. I couldn’t see the structure itself, only the gray smoke tinged crimson with Synth. Vehicles were overturned, their windows shattered or cracked. Some of the windows in the flats appeared to have taken damage, too.

I wiped the sweat off my brow with my arm, leaning on the car.

Where was Brad? He wasn’t nearby, from what I could see. I didn’t ask the question.

Man, did I want to just go home and cuddle Fizz and forget about this. But that was selfish. There were dead people here, hurt people. God only knew how many. If it were midnight, I could maybe help with the healing spell. At least try to do something other than stand here.

Wait. I still could help. Even if it meant holding someone’s hand while waiting for help to arrive. If only this ringing in my ears would stop.

Somewhere in that smoke was Buttons. He’d done this. Had he been hurt? Not killed, of course, but maimed in some way to really hinder his efforts.

Fingers crossed.

“Clay?”

I faced Tae in response to his muffled voice. He stood now, Victoria’s arm slung over his shoulder.

“We’re leaving,” he said.

“But what about everyone else?”

“We’re leaving,” he repeated.

“But—”

“You and Victoria are my concern. No one else.”

Even muffled, his tone was pure ice wrapped in more ice. A distinct line in the sand had been drawn. I didn’t know what to think. He’d never said we’d work together to help people. Not like this. But shouldn’t we? Didn’t we have a duty to lend a hand?

Says who?

Oh, God. My soul itched.

“If we don’t leave now, we’re asking for trouble,” he added.

He was right. I’d be no use to anyone dead. The better scenario for the mission had me alive, taking out demons, getting the one at the top of the hit list.

Tae offered his other hand to me.

I didn’t take it. “I’m fine to walk.”

“Are you sure?” He moved Victoria into his arms. She needed the full Tae carry.

I nodded, wreathed in solemn shadows.

Another quake rumbled underneath. Softer this time. Gosh. What else was coming?

I kept pace with the vampire, heading down a hill, taking to the back streets. Sirens filled the air with shrieks in the distance. More help was on the way. I even heard a helicopter.

That made me feel a bit better but didn't lessen the scratchiness on my conscience.

We kept walking down an incline, passing bars and shops, approaching the famous Lanes I'd always wanted to see in the flesh. Not one rise of excitement from me, though. This was the last place I wanted to be.

"What happened?" some passing people asked us. All of them got ignored.

It hurt to talk, to think. Buttons had come for me, everyone else getting caught in the crossfire while I walked off with my skin intact. If I ran away right now, just took off... The drama would only follow me and hurt those around me in the new place I ended up in.

Unless I find somewhere in the middle of nowhere...

I applied the brakes. Hard. How ridiculous to whine and think this crap. This wasn't me. I didn't give up. I didn't let anyone beat me down, even when they did beat me in the streets for being homeless and a warlock. All the bad shit washed away time and time again. So would this. I'd decided to help take out demons with Tae. A demon had done this. He'd pay for this suffering, one way or another. Blaming myself helped him win.

We approached a taxi rank next to a kebab shop.

"Ooo, I could do with some doner meat and chips," Victoria said.

"Me too," I added.

"I want you to get help first," Tae interjected, putting her down. "Can you lean on Clay for a moment, please? As long as he says it's okay."

“Erm, sure,” I replied.

She leaned on me, holding her compress of Tae’s shirt to her forehead, eyeing up the brightly lit food place. “Doner meat. Salad. Chili sauce. A huge portion of chips.” She licked her lips. “Sounds good, right?”

“Garlic sauce for me,” I replied, practically drooling.

“Victoria?” Tae said from behind us. “I have a taxi for you. He’s going to take you to the hospital.”

“Do I have to go?” she complained.

“Yes. And I want you to text me as soon as you arrive.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sitting in A and E for hours? Great.”

“You need stitches,” Tae said.

“You could heal me up with your vampire blood,” she countered with a chuckle.

“I don’t think so.”

Vampire blood healing... Yeah, that’d kicked off the various sexy and confusing moments between me and Tae. Vampire blood had a potent sexual energy to it.

“Worth a try, right?” Victoria snorted.

Tae opened the cab door for her. “To the hospital.”

“Yes, Dad.” She looked at me with another eye roll.

I couldn’t help but laugh and resolved to nail my healing spell for moments like this in the future.

“Bye,” I said.

“Nice to meet you again.” Tae helped her into the cab. He closed the door, and the taxi drove off, the driver not saying a word about the ADU building.

I drew a deep breath, eyes to the sky. “Wow. What a night.”

“Let’s go home, Clay.”

“That’ll be nice.”

An immense quake blew out the windows of every shop, sending me tumbling forward. Tae grabbed me before I kissed the concrete, crushing me to his chest again. The shaking didn’t stop, intensified, the vampire the only thing keeping us both upright.

“Hold on, Clay!”

The ground split around us with deafening cracks crashing through my exhausted ears.

“Tae!” I yelped.

The ground gave way, plunging us into violent darkness.

I screamed as we fell, holding onto the vampire for dear life. Eyes closed against the dark, apocalyptic sounds all around us. The earth’s jaws opened like some mythical monster whale, ready to swallow us whole.

Oh, God.

Oh, God.

Oh. My. God.

SEVEN



Once again, Tae bore the brunt of the impact. He grunted as we touched down and rolled, his limbs locking around me like a spider on landing on its prey.

We rolled, my insides a cocktail shaker in the hand of an enthusiastic bartender. Parts of my skin scraped on rock, the vampire not enough of a bubble. But nothing snapped or sliced open.

Go me with the good luck.

We came to a stop with me on top of him, curled against his body. I rose and fell with his chest, his arms around me still.

I slid off him, dizzy as hell, rolling onto my back. We were in a place of green light with darkness at the fringes. Somewhere underground.

If I fell down one more hole in the ground, I'd be throwing a hissy fit. Definitely not something I wanted to make a habit of.

“Are you okay, Tae?” I gasped.

He sat up. “That really hurt.”

I sat up to mirror him. His shirt and trousers were torn to pieces, scratches and cuts everywhere. And his left arm was,

erm, floppy.

“Fuck!” I squeaked. “You broke your arm.”

“Dislocated,” he said. He popped it back in with a loud crunch. I retched.

Him being him, he came to me, making sure I was okay.

“I’m good. That was just... yeah.”

Deep breaths, blocking out the sound...

Wait a damn second. My brain peddled to the top of understanding.

Green light. The green light of toxic rivers.

“Tae...” I slowly got to my feet.

A hollowed-out space surrounded us in a dome shape. A cavern, the whole thing too smooth and polished to be natural. The metal stairs and walkway above us also gave the game away. Oh, and the open doorway up there.

There were chunks of rock everywhere from the collapse that’d brought us here. The worst part about this place, though, was the three toxic rivers protected by Synth glass winding their way from the edges of the cavern. They met at a glass dome—the cavern’s heart. A pulsing green light radiated from that dome, brighter than that of the rivers.

I really, really hated those green things.

“What is this place?” I asked. “I thought Brighton was one of the few river-free areas.”

“So did I,” Tae replied. “At least the glass is intact.”

“Seriously. There’s nothing to say Brighton has a river problem anywhere.”

“I know.”

“So, it’s a lie?”

“I’m not surprised.”

“You’re not?” I asked.

“No. There are places all over the world that keep their rivers secret if they can.”

“That’s awful,” I said, massaging my biceps. Man, did they ache.

I moved forward, still taking in the details.

“I can understand it,” he said. “If this place was discovered by the general public, Brighton would lose everything. It’d go from tourist hotspot to desolate—as has happened to many places.”

He made a very good point.

I coughed, clearing some dust from my lungs. “Gosh. The ground must be all sorts of unstable after the explosion.”

“I’ll check those stairs,” Tae said. “Wait here a moment.”

A presence appeared on the walkway.

Buttons.

“Together again,” he said, his tentacles out in all their awful glory.

“Oh, fuck,” I muttered.

Tae stayed with me, scanning the cavern for another way out. I tried, too, even if his eyes were better than mine.

“I want to show her what I’m capable of,” the demon said. “I want to show you.” He cocked his head. “You have survived. I am impressed. Maybe I should leave you to respect

her request.” He shook his head, green light glinting off his buttons. “She is safer with you gone.”

There was another red orb in his hand.

“You slip through the net time and time again,” he continued.

“Doesn’t that mean you should give up?” I tried.

He held up the orb. Tae moved for the stairs. Two tentacles sprang into action, lashing at him. The vampire grabbed one, twisting the black snake. Buttons grunted, the orb flashing with power.

Tae flew across the cavern, smacking into the wall.

“No!” I cried. “Tae!”

He jumped to his feet, charging for the stairs again.

“Stay away,” Buttons said, using the orb again.

This time, Tae hit the dome, cracking the glass. My hands were over my mouth, panic having me by the throat. The vampire slid off the dome, rolled away, and jumped back to his feet.

My heart felt ready to implode.

Blood ran from his mouth and the side of his head.

“Tae...”

“I’m fine,” he said, eyes on the demon, his fangs bared.

“Will you give up trying to kill me?” Buttons asked.

“Never,” I returned.

He held the orb above his head with two hands, the reds of the Synth playing across his menacing face.

“The power...” he said wistfully. “Power that is not mine. Stolen.”

“Yeah, you shouldn’t be using Synth,” I warned.

“I know. But I want to show her what I can do.”

“Cause chaos?”

“Spill the most blood.”

“Please...”

His head snapped around, button eyes locking onto me.
“You’re begging for your life?”

“No. I’m begging for everyone else’s.”

“They’re already dead.” He turned his buttons away.
“Don’t waste your time.”

“We have to get out of here,” Tae whispered into my left ear.

“Where? He’s blocking the only exit.”

Tae growled, offering no suggestions.

“I can destroy so beautifully,” Buttons said. “She will see. She will forget about you.”

“What—”

Before I could try and keep him talking, he threw the orb. It hurtled toward the dome. Tae moved into action, gunning for it. He caught it just before it hit the glass, caught the surprise second one I didn’t see until the last minute.

“Fuck!” I squeaked.

Where the hell were these orbs coming from?

Buttons laughed.

A third throw hit. The orb smashed into the protective glass, released Synth like red ink from a popped water balloon. It splashed across the dome, fizzing and smoking. The dome glass fractured, lines creeping across it, even spreading to the curved glass over the rivers.

Oh, shit.

Tae dashed away from the dome, keeping hold of the orbs he'd caught.

Yeah, we really needed to get the hell out.

"Let the waters flow," Buttons said, slinking back into the doorway. He slammed it. I heard a heavy bolt slide into place.

The dome broke at the top, glass collapsing into the toxic green. The river glass followed suit, the protection crumbling as Synth crawled across it. The green ooze within churned, spraying the ground beyond. Rising. Ready to unleash.

Tae switched the orbs off and stuffed them into his coat pockets. He grabbed me and slung me onto his back. I felt like a baby chimp. He tore up the stairs, stopping at the door.

I looked back at the rising green water. Any moment now, it'd start filling up the cavern.

A green figure broke the surface of the dome pool, gripping the sides. Metallic green, a humanoid, sexless monster with no mouth. A creature I so didn't want to meet again.

"River monster," I whispered.

Tae kicked the door once, almost breaking it down. On the second strike, it collapsed with a deafening crash.

My poor ears today.

The monster was free of the pool, crouched on the ground, dripping with river. Tae took off again, speeding through dimly lit tunnels.

It didn't take long to catch up to a fleeing Buttons.

The demon spun, swinging his spikes, his tentacles lashing like whips.

“Keep your head down!” Tae ordered, going in for some serious melee action.

I tried to push my face as close to his back as I could, arms locked around him.

Buttons pulled out another orb. Man, he'd stocked up. He smashed the damn thing on the ground, crimson smoke engulfing him, swirling and hot. Within seconds it evaporated.

The demon was gone.

“Teleportation,” Tae growled.

A skill only high-level witches were permitted to use—and I'm talking royal family levels. It was difficult magic to come across because of its dangers. Used incorrectly, it disturbed the Earth's atmosphere. A witch prince from Spain had once triggered a devastating tsunami that almost wiped Barcelona off the map simply by moving from one opulent house to another. That prince basically had no public profile nowadays.

Buttons must have stolen it from the Synth labs, which was terrifying. He never should've been able to get inside the ADU building. But then he was him, wasn't he? Not the regular kind of demon.

The tunnel remained stable, no tremors triggered. A green glow came from further behind. The river. The monsters. Tae took off, speeding through the tunnels until we reached

another heavy door. Two kicks got it down. Another five doors faced us after that. He made short work of them all and got us out into the fresh sea air.

Brighton's famous pebbled beach crunched under Tae's boots. We'd come through a brick box covered in moss and vines, built into the seawall lining the top of the beach.

"Bloody hell," I proclaimed from his back.

He hurried along the pebbles, the salt air rich on my senses. Cold air grabbed at me, the waves a muffled roar like everything else.

"The monster..." I said.

Tae already had his phone out, reporting a river breach, then called Archie. He dealt with his calls as fast as he moved, taking us to the street above the beach. The demon towers lining the seafront were active, shining their scarlet warning beacons.

Tae put me down.

A series of explosions erupted the earth around us.

He grabbed me again.

Toxic river burst from the points of the booms, spraying the road like a geyser. People screamed and ran, vehicles lost control and crashed, one even overturned. Chaos took hold, more river exploding from beneath.

"Come on!" Tae commanded, taking my hand.

Before I could climb onto his back, Buttons ran at us, throwing an orb at the vampire.

"Look out!"

It burst open, smothering Tae in that red smoke.

“Tae!”

He was gone.

“Tae!”

Buttons stood still. His tentacles hanging limp from his body, dragging across the asphalt. There were wounds at his sides and his stomach. Nasty gouges and burns where his clothes had been burned away in patches.

Nothing he didn't deserve.

River geysers sprayed the seafront, erupting from buildings, from the sand, from everywhere. The ground cracked around me, green ooze bubbling to the surface. So many cracks, so many little rivers coming to life.

“What have you done?”

“I have—”

A woman came from nowhere, white eyes infernos in her pale face. A demon in a black bikini and stiletto heels.

Huh?

She grabbed the button-eyed demon's arm, her long fingers curling around his bicep. Her nails were a glittering bronze, her cropped hair the same color.

A beach-ready demon totally in the wrong place.

“You need to stop right now,” she hissed at Buttons.

“Please!” Buttons cried, suddenly meek and pathetic. “Please! I did it for her! I tried to free her from future suffering!”

This demon wasn't the actual *her*.

With her other fingers, she gouged down his cheeks, splitting the skin. Black blood spilled from his wounds. He screamed, falling onto his arse.

“You were told to leave him alone,” she said. “We will see what becomes of him.”

“I am the chosen!” he wailed.

“You will obey.” She hurled him to his feet. “Get out of here. Do not try to harm him again. If you do, there will be no place for you.”

“He will take my place!” he roared. “You want him! She wants him! She cannot want him!”

“Enough. You’ve interrupted my pool party. I’m not happy.”

“I didn’t mean to. I am torn. I didn’t mean to.” God. He sounded like a whiny kid.

The demon snapped her fingers, and Buttons closed his mouth.

“Go. Now. If I have to come to you again, you will be punished severely.”

Just like that, the button-eyed demon turned and walked away, leaping over the ever-growing green flows. Vanishing into shadows.

This new demon fixed her white eyes to me.

“Who are you?” I said, hands clenched into fists.

She didn’t answer. Simply turned and walked away.

“Who are you?” I called after her, going to move.

She snapped her fingers, sending me to my knees.

“Clay!”

Tae appeared to my left, rushing at me. He fell to my side, taking my face in his hands. “Are you okay?”

I launched into him, bear-hugging the poor guy. “Where did you go?”

“Not too far. He teleported me down the beach.”

“Oh, God.” I broke the hug, lost in his face as the world screamed around me.

Tae smoothed back my hair, bringing his face close to mine. “Are you hurt?”

“A little.”

His hands examined me. I glanced at the space the demon had just occupied. Confused out of my mind. Worse than before with this new ‘information.’

“I don’t know what this means,” I said.

“Who was that woman?” he asked.

“Demon.”

A river opened up dangerously close. He scooped me up and ran through the night before anything else could be said.

He didn’t stop until we reached his house on the cliff.

Ten minutes after stepping into the sanctuary Tae’s wife had built, an evacuation order spread across Brighton. A state of emergency declared.

I gathered up Fizz, my Walkman, some clothes, and my lollipops, barely having time to think, let alone shower. Tae took my bags for me, putting them in the boot of Archie’s black car. I slipped into the passenger seat, Tae joining me. It

was always a surprise to see him not driving—he liked to do it himself.

“Where are we going?” I asked as Archie started the engine.

“A hotel outside of town,” Tae said.

“A vampire one? Do you need some blood to heal?”

“Want me to call in a Feeder?” Archie added.

Human blood sped up the healing process if they were hurt. They could heal on their own, but the blood made it so much better. Without it, healing took seven days. Feeders were often used in the process—humans specializing in feeding vamps their blood.

A sexy process...

Feeders made home visits, or a vamp went to a special club.

A sexy club?

“Not right now,” Tae said.

Archie drove us down the lane, passing Charles carrying stuff into a blue car, Marjorie cradling their poodle.

I held Fizz close to me, thankful for her presence.

EIGHT



Brighton shone with green fissures when looked at from above. That was the picture running on the TV screen from a news helicopter reporting the devastation.

I sat on the double bed of my hotel room with Fizz in my lap five hours after escaping with my life, freshly showered and wearing a hotel robe over clean underwear. The dirt may have been washed away, but the trauma had settled in good.

My ears were working properly again, but the rest of me still reeled in the aftermath.

Two hours ago, the seaside town had gone to shit. Their ADU headquarters destroyed, so many dead. The button-eyed demon had gone beyond public enemy number one. Reports were coming in about his attack on the Synth labs, a lack of detail in the mainstream media and through Tae's sources. How had Buttons gotten into the secure labs? Was this all for him to be a chaotic bastard and please this mystery demon?

And who the hell was that demon in the bikini?

I sipped my tea, watching a piece on the river monsters. They'd escaped from the secret underground dome, killing ten people before being stopped. We'd let them out, the doors kicked down for them to run wild.

God. What a horrible mess. A town was sealed off and crying because of that button-eyed arsewipe.

I ignored the blows of blame chipping at my armor. Fuck them. Hard.

Arcana was awake, waiting to be released by me summoning the Mark to use it. I wanted to call it, to get out of here and slay the shit out of demon scum.

I sipped more tea, feeling as useful as a spoon against a mountain.

A knock at my door.

“Yeah?”

Tae entered. “Victoria’s here.”

“She is?”

“She’s stitched up and has food in Archie’s room.”

I hadn’t eaten yet.

Carefully, I popped a sleeping Fizz down on the bed and slid off the mattress. My dressing gown fell open, exposing my boxers and skinny flesh to the vampire. He stole a look, then turned away.

I tightened the robe belt and found some socks. I couldn’t be bothered to pull proper clothes on.

In silence, I followed him out of the room into the hallway of rose-hued walls and an off-white carpet so springy it was a few threads away from being a trampoline.

We each had a room on the fifth and top floor of the Carp Hotel (famous for its ponds of carp out back). Mine was between Tae and Archie’s—the human fixer/cleaner, as I liked to think of him, the human lawyer’s next to his.

Archie and Victoria were, for want of a better phrase, fucking awesome.

And there certainly was food. I could smell chip shop chips.

We entered a room like mine, with wallpaper designed with orange iridescent fish scales on a white background. More of the springy carpet and the trimmings of most hotels—TV, bathroom, kettle on a desk with sachets of tea and coffee in a white pot. The desk was big enough to seat five people, spread across the fairly big room like a bar top. Two of the five chairs were occupied by Archie and Victoria.

They greeted me happily, Victoria's forehead wound stitched up. She was wearing a Tina Turner dressing gown over some leggings, her hair tied up in a bun. Made me feel better amongst Tae and Archie's fully clothed bodies.

“Alright, Clay?” Archie asked through a mouthful of chips.

A mound of greasy potato yumminess sat before them in open paper, complete with two pieces of battered cod and three saveloys.

I caught the drool on my chin before it spread.

“You like a bit of Tina?” I asked Victoria. The face of the singer was embroidered into the black dressing gown in gold.

“Oh, yes. She's simply the best.” She cackled.

I laughed too.

“We got enough food for you, sweet,” Victoria said.

“I'm glad you're okay,” I replied.

“I’m good. Got seen to pretty quickly considering.” She winked. “You’ve been through it, though.”

“Not even close.” I scratched at my left arm. “All those people...” I shook my head, trying to keep it together.

“Aw, come and eat.” She patted the seat next to her.

I joined them, passing Tae, who watched the TV fixed to the wall, the news rolling by.

“What do you fancy?” Victoria asked. “We’ve got no plates, so I’ll make you one out of the paper. There’s a shit load of paper.”

“I can see that,” I said. “Chips would be great, thanks.”

I noticed cans of soda on the desk.

“Saveloy? Fish? It’s all still warm.”

“Fish, please. If you don’t mind.” My tummy rumbled in anticipation.

She made me a plate, dumping chips and one piece of cod on there.

“Oh, no,” I said. “Only a bit is fine. I don’t want to take too much.”

“Fuck that, sweet. In fact, have a saveloy. You’re a skinny bean.” She didn’t say that last part with malice but with tenderness.

“Thanks.”

Archie handed her packets of salt and vinegar, some ketchup, and even tartar sauce. I used them all and got to eating. At first, I wasn’t sure I wanted to eat, despite my hunger. The first mouthful blew that barrier apart, and I

enjoyed every single bite, relishing the distracting moment of good food.

“Whenever you’re ready to talk, we’ll talk,” Tae said.

I sipped on some fizzy orange, turning my chair to face the vamp, picking at more chips. The events of the night, and the night before, pressed down on me once again.

A hand on my shoulder. Victoria. “I know everything now,” she said.

“You do?” I faced her. “About...”

“Arcana. Yep.” She nodded, cracking open a can of cola.

“Oh.”

“We’re your triangle of trust,” Archie added, pointing at himself, the lawyer, and the vampire.

I smiled. “Sounds good.”

“Triangle of trust,” Victoria mused. “I like that.”

“You can trust them, Clay,” Tae said. “I promise you.”

Promise...

Promises were fragile things. My foster family promised to take care of me, but they didn’t, and that disgusting man almost managed to get his hands on me.

Whenever I fell into the little pits of gloom that caught me off guard, it took me a while to climb out of them. Their cold hold weakened my defenses. Going through two awful events in a row really didn’t help keep my pecker up. Old wounds opened, my faith in the better roads waivered. But I refused to let the pits be more than puddle deep. Enough to climb over the top of my wellington boots, but not enough to drag me under.

Wellingtons. Wearing them with my friend Lina. Rainy days at the home. Jumping in puddles, singing Kylie Minogue songs together. I wouldn't call them simple times, but they were fun. The kind of fun we fought to find for ourselves back then.

"Nice to have you around," I said to them before I drifted off too much. "The best people know chippie chips are good for the soul."

"And doner kebabs," Victoria added.

"My mum's not good with chippie food," Archie said. "Gives her the shits like you wouldn't believe."

Victoria's features scrunched up. "Lovely. Next time, save that talk for someone else. Or when you're alone with a gag lodged in that trap of yours."

"That doesn't make sense," he returned.

The lawyer looked at me, rolling her eyes. "Leave it to Archie to crap on a mood."

Like mother, like son... I kept that one locked inside. I did laugh, though. A nice balm to my mood.

"We have a lot to discuss," Tae said, not smiling.

Archie and Victoria nodded almost in sync.

"Firstly, Archie is right," Tae carried on. "This is a circle of trust."

"Triangle," Archie corrected.

"Indeed. Nothing will go beyond this group unless I say so. What you see now, Clay, is the top of the operation. The rest of my people will continue to work in the shadows."

Did this include Grindle? Because the fairy had all the details, too. I'd ask him later, in case these guys didn't know that part of the tale.

"Victoria and Archie joined my fight against demons fifteen years ago, after losing my family."

"Could say we're the OG crew," Archie said.

"Don't say OG," Victoria countered. "You're forty-six."

"What does that matter?"

"Oh, nothing. You keep on thinking you're cool and hip."

"I don't think I'm cool and hip. I *know* I am."

"You're too old for OG," she said.

"You're older than me."

"And what?"

"And stop being ageist. I can say OG all I want."

She frowned at the human. "Let me rewind. You're right, you're not too old. I'm just calling out knobery."

"Behave," Tae warned.

They stopped, sitting to attention.

I could really do with a lollipop to take the edge off. There was plenty of fairy magic flowing away inside me, but, well, my nerves were frazzled.

Lollipop or a glass of vino.

I settled for the orange fizz.

When Tae started to lay out all the details of what'd gone down again, my spirits took another tumble. The lift from the food and the nice company went toodles.

I sighed heavily, shoulders slumping. “What does this mean? Am I some sort of pawn in something bigger? Buttons clearly doesn’t want me to be part of it, even if he has orders to not kill me. He called me a usurper.” He shook his head. “Who are these demons? Why does this mystery woman want me left alone?”

My demon blood. It must have something to do with it. If I thought about it, I was a hybrid. Warlock, demon, now an Arcana wielder. A completely new species.

There had to be more to this. I had to dig deeper into my demon blood. Should I tell Tae the truth right now? Oh, gosh. He’d never see me the same way again. I’d move into his field of hatred, where I guess I belonged.

Shit.

My parents. They were dead, but they had family who might be able to help. *My* living family—my dad’s mum, his sister, and my mum’s twin brother. Three family members who lived outside of London, despite coming from Peckham, South London. Must have moved on for whatever reason. Adam and Maxine, my parents, had me in Peckham. Dead because of their drug addictions and their many troubles.

Did I really want to go *there*? My family had never reached out to me, never been around. They weren’t proper family, only part of my lineage. Still, they might have answers for me. I guess now was the time to finally crack open the jar. I’d always wanted to know more about myself. This was my chance.

My stomach did a loop thinking about it.

“It’s strange that a demon would want you alive, knowing of your power,” Tae said. “Unless there are more demons like

Buttons.”

“No, he said I’d kill this woman,” I responded.

“Use Clay as a tool?” Archie suggested. “What a weapon to use against other demons, eh?”

“Bit risky,” Victoria said. “He could just take them all out regardless of who wanted to use him.” She nodded at me.

I rubbed at my temples. “My head is pounding.”

Victoria stroked my back. “It’s okay. You don’t have to do anything now but sleep, sweet.”

No way. My magic was active. I wanted to practice some spells. After everything, sleep was the last thing on my mind.

“Can we go to the sugar factory?” I asked.

Tae waited a moment before responding. “Are you sure?”

“I need to let off steam, to practice.”

Another pause. “Whatever you need, Clay.”

I changed my mind in an instant, dreading going outside. “It’s too late.” Talk about a turnaround.

“Whatever you need,” he repeated.

Hmmm. That shit stirred my irritation. Whatever I needed? Make it all about me? That bugged me.

I didn’t let it show. “Tomorrow would be good for some practice, though.”

My attempts at keeping my tone light were completely try-hard. I wanted to climb into bed, sleep this off—or at least try to.

“I won’t be sleeping,” Victoria said. “I want to get my research on.”

“And you made a deal of OG?” Archie countered.

“Oh, frig off.”

Tae approached me, crouching down to my level. “You can sleep if you like. You’ve been through a lot.”

“It’s fine. I’ll help you research.”

Eyes boring into me... “Okay, Clay.”

Out came the laptops, the news permanently on.

After an hour, I admitted defeat and left the room for my bed. Tae walked me to my room, then left me to it.

Meow...

“I know, Fizz.” She yawned and purred and snuggled up to me as I lay beside her.

I popped a Kylie tape into my Walkman, fixing my earphones in place. My queen’s music coursed through me, taking me away from the craziness.



DREAMING of the throne of vines again, the lava bubbling away. Nothing happened. Just me standing there facing it, waiting to be given a clue, some sign as to what the hell this dream meant.

I woke up to the dark hotel room, my earphones still in, Fizz asleep beside me.

What time was it?

03:48.

I sat up, yawning, the lava and throne still fresh. Connected to the rest of the bullshit? I'd have to talk to Tae about it, just like I needed to talk to him about reaching out to my family.

Slowly, I got out of bed. Fizz moved, released the softest of meows, then settled back down. That cat was so in her element. With the added bonus of the warmth of this room, and with the softness of her recent living, Fizz was evolving into a sleeping queen.

I didn't blame her one bit.

I slipped on my dressing gown and made my way to Tae's door. I went to knock, hesitating before my knuckles made contact. Maybe I wasn't ready to talk about this stuff yet. And he'd be busy with his research and could do with a break from me, and I should be in bed even though that power nap was enough for me right now, and the urge for spell training crept back, and what if the others were still in there—

Gosh! I even rambled to myself.

After an internal breath or two, I dropped my hand. I wouldn't bother him now.

The door opened.

“Clay?”

A shirtless Tae in gray sweatpants faced me. His sculpted body of alabaster muscle greeted my hungry eyes. They explored of their own volition, roaming over every inch, studying the tattoo of roses on his right side. Then to the shape of his cock in those sweatpants.

Oh. Oh. Oh.

Eyes up! I brought my hazel peepers to his dark beauties. “Are you, erm, alone?” My mouth experienced a drought.

“Yes. What’s wrong?”

“I, erm, need to talk.”

“Of course. Come in.” He stepped aside to let me pass.

In Tae’s room with a shirtless Tae.

Shit.

His laptop sat on the bed, a sea of papers surrounding it. The TV was on mute, playing the news, and a solitary lamp cast a soft glow across the room.

He closed the door, walking past me. “What did you want to talk about?” He plucked a white vest hanging over a chair and pulled it on.

A shame, but at least I could concentrate properly from now on.

Sort of.

I sat on the edge of the bed. “Is it okay to sit here?”

He nodded, folding his arms. He stood before me, a looming force of sex-god might. And he waited, not pushing me to speak.

“I don’t know how to say this,” I began.

“Take your time.”

My demon blood made involving him with finding these family members dangerous. What if that came out? What if my parents were demonic themselves somehow? But I couldn’t leave him out of this. Our lives were so tangled up that sneaking around was impossible. And I didn’t want to

sneak around. I wanted his help, even if I had to leave one crappy piece under a veil.

Damn.

“I... I... Can I have some water, please?” I asked.

That's it, delay away.

He fetched a bottle from the desk.

“Thanks.” I took a few gulps of tepid water. “That’s better.”

He waited.

“Well, it’s like this. I, erm, I have a few family members I want to speak to.”

He listened, doing his whole brooding, too-cool-for-school routine of not reacting.

I continued. “My dad’s mum, his sister, and my mum’s twin brother. Grandma, auntie, uncle. I found out about them a few years ago, thanks to Grindle. Wondered if I should contact them, put it off because, well, drama. But it’s always been at the back of my mind to maybe reach out. Ask them why they didn’t take me in or maybe not ask them that and maybe build something with them. Although, why would I want people like that in my life when they left me to the care system because they must know I exist, right?”

I swallowed air, hands shaking. I clasped them together in my lap. “Sorry, Tae.”

“It’s okay, Clay. Do you think these family members may be able to help explain Arcana?”

And something else... “Yeah. I think so. It can’t hurt to try, to see if they give me any answers without actually asking the

question, of course. Actually, it *can* hurt like a bitch to try, and maybe—”

“Clay?”

“Yeah?”

“Take some deep breaths.”

Right. “Sorry, I go off on these tangents sometimes.”

He arched a brow. “Only sometimes?”

“Is that you being funny?”

He smiled, dropping his arms to his sides, resting his hands on his hips. “I gather you have their address details?”

“I do. In a notepad.”

“Did you have it with you?”

“I do.”

“That’s good.” He faced the window, the curtains drawn. “If this is what you want to do, I fully support it. I can even have them investigated without you having to meet them. If you want.”

“I... Really?”

“To protect you from the pain.”

“It might be okay.” Gosh, how delusional did I sound? “And I can take it.”

“Can you?”

“Erm, yeah. I’m a big boy now. And I’m used to feeling rejected.”

He stepped forward, his eyes onyx drills to my senses. “You shouldn’t be. You’re a good person who deserves so much better.”

“T-thanks.” *If only you knew...*

“You shouldn’t be used to anything like that.”

“No one should be used to pain, Tae.” I didn’t add ‘including you’ but injected it into my tone.

“You’re to be protected from everything,” he said.

“Huh?”

“You’re number one, Clay.”

“Don’t say that.”

“You are.”

This was making me uncomfortable, if not a little pissed off. “Having Arcana doesn’t mean I get the cotton wool treatment. My life isn’t more valuable than anyone else’s.”

“It is.”

“That’s wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s wrong. I’m not above anyone.”

“I don’t care about anyone else. You’re not just anyone.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do.”

My forehead creased. “No, Tae. I don’t like it.”

“What don’t you like? You’re special, Clay. Because of Arcana, because of your light. I admire you so much, as I’ve told you before. Whatever is thrown at you, you stay strong. You keep going.”

“I’m not the only one.”

He didn’t answer.

“I should’ve done more to help those people back at the ADU.” I swallowed, needing more of the water.

“Like what?”

I wiped my mouth after some gulps. “I don’t know.”

“What could you have possibly done other than get hurt?”

“I don’t know.” Anger bubbled in my chest.

“Those people wouldn’t have extended you the same sympathy.”

“Why?” I asked.

“You know why.”

“Because I’m a warlock?”

“Yes.”

“Not everyone’s a bigot.”

“Many are.”

I mean, he was right. “That’s not fair. In a crisis, you see the good in people come out.”

“And the worst,” he countered.

Again, he spoke truth. “I just... I just felt like I should do something.”

Another step forward. “You don’t have to be a superhero.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to.”

He looked away, back to the window. “You can’t save everyone. You can’t be the light all the time. You can’t... You can’t die.”

“What?” I stood up, my pulse racing a mile a minute. “What did you say?”

Eyes back to me. “You can’t die. I can’t let you die.”

“I’m not dying.” I refrained from reaching up to touch his face.

“I want to keep you safe.”

“You are. I’m not going anywhere. I said I’d help you, didn’t I?”

“I...” He stopped himself from saying anything.

“What?” We were so close, a small chasm between us.

“I... I know what you’re saying, Clay. I know you want to help. I’m sorry for saying what I said, but the world is a nasty place. You know that more than anyone.”

“I do,” I replied softly, my bubble of anger burst. What was the point in being pissed off? He was right. I mean, there might have been a witch in that building who would’ve helped me if I’d been seriously injured. But it was more likely I’d be stepped over, left at the bottom of the list. I shouldn’t think that way, but my history was peppered with abuse from arsewipe witches and humans.

So many peppercorns.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I get it.”

“I want you safe. I want us to do this and keep you in my life. I enjoy your company.”

“I enjoy yours.”

“You have turned me onto the delights of Kylie Minogue. I never thought that would be possible.”

I laughed, shuffling forward. “And you’re an awesome cook.”

“Thank you.”

“An awesome cook who’s opened my mind to Korean food. Amazing.”

“Thank you.”

“No worries. And, well, I’ll try not to whine about this stuff.”

“You’re allowed to whine, Clay. It helps to vent emotions.”

What about you? How do you vent?

“Makes me look like a dickhead,” I said.

A hand cupped my face, stealing my breath away with his warm touch.

Oh, gosh.

“You’re just being kind, Clay.”

“Erm...”

“Thoughtful,” he added, his breath a beautiful breeze against my skin.

“Tae...”

He lowered his head, his pale lips inching closer.

“Tae...”

“Clay...”

Wow.

His lips met mine in a soft collision, his hand sliding to the back of my head. The softness didn’t diminish the blistering heat of his kiss.

Tae pulled the dressing gown open, exposing the bulging crotch of my boxers. He looked down, placing a hand on my stomach. He drew circles with his fingers, kissing me again.

Oh, fuck.

Fingers on the band of my underwear, slowly slipping them down my thighs. He kissed my stomach, nipped at my flesh.

Wow. His kisses were electric.

I stepped out of the boxers, his hands now on my legs as he kissed more of my skin. Exploring, moving up my torso to my chest, lips pausing at my nipples, moving to my neck.

Gosh.

Tae slid the dressing gown off me, leaving me completely exposed to his wanton, crimson flushed eyes. He stepped back, getting an eyeful. I met his gaze, getting all wild and touching myself. For him. For his needs.

Fuck me...

What he did next had me slick with precum, ready for the rest of it to explode from my balls. He stripped for me, taking off those gray sweatpants, the white vest, and white boxers, his cock hard and big and delicious and right there.

Fuck. Me. Hard.

Please...

Forward again, his dick brushing against me. He looked down, his hair falling across his face to tickle mine. I reached for his abs, hesitant, shaking. Touched him there. A sharp intake of breath, those stomach muscles tightening even more than they already were.

A soft growl... "Clay?"

"Yes?" Should I move my hand lower?

"I want you on the bed. Now."

“O-okay.”

I climbed on the bed.

“All fours.”

“Erm, okay.” I did as I was bid.

Gosh. Gosh. Gosh. Gosh.

In a blink of an eye, he was behind me, spreading me wide. He grabbed handfuls of my backside. Kneaded, caressed, kissed. Licked. I looked back, having to see him, body so ready for this pleasure.

He sucked his finger, eyes on me. Slicked them up, bent toward my butt, and added some drops of his saliva into my crevice. Massaged it in, teased the sides of the entrance. Then slipped a finger in. Slowly, his other hand resting on my hip.

“Vampire lesson,” he said huskily. “Vampire spit is a perfect lubricant.”

He went deeper.

Oh, God.

He played and beckoned, gentle, warming me up, teasing my sweet spot.

Was he going to fuck me? Shit. He could do whatever he wanted.

Another finger joined the first. I gasped as he stretched me, doing me harder now.

“Oh, Tae...” I breathed.

He did fuck me. With his fingers. Harder and harder, striking gold with each thrust of those amazing digits.

Wow.

“Tell me when you’re close,” he commanded.

My body sparked with the sexiest of pleasure, firing on all cylinders. Who knew fingers could work that good?

“I’m... I’m... Oh, shit. I’m cu—”

With breathtaking speed, he moved me so I straddled his chest. Breathless and stunned and ready to explode, my balls tightened. He took me in his mouth, continuing to work me with his fingers, rocking his head back and forth for the finale. His mouth was a perfect vessel for my cock’s glorious release.

I climaxed so fucking hard, shooting down his throat in hot jets. Crying out his name, my back arched. More bursts of cum, my toes curled.

Burst after burst after burst after burst.

W-w-w-wow...



TAE STARED up at the ceiling, the covers pulled down to his waist. I lay beside him, wanting to go in for a snuggle. Who wouldn’t? But this wasn’t that kind of post-banging bliss.

I’d been watching him for the past ten minutes, studying his profile. He barely moved, as still as the dead. Or the undead. His hair fanned around him in beautiful black curls, smothering the pillow.

I propped myself up on my elbow, very aware of my nakedness beneath the sheets and his next to mine. The pleasure of his touch echoed across my skin.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

He didn't answer, didn't react. Any moment now, he'd reel off his regrets and leave me in the bed. His bed. Maybe I should get up and leave before that happened. Take myself out of the equation.

This 'not going there' stuff was a real disaster.

He turned his head to face me. "I feel strange."

"Strange?"

"A good strange."

"You feel good?"

He blinked, making me jump. "You don't feel good, Clay?"

"Erm, yeah. I feel great."

"Sexual activity will do that."

He managed to sound matter-of-fact and hot at the same time. What a weird gift.

"It... It does," I agreed.

He smiled. "I enjoyed it."

But I didn't do anything back to you. "Oh?"

He rolled onto his side, touching my face. "Very much so."

"You don't have any regrets? I mean, we're not supposed to be doing these things are we? The whole professional thing, like you said. And I said to myself I wouldn't—"

I stopped myself from crapping all over a nice mood.

"Fuck that," he said.

My turn to blink in total surprise. "You what?"

He traced a finger down my cheek. “I’ve been thinking about what you said in the penthouse.”

“What did I say?”

“That we can do whatever we want. That there are no rules.”

I watched the shadows of his lashes play across his cutglass cheekbones. “Oh yeah?”

“I’ve really been thinking hard about it. We have something here, don’t we? A need.”

“A need?”

“Sexual need. We can’t seem to *not* touch other.”

“That’s, erm, right.”

“It’s frustrating.”

“Yeah.” Where was this going?

He shuffled closer, his fingertip caressing the side of my neck, moving down to linger at my collar bone. A fucking awesome shudder rumbled through me, shaking my dick awake.

“I think you’re right,” he said. “I think we should have fun.”

Like me touching you? We kissed, sure, and I’d touched everywhere but his cock. It was as if he’d put up barriers to real pleasure. And it made me feel selfish for getting all the orgasms while zero cum, erm, came from him.

How did he get off? When did he release? He said he felt good, but where was the evidence other than the traces of me over his chest? Did he jerk off without me knowing? We didn’t

even talk about his sexuality. Did he label it? And how was that any of my business, really?

Maybe he just wasn't ready for certain things yet.

I didn't bring it up. "I like fun."

He took his hand away. "Then let's have fun."

This was a sudden shift from before. I'd given a speech about us being allowed to have fun if we wanted. That was until he told me about his wife and son. Guilt-free and nice. I could get behind fun, being fuck buddies, but how long before it came crashing down?

Fuck it. I couldn't resist him anymore. I killed inner questions, deciding to roll with it even it might be the worst judgment.

I just want you so badly...

"Clay?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm good."

He rolled onto his back. "Having no rules is freeing. I've been ridiculous, feeling like a traitor to my wife. But I've done things with others when feeding. It's only natural to want to play."

Did you cum with them? And what about me making it different?

"There's nothing wrong with casual fun with a friend," he said, applying heavy gloss to things.

"That's right."

Casual? He saw me as casual? That kind of stung when it had zero right to. He'd brought his wife up again. That should be enough for me to kick back at his new reasoning. Because even though I was right to have said there was nothing wrong with having fun, this wasn't right. I really didn't want to hurt him, not when his grief consumed him so deeply.

If I had any willpower or sense of reason, I'd back off from this unstable glossiness. But I wanted him. Man, I so fucking wanted him. Again, right now. For him to throw back the covers and do whatever he wanted to my body.

As if reading my mind, he peeled the covers back, clocking my hard cock.

“Nice, Clayton. Very nice.”

“Clay.”

“I'm only teasing you.”

“Oh.”

He licked his lips. “I'll take care of that for you.”

He devoured me, dragging another orgasm from my body. Wow. That mouth really knew what it was doing.

Phew!

I should say something. Put a stop to this.

Holy shit! A third wave was, erm, coming.



I ATE breakfast in my bedroom, watching the sun come up. Fresh air poured through the open window, cooling down the room and bringing much-needed licks of crispness.

At the first hint of daylight, I'd felt Arcana slip into sleep. Another night of not using it, of not testing my spells. I missed it, craved its presence like sugar. The beginnings of a headache made itself known in my temples, inching across the front of my skull.

I need you...

I ate the rest of my croissant provided by the hotel, drained my coffee, and got to fixing Fizz's grub. I'd brought her bowls and food with me.

"What do you fancy today?" I asked her, placing a tin of the salmon and a tin of the chicken on the bed.

She paid the chicken the most attention. Not that she was a fussy eater at all. Didn't get the choice to be choosy when living on the streets, but I always tried to let her pick things. Because why not? Why shouldn't she have nothing but the best I could possibly give her?

I put her bowls down, feeding and watering her, changed her litter tray. With that done, I hit the shower, finally washing Tae off me. The last thing I wanted. His lime scent lingered on my skin. I smelled my arms, touched the places he'd been with his lips and hands as the water ran hot for me.

Three times he'd made me cum. Three blissful moments with the vampire. And we'd moved into new territory. Fun territory.

Reckless territory.

Fuck it.

After the shower, I got dressed in a green polo shirt and black jeans, ready to face the day.

Kind of. Clicking on the TV and watching the news shook my determination. Brighton was suffering so badly. The death toll was in the hundreds and rising. Toxic rivers had spread everywhere in apocalyptic threads cutting through the town.

Shit.

My door knocked.

“Yeah?”

Tae entered. “Good morning, Clay.”

I’d left him, what, an hour ago? “Hi.” I gave him a bashful smile.

Ha. Right. Because now was the time to be bashful after him having his finger in my arse.

Ahem.

“Have you eaten?” he asked.

“Yeah. All good. What about you?”

“I don’t require blood just yet.”

“Right.” I cleared my throat. “Listen, I want to talk to you about something.”

“What’s that?”

Fizz limped her way over to him. He didn’t let her get far before picking her up for a fuss. Gosh, her purr became a jet engine with him around.

“I’ve had these dreams...” I told him about the throne of vines and the lava.

“Strange.”

“You’re telling me.”

“And that’s all that happens in them?”

“Yep. Do you think they have something to do with Buttons and the other demons? Or am I just a weirdo?”

“Why would you be a weirdo, Clay?”

“For not having a normal dream about food or sex. Or food and sex together.” I blushed, mercifully not breaking into a ramble to try and cover myself.

“Do you like food and sex at the same time?” he asked seductively.

“I, erm—”

“Do you want to play with food while I...” He didn’t finish, his dark eyes roaming over me with wicked intent.

He made my toes curl.

We’d really come to a different stage, hadn’t we?

“So, erm, what’s the plan today?” I pulled at the collar of my polo shirt.

Fizz rubbed her head against Tae’s chin.

We were both smitten.

“Plenty of research into Jarod Woods today,” he said. “We’re tracking his whereabouts carefully before we make a move.”

“Do you want me to help with that?”

“No. We must pick up on your training. Physical today, spells tonight. Also, I think we should get you out in the field to slay some demons. You need the practice.”

My fear spiked along with a flutter of adrenaline. Reset back to basics, do what I was here to do.

“Okay,” I said. “I can help with research, though. If you like.”

“Concentrate your skills elsewhere. I’ll fill you in with every detail.”

“I can read.”

“Sorry?”

“I can read. I do have reading skills.” Twinges of pain in my head, a kernel of anger burning painfully in my chest.

Huh?

“I didn’t say otherwise,” he countered.

Erm... Why was I being defensive about the research thing? Where had this anger come from? “Ignore me.”

“Would you like to be more involved in research?”

“No. Ignore me. Please.”

“Because you can, and you will be. I’ll not withhold information from you, Clay. My reasons for having you focused on training are for your benefit.”

I nodded frantically. “It’s fine. I was being a dick. My part in this isn’t to hit the books, but to hit the demons.”

He regarded me for a moment. “I have plenty of hits for you.”

More nodding. “Okay. Sorry for being a dick.”

“Don’t worry, Clay. We’ll set off within the next hour to train. I have acquired a place for us. We’ll be left alone. For the spells, we’ll have to return to the sugar factory.”

I nodded, smiled.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Was anyone okay after what'd gone down? "Fine."

"I'll leave you to it." He fussed Fizz some more, then put her down. "I'll call for you when it's time."

"Great."

When he left, I took a pew on the bed, tiny drills screaming in my head.

I need you, Arcana...

I didn't understand myself in that moment.

Really, really didn't. I never got wound up by the small things. I knew my place in this, but I'd, well, not quite jumped down his throat but got a tiny bit annoyed.

Idiot.

I blamed the lack of sleep, though I didn't want it yet. Hopefully, after the spell training, I'd pass out and get in like twelve hours.

How nice.

Yeah, definitely the lack of sleep.

If you say so...

NINE



Tae and I trained together in a gym five miles north of the hotel, the building standing alone in the middle of a field.

We had the place to ourselves for two hours. The billionaire vampire had clearly flashed the cash to get this level of privacy. I was glad and didn't grill him on his process.

At the end of a particularly sweaty session, where I'd practiced plenty of kicks and punches and ended up with an embarrassing boner, Tae made an announcement.

"We're moving back to London tonight," he said.

"Makes sense. You know, what with the sugar factory and stuff."

He nodded. "I would rather be in London."

Couldn't say I agreed. Yeah, it was the place of my birth, but I'd enjoyed being out of the city. Seeing what lay beyond its borders. Sometimes you forget there was another world beyond that capital bubble.

"Cool," I said instead. "How's Raven Tower coming along?"

"We should be able to return within a few weeks. Hopefully. For now, we'll be staying with Archie."

“Oh? Where does he live?”

“A charming house in Hackney. We’ll have to make sure we settle on a consistent identity for when we come and go. One for there, the other for our real faces. It’s all part of my plan to keep us hidden.”

Fairy face creams unleashed! “Okay.” I pushed my sweaty hair back. “Is Victoria coming to say with us?”

“No. She says Archie’s flat stinks of a chip pan.”

“Oh. Does it?”

“Only in the morning.”

“Chips for breakfast?”

“Each to their own,” he replied blandly. “Let’s clean up.”



ARCHIE’S END-OF-TERRACE house sat on a quiet street just off the busy Cambridge Heath Road. The street ended with his house and a small park with swings and two rickety-looking slides.

The house was a Victorian building with three bedrooms. The kind of house synonymous with a leafy London street. And this street was leafy and free of toxic rivers.

Thank God!

Tae parked his new black car in a convenient space outside the house. He opened my door for me—he so needed to stop doing that—and I followed him to the red front door with Fizz in my arms. He carried the luggage.

Number 8.

We were smothered in fairy face cream, not our real selves for any curtain twitchers. Just two guys rocking up, one of them clearly a warlock because the cream didn't hide the warlock mark on my forehead—an incomplete circle with a tiny star at the center.

It hid Tae's vampirism, though.

Archie opened the door. "Hello, you two."

"Hi," I said.

"Hello," Tae greeted.

"And hello to you," he said to Fizz, rubbing her head.

She liked that.

"Come in, come in," the human added. "It's cold out there."

"Oh, is that a candy cane smell?" I asked as I stepped over the threshold.

"That's right, mate," Archie said cheerfully. "Love a scented candle. This is a newie. Candy Cane Carousel."

"Why the carousel?" I wondered.

Fizz meowed as if joining in.

"God knows, mate. It was written on the packaging."

"Smells nice." And not of chips.

Teal wallpaper with silver leaf prints and wooden floors greeted me, spreading from the hallway into the long living room/dining room. A black cloth two-seater sofa and an armchair sat around a TV, a magazine rack beside the chair packed with car magazines.

The ceilings were high and not a cobweb in sight.

There was a bookshelf and a small set of drawers where the living room transitioned into the dining room. The candy cane candle burned on top of the pine drawers, another one on the pine dining table.

Explained the overpowering scent.

The curtains were closed against the night at the front and back of the long room, the central heating on full blast.

“Thanks so much for having us here,” I said.

“Always, mate. Fancy a cuppa?”

“Yes, please.”

For living here, my name was Steve, my face changed to suit for anyone not Tae or myself. Archie had to put up with this new blond, tanned version of me. He seemed unbothered. I guess when you worked for Tae, a master of disguise, you got used to a revolving door of faces.

Fizz also seemed totally unbothered, as if she saw through the fairy magic. I’d have to ask Grindle about that. In fact, I really should contact him on the Whisper app. He’d messaged me to ask if I was okay after the Halloween debacle. I’d replied that I was, but then the whole shit show in Brighton had followed.

Surprisingly, he hadn’t reached out to me since. But neither had I, so I could shut my face.

With our cups of tea, nothing for Tae, we sat down to chill.

“So, you live alone?” I asked Archie, knowing he did. I was just being nosy.

“Bachelor, like matey boy here.” He nodded at Tae. “But I don’t go without. Plenty of ladies grace me with their presence.”

“What a nice way of putting it.”

“Well, it’s true. I’m a bit of a beast. They’re the beauties I feel privileged to kiss them or even breathe their air.”

“Aw, don’t say that,” I said.

“You need specs, mate?”

“You’re fine as you are.”

“I know what I am, Clay. And I’m happy being me.”

“Then why put yourself down?” I asked.

“I’m being truthful.”

I sipped my tea, keeping quiet.

“Don’t let it bother you, mate. I might not sound it, but I’m comfortable in my skin. Anyway, I don’t have time to worry about that shit too much. Or about having a girlfriend. I like things casual, what with my job.”

“I work you too hard,” Tae said.

“And I love it.”

I glanced between them, at the exchange of respectful smiles.

“Sometimes we get to choose how we live our lives,” Archie said. “I chose this. I believe in this. I want to root demons out of our society, especially with you here.” He nodded at me. “You’ve changed the game.”

“Oh.”

“So, no room for a family of my own. I enjoy this too much. I’m not the marriage and babies kind of bloke.”

“Not everyone is,” I replied. “I’m sorry I probed.”

“What? Don’t be daft. We’re getting to know each other.”

“Right. Cool. So, where’s Victoria at tonight?”

“Having the longest bath of her life,” Tae said.

“Yeah, she sent me that,” Archie added with a nod. “I don’t blame her.”

Tae was staring at the electric fire. “We’ll meet up with her in the morning.”

What was going on in his head? Loads. I mean, plenty to worry about, right? But, of course, I turned the spotlight on myself. Wondered if he was thinking about me.

Selfish arsewipe.

More like a greedy arsewipe. Greedy for him, aching for another round. I could feel myself inching closer to the cliff edge, the abyss of obsession waiting to claim me. And I so wanted to take a dive.

Get a grip. It’s none of your business what he’s thinking.

I refrained from staring at Tae’s yummy face—not the easiest thing to do—and got back to chatting with Archie. About his likes and dislikes. I already knew my pancakes breakfast had freaked him out, but I didn’t know he was obsessed with karaoke. Like really obsessed to the point of going to the pub down the road every Thursday night for their weekly sessions.

“I’ve never done it,” I said. “Thought about busking when my warlock power was low. You know, the interim between being depleted and Trace Fall.”

Not something I had to worry about anymore. Trace, the magical remnant of Arcana, fell as snow once a month. Warlocks absorbed it, used it as weak magic. Like my shimmer trick.

“But I make a fire alarm sound like a pop song,” I added. “I wasn’t blessed in the pipes department.”

Archie chuckled. “It’s not about how good you are, but the fun of it.”

“Are you any good? Bet you’ve got a nice voice.”

“Aw, cheers. Yeah, I’m not bad.”

“He is a wonderful singer,” Tae contributed. “He reminds me of George Michael.”

Gosh. The seduction dripping off the vampire’s voice. “Oh yeah?” I squirmed in my seat as my balls tingled, ready to be, erm, licked. “That’s awesome.”

“Are you okay there, Clay?” Archie asked. “Looking hot. Want me to turn the fire off?”

My skin flushed with heat, but not from the fire. How could one man have the power to make me get like this?

“I...” Dry mouth. “I... Could I have something cold to drink, please?”

“Of course, you can.” He got up, heading toward his kitchen.

Tae looked at me, an eyebrow arched. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.

“Something is. Are you feeling unwell?”

Man, are you way off. “I’m fine. Honestly. Having a hot flush.”

“Okay.” Attention back to the fire, deep in thought.

Archie returned with a glass of ice water.

“Thanks so much,” I said, gulping it down.

“Thought the ice was a given.”

“You thought correctly.”

He chuckled. “Okay. Shall we order in some food?”

“That’ll be great.”



AFTER A CHINESE TAKEAWAY where I ate more chicken chow mein than should be humanly possible, I lay on my bed in one of the small spare bedrooms. Blue wallpaper and carpet, complete with a TV and a lava lamp. I switched that lamp on, mesmerized by the gloopy colors.

Kylie played in my earphones, my focus on the glow of the streetlights outside the window. Relaxing. Letting things melt away for a bit.

Fizz remained downstairs, curled up in Tae’s lap the last time I’d seen her. I’d tried to pick her up, got the serious stink eye, and knew to leave her the hell alone.

I opened a lollipop, sucking away on the fairy magic as Kylie’s *Fever* album reached the halfway point.

My phone buzzed.

It was Grindle on the Whisper app—our way of communicating away from prying eyes. The software was encrypted, but I always deleted our conversations for extra caution.

Grindle: I’m sorry for checking in with you late. I hope you’re okay after what happened. I knew you were safe but couldn’t find a moment to reach out.

Me: **I'm fine. Are you?**

Grindle: **Busy. I've closed the post box at Raven Tower with the backup lollipops.**

I'd forgotten about those. Kind of. Not fully forgotten, just low on my list.

Me: **Okay.**

Grindle: **How are your supplies right now?**

Me: **They're getting low.**

Grindle: **Don't panic. I'll get something to you.**

Me: **How? Without him seeing?**

Grindle: **Leave it with me. I'm glad you're okay.**

Me: **How did you know I was okay?**

Grindle: **I reached out to Tae.**

Oh, so he had the time to chat away with the vampire, but not me? I mean, we weren't exactly the best of buddies who went off to have a beer and boogie until the sun came up. But we had a solid bond after he'd found seventeen-year-old me on the brink of falling apart in an alleyway. He'd helped me, knew all my secrets, and didn't try to fuck me over, helping me keep the secrets locked up.

Grindle: **He's Tae Frost. Things are different with him.**

Me: **Because he's loaded.**

Grindle: **Are you pouting?**

Me: **No.**

Grindle: **Don't be offended. It's boring. He's a top client. It's bad enough when I have to delay him.**

I did get it.

Me: I'm not pouting.

Grindle: I'll be in touch tomorrow with details on the new lollipop drop.

I laughed to myself at his words.

Grindle: Delete this conversation. Bye.

I pointlessly sent back a goodbye, then wiped the convo.

At least he'd got in touch. At last. And money was power, so when money talked, you listened. I didn't begrudge him speaking to Tae first. I wasn't offended. Gosh, I, for one, knew there were a gazillion worse things in the world to bug me.

I kicked back, letting my dinner go down some more. We'd be off out later for some spell training. I found another spell when eating dinner, almost dropping noodles on the ancient Grimoire pages.

The spell was another defensive one called *Summon Wall*. Basically, you summoned a wall of whatever shape you created, which came up to protect you from anything. Another huge dose of concentration required to keep it going, and a spell I really wanted to perfect. If I could get to grips with it, that would be two magical defenses, mental wards aside, to use in a jam, as well as two offenses.

For now, I listened to my music, eyes closed. Drifting into a post-food nap. Ah, how lovely.

Until the throne of vines made it not so lovely. The same poxy dream with no more details. Just me standing there like a complete plum twiddling my thumbs.

"This is getting boring now," I spoke in the dream world.

The dream world didn't respond. The lava flowed around me, the vines slithering against each other.

I woke up as Arcana stirred. I blinked up at the ceiling, the magic waiting to play. I felt the rush of a first cigarette—a dizzy sensation that wasn't entirely unpleasant. Not that I found the first time I'd tried a cigarette pleasant by any stretch.

Arcana. So much relief to have it back again.

Now to wake up properly.

“Shit...” I groaned through the haze of sleep, sitting up with silent earphones in my ears. The tape had finished playing.

Rubbing my face, stretching out my sleep, I crawled off the bed to sort myself out with an all-black outfit and a freshen-up.

Tae waited outside my door. I yelped, almost bumping into him.

He was dressed in a black puffer jacket. No hat or scarf or gloves, his hair tied up into a ponytail, the curls at his neck brushing the collar of his jacket.

Fairy... Arcana whispered in response to the fairy magic he used to hide this face before me.

Oh. The cream.

“I just need to top up the fairy cream,” I said, zipping back into the bedroom.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I unscrewed the lid on the glass jar, applying the mixture to my face. It tingled as it went on, rapidly absorbing into my skin. Unlike with Synth, active Arcana didn't shut down fairy magic. It allowed it into me to trick, to lie.

“Yeah, I’m good. Sorry it’s so late.” I wanted to be at the sugar factory by midnight.

“You clearly needed some rest.” He moved into the room, his presence almost changing the air with a confusing energy of heat and ice.

“I did. Blame the takeaway food.”

“At least you enjoyed it,” he said.

“I always enjoy greasy food.”

“I’ve gathered that.”

I faced him. “Cheeky.”

He didn’t smile or react. “There’s talk of a serious lockdown being imposed on the country.”

“What?”

“It’s hearsay at the moment, but the kind of political hearsay with weight to it. The details are sparse right now.”

“Shit. What would that mean? Don’t answer that. You just told me the details are sketchy.” I finished rubbing the cream in.

“It will make our operation more challenging if it goes ahead. But not enough for us to stop.”

“Adapt.”

“Exactly, Clay.”

“I’m ready.” I stuffed my hands into my duffel coat pockets—also black.

He nodded and walked away. I followed, getting eyefuls of his booty cheeks encased in black denim.

Gosh.



AS WE ENTERED the haphazard sugar factory over in Silvertown, on the banks of the River Thames, winding through the mountains of rubble. I tried to stop shaking. We'd been listening to the radio on the journey here, to the latest information on Brighton. Not only was the death toll rising, but the entire town was basically done for as the rivers spread. And Buttons had been at it again. Only an hour ago, he'd murdered a family in their beds in a village outside of London.

He was on his way back to London, if not here already.

Great.

Once we arrived in the empty factory floor space, also known as my magical training ground, I got down to practicing.

I summoned the Mark of Arcana, the orange-gold pentagram burning across the ceiling in a blaze of orange-gold. For a moment, my brown, leathery wings pushed against my skin, staying firmly inside. Bumpy scales spread down my arms, my hands becoming claws. Seconds later, they disappeared.

I glanced at the vampire in a panic, knowing full well the fairy magic hid me well.

With the eek moment over, it was time to try that wall spell.

Protect my all, bring to life a shielding wall, I said on the inside.

Stupid words. The rhymes for spells were always like this.

They took. Yay! I moved my arms around in sweeping gestures, a move to boost the magical energy.

A glass wall of shimmering turquoise rose around me, gleaming in the glow of my light spell. It curved into a cylinder. Sweat broke out on my brow, across my palms. The magic reverberated through my bones, pushing outward as liquid cement from my core, becoming the energy surrounding me. I poured all my focus into it, and it lasted fifteen seconds before I had to let it drop.

I hunched over, drawing in lungfuls of air. “Gosh...”

“Impressive,” Tae said, coming over to rub my back.

“Thanks. That was a toughie.” I straightened, and his hand dropped. “I’m ready to carry on.”

I practiced through the night, running through each of my new spells. Even managed to get the healing spell active with nothing to heal. Still made my hands glow a pearlescent white, which I took as a win.

And I learned a new one—a spell called *hold*. Find a target, cast the spell, hold that target down for as long as you can by halting their movements. I practiced on Tae, which felt weird but managed to get to grips with it quite easily.

Yay! A handy spell to have in my arsenal.

As soon as dawn broke, Arcana went to sleep. I was so ready to follow her (I thought of her as female, like a ship), my energy levels on the downward spiral.

“Man, I really need to sit down.”

“Can you walk?” Tae asked.

“Yeah, I’m not that bad. Just worn out.”

“Take it easy when we leave.”

I leaned on him on our walk back through the factory’s rubble.

The sun was coming up, the sky a riot of pinks and oranges. Pretty. I’d seen many sunrises in my time, but they always seemed to be more special at this time of year.

We paused to look at it, his arm around me. As if we were a couple taking in the wonder of nature’s paintbrush.

Ha! A couple. Yeah, right.

Fuck buddies. Nothing more than that.

Really?

He released me, went and opened the car door for me.

“It’s so weird you do that,” I said.

“Why?”

“The billionaire opening a door.”

“I can’t open a door because I have money?”

Why did I ever open my mouth? “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant.”

“I’m back to my whole ‘where are the servants?’ thing. Ignore me. It’s nice you open the door. Really sweet.” I blushed. “So, erm, thanks.”

Blushing again despite the cum and kisses and fingers.

Ahem.

I got into the passenger seat. He closed the door, walking around to the driver’s side. My head was swampy, my limbs shaking. An ache pulsed in every corner, a craving rising.

A craving for my magic to come back to me.

I miss you...

“Do you want to stop somewhere for breakfast?” Tae asked, getting into his seat.

“Can we just go home? I can’t face food just yet.”

“Of course.” He started the car.

I fell asleep minutes later, waking up that afternoon tucked into bed with Fizz beside me.

After taking in this fact, I went back to sleep, dreaming of Tae naked in moonlight, walking through space. Stars shimmered with each of his footsteps. He never seemed to get far away, more like walking in place. Fine by me. It meant I got to feast upon his firm buttocks that were the perfect fit for my face.

Erm...

...ahem.

TEN



The demon backflipped and threw two knives at me. Up came my wall, the magic words flying out of my mouth at the speed of light.

Okay, not quite that fast, but super quick all the same.

The blades ricocheted off my wall, clattering to the ground a safe distance away from the acrobatic arsewipe's grasp.

"Fucking prick!" the demon hissed at me.

We were inside a private art gallery around the back of The Royal Academy. Pretty respectable, dealing in expensive stuff. The concrete space, trying too hard to be edgy, was big enough for a scrap.

I'd broken a painting with my push spell. No great loss, in my opinion. Some mess on canvas, looking like Fizz's sick.

The demon rushed me, swinging punches at the wall. Not manifesting his demonic energy, thank goodness. That would only attract the ADU's attention, and I was so over dealing with them, despite my sympathies going out to the fallen Brighton lot.

"Come out and fight me, pussy!" the idiot hissed.

My magic held firm, going past fifteen seconds. After a week of practicing and killing another demon two days ago, I

could manage thirty seconds before throwing in the towel.

The demon headbutted the wall. Yikes. “Fucking fight me!”

His dark brown skin didn’t so much as split under the force of his crack. That would’ve cut my forehead open and knocked me the hell out if I’d tried it. I guess some of us are built for headbutts. The rest of us, not so much.

I glanced at Tae, who snapped the neck of his foe. Not to kill him, but to leave him in some serious pain.

Ouch.

Ten seconds left.

Tae tossed the other pale-skinned demon to floor, then grabbed my vicious adversary.

The trouble with killing demons at night is you had to get them at the best moment. In this case, midnight or beyond to be slain. But not every demon was available to be killed after twelve.

So inconvenient.

Tae had the knife thrower in an arm lock, facing me. The demon struggled, trying to kick Tae’s legs out from under him. No use. He might be brutal, but Tae didn’t piss around.

My wall dropped. I staggered back, catching my breath. I really had to work on lessening this brief yet pesky after-effect.

With time.

“You’re the bastards hunting us down,” the demon said, spitting at the ground. “Don’t think we’re stupid to not notice.”

A reputation? Great.

“Demons disappearing outside of official channels.” The arsewipe shook his head. “Naughty, naughty. Shouldn’t be having yourselves talismans.”

Man, had this wanker missed the point of those ‘disappeared’ he so cockily mentioned.

They’re dead, idiot!

“You’re the toughest warlock I’ve come across,” he added. “I’ll give you that.” He snarled at me. “And I’ve come across many warlocks. Come on them, in them. Prefer tits and cunt, but I’ll take a dick now and again.”

“I’m not interested,” I returned.

“No? Can’t bribe my way out of this by fucking you into the wall?”

“Your manky cock will never get near this.” I tapped my butt.

“Who said anything about that orifice?”

God, he made me sick.

David and Damien Stone. Demons posing as brothers who ran an art empire. Big names in the arty world, Tae posing as Tim, one of their major clients. They hadn’t killed anyone like the demon I’d taken out the other day but were working on gaining power in local government. Tae told me all about their dealings, manipulating people into getting what they wanted. David, the brother with the twisted neck, was seeking the role of London Mayor—Damien being his right-hand man. I was surprised the current mayor wasn’t a demon already, to be honest. But hey ho.

A demon mayor? What fun.

Tae's investigations into this pair were now at an end, getting rid of them the grand finale. Another kill. Another piece of scum gone. Well, two pieces.

The Jarod Woods stuff was still pending.

"Time for this to stop," Tae as Tim told the demon.

"It'll never stop. I'll find those you banished, and we'll find our way back. Be sure we do." He spat again. "Sleep with one eye open, fuckers."

My orange-gold arrow manifested above my right shoulder, then split into two arrows. One killing blow for each demon.

"What's that?" the clueless demon asked.

I smiled, a malicious force lifting my lips. "Arcana."

His eyes widened, his brain clearly catching up. "How—"

The arrow struck him in the heart, the other shooting off to kill his brother.

Two more demons down.

Their bodies crumpled into black ash.

Tae texted Archie. The human and his team would clean up any messes, any signs we'd been here.

"This one will attract some significant media attention," the vampire said. "But so will we. As a distraction."

"Oh? As ourselves, do you mean?"

"Yes. Are you happy to be thrust completely into the public eye?"

"Erm, yeah. I guess."

"Are you sure?"

I scratched the top of my left thigh. “It needs to happen.”

We’d been mentioned on one gossip website, but nothing to break the internet yet.

“We have a rep,” I said.

No fingers were pointed at the real us being demon hunters.

“Our fake identities have one,” he said. “All the more reason to sow the seeds of a media circus to keep *us* away from that reputation. But you have to be ready for this.”

I rolled my shoulders. “Is it safe?”

“Safer than doing nothing. Let the reputation of the human and the warlock hunters spread in the demon world if it has to. The rest of the world can focus on the vampire and the warlock. If you’re really sure.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m sure.”

“It’s my job to worry about you, Clay.”

And make me cum... Our new sexual relationship hadn’t continued since the fingering.

Should that be The Fingering?

“What’s the plan?” I asked, trying not to think of the power of those fingers and how much I wanted them again.

His usually serious expression reached new levels of seriousness. Shadows moved in his eyes, his features distorting into something creepy even though they didn’t really. He stayed beautiful, his skin an alabaster glow to warm my cockles.

“Winter Gold.”

“Huh?”

“Winter Gold.”

I took a moment. “Oh, do you mean the opera singer?”

“Yes.”

“What about her?” The cogs of my mind got to working.

“She’s having a party.”

“Wait. She’s a vampire, right?” One of the few vampires in the public eye, like Tae.

Famous opera singer. Secret private life like other vampires. From a world completely away from mine. Opera? Pfft. Not for me, thanks. But Winter Gold’s legendary status managed to reach me, nonetheless.

A vampire opera singer throwing a party Tae didn’t seem happy about.

“Are we going to her party?” I asked.

“Yes.”

Okay. “Is this where you want to, erm, kick off the circus?” I asked. “Is this going to be a grand event?”

“Yes, on both counts.”

I felt my forehead crease. “I don’t get it.”

“Winter Gold is my sire.”

Penny-drop moment. “Your...”

“My sire. My maker.”

“Winter...” I coughed in shock. “Winter Gold is your sire? How? I mean, I know how. Actually, I don’t know how because I don’t know how vampires make other vampires, and I’ll shut up now.”

He folded his arms. “We met in 1776, Seoul, South Korea. I was living with my parents—twenty-five, poor, and completely lost.”

He continued. “She came across me one day, offered me a bath at her home on the coast.”

“A bath?”

“It wasn’t often I got to bathe.”

“Oh.”

“After the bath in her opulent house, she offered me clothes and food and wine. I took all of the opportunities. Indulged in her and her gifts. This was the Winter long before she became the star. When she went by the name of Lee Min-Kyu.” He unfolded his arms. They fell to his sides, his hands curled into fists. He didn’t look at me but at one of the crappy paintings—though I gathered in an unseeing way.

“I fell for her over the course of the evening. For her beauty, for her voice, for her stories. She charmed me into bed. We made love all night, enjoying each other until she took me home and left without a word.” He sighed. “I longed for her to return, but she didn’t until a week later. Again, she took me to her coastal home and let me bathe and eat and make love to her. I’d never known pleasure like it.”

I shuffled from foot to foot, a little uncomfortable because I was a dick.

He didn’t notice my stupid unease.

Good.

“She didn’t want me to leave this time,” Tae continued. “So I stayed, writing to inform my mother and father that their only son would not be coming home. A selfish move. They

depended on me to bring money into the home. I found work where I could, my wages always menial. They were unable to work themselves. But I didn't care in that moment. I'd tasted ecstasy. I wanted nothing but Lee Min-Kyu. My beautiful Winter.”

His eyes moved to mine. Radiant dark fires snatching my soul.

“My parents died a month later.”

“I'm... I'm sorry, Tae.”

He didn't stop staring at me. “My guilt and sorrow were too much to bear. I tried to join them, devastated by letting them down so terribly. But Winter wouldn't let me die. She needed me now—so she said. Sweet nothings whispered into willing ears are powerful weapons. They worked on me over the weeks following my loss, Winter firmly in my heart. From the ashes of my grief, I could rise up and honor the memory of my parents. Love. Be a better man. And Winter could help me make that possible.”

Man, did I ever want to hug him.

“To be with her came the condition of immortality,” he said.

“That's when she made you a vampire?”

He nodded. “We sailed to Rome first. She wanted to show me the beauty of the world, what we could see together if we explored without the constraints of time.” A pause, eyes still locked on mine. “After we made love one night, she turned me.” Another pause. “Turning requires an act of love, sexual love. Real intimacy that only comes with the joining of souls. It requires the human to be completely drained of blood until their heart stops.”

“During the, erm, act?”

“Yes. Then, within a small window of opportunity, the vampire feeds their blood into the human. The human heart beats again, this time as a new heart. An undead heart.” He looked away. “We haven’t covered this part of your vampire studies yet, have we?”

“N-no.”

Tae folded his arms again. “I made Tae Ae-Jung, my wife, this way. Through love. She was a human when I met her. We wanted...” He didn’t carry on.

“Tae?”

Then he did. “Vampires can breed during a turning. It is rare, and it is dangerous. Often the child doesn’t develop properly in the womb. We are undead, but with working hearts and blood and some organs functioning after ‘death.’ But this isn’t death. This is undead, an undying state. An altered state. I have a brain but no need for a liver or kidneys. I have semen, though, and a woman has eggs for that semen to fertilize, both only becoming fertile during a turning. A magic all of its own.”

“Wow.”

“But a fetus, should one be created during that act, faces an uphill battle in a body that isn’t necessarily built to nurture it. There are three vampires in the world born from a turning. My son, Tae Ji-Hoon, was one of them.”

His son’s name. My heart jolted.

“He survived. When he came out, we fed him our blood. It was touch and go, but he took the blood well and became our little miracle.” His brows came together. “I was excited to see him grow into a man.” He faced me. “Vampire babies grow

into their twenties and stop aging from there. Sired vampires remain the age they were made at.”

Oh, God. The hurt in his heart must be horrendous. I really wanted to hug him.

“We’ve got off track,” he said.

“I, erm—”

“Winter Gold demands my attendance to her party in Paris.”

“Paris?”

“Yes, Clay.”

“Demands?”

“When your sire demands to see you, you have no choice.”

“Oh. Didn’t you say it’d been ages since you’d seen her?”

He didn’t answer for what felt like ages. “Sires and their spawn are connected—a metaphysical link. She has sensed something from me.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

“But...” Gosh, my head was spinning from the information. “How are we going to get to Paris?”

The Witch Queen and King of the United Kingdom had announced a country-wide lockdown. Within a day, so many checkpoints were set up across the counties and towns and cities. Airport and port security intensified. ADU agents patrolled the streets in huge numbers, aided by police and volunteer witches. Getting out and about on missions was, well, a mission. If it weren’t for Tae, I’d never be able to get around. He covered us, his team helping. We slipped through

net after net, hiding with the fairy cream and using different cars each time to get around the city. Killing demons, training, heading off to the sugar factory without even a whiff of an incident.

I followed him into the back alleys behind the gallery. Before I knew it, we were driving through the streets, coming to a stop at a checkpoint a mile away.

Tae showed our fake papers, and we moved on, my heart in my mouth as always.

“When is this party?” I asked.

I still aimed to go in for a hug.

“December the second.”

It was currently Monday, November 8th. “Oh. A little while away yet.”

“I thought we could cause our media distraction in the meantime.”

I slouched in the seat, head bowed. “Okay.”

Paris. Abroad. Leaving the UK.

Wow.

“One final detail, Clay,” he said.

“There’s more?”

“Something important, which makes speaking with Winter Gold all the more important.” More shadows swam in his eyes.

What had his sire done to him?

“Jarod Woods will be at this party.”



TWO WEEKS after it'd begun, the Tae and Clay show rolled on through November. Its latest stop at a fancy tailor in Mayfair.

Throughout the years, I'd walked these streets of expensive shops and posh, well, everything. Eyeing up the goods in the windows, drooling over some of it, wishing I could pull out a credit card and declare, "I'll take one in each color, darling!"

I got measured up for a tux, a guy completely out of place amongst the suits and the oak design of the shop. All very gentlemanly. Not a trace of sparkle inside.

I'd have thrown a bit of glitter on the walls or something. You know, to elevate it past the hoity-toity vibes.

By the end of it, I had myself a new tux, thanks to Tae, and plenty of paparazzi outside to add to the mix. Clicking away, jostling for a scoop. We were already online, creating a buzz after being spotted out together a lot.

The vampire made sure we were on full display in this shop window.

Mayfair, like a lot of Central London, scored a lucky miss when the toxic rivers showed up. There were many untouched places thriving while the rest of the world fell. Gosh, the guilt. For Brighton, for those I'd left behind on Golden Lane at the shopping center at Elephant & Castle. I needed to do something. Give back to that homeless community that'd given me so much.

I'd give them my salary from this demon hunting gig. The cash just sat there doing nothing because Tae's own cash ran

the show.

“Are you ready to leave?” he asked.

He really radiated unattainable perfection today in a crisp white shirt and burgundy trousers. More than usual. But then I thought that every day. His hair flowed free as liquid obsidian, the curls bouncing with every step he took. A walking wet dream who watched me get measured up.

When I was done, dressed again in designer jeans and a jumper, a member of staff took the new garments to the car as we waited in the shop. Some of the photographers, and a few members of the public, snapped the loading, then turned back to us. A serious crowd now gathered outside.

Shit.

Nope. It's fine. You agreed to this.

Tae linked his arm in mine, selling the lie. Sowing those seeds.

Kind of a lie. We'd set tongues wagging with an unusual romance storyline the media started, and we didn't deny or confirm. Yet.

The warlock and the vampire. How cute. How odd. How hot.

In real life, there wasn't a romance between us, but a confusing mess. A sexy mess.

If only it could be one...

I turned to gaze up at him, offering a warm smile. He did the same back, photo-ready, both of us smart for the cameras—even if he did leave me in the dust.

We walked out of the tailor's arm in arm, hitting a wall of immense sound. Cameras flashed, and people screamed for quotes and details, and I couldn't help but wince and shrink into him. He put his arm around me, guiding me to the back of the car.

The crowd loved that.

He didn't drive. Instead, he sat in the back with me while a member of his staff not privy to his secret demon-hunting or my Arcana drove us across London. Away from the glare of the spotlight and those gossip-hungry bastards.

When we arrived at the Orchid Hotel, an establishment for vamps, more cameras caught us. Arm in arm again, we went inside, not speaking until we reached the suite we were staying in.

I sagged with relief as the door closed, Tae carrying the new clothes.

"That was intense," I breathed.

"I know."

"How do you deal with that all the time?"

"I try not to make a habit of it."

"Oh."

"I keep away from those things unless I need to show my face." He draped the clothes bags across the sofa in the lavish suite. The sofa he slept on so I could take the bed—no matter how much I tried to insist he have it.

Okay, so the plan. Head to Paris on his private jet (eek!), use this hotel for Tae and Clay moments, disappear and head back to Archie's as other men to be the hunters and to make

sure Fizz was okay. I wanted her to come to the hotel but also didn't want to cause her more upheaval.

I checked in on her three times a day via video call.

She was in good hands with Archie.

Hunting. Plotting. Playing things carefully. Being smart at the new checkpoints. Keeping our veils over everything.

Lies. Lies. Lies.

Kill. Kill. Kill.

Plenty of night troubles. And day ones.

I ignored any doubts, even if they did worry me. And Winter Gold worried me big time. Why would Jarod Woods be at this party of hers? I mean, they were major celebs, so why wouldn't they occupy the same space from time to time? Only, the timing seemed super convenient.

Killing two birds with one stone wasn't always the best outcome.

Butterflies with an attitude took up residence in my tummy, moving up to my chest. They'd flutter aggressively until this was over.

"Would you like something from room service?" Tae asked.

"Sure." I picked up the menu from beside the telephone. "Could do with a sandwich. A BLT, maybe? And a coke. Oh, and some ready salted crisps. Maybe a slice of lemon drizzle cake. No, chocolate... No, lemon. Gah! I don't know."

He smiled, opening his laptop over on the elegant oak desk by the window. Sunlight streamed through the window, illuminating him between the burgundy velvet drapes.

“Let me know when you’re ready, and I’ll place the order,” he said.

“Okay.” I got down to the serious business of deciding on cake.



CHOCOLATE ORANGE CAKE won the match.

Wow. My mouth would never recover from that amazing taste.

I leaned back on the sofa, patting my belly after the huge sandwich, crisps, and cake. Kind of content, if only for a few minutes.

Tae tapped away on his laptop, typing something up. Mine was beside me, two tabs open. One about me and Tae, a speculation piece on the vampire’s sexuality and why the hell he was hanging around with a freak like me.

The murder of his family wasn’t public knowledge. The names of his wife and son were never mentioned, and neither was their existence.

Tae wanted it kept that way.

The latest headline read:

A Christmas Romance for Billionaire Heartthrob?

Yes, they used my surname for the headline as a pun, having found out my name because why wouldn’t they? It wasn’t a secret. Plus, Christmas was coming up, so why not milk my last name and get the ball rolling for Christmas puns galore from now on?

The other open tab was on my grandma. Beryl Christmas from Luton, Bedfordshire. Seventy-one. Lived in a ground floor flat. Widowed. I knew all this already, of course, but I'd come to a point where I took reaching out seriously. And with Tae's resources, I had her phone number.

Post-food joy dead, I pondered and craved Arcana. My left leg bounced frantically, skin itching for the magic.

I miss you...

No. No. No. This wasn't happening.

I want you...

"Tae?"

"Yes?" he asked without turning.

"I want to donate my salary to the people at the shopping center. *My* people."

He stopped typing, looking over his shoulder. "Okay."

"Can we take it down there at some point? I'll draw it out." I had a bank account now, after all.

"I can give them—"

"No," I stopped him. "I want to do this out of my own pocket. Which is really your pocket, but this is money I've earned working for you. Kind of. Not really. I just... I just shouldn't have it. They should. They need it, I don't." I gasped, shaking my head. "Listen to me. Not needing money. Words to not live by."

"Only, you do live by them now."

"Until we're done," I said too quickly with a bite to my tone.

Huh? What was wrong with me?

He fully turned around now. “Why would we be done?”

“I don’t know why I said that.”

“After our working relationship is finished, do you mean?”
he asked, standing up.

“Y-yeah. But I didn’t mean to say it. We’re friends, and we won’t be done.”

What was my problem? Where did this come from?

I miss you...

“Oh, shit...” I breathed, the food churning in my stomach.

“What’s wrong, Clay?”

“I don’t know.” Dizziness, a rising nausea.

He moved toward me. “You’re sweating.”

“I...” My vision blurred, my body swaying. “I need to... I need to sit down...”

“You are sitting down.”

The vampire loomed over me, fading into a melted image. Darkness danced at the edges of my vision. Spilled ink spreading, blinding me.

“I miss you...” I heard myself say. “I miss...” My stomach lurched, and I retched. Thick, acidic goo came up my throat and sprayed me... Sprayed him.

I miss you...

Can’t see...

Miss...

Can’t see...

Hands on me. Arms around me. Vampire...

Vampire... Arcana said.

Why can't you be here now? Fully awake. Not fair. I miss you.

Touching me. A voice. Soothing. Deep. Nurturing hands, making sure everything was okay.

My vision cleared, a film peeled away from my lenses. I blinked at him, my throat burning, my mouth full of dry fire.

“Water...”

He got me water as I blinked, slouched.

“Here.” Tae tilted my chin, gave me the liquid.

Gosh, that felt good.

“What happened?” he asked as I gathered myself.

I sat up, a headache blooming in my forehead.
“Something... Shit.”

“Take your time.” He rubbed my back.

“Arcana,” I said. “I’m craving it.”

“Tell me more.”

“I’ve never been addicted to anything, so I don’t know.” I drank more water. “But it feels like I’m an addict, or how I’d imagine one to be. I start shaking. I think about how much I miss it.”

“That’s worrying.”

“Yeah. Last thing I need.” More water.

“Did you ever feel a craving for Trace?”

“Not like this. I missed it when I used it up and couldn’t wait for Trace Fall. But my body never reacted this way.”

He nodded. “We’ll monitor this. I’ll see if I can find any records pertaining to addiction.”

“I’ll help. There might be something in the grimoires.”

“Okay.” He touched my face, felt my forehead. So caring. So soft. “Let’s get this mess cleaned up.”

“Sorry I puked on you.”

“It’s fine, Clay. This is all still so new.”

“Being the one and only doesn’t help, right?”

“It makes it complicated.” He smoothed the side of my face with the back of his hand. Leaned closer, then pulled back.

Good. Sick breath wasn’t a turn-on.

I got up, ready to guzzle mouthwash and mints. “Want me to clean this up?”

He stood, heading back to his laptop. “I’ll call someone up.”

He’d considered kissing me again. Right? “O-okay.”



FRESHLY CHANGED AND CLEAN, with minty fresh breath and no headache, I dialed the number of Beryl Christmas.

I wanted to be sick again.

“*Hello?*” a woman answered on the third ring.

“Hi, erm, hi.”

“*Who is this.*”

“Erm...”

“Not interested.”

“Wait!”

Silence.

“This is Clay Christmas.”

More silence.

“Your grandson.”

“I know who you are,” she said.

Good. Still there.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“To talk.”

“I’m busy.”

“Oh.”

“Come tomorrow morning.”

“Really?”

“You’ve got my number, so you must have my address.”

She didn’t sound surprised or full of any emotion.

“Thank you. What time should I come over?”

“Eleven.”

“Okay. Can I bring a friend?”

“Don’t care. Bye.” She hung up.

Hmmm. This would be interesting.

ELEVEN



Thursday. Eleven in the morning on a street in Luton, a town thirty-three miles north of London. My heart pounded in my ears as I faced the blue door of a ground floor flat in a five-story block.

Thankfully, no press had seemed to have followed us, despite being ourselves for this.

The blue door opened, heat spilling out into this gray November morning.

Oh, God. My grandma. Any moment now, I'd see her face.

Tae gave my arm a squeeze.

The stench of tobacco and fried food wafted at me, along with the cloying heat. My nerves were at a breaking point.

And there she was, a hunched woman leaning on a walking stick with white hair set in a short do—a stereotypical old lady number. Pale like me, but rosier around the cheeks. A map of lines and crevasses cracked her face, her small blue eyes watery—not from tears. She wore a white jumper with a silver polar bear on the front and purple slacks.

“Morning,” I greeted her. “I’m Clay.” I offered my hand. “It’s really nice to meet you.”

She grunted, turning her back and waddling off with her stick.

Right.

“You don’t have to do this,” Tae said.

“I want to. It’ll be fine.”

I already knew it wouldn’t be. This woman didn’t want me here. But I followed her into the flat.

Floral wallpaper peeled from the walls, yellowed by nicotine in the air, from the hallway to the small living room. The years of yellowing was worse here, spread across the ceiling, in the net curtains across the window.

Beryl lowered herself into a salmon-colored armchair, the material at its arms frayed. She gestured to a matching sofa beside it, both seats angled toward a muted TV playing some daytime talk show.

There were a lot of doilies in the room and figurines of dancers—ballet, men and women mid twirl. And photos of a man and a boy. The same man?

“That’s my Adam,” she said without feeling.

There was a photo in a gold frame on the table beside the sofa. A man in his twenties. Laughing, a warlock mark glowing on his forehead from what seemed to be bright sunshine. A summertime shot?

My dad.

In a separate picture next to it was a blonde woman I assumed was my auntie—his sister. With the vibes my grandma gave off, I didn’t expect to see a picture of my mum here.

I folded my hands in my lap, sitting on the closest point to Beryl with Tae beside me.

She stared at me.

“Thanks for having us over,” I said.

“Been expecting it.” She picked up a cup and saucer from the mahogany table beside her chair. I noticed the thick stains of many uses of tea inside it, the dregs of this cup swirling as she lifted it to her lips.

My grandma didn’t offer her guests a cup.

“You were?” I asked.

She slurped, put the cup and saucer back with a shaky hand. “Always been expecting it.”

“Oh.”

“Ask what you want to ask.”

Wow. Talk about frosty.

“Well, I wanted to come and meet you and, well, ask you some things about my dad.”

“What about him?”

Everything! “I don’t know where to start, really.”

“Why do you care about your dad?”

“Because I want to know about my life. About where I came from.”

Beryl picked at her fingernails, not looking at me. “How old are you now?”

“Twenty-four. Twenty-five next June.”

Mean eyes up to me. “And now you want to know things?”

Seriously? “I... I never knew how to approach you or anyone. I found out you weren’t living in London, that my dad has a sister, and my mum a twin brother. But I didn’t know what to do with the information.” Deep breath. “Is she my aunt?” I nodded at the picture of the blonde woman.

She shook her head. “Emma.”

“Right.” I did know that.

“Don’t bring up that bitch in my house,” she hissed.

“Emma?”

“Maxine. Your mum. And don’t talk about her brother.” She sniffed, lips curling into a snarl. “Ever.”

Mum. Uncle Craig.

I didn’t probe that poisonous response. How did you react to a putdown about a mother you didn’t know?

“I had dreams for my sweet boy,” she said. “Adam was a lovely lad. Really happy. Loved football and cake. Saw him going far. Then his best friend died. Killed himself with pills and booze he stole from his dad. A horrible man, he was. Beat that poor boy black and blue.” She shook her head. “Poor Lewis. He was only a kid.”

Again, I didn’t say anything.

“It really messed with Adam’s head,” she continued. “I tried my best with him. But after losing my husband, George, I found it really hard to cope.” She shook her head. “Adam fell in with the wrong crowd. Met your mum.” She sniffed again, looking at me like it was my fault. The lines on her face must’ve represented her deep-rooted hate.

She reached for a packet of cigarettes from the table beside her, the white and purple packet resting on a yellowed doily.

“I’ve seen you both on the telly.” She popped a cigarette into her mouth. Lit it up, took a drag. “Dunno why the media have taken a shine to you.”

Neither of us said a word.

“Dunno what your dad would make of it all. His only son parading around with another man. And a vampire at that.”

Oh, did I get to add homophobia to my list of reasons to dislike her?

“Couldn’t care what your mum would think. Evil little witch.”

I did speak now. “What was evil about her?”

Another puff on her smoking stick. “Got him into drugs, didn’t she? Didn’t let him move without her. She was the final fucking tug in the wrong direction. A slut, too. She slept with any man that’d have her. Shocked Adam is your dad, really.”

“Is he?”

“Unfortunately. A miracle if you ask me.”

Did she think she could hurt me with this? “I’m sorry for your loss.”

She nodded, flicking her ash into a glass ashtray. “I miss him. But that don’t mean I want a relationship with you.”

Nothing I didn’t expect. I wouldn’t be getting answers about Adam Christmas from her. Maybe that was a good thing. If she suddenly blurted out, “My boy had demon blood” in front of Tae, the resulting awkwardness wouldn’t be fun.

This was risky, really.

“That’s fine,” I said.

But what about Arcana? Did she know anything?

My gut told me no. If I told her, I wouldn't be one bit surprised if she sold me down a painful river.

I kept a lid on the big reveals.

She snarled at me. "That's fine, is it? Then why are you here?"

"I just wanted to know more about my dad."

Beryl stubbed out her cigarette. She immediately got herself another one. "What's your life been like?"

"Not good. Foster homes, care homes. Homeless until recently."

"I read the homeless bit in the paper this morning." She wrinkled her nose.

"Oh."

"You don't look homeless."

"It doesn't really have a look."

"I think it does." Her small, mean eyes narrowed as she blew smoke my way. "Dirty. Downtrodden."

I always kept clean. Sometimes I did feel downtrodden. Who doesn't go to sad and dark places sometimes? It's how we climb out of them that counts. At least that counted to me.

Bring the sunshine. No matter how nasty the grandmother.

I smiled. "I've survived."

"I suppose it's my fault."

"What is?"

She pointed at me, waving her finger up and down. "This. You. Your upbringing."

"I didn't say that."

“But you think it. Everyone will think it when they find out.”

“No one needs to—”

“Clay Christmas. Surname gives it away. In the press, on the telly. Git neighbors and wankers knocking to ask me about you, if we’re related. You made sure of that. Wanted a scapegoat. Wanted to cause a scene. Make me look like the old bitch of a nan who didn’t want nothing to do with you.”

“Isn’t that true?” Tae stepped in.

“What did you say?” Her lips curled.

He didn’t answer.

“Tae, it’s okay,” I said. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You’re bloody right it doesn’t matter,” she snapped. “The best thing your slut mum could’ve done for you is throw you in the Thames.”

“You’d do well to shut your mouth,” Tae warned her.

“And we’re done,” I said, standing up.

She didn’t take the vampire’s threat. “Or given you to one of those demons who likes babies.”

A famous demon case years ago had shocked the country. Baby eating demons traveling across the UK in vans. Nasty stuff, the scum now banished. Nice to know Beryl wanted that for me.

“We’re leaving,” I said.

“Get the fuck out of my flat. You’re not my grandson. You’re the spawn of that whore. I don’t want to see your face again. But I will, won’t I? You’re flaunting your shit in the press.”

A low growl emitted from Tae.

“And you can fuck off, too,” she spewed at him. “Shame the sunshine don’t burn you up like it does in books. I’d pay to see you crispy.”

With some odd instinct, I threaded my fingers in his and led him out of the cesspit of hate. Blocking her voice out as it trailed after us like a noxious cloud. A fart of nicotine and loathing.

Back in the fresh air, we kept walking until we reached the car.

I released his hand. Leaning on the car, I tilted my head back and drew a deep breath.

“Good to be out of there,” I said.

Tae stood beside me, the pair of us leaning on the uber-expensive vehicle.

“Clay?”

“I’m fine.”

“That was a lot of hate to take in.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know how to be hurt even if I wanted to be. It means nothing, just someone spouting off nasty shit. You think I’m not used to hearing stuff like that?”

There wasn’t any room inside me for this pain to slip into. This woman’s barbs were feathers to a fire. My fire.

“There’s nothing there, Tae.”

“But she’s your grandmother.”

“Only by blood. She’s made it quite clear that she doesn’t want to know me. She’s ashamed of me, and she doesn’t have answers.”

“She’s a fool,” he said.

“Thanks, Tae.”

“She’d be lucky to have a grandson like you in her life.”

“Erm, thanks again.”

He closed the gap between us, taking my face in his hands.
Warm against my skin.

“Your hands are hardly ever cold when you touch me,” I said.

“I know.”

“On purpose.”

He licked his pale lips. “Yes.”

Vampires could adjust their temperatures at will—another awesome thing about them.

He lowered his head and pressed those gorgeous lips to mine, as warm as his touch. Taking me by surprise. For a moment, I tensed, then relaxed into it as his hand moved to the back of my head, fingers drawing circles on my scalp. I shuddered, kissing him right back. He pressed himself into me, his excitement saying hello.

Right here?

Movement beside the car. The clicking of cameras.

We’d been papped.

Tae laughed against my mouth, then broke the kiss. He took the lapels of my jacket, eyes on me.

“Money shot,” he whispered to me and kissed my forehead. “Finally, some fuel to those romance rumors.”

“I…” *Is it a real one?*

No. Don't be so stupid!

“I...” Apparently, he'd stolen my capacity to form sentences.

“Let's get out of here. I want to take you somewhere.”

He opened my door for me as usual, then off we went.

“Where are we going?”

The corner of his mouth cocked into a smile. “I'd like you to come with me to a feeding club. I need to top myself up.”

I swallowed. “Really?”

“It can be an extra part of your vampire lessons.”

Oh. My. God. “What do you do in those clubs?”

“You'll see for yourself.”

Wow. I hadn't expected this turn of events. “O-okay.”

“If you want to, that is.”

“I'd love to.” Shit. Too eager. “I mean if you don't mind.”

His smile was mischievous, a wicked kind of sexy. “Excellent. When we get back to London, we'll return to the hotel first. I want to wash the stink of that woman off me.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Maybe my auntie or my uncle would give me the answers I needed.

TWELVE



Two hours later, after sucking on a whole lollipop Grindle had left in a post box outside the hotel, I followed Tae into a club not too far from the Orchid Hotel. A nameless building with nothing special about it on the outside.

My heart still beat a little too quickly after sneaking out to grab the lollies earlier from my new drop-off place. Tae hadn't followed me, and I didn't think he'd seen me.

Gosh. This risky behavior was messing with my head.

The club's décor of red and black really set the mood, as did the opulent chandeliers. A complete contrast to the bland exterior.

"Wow," I whispered.

It was the kind of place you'd expect a vampire from a novel to hang out in. A bit cliché, a bit worn around the edges—the black tiles needed a bit of love. But I liked it for that. Decadent, full of character. If those scarlet-painted walls could talk, if the drapes whispered, oh the stories they would tell.

"There are more modern places than this," Tae said. "I'm not interested in those."

"I don't blame you. I like it here."

This was the ground floor. A bar with red and black furniture, a relaxed space for a drink, to chat. Soft classical music swirled around me. A proper chilled-out playlist of pianos and gentle strings.

But upstairs...

The feedings happened up there.

“Come with me,” Tae said.

I went with him up a steep staircase, keeping close to him. At the top, he led me down a corridor of closed doors and soft moans. I smelled sex and wine and blood. My head spun with the scents, with the intoxicating sounds.

“What—” I tried.

“Here.” He stopped before a black door. “Are you ready?”

“For what?”

“To see.” His voice dripped with erotic energy.

“I... I guess so.”

He opened the door. A scarlet room, a black X-cross for BDSM fun in the center of it. Chains hung from the ceiling, pooling on the floor. Some were fixed to the floor and the walls, with an array of shackles and ropes on a table, too.

Kinky shit for kinky people.

Like Tae?

“What is this?” I asked.

“This is how I like to feed.”

“Oh. You tie up your feeder?” I wondered.

“Yes.”

“Gets your blood pumping, right?” Why did I say that so seductively?

I knew why. The scents, the sounds, the chains—they pushed a button in me.

“I can sense your blood pumping, Clay,” he said.

What the hell? I met his crimson flushed eyes. “You can?”

“I can.”

I licked my lips, my cock stirring. “What happens now? You have a feeder coming?”

So... I was going to be watching a sexy show of some kind?

He closed the door behind us.

“What... What are you doing?”

He removed his coat, hanging it on a coat stand by the door. “Clay?”

“Yes, Tae?”

He unbuttoned his shirt halfway. “Would you like to feed me?”

I lost my balance in surprise, staggering to the side.

He rushed forward to steady me. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“I shocked you.”

I swallowed—a proper gulp. “You did. I thought you didn’t want to drink from me.”

“That was then. This is now.”

“Oh.”

“It can be fun.” His hands were on my shoulders. “If you want it to be.”

Oh, did I want it to be. “Right, we’re having fun now.”

“Only if you want to.”

“I won’t get hurt?” I asked.

“Never.”

“Okay,” I said, heat in my groin.

“Are you sure?”

“I guess so.”

“You don’t have to do this. Maybe this isn’t—”

“I... I want to.”

“I thought after the encounter with your grandma, you’d need some pleasure,” he said.

Whatever happened to lunch and walk in the park?

Feeding him. Letting him bite me, drink from me.

I...

I...

Sod it. Why the hell not? Anything to have his body on mine again.

“Let’s do it.” I stroked his arms, giving him my best smile. “Tie me up, vampy.” I blushed. “Sorry.”

He smiled back and nodded. “We need a safe word.”

“Glitter,” I said.

“Sorry?”

“Erm... Shit.”

“Glitter?”

“First word that came to mind,” I answered, positively beetroot in the face. At least it felt like it.

He chuckled, smoothing his thumb at the corner of his mouth. “I like it.”

“We need a safe word?” I asked.

“You ask after answering?”

“That’s how I roll, Tae.”

Another chuckle. It was nice to hear. “If it gets too much for you. If you feel uncomfortable being bound in chains.” A pause. “As you said, tying my feeder gets my blood pumping. It intensifies the pleasure.”

Pleasure for you, too?

“Sex?” I blurted out.

Ugh. My stupid mouth.

“No.”

“Oh.”

“Your pleasure will be magnificent.”

“And yours?” I didn’t mean to ask.

“Mine will be mine.”

“Oh.”

“Are you ready?”

Was I really doing this? “I’m... ready.”

“Take your clothes off. Slowly. Let me see your beautiful body.”

Oh, how I blushed.



NAKED. Bound to the X in chains around my arms and legs, my naked body in the same shape.

Wow.

The vampire's fingernail on his right index finger elongated into a point several inches long. He ran its sharp tip down my chest, not cutting, only sensually scratching. Man, it felt so good, so frustratingly teasing.

"You like that?" he asked.

"Yeah..." I breathed in response.

He teased me some more with it, drawing across my flesh, moving up and down with delicious strokes until his hands were gripping my thighs.

Fingernail playtime was over.

The familiar sensation of his lips and hands all over me, caressing my aching cock. He fingered the sensitive strip between my balls and butt. Man, that was such a nice spot to be stroked.

He kept his clothes on.

Fingers inside me again. A brief dive, more teasing pleasure, then coming back out to wander elsewhere.

My body sang with need. So vulnerable and naked, so at the mercy to his whims. Unable to reach out and touch him back, to claw at anything. I wanted him to take my dick and wank the shit out of it. I so wanted to cum. But he edged me, taunted me, and I loved every second of it.

"I'm going to bite you now," he whispered.

“O-okay.”

His fangs appeared, protruding from between his lips. Marble points against his pale flesh, his eyes radiantly red.

Fuck.

Slowly, caressing my balls, he moved those teeth to my neck. At first, he licked, and then...

And then...

And then...

...they pierced my flesh. A brief scratch, low on the pain meter. He sucked me, as if giving me a love bite. Magnificent heat and sparks worked together where he granted me his kiss, traveling to every pleasure point in my body. I struggled against my restraints, desperate to grab onto him for support in this sexy maelstrom.

He held me, his hands on my arms, his grip tight. His body pressed against me, his hardness in his trousers brushing against my cock.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

He growled against my neck.

Holy fuck.

His grip on me tightened. He pressed harder into me. He sucked harder, hurting me a little.

Something was happening.

Did I call the safe word?

But he stopped, coming up to face me. Blood on his lips. My blood. He licked at it, catching stray crimson droplets.

Did he taste demon?

Oh. Shit.

You fucking idiot!

He touched me again, between my legs. I'd never seen his eyes *that* scarlet.

Fingers probed my entrance. He panted, gaze boring into me. Waiting. Wanting.

Hungry.

“You taste incredible,” he whispered.

Staring and waiting and a silent understanding falling between us. So fucking hot, my body so fucking ready.

“Fuck me,” I said.

He undid his trousers, yanked them halfway down his thighs. He undid the chains on my legs, lifting me into position, my legs wrapping around him. With his special saliva, he slicked us both, then entered me. Pounded me on the cross. Bit me again as he slammed into me.

“Fuck!” I screamed. “Fuck me!”

And he did, so hard, a power drill, a force of sexual nature. His thrusts were heavy and expert, unlike any other man who'd been inside me before. And his bite... Oh, God. Hot and delicious with a sting in its tail. A good sting. An amazing sting. He drank and fucked, and I tried to break free from the chains on my arms but didn't want to be free, wanted to stay—

He broke me free, spun me around, bent me over. So fast, so breathtaking, taking me doggy style.

“Yes...” I gasped.

He grabbed my dick and fucked me all the way to the bank. He came inside me as I came in his hand, filling me up good with his hot wonder.

Tae. Had. Cum.

Inside me.

Holy. Shit.

He pulled me upright, licking at the place he'd fed from me.

“Wow...” I breathed.

“I just healed the wound,” he whispered, kissing me there.

“What?”

“Where I bit you.” He was both breathless and able to speak clearly.

“T-thanks.” I, on the other hand, needed to catch my breath.

His hands slid to my hips. He kissed the back of my neck, his cock still inside me.

“No, Clay. Thank *you*.”

“H-happy to...” I swayed.

He held me tight. “Let's get you cleaned up and fed yourself. You'll need to replace those blood cells. There's a café nearby I think you'll like.”

“O-okay.”

“You're okay?” he asked.

“I'm... I'm very good. That was... amazing.”

He slipped out of me, pulled up his trousers.

“Don’t you think?” I asked.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.” He smiled and leaned down to kiss my cheek.

“Did you enjoy it, though?”

“I did, Clay.”

Why didn’t he sound so sure?

“There are showers here. Through there.” He pointed to a door I hadn’t noticed before. “I’ll let you get cleaned and dressed.” He went to leave.

“Tae?”

“Yes?”

“How do you feel?”

“Fed.”

“Oh.”

“And really good.”

With that, he left the room.

Hot and cold, eh? Great. And now I was really worrying about what he’d tasted in my blood.

Glitter!

THIRTEEN



By the end of November, more demon kills under my belt, Tae and I were back in Raven Tower, preparing to leave for Paris.

Buttons had got in his kills, too. Evading the ADU, nothing changing there. The frustration didn't ease as such, but the killing of demons helped.

What did that say about me getting kicks from slaughtering them? I wasn't a psychopath, and the demons weren't exactly a loss to society. Still, did I need to feel so good about it to the point of languishing in a horny adrenaline cocktail each time?

A cocktail Tae liked to drink now and again. Well, three hand jobs from him to me. Nothing else, nothing as mind-blowing as the feeding club. And no more vampire orgasms.

Gosh. I wished *that* would happen again. Did I need to find a well and take a penny to it to make that wish come true? Because he wasn't giving me any signs he wanted to drink my blood again.

Hmmm.

At least I'd got away with my demon blood being discovered. I must have tasted of lollipops, not a scary half-monster or whatever.

Lucky dodge.

There were now three stories dominating the news: Buttons, Tae and Clay, and river monsters. In the demon news outside of mainstream media, the mysterious demon hunters were the top story. Thankfully, minus Arcana talk for the time being. The angle right now was of a vigilante duo, one a warlock, banishing demons. Their identities unknown, a hunt to take them down in full swing.

Thank you, fairy face cream, for the upper hand.

I wondered if the story had reached the witches. Tae kept his finger on the pulse to see if and when it would.

The river monsters were starting to show up all over the world, breaking through the protective glass. A real, terrifying problem. And a complete mystery. Where were they coming from? The rivers are toxic magic, left over from when idiot humans tried to fight back against the witches and made the rivers and The Rift and the terrible devastation. Were things changing? Was that magic shifting and gearing up for another round of destruction?

Scary times.

As for the Tae and Clay show, we'd given a few more kissy money shots, becoming something of a phenomenon.

Tae put the food down before me as I sat at the penthouse dining table.

"This smells good," I said, taking in a deep sniff.

The vampire made me *Maeun-tang*—a spicy fish stew.

Yum.

The penthouse was back to normal as if Synth bullets had never been fired into the glass. And there was better glass in

place now, tougher security measures.

I was glad to be back. As minimal as it was with its gray walls, black tiled floors, and super white kitchen, the open-plan space felt more like home, the place where my life had changed. It held a lot of the spirit of our first meeting.

And it had two floors. I mean, wow. A flat with two floors. It blew my mind. Make that three when you included Tae's study below the kitchen.

Plus, the view of London from the panoramic windows was nothing short of bangin.' With the building being on the North Bank between Blackfriar's Bridge and Millennium Bridge, it offered views of the Thames, of the glittering skyline of the city.

Amazing.

Fizz was happy too. Man, did she love her spot by the windows.

"How is it?" Tae asked from the other end of the dining table, face slightly obscured by the vase of white roses. He sipped his expensive vodka, leaning back in his chair.

After another mouthful of the stew, I responded with, "It's really good, thanks."

I ate in silence after that, then went to chill out on the sofa and continue to be nervous as hell about tomorrow night.

Paris. Tae's sire. Jarod Woods.

Yikes.

Fizz didn't want cuddles right now, so I popped on the TV and found a Kylie Minogue concert to stream. I kicked back, relaxed, and Tae slid in beside me.

I jolted in surprise, kicking the coffee table.

“Fuck!” I barked, big toe throbbing. “What the fucking fuck?”

“Sorry, Clay.” The cheeky vampire actually smirked.

“Not funny.”

“Are you okay?”

“No. Stubbing your toe is the worst.”

“Shall I kiss it better?”

Hello, husky tones. “Erm...”

“I can if you like.”

“I’ll pass...” I pulled off my sock, brought my foot up to give it a blow. As if my breath were a healing wind.

If only.

Warm hands around my foot, a sexy head leaning close to it. Tae traced a finger across my big toe. I giggled, sensitive there.

“Let me rub it better,” he said.

“I...”

As he started to rub, I shut up. He gave good massages, and this was no different. He worked all my toes, the whole of my foot. Even went off to get lotion and ended up giving me the full works on both feet. Massaging the lotion into my skin, working the tension out of me as Kylie sparkled on the screen.

“This feels so good,” I breathed.

He took his time. Man, he could take all the time in the world.

“So much tension in these feet,” he purred.

My head tilted back, my arms spread across the back of the sofa. “Oh, Tae.”

His touch never failed to get me hard. My dick stood to full attention in my jogging bottoms. Full of tension, too.

I looked at him, a wicked glint in his eyes.

“Right now?” I said.

“If you want it.”

I wanted it.

He gave some amazing head.



ALONE ON THE SOFA, curled up under a blanket with Fizz being a purring hot water bottle in my lap, I messaged my Uncle Craig.

Unlike Beryl, Craig seemed a lot friendlier. I’d reached out to my auntie Emma but heard nothing. With her being my grandma’s daughter, I didn’t expect to.

Craig Mayfield. Twin brother of my mother, he lived in Bedford, Bedfordshire—not far from Luton. A roofer. Currently hauled up with a nasty bout of the flu. If it weren’t for that, he’d love to meet me.

We’d been speaking via text the past week. Conversations about the weather or menial stuff. Never mentioned Tae. No phone calls, no photos—though I did check his social media accounts for some snaps. He’d been nothing but pleasant.

Could he help me?

Uncle Craig: I'm getting better. Maybe meet up in a few weeks?

Me: Sounds good. Just let me know. Sending healing vibes.

My phone buzzed. Not him replying. A notification from the Whisper app.

I opened Grindle's message.

Him: Fresh lollipop delivery.

Me: Cool. Thanks.

Him: Delete this.

I deleted it. He'd moved the fairy drop-off back to its original place in a post box behind Raven Tower. Thank goodness. I was on my last lollipop.

Summoning up some bravery, I got up to tell Tae I was popping out for a walk. I headed to the kitchen and down the black metal stairs to his private study, where all his major research took place.

The study was different from the rest of the penthouse. Amber-painted walls, plush brown carpet, a writing bureau, a lamp, a sofa, and filing cabinets. Paperwork piled high everywhere, and a murder wall faced the sofa—a collage of information on demons.

"Tae?" I said softly.

The vampire sat at the writer's bureau, examining some paperwork.

"Yes?"

"I need some fresh air," I said. "Do you mind if I pop outside?"

“Alone?” He turned around.

“Yeah. I just need five minutes around the block. I’ll leave my tracker on.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Honestly, I’m fine.”

“There are photographers out there.”

Shit. I’d forgotten them.

“We can go together.”

This lollipop drop-off point wasn’t going to work.

“You know what? I’ll leave it for now,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It’s cold anyway.”

“Let me know if you change your mind.”

I wasn’t a prisoner, but the freedom to walk down the street wasn’t a liberty for me to take.

Me to Grindle: Not happening. I can’t get out. Can we think of something else?

Him: A delivery to the apartment.

Me: Isn’t that risky?

Him: He trusts you enough. You can say they’re for your sweet tooth.

Me: Okay.

Him: For when you get back from Paris.

Me: Okay. I’ll make this one last.

Him: Don’t worry. It’ll be alright.

Me: Thanks.

Him: Delete this.

We could've done the delivery thing in the beginning, but it'd been different then. Tae's trust for me had grown, so me receiving packages wouldn't be a problem. I mean, I'd ordered a special edition of *Christine* by Stephen King a couple of days ago after leaving my 'salary' to my people at Golden Lane.

My form of retail therapy after getting the cold shoulder.

I'd handed it to Roy, the kind of guard of the lane. He'd been warming himself by the fire. Seeing his dark brown face had warmed me, put some springs in my step. Roy was such a lovely guy, always smiling.

No smiles for me. Only a chilly, "People like you don't belong here," followed by, "Just leave us alone, Cinderella."

I'd left the money and let Tae take me home. No tears, but lots of guilt. And a bit pissed off, if I were honest. He'd rejected me because I'd got out? Was that it? Why should I feel so bad? If the tables were turned, I'd be so happy for him getting off the streets.

A delivery. Lying to Tae again. Lying to this man who gave me shelter, protection, and orgasms. The one who'd got me off the streets.

I guess you could say it was the demon in me that made me do it.

Ugh.

FOURTEEN



“I dentification,” the aggressive ADU agent demanded.

Until he recognized Tae driving the car, and me, the warlock, in the passenger seat.

“Is it you?” the man said, the aggression softening.

We’d passed so many checkpoints on the way to London Biggin Hill Airport, receiving various degrees of greetings from the bored to the full out fangirling.

My ears were still ringing after a particularly shrieky encounter with a man and woman guarding a checkpoint. We even posed for selfies.

Gosh!

Tae said nothing to this latest guard, handing the man our paperwork nonchalantly.

“It is you. Both of you.” He nodded, seeming impressed. “You’re a cool pair. My girlfriend thinks you’re really cute.”

Was this the nicest this witch agent had been to a warlock in his lifetime?

“Go on through, Mr. Frost. Mr. Christmas.”

“Thank you.” Tae clicked the window up and drove through to the airfield.

I watched the sun setting on the day. After takeoff, we'd be in Paris in about fifty-five minutes.

Mind. Officially. Blown.

Tae drove up to a private jet waiting on the airfield. Sleek and white and getting my nerves jumping to the beat. There were people on the tarmac. Staff of Tae's, I presumed.

"I've never been in a plane before," I said.

The vampire brought the car to a stop, saying nothing but did give me a smile.

It all happened so fast, from the car to the plane. Luggage carried on for us, champagne offered to us in the opulent cabin.

I took a seat with my glass of bubbly, thanking the woman who'd handed it to me. Tae sat in the seat on the other side of the cabin—there were two sets of two seats on each side.

"This is amazing," I said, sipping my drink. I looked out of the round window to see the ground crew with their stick light thingies, preparing us for takeoff.

"Thank you, Amanda," Tae spoke to the stewardess.

"Do not hesitate to call for anything, Mr. Frost," she replied and disappeared behind a curtain.

The engines started. I drank it all in. Nervous, excited, eyes glued to the window with the odd glance at the vampire watching me. I'd become Fizz, having to keep an eye on absolutely everything in case I missed a mouse, erm, I mean something cool. She was with Archie again. Bless her. She liked him, and I liked him looking after her.

A *bing* caught my attention. The seatbelt sign. I did mine up, settling down. Gulping down the champagne and gnawing

on my bottom lip.

Yeah, I'd be having no more drink before the party. Imagine rocking up pickled and hiccupping in Winter Gold's face. Or falling in a cake. Or puking everywhere.

This was really happening. The plane moved down the runway, getting into position. Lining up. The turbines gunned, the plane shot off, and we were climbing into the sky. Up and up and up, the ground falling away, the sky filling up my view.

“Wow...”

Sunset made it better, a stunning canvas for me to feast on above the clouds.

I was above the clouds. Me. On a plane. Flying to France.

Can I get a WOW?”

“Are you okay?” Tae asked.

I smiled, glued to the window. “I'm really good.”

I remained good until we touched down, my nerves taking over once again, only to lift when we drove into Paris from the airport. Well, someone else drove us.

“This is so pretty,” I whispered, in awe of the magnificent architecture.

“Paris is beautiful,” he replied.

“It really is.” Wait a minute. “You have a house here, don't you?”

“I do.”

“Oh.”

“What's wrong?”

“Are we going to the house?” I asked.

“No.”

“Oh. Why not?”

“I don’t want to.”

Maybe it’d be worse than the Brighton house, full of his wife and memories he couldn’t face.

“Okay. Fair enough.”

We passed the Eiffel Tower, and I screamed. He laughed, and I blushed.

My turn to fangirl.

I wanted to get out and walk around. Get lost in the sounds and sights, get a feel for the heartbeat of the city. But we weren’t really here for that.

“What hotel are we going to?” I asked.

“Coer de Rose. A hotel streets away from the Eiffel Tower.”

“Cool. Sounds fancy.”

He laughed, though he seemed sad. “It is.”

I peeled myself from the window as we stopped at a red light. “Where’s your house?”

“East of here.”

“You’ll need to give me more than that.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it, Clay.”

“Shit. It’s fine. I wasn’t trying to convince you to change your mind.”

He nodded, turning to the window.

I did the same, thinking it'd be better to keep my mouth shut.

When we reached the grand hotel, built to fit in with the stunning Parisian style, I really lost my head. In a good way.

My opulent room of terracotta-painted walls and heavenly biscuit-colored carpet faced the Eiffel Tower. I actually cried happy tears, watching the structure's impressive light show.

"Wow," I breathed, fingering the copper drapes.

Another posh room packed with an amazing bed, a state-of-the-art TV, a sofa, and a desk. Huge, on the top floor of the hotel. A room I shared with Tae. You know, to keep up appearances.

The bed.

Would we be playing in it at some point?

No. I couldn't think about that now. We had a Hollywood demon to catch.



TAE TOOK my hand as I slid out of the car and into the cacophony of voices on the Paris street. After our joyful arrival, reality returned to kick me in the balls. I'd been reading up on Paris while waiting for Tae, discovering that three of the arrondissements had gone. Consumed by toxic rivers. Smothered in them. And Paris had faced some river monster problems of its own recently.

The hotel housed the party. Weirdly, though understandably, we had to leave via the back door where a

fancy car was waiting. The car then drove to the front of the building for us to get out and walk the red carpet.

Gosh.

Cameras flashed, people called our names. My fingers locked with Tae's as we mingled with people dripping in glamor. I took a deep breath as we slowly walked toward the entrance.

I didn't speak, smiling, keeping my lips zipped apart from the occasional bonjour. Tae did the talking in French and English, me the trophy boyfriend—though not really. Only for the fake story, the reality being a friends with benefits situation.

Dressed to the nines, we eventually made our way into the venue. I looked good. He looked amazing. I felt kind of good, too. Special in a silly way.

Inside, more opulence met my senses. There'd been so much of it of late. I didn't like it much, preferring Raven Tower, Archie's place, even the Brighton house. They weren't like this fancy ballroom with its gilded edges and copious amounts of purple. Everything gleamed, from the marble floor to the people. As stunning as it was, it intimidated me at the same time. Which it shouldn't. I mean, I loved sparkle.

This wasn't sparkle. This was something else.

Wait staff carried food and drink in an endless ballet, more of it laid out on a table on the far side of the room on white tablecloths, probably costing more than some small houses.

Maybe that was an exaggeration.

A string quartet and a pianist played over in the corner, spreading lovely classical music through the air. A few couples danced to the music in a designated dance area.

I wondered if they took requests. Would they do a Kylie number? Maybe 'On a Night Like This'? Probably best not to ask, no matter how cool it'd be.

Tae released my hand as a woman in a navy pantsuit with lips as red as blood approached.

"Excuse me, Clay," he said.

"Okay."

Not Winter. Someone else. They air-kissed and got to chatting in English.

I hovered, sampling a crab canape from a passing waiter. Delicious. I decided to follow him for another, only to be stopped by a famous pop star.

Belle. Just Belle. A huge British pop star never out of the gossip columns herself. Wearing a vibrant orange skintight dress and a smile to melt the polar icecaps. Bronze skin, perfect teeth, and expensive blonde hair. Gosh. She looked too good.

Lucky her.

"Oh my God!" she cried, going in for an air kiss.

No more crab canapes for the time being.

"The famous Clay Christmas." She giggled. "I love that your name is like named after my like favorite season. It is soooo like nice to meet you."

"Erm, yeah. Thanks. Likewise. Hi."

Someone took a picture of us with their phone.

"Who're you wearing?" She appraised my outfit.

"Erm, it's Prada."

“It’s fabulous. I love it. You look soooo amazing.” She waved her hand at a waiter. He brought over champagne.

“For you, sir?” he asked.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Soooo,” Belle continued. “You and Tae Frost are like amazing. I’m obsessed. Who knew he was into guys, too? Always assumed he preferred women, but I suppose that’s like my lust talking.” Giggle, giggle. “He’s so hot. You’re so lucky.” She bit her lower lip. “Is the sex amazing? I bet it’s amazing.”

“I, erm...”

“You don’t have to like answer. I literally already know.”

“You—”

“I don’t really know for like real. I wish I did.” More giggles. “He just looks like such a stud in the sack. Anyway, it’s nice to see something fun in the news. Something magical. Hasn’t it been like soooo dire? That button-eyed demon and the thing with Brighton.” She clutched her chest with her champagne-free hand. “My heart like breaks for those poor people. And you were there. Ohmygod. How was it? Awful. Soooo awful.”

“I...”

Belle’s voice hit me like a sledgehammer. Never letting up. She seemed nice enough, apart from waving at the waiter quite rudely. But I wanted out of this attempt at sex talk and of the remembering the trauma of Brighton.

She had no fucking idea how awful it’d been, how awful it was.

“You poor thing,” she said. “You don’t need to talk about it.” She waved at another waiter, took a glass of bubbles, and handed it to me. “You look like you need it.”

With no choice, I took the drink from her.

She leaned in and air-kissed me again. “I’ll leave you to it. Good to meet you, Clay.”

I nodded, relieved she’d got bored of me. Off she went to talk to some other pop star I recognized.

“Are you okay?” a woman asked.

“I’m fine.” I sipped the drink, facing her. “Oh. Shit.”

Victoria. Her hair slicked back, statuesque in a red gown. “She’s too much, that Belle.”

“What... What are you doing?” I asked. “You look so good.”

“Compared to my normal state?”

“No. I—”

She laughed. “I’m messing with you, sweet. You look good, too. Love the suit.”

I looked down at my black Prada number with silver piping. “Thanks. When did you get here?”

“Came over a few days ago. In preparation. Tae likes to have me around on standby. And I like being around.” She switched her glittery red clutch from one hand to the other. “I’m also here to sort out some business for him. Boring Auto Frost things. Some big players are here. Board members. When they found out Tae himself was coming over, their brown-nosing got ready.” She rolled her eyes, tugging at her dress. “Fucking hate this thing.”

Tae had mentioned a dinner he had to attend tomorrow night.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "It's a really nice dress."

"It's horrible. But what you going to do when you come to one of these things?"

"Right?"

"Can see you're not that comfy here, sweet."

She wasn't wrong. "You always think these things are going to be glam and amazing."

"They are from the outside. Boring in reality. Okay, not always. This one's a bit dry." She shrugged, looking around. Then she leaned in closer. "Haven't seen you know who." Victoria kept her voice extremely low.

She meant Jarod. I didn't answer.

"Probably fashionably late," she said. "Typical of a man like him."

"Isn't that part of the spectacle?"

"No, it's just fucking rude." She grabbed a nibble from a passing plate, returning to normal voice volume. Not crab canapes, but some pastry thing with brie and cranberry. I ate two regardless.

"Well, I'd better go mingle before I piss off to bed," Victoria said. "Try and have some fun."

"I will."

Tae didn't really talk much about his business. Make that never. It remained a part of him completely closed off. I didn't mind. Corporate numbers and cars and me weren't a good mix.

“How are you?” Tae asked, finished with the woman. He put a hand on my waist.

“I’m okay.”

“Is it too much for you?”

“Just new,” I said. “Bit overwhelming.”

“I’ll never get used to it.”

“Oh?”

“How many times am I supposed to air kiss and talk about how good it is to see these people?” He smiled.

“I know what you mean.”

“Speaking of which...”

A man approached and shook Tae’s hand. They started speaking in French.

What other languages did the vampire know other than French, English, and Korean?

I’d ask him later. Maybe he could teach me some.

As they spoke, a woman caught my eye.

Vampire... Arcana confirmed.

Like Tae, she stood out from everyone. She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. Alabaster skin glowing as a vampire’s did, her onyx-black hair constructed into an expensive updo. Her black velvet gown sat off the shoulder, split up one leg. Classy and sexual and just purely rocking it.

Gosh.

Her cheekbones were as glass-cutting as Tae’s, her eyes as obsidian. If he looked like an older K-Pop boyband member, she was the female equivalent.

Jesus Christ...

Of course, I'd seen many pictures of Winter Gold over the years. Man, did they not do the reality justice. If I were that way inclined with women, I'd be trying out all my moves to get a moment of her time. Get obsessed with her like I was with Tae.

Glad to hear you admit to the obsession...

Tae's sire. The vampire who made him. His lover. Once his whole world.

She caught me staring. I gulped, looking away into the bubbles of my glass.

Shit.

Tae still chatted with the French guy.

I looked back up. She was looking still. In fact, she lifted a hand and waved with her manicured fingers. Smiled a predatory smile.

Oh, for God's sake.

Slowly, the vampire made her way over, weaving through the crowd. Pausing to air kiss, to speak briefly with others. I watched her every move, frozen to the spot. Scared out of my mind.

Tae stopped his conversation with the man, his hand on the base of my spine.

"Here we go," he whispered.

I counted down her every step until she stood before us.

"My darling Tae Hyun-Ki."

My breath caught in my chest. His name. His real name.

She noticed my reaction, my tiny gasp. “Are you surprised to hear his name?” she asked.

“I, erm... Oh... Gosh...”

She cocked her head to the side. “Clay Christmas.”

I was shaking. “Y-yes. Hi.” I offered my hand. She didn’t take it. “Nice to meet you.”

Instead, she leaned in and kissed my cheek. “You smell of strawberries and cream beneath that cologne.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. She saw right through me, smelled the fairy magic. My cover was about to be—

“I like it,” she added.

“You do?” I almost fell over.

“Delicious.”

“Oh.”

Her attention moved to Tae. She kissed his cheek, he kissed her back. She met his height, seeming to tower over him with her presence alone.

“Good to see you again,” she said.

He didn’t respond with the same, but with, “What is it you want?”

She regarded him for a moment, both cold and seductive like her creation. “I’ve missed you.”

Tae didn’t offer a response.

“I miss you every day,” she added. “It has been far too long.”

“It has,” he answered then.

“You look incredible.”

“So do you, Winter. What do you want?”

“Can’t we talk first? Maybe dance like the old days.” She smiled at him.

“Why would I dance?” He was nothing but ice.

She stepped closer to him. He stood ramrod straight. Not a single muscle moved. Nothing on his face reacted.

“Because we used to enjoy a dance, didn’t we? Arm in arm, lost in one another.” Her lips seemed to throb as she spoke. “You can’t tell me you don’t miss it.”

Tae kept quiet.

She leaned closer, receiving some attention from other guests. What was this? Tae Frost and Winter Gold almost kissing with Clay Christmas standing right there? How juicy! How the plot thickened. Was this more than two guys together and more of a throuple situation with Winter Gold?

Not for me, thanks. Totally hooked on the boys. And only one boy at a time.

Any moment now, she’d kiss him properly on the mouth. It looked like it, anyway. They made a hot pair, far hotter than me. I mean, just look at her. Look at him. Smoking hot.

I stared at him, dressed in a beautiful dark green suit and white shirt. Elegant and sexy, and I wanted him to just take my hand and tell me he—

He what?

I don’t know...

“Come on, Tae Frost.” She spoke his commonly referred to name like she didn’t believe in it. “Come and dance with me.”

He didn't shy away from her intense gaze for a second.
"Why are we here, Winter?"

"Because I told you to be."

"Other than that," he said.

"To talk."

"About what?" he asked.

Her hands on his chest, sliding up to his shoulders. "Such an incredible body."

Wow. The whispers from the crowd were really getting going now. I heard my name. I heard stupid stuff like 'sex' and 'scandal.' What scandal? Idiots.

Yeah, a spike of jealousy jabbed me in the heart. Even though Tae didn't react to her touch, I knew she'd touched him like that before when he'd been more receptive. When they'd fucked and—

"You are causing quite the stir with this man," she said and laughed as light as a snowflake. "I always enjoyed watching you kiss the men. Do you remember those nights we shared such delicious male specimens?" She moaned into his ear. "I'll never forget them."

Tae remained a statue of ice, not answering her.

She proceeded to stroke his chest. "Dance with me, Tae Hyun-Ki."

"Fine."

And just like that, Tae gave into her and took her through the crowd to the dancefloor area.

Leaving me sucking air in shock.

Tae?

“Did that really just happen?” someone just said.

Tae?

He didn't look back at me.

“That really did happen,” another voice drifted toward me.

He took her in his arms, leading the dance. Slipping back into the past. Being one half of a power couple so stunning, so perfect. Much better than a ragged warlock man.

I wanted to be sick.

“I'm like soooo glad I got a ticket to this.”

Fuck you, Belle.

I left the room quickly, unable to take any more of this shit.



I SAT ALONE on a gilded chair with a glass of champagne in a hallway on the first floor of this damned place. Running outside seemed like a better idea until I remembered the crowds of people still out there, including at the back entrance. This corridor away from everyone became the next best thing.

An empty vase sat next to me, some posh thing with the essence of money radiating from its blue and white mosaics.

I'd found the chair, and the vases, around the corner from the stairs, tucked away for me to sort my head out away from prying eyes. Rain pattered against the window on the other side of me.

I tilted my feet back and forth on the carpet, wishing my heart didn't hurt. It had no right to hurt. I wasn't Tae's

boyfriend, despite the bullshit we were peddling. No relationship, no reason for this drama. Only, it fucking sucked. I couldn't stop the pain, the literal aching for him.

Gosh, what a mess. What a pathetic bloody mess.

I'd fallen for him. Plain and simple. More than the sex stuff, but for him. His scary strength juxtaposed with his softness. How he always asked me how I was doing. How he opened the car door, looked after me and cooked for me and loved my cat. How he made me feel so safe, so sexy, so warm on the inside.

But he was a broken man, wrapped up in grief. As much as all the positive things were great, he confused me, and I shouldn't be falling for him like this. It couldn't go anywhere other than the bedroom. He wouldn't want it to. And, yeah, cut to me speaking for him. But how could there be anything more after the loss he'd suffered?

I blinked tears free, caught them with my free hand.

"Stop this," I told myself. "Please."

Winter Gold and him. He'd seen her and realized what he'd been missing. I mean, how the hell did a scrawny freak like me compete with the perfection of her and even some of the other men and women in that ballroom?

To be honest, the thought never left my mind. What did he see in me apart from finding me a good soul and all that? I was a liar yet to be found out and hardly a showstopper in the looks department. He could have anyone he wanted.

I drained the champagne. I wasn't doing this shit. I wasn't sitting here pining over a man, feeling like a jilted boy at a prom. The geeky kid wishing he could be on the arm of the prom king in place of the pretty queen. Not a real-life

experience, but a moment in a book I'd read once. A sweet story. Nothing like this.

I remained in my seat, though. Enjoying the rain and the peace—at least on the outside of my brain. Tae could have his moment with Winter, see what she had to say. I'd catch up with him after and stay away from all that fake glamor and eventually get over my bullshit.

Feeling gloomy really drained my energy. That's why I avoided as much of it as I could. Alas, sometimes you stepped in dog shit. Well, fell into those dark pools in the landscape of my mind.

Really, the mature thing to do would be to head downstairs and keep my pecker up. Well, my dignity. Act like I didn't give a shit. Maybe ask someone to dance myself. Cause a solo stir.

Man, I did not have the strength to pull that off.

Footsteps coming down the hallway.

My party for one was over. Time to face the music.

Sigh.

A man came around the corner as I got to my feet.

He stopped when he saw me. "Hi. Didn't think anyone would be up here."

Holy shit.

Jarod Woods!

FIFTEEN



“**Y**ou here for the same reason as me?” the Hollywood star asked me.

I had two choices. Behave like a fish on dry land or be cool. I went for the latter, thinking fast, my insides screaming in panic.

“I needed a break,” I replied.

He nodded, stretching his arms above his head. “Tell me about it.”

The blond, golden-skinned Adonis. Hotness in a perfect Hollywood package that hid a murdering demon scum bag of the highest order.

Demon... My dormant magic told me.

Fancy waking up early for a kill session?

No. Tae had to question him first.

Seeing him in the flesh, and hearing his American tones, brought the surrealness. An actual living, breathing movie star before me. A man I’d seen on the screen doing all sorts of things. A demon. A monster.

Bastard.

“I’m Jarod,” he said modestly.

We shook hands. I almost felt the dirt from his corrupt soul linger on my skin.

“Clay.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “Are you okay with that weirdness downstairs?” He shook his head. “Thought you and the vampire should be the ones dancing.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, going for deer in the headlights realness. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Just didn’t expect that.”

Get away from me, arsewipe. “That’s why I’m up here.”

“Aw.” He gave me a sympathetic smile, moved in to pat me on the arm. “I’m sorry, bro.”

Touch me again and say goodbye to your bollocks.

Demon... Arcana whispered.

I miss you... I told it.

Come to me... Let’s mess him up...

“You’re shaking,” Jarod said.

I blinked at him, my skin itching. Ah, shaking. Look at those hands go.

I hated this.

“Sorry. Think I need another drink.”

He raked his hand through his hair. “You ready to go back down there?”

“I don’t know.”

Should I chat with him? Get some intel of my own? Be more proactive rather than rely on Tae for everything all the time?

“Or we could hang here,” he said. “If you want some non-douchebag company.”

What a joke. I smiled. “Let’s get a drink first. Maybe come back here.”

“They’ll start talking when they see us together.”

“You think?”

He shrugged. “I don’t care. Let them say what they want. Because they have no life of their own, they project onto ours.”

“The perils of fame, eh?”

“The money makes it worth it.” He winked.

“I bet.”

“God, I sound like a dick. Money isn’t everything.”

“But it helps.”

He removed his black bowtie. “I love the work. I love my craft. That always comes first.”

He says from within the walls of his Hollywood mansion... “That’s great.”

“What about you, Clay Christmas?”

I slipped my hands into my trouser pockets. “What about me?”

“What’s your thing?”

Killing arsewipes like you. “I’m not really sure.”

“Okay.”

“I like to entertain. Did that before meeting Tae.”

He stuffed the bowtie into his jacket pocket. “What sort of entertaining? Acting?”

“No, more like magic tricks. I used to perform living CGI, so to speak, on the streets. It was my thing. I’d like to turn it into a full-on show. You know, an arena-sized thing.”

I’d never said that out loud before or really had time to bring it up to myself recently. But it was true—a dream I liked to bask in sometimes. How cool to put my skills in a show, to entertain packed audiences with my warlock magic on a huge scale. Set it to Kylie Minogue’s music. So, so cool.

I guess that dream took a back seat the day Arcana came.

“Sounds good to me. You’ve got the perfect boyfriend to bankroll it.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?” he questioned.

“I just couldn’t ask him to do that. We haven’t been together that long.”

Now he shook his head. “Bro, if you’re going to bang the big buck dudes, milk it for all it’s worth. And I mean that with respect.”

God, I loathed this man already.

“I—”

“Don’t ever be afraid to go for what you want,” he said, cutting me off. “I did, and look at me. Dreams do come true. If you need your boyfriend to help you, what’s wrong with that? It’s a tough world out there. You shouldn’t be afraid to ask for help. And if your shows are good on the streets, think of the joy you’d bring to the masses in arenas. The world needs more fun.”

How I didn't charge forward and punch him in the face proved testament to my patience. The evil, cruel piece of shit. The world needs more fun? Seriously? After what he'd done to those poor women?

I fought against showing him my disgust. "Maybe..."

"No maybes, Clay. I want you to do this. Promise me you'll make it your mission from this point on."

"I can't promise that," I said.

"What would you call it?"

"You what?" I returned.

"The name of your show."

"Gosh. I haven't got a clue."

The arsewipe demon-in-hiding scratched his chin. "You could have fun with it with Christmas as your surname."

Ugh. "I could."

"Have a think. I'll think, too."

Idiot. "Why do you care so much?"

"Well, Clay, I care deeply about the arts. Too many creative people get left in the ass crack of life. You were one of them—forgive me for being blunt."

"It's fine." I mean, he wasn't wrong. But I didn't see myself as a creative person.

"What if you're the next big thing?" he added.

"A warlock?"

"Why not? What's so impossible about that?"

Couldn't he just flip and be the monster now? Why did he have to be so nice, so supportive? And why did I have to tell

him anything in the first place?

Part of his deceitful evilness. Act the nice guy, then show his real face.

“Clay?” I jumped.

Tae. He stood at the end of the corridor. Alone.

I said his name.

“Hello, there,” Jarod added, striding down to meet him.

Tae turned on his charm.

Slowly, I inched over to them.

“I loved your last movie,” Tae said.

“I loved your last car,” Jarod replied.

It went on like that, some banter between them with me waiting in the wings until I got brought into it.

“Clay here was just telling me about his ambitions,” the movie star announced.

“He was?” Tae looked at me.

“It’s nothing,” I countered. “Really.”

“I don’t think so,” Jarod said. “Shall we go and have a drink?”

Tae didn’t ask what those ambitions were. Instead, he came over and put his arms around me, pulling me close to him.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into my ear, setting my pulse on fire.

“It’s okay.” My arms slid around him.

“We’ll talk later.” He released me, taking my hand.

Jarod chuckled. “Come on, love birds. I need some whisky.”



I SAT on a sofa with gilded wooden edges in Winter’s penthouse suite. From here, I could see Montmartre and the permanent green hues from its river infestation.

“Gosh...” I whispered.

Sacre Cour shone like an emerald warning of death. Still beautiful, still standing. At least that was something.

It was one in the morning, the party over.

Winter poured out some vodka—the same brand Tae liked to drink. They were standing together by a bar within the penthouse suite, saying nothing, only dealing with boozy beverages. I twiddled my thumbs, wondering what the hell would come next. A third wheel again.

I never got to tell Tae my dreams, not one quiet moment alone with him. Good. They could stay silent dreams. Especially with Jarod’s ideas tainting them.

Tae brought me over a vodka and sat next to me. Close, his leg pressed against mine. Winter noticed, her dark eyes lingering for a long moment before roaming over our bodies.

“Now we can speak freely,” she finally said.

“Oh?” I responded.

She brought her glass to her lips, closed her eyes. “I made this party possible for your cause.”

I waited.

“The connection between my sire and I revealed a lot of details,” Tae said.

Winter opened her eyes. “There is no need to be so cold.”

He didn’t respond.

“Yes, I made this possible,” she said. “Being Tae’s sire has given me pieces of a puzzle, slivers of desire. I put them together myself.” Her crimson lips spread into a smile. “At first, I believed he wanted to see Jarod Woods so he could fuck him. So I invited him here, knowing his new movie is set to have its premier at the Grand Rex. And why not add extra sparkle to one’s soiree? How wrong I was. Jarod is a demon, it turns out.” A smirk. “And I like this situation better. I like Arcana better.”

“You... You felt *that*?” I asked.

“I did, Clay. One of the first things I saw. Confusing, yet brilliant.”

“Oh.”

“I enjoy the idea of demons dying for good. Again. They were good days.”

“Not an idea,” I said. “Actual reality.”

“Yes.” She drank her drink like a sex act.

If she saw all those things, then she saw the reality of Tae and me. How much had she seen? God! Were there pornos starring me and the vampire in the library of her mind? Did she get to download and keep them? Shit.

But she didn’t say anything about us. At least not yet.

“Tonight will be the opportune moment to take him,” she said.

“Jarod?” I asked stupidly.

“Yes, Clay. He’s drunk and went home with two women I hired for him. To wear him out.”

“What? He’s dangerous!”

“The women can handle themselves, don’t worry.”

“You hired them to sleep with him?” I said.

“That’s what I said.” She strode away from the bar, coming to stand beside Tae. “Trusted people. Good at what they do. He will be ready to be taken.”

“What if he tries to kill them?” I asked, Arcana desperate to be free.

Or was that me desperate for it to come out and play?

I drank the vodka, curbing my shakes as best I could.

“He won’t get the chance,” she replied. “He’s ready to fuck and party.”

“He gets his kicks from...” I couldn’t finish.

“I’m aware, Clay.” She touched Tae’s shoulder. “I’m ready for him to die. Eventually. First, I want to see you get that key of his. Tae Hyun-Ki.”

He said nothing.

“So take him, get what you need tonight,” she said. “End his horror.”

Tae knocked back his vodka, got up, and went to pour himself another at the drinks table.

She watched him. “No matter what happened between us, I want you to have your vengeance.”

He didn’t turn as he drank.

What'd gone down between these vampires?

“Why do you care?” he asked, still facing the other way.

“Because I have always cared, Tae Hyun-Ki. And I always will. I want to help with your pain.”

More silence.

“Tae?” she spoke.

He slammed the glass on the bar, grabbing the edge of the glossy oak. “You don't care about my pain, Winter. If you did, you wouldn't have—”

“Enough,” she cut him off. “Enough of that.”

“You broke my heart.”

“You broke mine.”

“I loved him.”

“I love you.”

Tae turned to face her, a storm brewing in his expression. “He was mine. You took him from me.”

Oh. Wow.

“I wanted to show you he didn't love you,” she said.

“By fucking him?”

“It takes two to fuck. Sometimes three or four or five...”
She smiled at me, sipping from her glass.

“You betrayed me,” Tae said. “You manipulated me, you lied, you—”

“He wanted me, Tae Hyun-Ki. That's the end of it. I wanted you to know that there wasn't such a thing as monogamy with a man like him.”

“Because you’re cruel,” Tae said, reaching behind him to grab the vodka bottle.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you going to take that bottle outside and wander the streets in grief?”

He didn’t answer.

“What did it do?” Winter added. “My fucking him? Think about it. I saved you from sadness. I pushed you toward the love of your life. To having a son.”

“Where the pain came fresh again,” Tae said, drinking from the bottle. “Worse than any other pain.”

“Tae...” I tried.

My voice fell by the wayside.

“Do you blame me for their deaths now?” Winter asked him. “Is that what you’re trying to say?” She tapped her nails against her glass, her own stormy energy crackling.

He growled. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Why not? You blame me for everything else wrong in your life. You punish me. You deny me.”

“I came here, didn’t I?”

“Because you forced me to use my power over you. I’ve resisted all these years. Until I saw the pieces in my mind, the situation you found yourself in. And now you have a way out of your vortex. To make the hunting—”

“A way out?” he questioned. “You think killing that demon makes up for it? Nothing will ever make up for. It’ll never not hurt. It’ll never not be in here.” He tapped his heart. “Forever breaking me down even though there’s nothing left.”

Oh my gosh...

“Tae Hyun-Ki...”

“They died. I failed them. This is for them, not for me. I don’t deserve...” He stopped.

“You don’t deserve what?” Winter pushed.

He didn’t answer.

“Please, speak to me.”

“I’m grateful for this help.” His response was ice personified.

“I’m sorry. Please. I—”

Tae breezed past us, leaving the room. The door slammed heavily behind him.

Immediately, I jumped up to follow him. As my hand met the doorknob, Winter’s voice stopped me in my tracks.

“I love him so much,” she said.

What the hell did I say to *that*?

“I don’t want or expect him to love me,” she added. “Yet I wish he would let me back in. Let me help him.”

I looked over my shoulder. “He’s letting you help him.”

“I can help him more.” She gulped back her vodka. “I can be so much more.”

I mean, she fucked his lover. What could you say about that?

“I need to follow him,” I said.

She stared at me. I opened the door.

“He likes you,” she said softly. “I saw it. I felt the passion between you. He holds back because of her. No one will ever

take her place. No one ever has. But you feel different. You've turned his world upside down."

"I..."

"Don't hurt him, Clay."

"Never."

"Please don't hurt him."

"I wouldn't." *Maybe with my secret, though...*

And with that, I hurried down the corridor in search of Tae.

SIXTEEN



I bumped into him as I burst onto the landing at the end of the corridor.

He grabbed me, stopping me from falling down some stairs. The vodka bottle slipped from his hand, tumbling down the carpeted steps.

His lips crushed to mine, his hands pulling me flush to his body. I responded by kissing him back, forgoing a rational mind. In the case of Reason vs. Kissing Tae Frost, the latter scored the win.

He spun, slammed me against the wall, lifted me, my back sliding up the purple paintwork. I wrapped my legs around his waist, heart racing. Scared of being caught, also not giving a shit.

His lips moved from mine, ferocious kisses traveling down to my neck. My cock stood to full attention, on the verge of unleashing pleasure at the memory of his vampire bite. Fuck. Let him do it again. Let him fucking bite me again. I could take it. Now I knew the fairy magic held my demon blood against his tastebuds, he could take all of me. Whatever he wanted.

I lifted my hips, grinding against him. He lapped at my skin, growling into my flesh.

“Bite me...” I whispered.

Another growl. More frenzied sucking and kissing and licking, his teeth scraping my flesh.

“Fuck...” I breathed. “Oh, fuck.”

Tae tore my trousers open, then my boxers. So fast I yelped, my entire bottom half exposed. He peeled me off the wall and carried me a few feet to a door. Never letting me go, taking us into the dark of a storage cupboard.

Holy shit.

“I’m going to fuck you now,” he purred.

Back against the new wall, his glowing skin was my only light. He slicked me with his vampire saliva, keeping my legs around his waist. A brief tease of fingers, of neck kisses. Then he pushed himself into me, pinning me good and proper. Nothing soft about it, going from zero to exquisite in half a second. Pounding into me, teeth on my neck, growling with his thrusts.

My back slammed against the wall, my eyes rolling into the back of my head as he continuously hit my sweet spot. Blowing my mind. I didn’t need hands to help me along the journey to orgasm. His dick was the magic stick hauling me to the great place.

He bit me, his fangs out and piercing. Drank from me, upped his pounding, took me to paradise. The pain and the pleasure joined hands and spun me into a frenzy of screams.

He covered my mouth with a hand. I cried against his yummy palm, the scent of limes enrapturing my senses.

I came hard, hands-free, fingers digging into his scalp, screaming against his gag.

Holy fuck.

He came inside me for the second time. It brought more out of me—another wave of earth-shattering pleasure. The heat of him incredible

Tae dropped his hand, and I caught up with my breath.

“Fuck...” I said.

“I know.”

You came again...

He put me down and licked my neck, sealing the wound.

“That was amazing,” I said, getting hit with guilt.

He’d been sad and vulnerable, and I should’ve stopped him.

“I’m sorry, Clay,” he panted. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“One of those ‘in the moment’ things,” I tried for us both.

“My head... I’m sorry.” He sighed.

I touched his face. “Don’t be. I’m the sorry one. I can’t—”

To my total surprise, he kissed me. Gently. Sweetly.

Gosh. Winter’s words went wild in my head.

He liked me. I’d turned his world upside down.

You make it different...

The vampire pressed his forehead to mine. “Thank you, Clay. I needed that. Let’s not feel guilty about it, okay?”

“Okay.”

God, he felt so amazing resting against me. “We should get back to work.”

We had a drunk, shagged out demon movie star to kidnap and torture.

“Yes,” he said, not moving. “We really should.”

He wrapped his arms around me. And so, for a good few minutes, we hugged. I held him tight, let him hold me in silence. His frustration had come out as sex, and hugs, and I was happy to have helped, my guilt fading. If he wanted to talk, too, he could. I didn't say anything, though. Because something in the way my body tingled from being fucked in a cupboard told me talking was the last thing the vampire wanted to do.

The hug ended. A draft tickled my balls and backside.

“Erm, Tae?”

“Wait here. I'll get you some new clothes.”

“They were Prada trousers.”

“I know. But we should change into something more comfortable anyway. I'll be back to protect your modesty.”

I chuckled. “Thanks.”

He left the cupboard.

The door opened shortly after, light spilling inside.

It wasn't him. Bollocks!

I covered myself with two hands, face hot as hell. “Oh.”

Winter looked me up and down. “I see you've been busy.” She sniffed the air. “You've put me in the mood for some business of my own.”

“Erm... great.”

She grinned. “Once upon a time, I helped him with my body. Now it’s your job.”

“That’s not—”

She closed the door.

Bloody cheek. I wasn’t just some fuck toy for him to work out his issues on. How dare she say that! How dare she put that in my mind!

But wasn’t that what I gladly offered him?

Nope. Bullshit. It was more than that. He wasn’t using me. Not Tae. And if screwing me helped him get his head together, then I was an obliging hole.

Right?

SEVENTEEN



Fairy face cream. Check.

All black outfit for hitting the Parisian streets. Check.

Buzzing from the cupboard fuck and craving round two. Check. Check. Check.

We drove through the Parisian streets as fake men, clinging to shadows, heading over to Jarod's hotel five miles west of ours.

The city was so different at night, lit by a soft yellow light bringing plenty of creepy atmosphere. Highlighting the shadows, the old soul of Paris. Both pretty and menacing at the same time, a beast with many secrets in its corners.

Jumping out of the car a few streets away from our goal, we slipped past drinkers and the homeless and all the creatures of the night, making ourselves as inconspicuous as possible.

“Be ready for anything,” Tae whispered as we paused opposite the old European building. A smaller hotel than ours. Quaint. Quiet. No sounds coming from it, only those you'd expect in a city at this time of night—light traffic, a general hum.

Arcana tickled my senses, pushed against all my barriers. It wanted out. I wanted it out.

Be patient...

“Are you ready, Clay?” Tae asked.

“I’m ready,” I whispered back.

He clicked his phone, detonating an electromagnetic wave to scramble the cameras in the area. People working for him had set this up earlier, putting tiny devices in place for Tae to detonate.

It was kind of like a load of chaff grenades popping at once to mess with the cameras, but cleaner and making zero sound.

Batman strikes again.

We had thirty minutes to get the demon before the effect wore off.

The vampire took point, leading me down a side alley, then hoisted me onto his back. He climbed the wall without breaking a sweat, doing that thing vampires did by shifting their body weight from hard to light.

Up we went toward the roof to a slightly open window on the rear side of the building. Tae checked around him, making sure we were as hidden as possible. I held on tight, the side of my face against his spine.

This was planned. The women Winter had hired would leave the window open for us.

Slowly, Tae opened the window wider. Not being a modern hotel with security windows, this one came all the way wide.

Snoring. Jarod on the bed with a sheet pulled over his waist. The sickly light of a bedside lamp spread across him, highlighting some of his features. His mouth sat open as he sucked in air like a freight train.

Someone had a good night.

The room stank of booze and cum. I stayed by the window as Tae moved around the bed.

Having summoned the Mark of Arcana before setting off, I got ready with my *hold* spell.

Hold him tight, with all my might.

The magic sparkled at my fingertips as I thought the words, shooting out at the sleeping demon scum. He stopped snoring, only his chest moving. His eyes opened, blinking. He spotted Tae looming over him—only he wouldn't be seeing the familiar face of the vampire.

He groaned, but the spell held his mouth shut.

Jarod's wide, frightened eyes met mine. They could be as terrified as they liked. Good. Now it was his turn to be afraid.

I couldn't wait to kill this prick.

Tae grabbed him, throwing him over his shoulder. He kept the sheet around his naked arse.

“Ready?” he asked me.

“Ready.”

He went out the window, I went out of the door, hurrying down to street level. Casting my warlock shimmer trick a couple of times. Becoming a blur to anyone who might be watching until I met Tae outside. We took off to the car.

Wow. That'd gone smoothly.



WITHIN THE MASSIVE network of dark tunnels beneath Paris, a zombie greeted us. She didn't seem bothered by the body slumped over Tae's shoulder. Jarod's groaning didn't so much as raise a concern.

Excellent.

Tae asked her something in French, Jarod slung over his back.

"Happy to help," the creature replied in English. "At the right price."

What. The. Hell.

Tae'd told me he'd met a zombie here before. And he'd not been bullshitting. This wasn't the same one he'd shared a red wine with, though.

She looked dead, with pallid, ashen skin and matted brown hair. Part of her cheek was missing, and she stank of lilies and dog shit.

I tried not to breathe in.

How had Tae enjoyed a glass of wine with one of these smelly creatures? Maybe they didn't all reek like this.

He paid her the toll of brains. Sheep brains. Apparently, zombies enjoyed sheep brains the most.

Right. Okay. Gross. But not my business.

The zombie nodded approvingly at the box of brain. "Follow me."

We followed her into the dark, my fear a living thing sat on my chest. Being underground in this darkness? Not my idea of a good time.

But I sucked it up like a good little buttercup.

Paris is famous for its extensive underground network. Miles and miles of tunnels, home to zombies, apparently, and a dark so thick it'd kill you if your flashlight ran out of batteries.

I avoided these sorts of places in my days on the streets. London had its fair share of tunnels too. Good for London. I preferred to be where I could see the world, where the sun and moon could touch me. But for many, these places were a sanctuary or a place to vanish from society forever. Like the zombies, I guess.

Our zombie escort didn't say much, didn't ask any questions. She walked with the gait of a regular human, an unbothered aura about her. She really didn't give a shit about Jarod or why we were here. I guess when you had yourself a yummy box of sheep brains, things were good.

"Here you go," she said, added something in French, then handed him the flashlight she'd been carrying.

"Merci," Tae replied, also throwing in something in French at the end.

The zombie left us at a small arched doorway.

"What was her name?" I asked.

"No idea. Come on."

Tae ducked through the door into a wider space with a high ceiling. The flashlight chased the dark away where its beam touched, revealing dust and cracked walls and a chair at the center of this mini-cavern. A coil of rope sat underneath the chair.

The air was close and damp. Far away from freshness, a world lost to the reality above my head.

Man, did I want to be back up there.

“A chair?” I questioned.

“I asked for it,” Tae answered. “Zombies are very accommodating.”

“I can see that.”

He put Jarod in the chair, my magic still holding him down. Arcana thrummed away happily like a smooth-running engine, pumping magic at the demon. It made me happy, filled me with relief to have it awake again. It scratched so many itches, fed my pesky cravings.

The vampire moved swiftly, tying the demon so he sat upright. Jarod slumped forward a little, the rope taut across his body.

“There,” Tae said. “You can let him speak now.”

I removed magic from his head area.

Jarod sucked in the cloying air, coughing violently. “Shit...” he gasped. “Shit. Shit...” Cough, cough. Gag and spit.

“Water...” he pleaded.

Tae had a small bottle in his coat pocket. He cracked it open and tipped it to the arsewipe’s lips. He drank up.

“Th-thanks,” Jarod wheezed.

We gave him a minute.

The demon glanced between us with a heavy sigh. “Who are you?”

“We want information,” Tae said.

“About what?” I saw him trying to figure out a way to move. Felt him try to push against my magic, a falling leaf brushing against my skin.

“Your key to the third demon level,” Tae said.

The color drained from his face. “My what?”

“You know what I’m talking about.” Tae’s voice sent shivers up and down my, well, everywhere. And not in the hot way.

“I—”

“Cut the crap before you even start, Jarod. We know all about you and what you get up to.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The murders. The rapes. So many cases, so many stolen and ruined lives.”

“But what—”

“Don’t try it,” Tae countered. “It’s dull.”

“Try what? I haven’t done anything to anyone. I wouldn’t. That’s not me.”

“But you would say that, wouldn’t you?” I added. “Anyone caught in this position would try to weasel their way out of it.”

He frowned through his terror. “I’m telling you, you’ve got the wrong guy.”

“You’re a demon,” Tae said.

He sighed. “Yes. But that doesn’t make me the bad guy.”

“Kind of does.”

“You really have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

“I have an excellent idea of who I’m dealing with.” Tae walked around the chair, prowling with menace.

“You don’t. I’m not the guy you think I am.”

“You’re not a murdering rapist?” Tae questioned.

“No!” Jarod hissed. “I’d never do that to people.”

“Why not? You’re a demon. And I have plenty of evidence.”

“It’s bullshit evidence. I’m being set up.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because...” Jarod hesitated. “Because I’m the problem.”

Tae nodded, standing to his side with his arms folded. “I’d say you are.”

The demon looked to me. “You have to believe me.”

“I don’t,” I responded. “Why the hell would I? Why would anyone? You’re scum. You can’t deny the evidence.”

“I’d like to see this evidence,” the star countered with some bravado.

“We want the key,” Tae said. “Where is it?”

Jarod was incensed. “You’re fucking stupid. Both of you. Walk away now.”

“And leave you here?”

“I’ll get out.”

“Cocky.”

“Walk away now.”

“Give us the key.”

“What key?”

Tae grabbed him by the hair, dragging his head back. “Do you like pain, movie star?”

“Fuck you.”

“Want to know what your insides look like?”

“Fuck... you.”

Tae pulled out a curved dagger, his eyes flushing crimson outside of the fairy lie otherwise hiding them. “Where. Is. The. Key.” He pressed the blade to the side of Jarod’s throat—a small yet sharp instrument.

“Do your worst,” Jarod croaked.

“I will.”

I watched, silent, my hands opening and closing. Tae knew what he was doing. He didn’t need my input until he said so. I kept the spell going.

Blood beaded where the nail touched.

“You’re not having the key,” Jarod squeaked.

“Ah, so now you’re complying.”

“No. I’m not...”

“You just admitted there’s a key. Good one, Hollywood. Baby steps.” Tae removed his blade, prowling in a circle again. He turned the weapon over in his hands as he spoke. “How is Tasmin, by the way?”

Jarod swallowed. “Tasmin.?”

“You know, your dear friend Tasmin Vacquier.”

“She wasn’t... She isn’t my friend.”

“Are you afraid, Hollywood?” Tae asked.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Well? Are you?”

“No...”

“You smell afraid,” Tae responded.

“I smell of spunk.”

“That, too.”

Jarod’s eyebrows came together. “I’ve heard about you two. Heard all the whispers from the underground. The Banishers, they call you.”

“Is that so?”

“What do you want the key for? To go into the demon realm and what? Visit Tasmin?” He laughed, albeit without any front. “You’re fucking idiots.”

Tae lowered his face to the arsewipe. “Are we?”

“Please let me go.”

The vampire straightened again. “Is that what your victims said?”

“I have no victims.”

What a vile piece of work. I sent more of my magic at him, willing for the lock on his limbs to hurt.

He moaned, sucked air between clenched teeth.

Tae pressed the dagger to Jarod’s stomach. “Now, then. You may think being immune to death saves you. It doesn’t. And you’re certainly not immune to pain, are you?”

“Who are you?” Jarod asked, attention on the knife at his belly.

“Where is the key?”

“You’ve got this wrong. So fucking wrong.”

“I’ll count down from ten, then this goes in. Believe me, I’ll make it hurt beyond your imagination.”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Let the countdown begin. Ten.”

“Please don’t do this.”

“Nine.”

“I can’t give you the key.”

“Eight.”

“I’m not the demon you think I am.”

“Seven.”

“They’re trying to get rid of me.”

Tae paused. “Who are?”

“Quentin Dawn and his fucking followers.”

The vampire removed the blade. “Speak. Now.”

“I’m trying to bring him down, stop what’s going on. And there’s so much going on.”

“Like what?” Tae asked with a tone packed with the crispest frost.

“A major takeover,” Jarod said.

“Obviously. Demons want to take over this world. That’s always been the demonic goal to claim Earth.”

“Not for Quentin. He wants to take the demon realm and destroy Earth.” He drew in a painful-sounding breath. “He wants to activate The Rift, bring about an apocalypse.”

“Why would he want that?” Tae asked.

Jarod stared at the vampire-in-disguise. “For a long time, demons have wanted to take over the Earth. The witches have made it a centuries-long challenge, and Quentin feels the time

has come to remove the weight from around our necks. It's time to move forward and forget about Earth."

"By wiping us out," I cut in.

Eyes on me now. "That's right, warlock."

My heart jumped into my mouth. *He knows it's me*, went my panic, and then my reason returned. No way around hiding my warlock mark, so to him I was some mystery warlock. Not Clay Christmas.

And breathe.

"Quentin wants rid of the queen—"

"Queen?" Tae cut him off. "You have a queen?"

"Yes. I serve Her Majesty's interests. Kind of."

Tae folded his arms, moving back around to Jarod's front. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not a supporter of the queen by any stretch. She wants dominion over Earth but will do so with too much of an iron fist."

"And you want to stop them both?" Tae asked.

"Mainly Quentin."

"So you do want a demon kingdom here?"

"Not really. I just want a quiet life," the movie star said and sighed. "We're not all monsters."

"But you want Earth. What's wrong with sticking to the demon realm?"

"Sunlight. Oceans. Humans. Cake."

Tae twirled the dagger in his hand. "You don't have these things?"

“Yours are better. Brighter. Warmer—at least in the warmer moments. The demon realm is always cold.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“I’m not,” Jarod replied calmly.

“You’re trying to weasel your way out. Stick the knife in the first moment you get.”

“I’m not that kind of guy.” What was with this calmness? “I want Quentin stopped.”

“How will he do it?” I asked.

“All I know is that he’s looking for something or someone,” Jarod said.

“Shit.”

“Absolutely.” He winced. “You two clearly want Quentin for something. What?”

Tae growled. “Information. You’re connected to him. You know things. I’m looking—” Tae stopped, clutching his cards to his chest.

When should he play them? When should he demand to know who killed his family?

Definitely not yet. Things were too tangled, too messy. But the truth was somewhere in there.

“Looking for what?” Jarod asked.

“Where is the key?” Tae retorted.

The demon didn’t answer.

A demon queen. A demon kingdom on Earth, and crazy Quentin going even further by messing with The Rift and

getting rid of us. Gosh. Where did you even begin to process this?

“You’ve got no reason to trust me,” Jarod said. “I accept that. I understand it. I don’t expect to change your notions of my kind because my kind hasn’t done anything to help the cause. But some of us aren’t spun from nightmares. I won’t lie and say I don’t want a kingdom here. I’d just want it to be run by someone less bloodthirsty than the queen or Quentin Dawn. Peaceful, where we can all share in the spirit of this world.”

Again, Tae kept quiet.

“Why?” I asked, taking the talking stick. “Your list of reasons aside, why would you want to live in a place you’re not welcome? I mean, the towers and the witches will never let you live in peace. And why should you? I mean, the demon stuff I’ve seen lately... It’s fucked up.”

“I know. I wouldn’t want the cruelest of my kind here either,” Jarod said.

“But how would you regulate that? We have enough crime and issues as it is, without adding extra demon dramas.”

“I know.”

“You don’t know.” I pushed on him with my magic some more. “You don’t know what it’s like living your gilded life.”

He grunted. “My life’s not so gilded.”

“Money and privilege aren’t gilded?” Ha! Said me who lived in a money-laced cage now. No longer needing to think about my next meal and heat and all those things that ran through my mind when I was homeless. Man, how quickly I’d moved on.

I had no right to be angry with the demon about those things. The rest of it? Hell yes!

“Of course they are,” he answered my response. “But that doesn’t mean I’m blind to everything else.”

I frowned at him, pushing harder. He sucked in air, chest strained as if I were really sitting on his ribcage.

“Why should we believe any of this?” I said. “Everything you’re saying could be part of the master plan for the grand takeover. Maybe you’re working for Quentin Dawn. Maybe there is no queen. A great story to try and pull over our eyes while the real horror show kicks off.”

“I’m telling the truth,” he struggled. “I’m not who you think I am.”

“But you still want an Earthly kingdom,” Tae said.

Jarod winced at the pressure. “Earth’s history is full of this stuff. Taking land, building kingdoms.”

Good point. “So why add more to the line?” I asked.

He didn’t respond, too busy struggling against my magic. I could easily let him take a breath, but then I remembered the files on him and his crimes. No matter what he said, I couldn’t get them out of my head.

“Quentin... Quentin wants me out of the way,” Jarod said. “Others like me.”

What if this was a setup? What if everything he’d said was true? It still left the world with three options—the apocalyptic way, the queen’s way, or a more peaceful one. Demons were coming either way. And there was only one of me to wipe them out.

What if there were ‘good’ demons? Those who wanted to live a peaceful life?

Gosh. What a pain in the brain. And what about me? Was I a bad person because of what lingered inside me? Did my demon blood make me evil?

“What now?” I asked Tae, shelving my inner turmoil.

“I need to think,” he said.

“I’ll say you do,” Jarod added. “Think hard before you banish me.”

“Not until we have the key,” the vampire countered.

“I can’t let you have it.”

“Why?”

“Because it doesn’t belong to you.”

I groaned. “That’s the worst excuse ever.”

“Fine. Because you don’t understand its power.”

“I understand it gets me where I want to be,” Tae said.

“The demon realm isn’t for you,” Jarod responded.

“And *this* realm isn’t for you.”

The movie star sighed again. “I can’t let you bring chaos to my home.”

“But you can to mine?”

“It’s not the same.”

Tae blurred forward, making me jump. He pressed his knife to the demon’s neck again, this time drawing black blood. It ran down the golden flesh as a quick stream.

Jarod grit his teeth, eyes clamped closed. “Please don’t do this...” he whispered.

“Demons are not welcome here,” the vampire responded with Arctic breath. “They murder. They steal. They destroy.”

“Humans do this—”

More blood as Tae pushed the blade in harder. “I don’t give a fuck about humans. I give a fuck about those you protect while pretending to be a good man. Give me the key. I want to talk to Tasmin.”

“I... I... I...”

Tae drove the blade into the demon’s left thigh, burying it hilt-deep.

Jarod roared. I clamped his mouth shut, cutting him off.

Tae grabbed his face, crushing his cheeks together, the demon’s lips twisting. “The next words out of your mouth better be about the key. If not, you suffer. And don’t worry, I’ll make sure you can still speak at the end of it. Your choice.” He released the demon and withdrew the blade.

Gosh.

“I’ll give you a minute,” the vampire added, flinging demonic blood from the weapon.

I watched Tae, his pain a shimmer of deadly haze across his face, sending aches to my heart in solidarity, along with a ton of fresh guilt to spread onto the already rotting pile.

Demons. I was part of the problem, a part of his hate. A thorn in his side without him knowing.

I’m so sorry, Tae. I didn’t mean for this lie to happen.

I had to tell him. Right? I had to cut out the rot before it—

A jolt in my chest bounced through my bones, taking my legs out. I went down hard on the ground, knees crunching against stone.

“Clay!” Tae cried.

My vision spun and twisted and became campfire. Only, it wasn't the same now. Fire burned around me, the golden orange blaze of Arcana. No sign of the elements of this lost magic like at the campfire. Only me and the flames and the chaos of the burning...

...and the weeping. The lament in the fire, in my soul. I wasn't right. I wasn't supposed to be here. I'd gone away long ago, my time over. I became Trace. I was supposed to be the snowfall, done with my old ways. But I broke free, twisted into something new, something deadly, something unknown within the knowledge of Arcana.

Because of... What? Who? My blood? Where did Arcana and the demonic energies come from? They clashed. Tainted. Dirty. New.

Where...

Where...

Where...

The grimoires floated above the flames, rising up and at me, their pages open and fluttering.

So much power within for me to learn. If only I were a real student, a proper wielder of the magic, then everything would be fine. But those days were lost to time. At least, they *should* be.

“I'm wrong,” I whispered fact.

The books flew at me. I opened both hands, the heavy tomes landing as if made of metal and my palms magnets.

“Power...”

The magic within those pages flowed into me. A physical thing made of silken fluid. It filled my veins, my heart, my muscles, and bones, caressed my skin. And it hit my brain hard, downloading information at lightning speed. Spells registered, clear and unforgettable. Every piece of magical knowledge mine to hold. Every spell at my command. So many, so bright.

Mine.

“A new power,” I said to the flames.

“Clay!”

Hands on my face, arms around me. *His* voice pulling me back.

“Clay! Come on!”

I saw him as the flames snuffed out, the place of the campfire dead to me. Not a place for a man like me. Never again.

Never.

Never.

Never.

Tae’s dark eyes flared with crimson. Flowers in the night, blooming for me, for his anger, for his sorrow.

“I’m okay...” I whispered.

Magic sloshed inside me. Potent. Ready. So much power at my disposal. Too much. Too ready. I felt my control slipping as my body tried to adjust to the onslaught of spells. I’d moved

from studying the grimoires piece by piece to being hit with this tsunami.

Oh. Gosh.

“Clay?”

“Tae and Clay?” Jarod questioned. “How?”

Arcana wanted him dead. Jarod Woods, the murdering scum, had to die. Fuck his key. This ant to my inferno didn't deserve another moment of breath.

I leaped to my feet, a surge of energy springing me onward. Knocking Tae back in surprise.

Rage took hold of me, volcanic and alien. “You piece of shit.”

The fairy magic melted off my face, keeping hold of me on the inside. Arcana made sure it left that part alone.

“Clay?” Jarod said as I approached him.

“No, Clay!” Tae cried.

I help up a hand, calling upon a spell as if it was now completely second nature.

My holding spell held Tae in place so he couldn't stop me.

“Clay!” the vampire yelled. “Not without the key!”

My reason sat on a bench, waiting this one out. Arcana gave me the best kind of rush—a new and improved one. I was the most powerful creature on the planet. Well, at least up there in the top five.

No. My reason... I had to be smart. Get that key.

“It's you two,” Jarod said. “You're the ones, aren't you?”

“Doesn't matter,” I replied. “Nothing matters to you now.”

“Please, Clay. Don’t banish me. I can—”

“Be quiet.” I cast a spell to force my will on him. If I wanted him to run up the walls in a tutu, he’d do it. He was my puppet now. I’d seen this spell before, too afraid to try it.

Too late to be afraid now.

“Tell me where the key is,” I demanded.

Jarod answered with zero choice. “Inside me. Safe.”

“Clarify.”

“Implanted inside me. Literally. In my side. On the right.”

I looked for myself. A thin scar. No. Wait. A zip. An actual zip made of flesh, not metal. Weird but kind of cool.

“They key’s in there?” I asked.

“Yes. Always want it as close to me as possible.”

“Open it,” I commanded, giving him access to his left arm. “That’s all you’ll do. Don’t try anything else.”

He wouldn’t.

“I can’t believe this,” he said, obeying my command. Just like a zip, it came open, parting like lips. He went in with his finger and thumb, plucking out the key.

Silver with a smooth round head, he stared at it, fear in his wide eyes. “You can’t—”

“Give it to me,” I demanded, breaking out in a sweat. It ran down my face as if someone had lit a bonfire at my feet.

The spell was burning out, my hold on it tiring.

Shit.

He handed me the key with a trembling hand. “Please, Clay. Don’t do this. I can help you.”

My spell of holding waivered too. He'd be free any minute now.

I took the key. Carved into the flat head was a 'III.' I handed it to Tae, setting him free of my spell.

I'm sorry...

"You can't do this," the demon said. "There has to be another solution."

"There's nothing you can say," Tae countered. "It is done."

"Clay?" the demon spoke again.

"What?"

"Where is this coming from? Your magic, I mean. Warlocks don't have this level of power."

"I know." As I said it, my two spells burned to the end of their wicks.

Oh, gosh.

Jarod lunged forward, free from my hold. Made a beeline right for me. He manifested his demon side, his Hollywood glamour breaking like a lightbulb in a heavy hand. Black scales rippled across his skin, his clothes tearing away to barely cover his private parts. Talons the size of my head came at, erm, my head. Tae slammed into me, tackling me to the ground out of his trajectory. We rolled, then Tae sprang to his feet and dove for the demon's legs in a rugby tackle. They went down, Jarod slashing wildly, missing Tae by inches.

"You fucking bastards!" Jarod cried, his voice demonic and packed with gravel.

I summoned my demon-killing arrow, firing it into his back as he jumped up to his feet. Hitting him in the heart from

the rear.

The arsewipe went down, the room shaking on impact.

Tae hurried over to me. I met his charge, my sweaty arse crashing into him. We hugged hard.

“I’m sorry I held you like that,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He smoothed his hand against my spine, his chin resting on the top of my head. “Are you hurt?”

“No. You?”

“No.”

We stopped hugging, watching as the demon corpse crumbled into obsidian ash.

I grabbed the bridge of my nose, my temples pulsing. “Do you think he was telling the truth?”

“I’m not sure. Only one way to find out.” He pocketed the key.

“We’re really doing this,” I said. “We’re really hitting the demon realm.”

“Soon. Obviously not tonight.”

I rested my head on his shoulder. He slipped a hand around my waist. “Thank God for that.”

“What happened, Clay?” he asked. “When you passed out.”

I smiled at him with a smile that wasn’t happy. “Man, do I have big Arcana news.”



AFTER TAE'S Sunday business dinner in Paris, we were back in London. I'd collapsed onto my bed at Raven Tower upon return, sleeping until the sun went down on a gray Monday.

Awake now, I sat with Tae in the penthouse living room as rain pelted the panoramic windows. Sipping on vodka, Fizz curled up between us after a hearty meal and lots of fussing.

On the coffee table were the grimoires, their pages bent from water damage that didn't actually happen because they weren't near water, their words gone. Empty of magic and information.

"They're really gone?" Tae said.

I nodded. "I sucked them dry."

"And you know every single spell?" We'd been through this a few times, but I guess repeating it really affirmed it.

"I think I do," I said. "I mean, I know I do. Yeah, I definitely do."

"Incredible."

"Scary."

"I know. But we'll manage this."

"This isn't right, though," I countered. "I shouldn't have this power. Not so easily."

He faced me, his hand on Fizz. "You said yourself this is different to the old Arcana."

Was his mind too clouded with revenge for him to see a negative? Because he hadn't listed a single one.

"I'm really scared," I added. "I don't want to lose myself to this. I'm already missing it, counting down the seconds until

midnight. I can't be addicted. I can't have these cravings. It's not right."

The rules of midnight awakening and sunrise snoozes still applied, regardless of the new version of me. Those rules were definitely tied up with Trace Fall—the whole snowing from midnight to sunrise thing. I knew it because Arcana confirmed it.

"I won't let you lose yourself, Clay. I promise. I'm here for you every step of this journey."

Not a promise he could keep.

I drank more vodka, done with magic talk. "What now?" I yawned, still a little sleepy.

"We prepare to enter level three," he said. "In a week, maybe two. Let's see how it goes. I want to do more research, train you more, let you adjust to your new situation with your magic."

"O-okay."

The demon realm.

Yikes.

"We can do this, Clay." His hand covered mine.

From hunting demons, specifically his family's killer, to this complicated mess. Who could've seen this turn of events?

"And deal with Buttons," I added.

"Of course. He's a prime target."

"Do you think this queen might be the *she* he's been talking about? Oh, God!"

"What's wrong?"

“The demon in the bikini is the queen? Shit! The queen.”

“It could be.”

“No. Not her. Buttons mentioned *her* to her, you know? So she’s not the queen. At least, I think so. Shit. Jarod was telling the truth, wasn’t he? At least about that part.”

“We’ll find out for sure, Clay.”

I nodded, sipping on more vodka. Listening to the rain, creped out by the approaching future.

EIGHTEEN



December. Two weeks in, the whole time spent prepping for the demon realm expedition.

Hopefully, it wouldn't be like the Doomed Expedition—the one and only official attempt to get intel on the demon realm.

Think positive!

It was almost *that* time of year again.

Though Christmastime can be a slog when you have nothing, I always tried to make the best of it. Hanging tinsel in my hovel from the 99p shop or from what I found in skips and bins. I even had a little tree with some battery-powered lights—which had to be switched on sparingly. Batteries were crazy expensive.

On this day, in my new life, I had myself a real tree to decorate. An actual real tree.

Wow.

I hung multicolored lights through the branches, taking my time to get the balance right. Now that Fizz was a billion times better, she was playing with a couple of baubles and tinsel. Thankfully, she didn't have the supposed feline proclivity to

destroy Christmas trees, happy with a few sparkly bits to play with.

It took me two hours to get the tree looking right. Tae was off at Auto Frost HQ dealing with business, not one for Christmas. But he wanted me to have a tree, to do what I wanted.

Bless his cotton socks.

With the tree done, I set up the LED village scenes. The snowy kind with railways and cuteness galore. I'd wanted one for so long. Now I had four. I spread them around the penthouse. It gave the place a dose of festive warmth.

“What do you think?” I asked my cat with my hands on my hips. “I did good, right?”

She meowed, but a pink bauble pulled her full focus from me.

“Yeah, I did good.” I smiled at the lights of the tree and the villages. Perfect for the evening settling in. My kind of distraction from the mission tomorrow. At midnight, so Arcana could be out and ready to help, we'd be going into the demon realm.

To settle my nerves, I headed into the kitchen and made myself a Snowball—part advocaat, part lemonade. Incredibly sweet and sickly and festive. I remember having one with my friend Lina, at the home, along with too many mince pies.

I grabbed a mince pie from the cupboard.

Sugar overload, here I come!



TAE RETURNED AROUND eight o'clock while I sat watching a small-town Christmas movie that was so cute and cheesy and so what I needed.

“Hi,” I said, getting up. “How was work?”

Sexy Tae in his suit and tie, clothes perfectly cut to his frame, hair tied up. There was a package in his right hand. Square, pretty big, wrapped in gold Christmas paper. He smiled at me, at the Christmas tree.

“Impressive,” he said. “You’ve done a great job.”

“Thanks. Busy day?”

“And tedious.” He came over to me. “I have something for you.”

“Oh?”

“A Christmas present.”

“Really?”

Tae handed me the package. “For you, Clay.”

A tag hung from it, bearing his elegant scrawl.

Happy Christmas, Clay

Tae x

“Thanks so much. I haven’t got you anything yet. But there’s still time because it’s not quite the big day yet and—” I stopped myself before I went into a mega ramble. “I’ll pop it under the tree. First one under there.”

“Open it now,” he said.

His purr sent shivers to my yummy places. “You what?”

“Open it.”

“What about bad luck?” I asked.

“Sorry?”

“Opening presents early is bad luck.”

“Is it?”

“Apparently.”

He removed his black suit jacket and undid his shirt cuffs. “How many presents have you opened early in your life to be dealt a bad hand?”

“I...” He had me there. “Stupid superstition.”

He rolled up the sleeves of his crisp white shirt. “You’re allowed to believe in whatever you want. But you can certainly open that right now. I want to see your face.”

“Oh? Erm... Okay.” I carefully opened the expertly wrapped paper. Of course, it was wrapped perfectly. Why wouldn’t it be?

What could it be...

“Oh my God!” I yelled. “You didn’t!”

“I did, Clay. I’m hoping this is your very first.”

“It really is. I’ve never owned something like this. Thank you so much. Wow.”

Kylie Minogue on vinyl. My first Kylie vinyl—her *Light Years* album.

“What’s this?” I asked, checking the sticker on the cellophane. “One of a kind?”

“Gold-colored vinyl pressing,” he said. “Specially made for you and you alone. The only one in the world.”

I wanted to sob my warlock heart out. “Gosh, Tae. This is... This is so amazing.”

“I had it made. I know the right people.”

I put it down carefully on the sofa and hugged him. So close to tears. “This is one of the nicest things anyone’s ever done for me.” I buried my face in his chest.

He held me right back.

Breaking my hold, I looked up. “And you’ve already done so much for me.”

He smiled. “I get to see your happiness.”

“Thank you.”

He placed his warm hands on my face. Ready to kiss me again? He didn’t, letting me go instead, his arms dropping to his sides.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He stepped away. “You make it different, Clay. This isn’t casual. I can’t stand back and call it that. I can’t pretend. I can’t deny it.”

“Tae...”

His eyes were on the Christmas tree lights, the colors playing across the planes of his face. “You’re more than a delicious thrill. So much more.” He looked to me now, making my heart thrum. “I should’ve never kissed you.”

“Tae...” What did I say?

“I never wanted to feel this way again, for someone to get inside me again. Losing my family destroyed any semblance of emotion I had left. At least, I thought so. But you’ve turned things upside down.”

Just like Winter had said.

“Tae. You...”

“I tried to hold back, to not climax with you in case I lost my mind.”

I’d been right about the non-cum theory. Only pleasing me. The club had changed that.

“I shot that to shit, didn’t I?” he added.

“You, erm, did.”

He shook his head, coming closer again. Then placed his hands on my shoulders. “How stupid am I?”

“You’re not stupid.”

“I am, Clay. I’m stupid and a mess, and I can’t deny this anymore. I want you. I don’t want you to *not* be here.”

“I don’t want to not be here either,” I said, then chuckled nervously.

He bent, resting his forehead on mine. “I don’t know what to do. I’m a widow. I miss my wife and son every fucking day. It stabs me in the guts every wretched second. It never stops. It never gives me a break. And I don’t want a break. I don’t want to stop feeling this agony because I deserve every painful moment.”

“Tae...”

“I failed them, Clay. I didn’t stop that demon. I didn’t do my job. All I had to do was love them and protect them, and I failed at both. The only reason I’m alive is to give them back the vengeance they deserve. I don’t follow them because...” He removed his forehead from mine, turning his back on me. “Sorry.”

This poor, sweet, amazing man. “You have nothing to be sorry about. Talk. I’m here.”

A long beat. “You’re such a lovely person, Clay.”

“I’m here for you.”

“You don’t have to be.”

“You’ve done so much for me. You’ve changed my life. I’ll never be able to repay you. I’ll thank you until I drop dead, and even that won’t stop me.”

His shoulders moved with a soft laugh.

“And you bought me Kylie Minogue vinyl. I mean, you’re practically God to me now.”

More laughing shoulders.

“Tae?”

He turned to face me. “You’re the star in the dark. The hope in the pain. Hope I don’t deserve, but I crave so badly.”

Holy shit. My heart was set to burst. “Tae...”

“I think I’m falling for you, Clay. And I don’t know how to stop.”

“Don’t stop,” I breathed. “Please don’t stop.”

And don’t fall for me. I’ll break your fucking soul with my truth...

He walked toward me.

“I... I’m falling, too...” I said.

My face in his hands again, his lips inching closer to mine.

Oh, gosh.

He kissed me again, beside the Christmas tree. Lit me up like those bulbs, made me sparkle on the inside with the touch of his lips.

Tae was falling for me, and I admitted the same.

This was set to crash and burn. But for now, I let his kiss sweep me away.

NINETEEN



Tae drove us to Barking, East London—the location of the secret demon realm gate. The other gate was in Richmond Park, inaccessible after the Doomed Expedition, heavily warded and guarded.

On the approach to midnight, weaving through the streets and ADU checkpoints with the radio on, we listened to a report on a Buttons killing spree last night.

“Evil prick,” I said, sucking on a fairy lollipop.

Tae nodded, making a left turn. “His days are numbered.”

If only that were a concrete statement.

The radio went on to talk about the disappearance of Jarod Woods. Last seen in Paris at Winter Gold’s on December 2nd.

“Never getting seen again,” I said, surprising myself. “Sorry. Too dark.”

“And true,” Tae said.

I wondered if I should care more about these demon killings, if there were more nuances I wasn’t seeing. Or should I just slay and not worry about it? A higher percentage agreed with the latter.

Before I knew it, Tae parked the car at the top of the dead Longbride Road that ran alongside Barking Park. The houses were all collapsed, a toxic river running through where they'd once stood. That same green vein cut through the park, winding through the overgrown grass of the park.

I watched the green glow, so not wanting to get anywhere near it. At least the protective glass was in place.

“Don't worry,” Tae said. “The gate is this end of the park.”

“Okay.”

Out in the cold, biting air, shadows clinging to us from the lack of any street lamps, we made our way through a hole in the high three-point metal fence circling the park. Tae clicked on his blue glow stick thingy he always took to the sugar factory, chasing away some of the dark without being too bright.

I kept close to him, wanting to hold his hand after our revelations of falling for each other. To feel more secure, because I wanted to know if that's what we did now. After the kiss, however, no more had been said about it. Not even a chat with our bodies. Just chilling and preparing and anxiety turned up to a million.

Our boots squelched on the damp ground. Tae led me to the right, heading for the empty husk of a dilapidated building. My skin prickled, the hairs on the back of my neck at full attention.

Please, not in that place...

“We're here.”

Thankfully, Tae stopped at a tall tree, not that building. It looked old, a relic from ages ago, but just a tree, not a gateway.

“How did you know this was a gate into the demon realm?” I asked.

“Patience, resistance, and help from a fairy.”

“Grindle.”

“Yes. He showed me how to feel for the vibrations.”

“Oh.”

He removed a keychain from his pocket. Three keys. Two silver, one bronze.

Midnight hit. Arcana surged.

“Shall I summon the Mark now?” I asked him.

He looked around him. “Do it. We’re alone.”

I called it out, calling the pentagram of orange-gold to the grass. Waited for it to die away.

Tae patted my shoulder when it was over. “Are you ready, Clay?”

“Is it too late to say no?”

“Of course not.”

My humor had slipped past him. “I was joking. Let’s do it.”

He pushed the bronze key into the trunk. I didn’t see a keyhole, only the metal slip inside the bark like pushing a spoon into jelly. As easy as that. Tae turned the key. No change in the tree yet.

A click, a rumble under my feet. I moved closer to him.

The bottom of the tree opened inward, spreading up the bark as it sank into the shape of a door. Wide enough to fit an adult, low enough for that person to have to duck inside.

Darkness awaited, motes of dust dancing in the glow of the blue stick.

“Are you really ready?” he asked.

I nodded, unable to speak. Mouth sandpaper, fear laughing like a drunk on a park bench.

There was actually a guy on a bench who’d laughed at me once. Quite a nice man before the cider took hold.

“Follow me,” Tae said, ducking into the dark.

His blue stick showed a stairwell of black stone leading downward in a narrow spiral—on the steep side with no handrail. I resisted touching the black, almost slick-looking walls for support, though. God only knew what treats might lurk inside them. And I didn’t stop to ask the vampire, seeing as he’d been through here before. Knowledge wasn’t always power. Sometimes it scared the crap out of you.

“Should I cast my ball of light spell?” I asked.

“Not yet.”

The stairs went on for bloody ages. Round and round and round. Never changing, every single section the same as the last one.

Until they stopped, opening into a field.

Black walls ringed the field, the size of it smaller than a football pitch—small enough for me to see all sides clearly. Tall lanterns lined the walls, revealing the shadowy stone and black grass at our feet with soft light. At the center of the field, more like a green really, was a fenced playground. Benches sat around the outside of the fence, swings rocked in the cool breeze, a slide and a roundabout in the middle.

Above my head, a night sky twinkled with stars and a moon. Clouds passed across them, carried by this chilly air.

So *not* what I'd been expecting. I mean, huh? Go down to see a sky? Right. Okay. Pass me the other magic mushrooms, please.

The stars were various shades of blue.

Uh-huh. Okay.

I watched Tae scan the park. "The coast seems clear. It was the last time I came here."

"No guards?"

"No. That's for the second level."

"At least we get one easy one," I said. "Where's the entrance to the second level?"

"Over there." He nodded at the right wall. "Far corner." He checked out the surroundings again. "Let's move."

We moved, hugging the wall at a quick pace. Wow. I'd never been so scared in my life. But there were no demons, only the wind and the rustle of a newspaper that scared the shite out of me. It rolled by like a tumbleweed, a twisting black and white thing.

"That's a human paper," I said. "A tabloid."

Tae used one of the silver keys on the wall. Like the tree, the lower part of the wall recessed and revealed stairs. This time the entrance was tall enough to accommodate all of Tae's height.

After another endless spiral staircase, we arrived at Level 2.

Tae's arm shot out at the foot of the stairs. A spiderweb-like veil billowed across an archway.

I froze. Waiting.

Demons... Arcana whispered.

At least two beyond the veil.

If I remembered correctly, he'd banished a demon here with his talisman, met the arsewipe again to try and question him about the third level key.

Arcana readied itself, waiting to kill at my command. I licked my lips, hungry for demon death.

"Okay." Tae moved, brushing the webby curtain aside. It didn't stick to me or summon a spider. Phew!

Beyond the veil, we stepped out onto a hillside, facing an expanse of night sky like the first level. Green grass this time rather than black. We ducked behind an apple tree with a fat trunk, me behind the vampire.

Rolling fields spread to the horizon, dotted with woodland and lakes. At the bottom of the hill sat a small village. Cottages hunched together around a central river that ran to the closest lake.

Lights shimmered in windows of those buildings, in streetlamps lining the river. If it weren't for the reality of the location, I'd be really impressed with the idyllic sight.

Ah, well.

And banishment was a bad thing, was it? I could think of worse places to have my arse stuck in. The stars were pretty, maybe even brighter than Earth's.

Hmmm. What'd Jarod been talking about? Him and his ilk were just greedy and wanted to take over everything.

Arsewipes.

“Where to now?” I asked.

“The last time I was here, I did find the door. Do you see that small mound by the first lake?”

“Yeah.”

“It's there. I felt its vibration, but then the issue of the banished demon occurred.”

“What happened?”

“I tried to question him on the third level key. It didn't go smoothly. The villagers rose up, drove me away with pitchforks and torches.”

“For real?”

“Yes. I had no choice but to retreat. They were coming for my head.”

Yikes. “So the trick is to avoid the houses?”

The row of cottages ended before the river reached the first lake.

“Yes. Unfortunately, the only way to the lake is through the village. The land around the village is boggy and will swallow us.”

“Shit.”

“Beyond that, it's solid—the water aside.”

Was that him making a joke?

“Wait. Wait just a minute,” I said.

“What is it?”

My index of spells spun like a gameshow wheel. So many options. Where would the needle land?

“Flight,” I said. “I have a flying spell.”

I saw it in my mind, fresh from the sucked-up grimoires, a series of pink neon letters forming, complete with a glittery background because why the hell not?

THE SPELL OF FLIGHT

ENABLES THE SPELLCASTER TO TAKE FLIGHT FOR TWO MILES AT A TIME. IT IS NOT A SPELL OF PERMANENT FLIGHT, BUT A MEANS OF ESCAPE.

IT CAN BE USED THROUGH THE FOLLOWING TWO METHODS:

1. USE OF THE CORRECT WORDS—WITHIN AND WITHOUT.

2. BY USING THE CORRECT INGREDIENTS AS SHOWN OVERLEAF. MIXING AND BREWING TO BE UNDERTAKEN WITH EXTREME CAUTION. INCORRECT MEASUREMENTS CAN LEAD TO EXTREME VERTIGO FOR AT LEAST FOUR DAYS, SOMETIMES LONGER.

Within seconds, the spell tingled at the edge of my tongue, sat in my brain. Already a permanent resident after what’d happened with the grimoires, but now a brighter star amongst the bountiful stars already clinging to me.

Man, listen to me go on. Ha!

Unfortunately, there was no such thing as a teleportation spell within my encyclopedia of magic.

“I can fly us over there,” I said.

“Can you bear additional weight?” he questioned.

“I think... I don’t know. Doesn’t mention anything about passengers.”

“I’ll make myself as light as possible.”

“Let me test it first. I’ll give it a hover.”

He let me crack on.

In the day or the night, I wish to take flight... Simple, kind of stupid words. And just like that, my body became light, too. Hovered, then lowered.

“I did it.”

The spell sank into my being.

No more tests required.

Okay, maybe one with the vampire in, erm, hand.

I wrapped myself around Tae, knowing a carrying move would be best. Yep. Up we went, me using the power like a pro. An Arcana warlock with a silver spoon in his mouth.

So close to me. So warm, so solid yet airless. So fucking hot.

No. Do not think about him naked.

Not now.

Just a little...

NO!

I lowered us back to the ground. “How did that feel?”

“Strange,” he said.

“Right?”

“But perfect. It saves us a lot of potential bother.”

“No pitchforks up the bum.”

“Indeed, Clay.” His lips spread into the tiniest of smiles.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Ready.”

Holding him again, fingers interlocked at his back, I lifted us off the ground, angling us toward the mound. Focused on getting there. We flew in a vertical position across the village, keeping fairly high and, hopefully, out of sight.

“All good?” I asked him as we cut through the cold night.

“I’m good, Clay.”

Without incident, we landed beside the lake shore and the mound. The green lump was taller than Tae and wide enough to hide us. Unfortunately, the doorway sat on the other side in view of the village. Thankfully, there didn’t seem to be anyone around.

Demons... Arcana said of the village.

Tae got to work with the newly acquired key. “This is it,” he said, sinking it into the grass. “This is really it.”

Tasmin and answers. Details on Quentin and the rest of the keys. To see if there really was a demon queen.

Gosh. The thought of such a creature didn’t sit well with me. Being a queen would make her the worst of the worst or the best of the best. Buttons wanted to please her. It made sense. Who else would the crazy arsewipe want to please if not the queen of all demons? Could she survive Arcana like him? And why did she want me left alone? Surely she’d want me dead.

Something whizzed past my head. I jumped back, bumping into Tae.

“What was that?” I said.

“Get down.” He yanked me to the ground. Something hit the mound.

Looking up, I saw two arrows sticking out of the lump of grass and mud. “What the hell?”

Another fired, almost hitting me in the head.

“Get—”

“Fuck this!” I snapped, jumping to my feet.

I summoned my wall spell. Easier than before, a fluid action requiring little concentration. The consequence would be the spell burning up quicker. With greater ease came greater sapping of the spell. Not my energy, just the spell’s. It meant it needed to recharge, and I had to use something else while it recovered.

A price I didn’t mind paying.

Arrows bounced off the turquoise shield, flaming arrows coming at me between the non-burners. The arsewipes had clocked us.

The mound opened. More flaming arrows landing feet away, starting fires in the grass.

I laughed, my own fire taking over. “Oh, you want to play that game, do you?”

Elemental magic. Hmm... Send fire back? Blow their houses down? Earthquake? Flood?

“Come on, Clay.”

The door to Level 3 was open.

“One sec.”

“We have to—”

I summoned wind and fire, joining them together in a wall of flames as wide as the village. Where the fire didn’t reach, I

called water to rise, the earth to tremor. The magic rocked me, stole my breath. And the biggest grin split my mouth.

“Eat this, arsewipes.”

The wall of fire launched forward, engulfing the cottages within seconds. They went up like paper. Water thrashed either side of the village as the ground shook, waiting to drown and swallow.

These demons were fucked. Not dead, but fucked.

“Enjoy cleaning up that mess!” I cried.

Tae’s firm hand on my arm got me spinning, ready to strike him with a powerful dose of my push magic. Momentary madness, forgetting it was him and not some demon set to kill me.

His obsidian eyes sent my brain in a flurry of wonder.
“Tae...”

“Get moving, Clay.”

A dark tone. “O-okay.”

More stairs, the doorway closing behind us.

“Tae?” I said, the silent descent a real drag.

“What?”

“Have I pissed you off?”

He didn’t answer.

“I have, haven’t I?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

I transformed from mild to spicy so quickly I almost got whiplash. “Well, get the fuck over it.”

He stopped, turning around. “What did you just say?”

“Get the fuck over it,” I repeated, folding my arms. “They were firing at us. I gave them back what they gave us.”

“I know you did.”

“So why the attitude?”

“Repercussions,” he said.

“But they already know we’re here.”

“I know.”

“And the problem is?”

“There isn’t one, Clay.”

“Yeah. There is.”

“I’m concerned about the retaliation.”

“You’re scared now?” My tone was mocking. Gosh, this didn’t sound like me.

“I fear no demon,” he growled.

“Then fuck any comeback. I’ll just kill them.”

“It was reckless, Clay. That’s all.”

I shrugged. “Isn’t this what you wanted?”

His expression screamed of cold rage. “Enough.”

“It is, though? You wanted me to join you, to kill demons. I’ve killed them. I’ve hurt them. What’s the issue? I got heavy-handed? What have I been doing this entire time?”

“I’m not angry with you.” He took a moment. “I want you to be careful. Don’t burn down the wrong thing. Like the exit.”

A sobering punch to my gut. “Oh, shit. You think I’ve screwed us over?”

No answer.

“I’ll go back,” I said.

“No. We keep going.”

“But—”

“It’s too late to go back.”

Panic was setting in. “What if we can’t leave? Fuck! I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. Let me fix this.”

I went to run. He grabbed me.

“No, Clay. We keep going.”

My arrogance ebbed, leaving me reeling from what’d come out of my mouth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean... I didn’t...” My shoulders slumped forward. “I’m sorry I spoke to you like that. I’m an arsewipe.”

“Don’t worry. Let’s keep moving.”

Arcana. It made me do it like a dog to a kid’s homework.

Pass the blame. Idiot.

I had to get a better grip on this. Adjust myself to not crave, to not go mad with power. If I allowed myself to spiral, Tae would suffer. He couldn’t suffer. I was here to help with his trauma, to bring him some sort of peace. *Not* give him a headache.

We’d fallen for each other...

Until he found out my dirty truth...



THE THIRD LEVEL.

Through a series of three gates and a wooden door, we stepped into a town with sunset skies. It was still cold.

“Wow,” I breathed at the orange and purple smears, the hint of a moon and blue stars beyond it. “How is this place so pretty?”

Tae didn't answer.

We'd arrived slap bang in the middle of a large town square. A semicircle of variously-sized buildings huddled together—from shops to bakeries to bars. A proper, working town filled with demons going about their business. Carrying bags of goods, chatting at the benches beside the central fountain—a fish spraying water into the ornate stone pool below.

No one had noticed us standing by the rectangular monolith-type thingy we'd walked out of yet.

Towering over the square was a tall building made of beige stone. Made of three levels in a step design—the back the tallest part, the middle the next, the front the smallest. It reminded me of a church or a castle, gothic spires jutting from each level. And it kind of gave off office block vibes at the same time.

Weird.

Light shone in its many windows, a gathering of figures at the huge doors at the top of some wide steps.

A town hall?

Demons...

Yeah. Everywhere.

Someone finally noticed us, waking close by with three shopping bags. He froze and backed off, pulling a phone from

his jacket pocket.

I'd been expecting a place of lava pits and nightmares—a real Hell vibe. Not this realm so familiar to mine.

Lava. The throne. Part of the demon realm? Was it somewhere here?

Ugh. More questions.

The word spread. Demons spotted us, freezing their activities. But they didn't attack. We didn't, either. My craving to kill bubbled, but I kept calm. Waiting. Watching. Maybe too passive, but I was waiting to follow Tae's lead. He knew better than me.

Does he? Does the vampire match your power?

“What do we do?” I asked, ignoring the shadow voice lurking inside me.

There were so many of them. From our position, I saw the town spread away through four streets leading off from the square.

“We—”

“Stay exactly where you are.” A male voice rich with depth announced.

I startled, eyes darting to the right.

A handsome man walked toward us. Bronze-skinned, big brown eyes, and cropped black hair. He wore smart blue jeans and a white duffel coat.

Tae bristled, positioning himself into protective mode. Ready to strike when it should be me taking point.

I readied Arcana.

A woman joined the man. Fair, taller than him with short red hair and piercing blue eyes. She kind of matched him. Only her jeans and coat were the opposite colors.

They strode over with the air of not giving a crap, coming to a stop a few feet away. The other demons scuttled off, putting a lot of distance between them and us.

Another man joined them. Pale, shorter, in battered clothes and a jacket. His hair thinning, a whisper of a mustache on his face.

“You,” Tae growled.

The demon sneered at him. “Me again, you wanker.” The demon sniffed, wiping his nose with his yellowed fingers.

The woman looked down at him with disgust.

He must be the one Tae had questioned before.

“Hello to you both,” the man in the white coat announced. There was an object in his hand. Purple glass? A glass flower?

Neither of us answered.

“It’s nice to see the men responsible for this new fear amongst my people,” he said. “At least, it will be.”

He smashed the glass flower on the ground. A force passed over my face, bringing the sensation of a face mask being peeled off.

Fairy magic... Arcana told me.

What?

I whispered it so softly to Tae’s super hearing.

Fairy magic? The flower was made of fairy magic? And it was removing the power of our face creams.

What the fuck?

“Ah, there you are. Tae Frost and Clay Christmas. The vampire and the warlock.” He smiled. “I’m Quentin Dawn. This is my friend, Tasmin Vacquier.”

Oh, shit.

Fairy magic... More of it on Quentin’s face.

“You’ve been a busy pair, haven’t you?” Quentin added.

Arcana broke through his disguise, plucked his pretty feathers like a dead chicken before a boil. Showed me the true him. Well, not the full demon yet, but how he looked without fairy stuff all over his face.

Did Grindle have something do with this? A heavy, anxious anvil took up residence in my guts.

The real Quentin: An angry red scar sliced his face in two, his left eye black with blindness. Pocked scars marred his skin, and two of his front teeth in the bottom row were missing.

He wasn’t smiling now, his eyes on me. “The Arcana wielder.”

My jaw dropped. “What—”

“Oh, I know all about your magical skills. I’m not blind to the mechanics of your world.”

“But—”

“Was it a secret? Sorry.” Still no smiles. If anything, he seemed sullen. “Good job on hiding your identity, though. You had me there.”

Tasmin chuckled. “Me too.”

“We’re here to see you,” Tae said.

“Is that so?” Quentin replied.

Well, Tasmin. Quentin was a bonus we hadn't expected.

“I want answers,” the vampire addressed Quentin now.

Quentin folded his hands behind his back. “What answers do you want?”

“Paris. Fifteen years ago. The murder of a vampire woman and young boy.”

Quentin cocked his head. “I'm confused.”

“What do you know about it?” I saw Tae's jawline clench.

“Fifteen years ago?”

“Yes,” Tae practically growled.

“Nothing. I do not mix with vampires. Ever.”

“You're a liar.”

Quentin seemed confused. “Lying about the murder of vampires? How odd.” He cocked his head to the other side. “Are you asking if I killed this woman and child?”

“Yes.”

“Then the answer is no. I've never killed a vampire. I've never killed a child.”

Tae took a step forward. “But you know something?”

The demon shook his head. “No. Afraid not. But do tell me, Tae Frost, why are your eyes so haunted? Were they related to you?”

Tae didn't answer, emitting a low growl.

Did Quentin know something?

Paris. Tae's house there? Is that where they'd been killed? Oh, God. No wonder he didn't want to go there or speak about it.

"And there was me thinking you were coming for our queen," the demon added.

Tasmin snarled. "Bitch." She winced, a red mark spreading across her left cheek as if from a slap. "I'm sorry..." she whined.

Huh? No one had slapped her.

"What you need to know about my fellow demons is we are what you think we are," Quentin said. "We're your enemies because our queen tells us to be. We follow what she says, bound to her in duty and life. Her will is our will. We try to find a way to fulfill it. No matter how much Jarod dissented, he had to obey her. And he did more than us."

"I'm assuming you are both the exception to obeying?" Tae questioned, a panther ready to pounce.

I wanted to hug him.

Quentin tapped his scar. "This is the price of refusal, as is this." He gestured to Tasmin's cheek. "It hurts to disobey our queen. Outside, inside, everywhere. I weep for Her Majesty, for my desire to kill her." He winced, the red of his scar flaring as scarlet embers in his flesh. "But I know what is right."

"Like destroying my world," Tae responded.

He grinned, exposing three gold teeth within a neat line of white on the top row. Clashing hideously with the damage in the bottom. "The cat is out of the bag, as you humans like to say."

Everything the movie star told us was true. And I'd removed him from Quentin's path.

Oh, shit.

"Jarod didn't go as far as me with his disobedience," Quentin added. "As you saw from his good looks and his insufferable movie career. He would never have tried to completely stop her. He was weak. But *this* is the price you pay for hope. For vision."

Tasmin nodded. "This man has more vision than you'll ever know. We're all trying to find the best route to success to please our queen—working within your society to cause chaos, taking positions of power. Whatever works to best achieve our queen's goal in taking you over. But Quentin wants more. He sees we deserve more."

I noticed part of her left ear was missing.

"Despite the death toll he'll rack up by poking at The Rift?" Tae asked.

"Exactly. A small price to pay for a better future. For us. You'd do the same to better your kind."

Quentin looked between us. "Whatever Jarod told you was true. He couldn't lie. He didn't do those things I planted."

What. The. Fuck. "You planted false evidence?" I spoke for the two of us.

"Yes, Clay. I wanted you to take him out. One less solider on the other side."

"The queen's side," I said.

"Absolutely. As I said, he was still on her side, regardless of his resistance."

“Shit,” I added, meaning to keep it inside.

“You’re in the deepest of it,” Tasmin responded.

Fairy magic... Arcana said.

Huh? More of it?

“Not necessarily,” Quentin countered her. “It depends on the outcome. I’m still unsure.”

“Unsure of what?” Tae asked.

I could use the force of will spell on him. As easy as that. These demons were no match for me. First, I needed to remove more fairy magic from them. I felt for it, met resistance. A pinching at my insides.

Where did it come from? Grindle? Had the fairy fucked us over?

Why would he do that?

“Clay could be a useful tool,” Quentin said. “Much like—”

Being all gung-ho, I flung my spell at him. “You’re mine now...”

Only, he wasn’t. The spell fizzled out, falling away as a soft trickle.

“What—”

Fairy...

Quentin laughed a deep, hearty laugh. “We’re not idiots.”

“But... But...” Anger kicked in. Hard. I summoned the arrows to kill these fuckers.

“Clay!” Tae barked. “Don’t!”

Demons in the distance screamed. These three didn’t give a shit. I let the arrows fly, Tae’s protests nothing but muffled

cries.

He grabbed me, but it was too late.

“You’re dead,” I declared to the demons.

Dead demons—demons Tae needed.

Oh, shit! You idiot!

The arrows fizzled out like my spell, falling as orange-gold sparks, landing harmlessly at the feet of the arsewipes.

What the hell? First Buttons, now this? With Buttons, the reaction had been different. More dramatic. This was what you called a damp squib.

Not good.

Fairy magic...

“Surprise,” Tasmin said.

I shook, holding onto myself. I’d been reckless.

“I’m sorry,” I breathed at Tae, who stood beside me, ready to pounce.

“As I was saying,” Quentin started the conversation back up again, “Clay can be useful. After all, we want the queen dead.” His scar flared again. “He can make it possible.”

A shriek from the town. Another figure walked into the square. A cold fist closed around my chest.

Buttons.

He came over, the three demons furious at his sudden appearance.

“What’s he doing here?” Tasmin demanded.

Buttons approached from the side, coming straight for me. I prepared to fight, Tae being all protective again.

“Clay...” Buttons said. “Clay. Clay. Clay.”

“Leave here,” Quentin demanded.

Buttons ignored him. “I thought you were nothing but a man trying to rob me,” he said to me. “That you’d caught her favor over mine for some bizarre reason. Now I see more. Now I know more of me, of us. Why I shouldn’t hurt you.” His hands were fists at his sides. “Why your blood is as sacred as mine is.” He seemed to not want to admit that last part.

What the hell was happening?

“There is more within you,” he said. “There is us.”

It was my turn to demand. “What are you talking about?”

“The blood of us. You and I. Now I see.”

Cold fingers traced my soul. “What... What are you saying?”

“Brother.”

No...

“You are my brother,” he added.

No way. No fucking way.

“Demon and Arcana. The same. Different.”

I looked to Tae, practically feeling the blood drain from my face. “No. This... No.”

Let the world stop now. I wasn't hearing this.

“Your blood is demonic,” Buttons said. “Our blood. Demonic and Arcana. We hold the greater power in our own ways.” He smiled, his burned button eyes appearing to gleam. “*She* is pleased.”

This was a nightmare.

“No...” I said, my mind a billion rollercoaster trains occupying the same track. “No... I’m not. No...”

Tae’s eyes throbbed, glinting with terrifying danger. “Clay?”

My heart battled to burst out of my ribcage. “Tae. I... I...”

“Your blood?” he said.

“Tae...”

“His blood is mine,” Buttons reiterated. “We are brothers, vampire. We’re here to take him to the queen.”

Oh, God.

Oh, no. This wasn’t happening.

“Please tell me this isn’t happening,” I said, my voice cracking.

“Now we must go, brother. Her Majesty wants to see us.”

Rising anger again. Devastation digging its talons deep. “No. I’m not what you say I am. It’s not possible.” Fury set to boil. “I’m not your fucking brother.”

Arcana. A beast to command. It threw its head back and roared. Anguish and fury and destruction a hurricane coming to life in its wake. It all slammed into me again and again. This couldn’t be. I wouldn’t let it be.

“Clay!” Tae cried.

“Brother!” Buttons joined in.

The lollipop fairy magic within me broke, exposed me. I ripped my coat off, pulled off my T-shirt to reveal my red vest. Too hot, needing to think. Ha! Thinking wouldn’t help.

My demon scales and talons and wings were out for all eyes to see. Including Tae's.

Screams. My wings flapped behind me, lifting my body off the ground. My power electric. Deadly. Potent. A new and dangerous creature inside the demon realm. Losing myself to rage.

Not him... Don't hurt him...

But the magic churned, thrashed against my sense of control. It was all or nothing. Destruction or surrender.

The winds rose, the sky split with lightning, boomed with the violent cracks of thunder. My doing. All me. The town square shook. Tiny fires burst to life. The fish fountain cracked and tumbled. Screams filled my ears.

I'd obliterate them all.

Not Tae! Oh, God.

"Run, Tae!"

But it was too late.

TWENTY



TAE

Clay was a demon, the brother of Buttons.

How was this possible?

I listened to the words of Buttons, weakly refusing to believe them. Yet there he was, the warlock partly covered in scales, hands now talons, leathery wings bursting from his back. They flapped, lifting him into the air.

Clay. A demon. His blood... I thought I'd tasted something strange when I'd drank from him. I'd put it down to Arcana.

How wrong I'd been.

His blood. His amazing blood. Delicious, able to break through my control. I hadn't meant to fuck him like that, to cum inside him, to cum at all. I always wanted that wall to remain up, no matter how ridiculous. It was inevitable that I would lose myself to him.

He was losing himself, too. The air around this town square crackled with deadly energy. I had to save him somehow. Losing him was unthinkable. Not now. Not after everything.

Had he been lying to me, or had he only just found out this truth himself?

Quentin and his friends ran. I went to follow them. I wanted to question him, to torture answers out of him. From the intel I'd gathered over the years, there were many tales of a demon realm master key. His name always came up. He either had the answers I sought or access to the murderer.

How things had fallen apart. This mission to find Tasmin a failure. Yes, we'd found her and Quentin, but the course of our actions hadn't run smooth. Starting with Clay attacking the level two village.

Clay...

My family...

I had to stop Clay. Get him home, process this new information.

He's a demon...

"Run, Tae!" Clay cried from above.

The warlock's magical energy thrummed around me, the air crackling with the storm about to land. Demons screamed and ran, tried to take cover.

This was going to kill me.

A hand on my arm. I spun to see a hooded figure. My eyes couldn't quite cut through the dark folds of his hood.

"Who are you?"

"I'm here to watch a show," the figure answered in a thick, male voice. "But first, let me take those from you." He clicked his fingers. My acquired keys were in his hand.

I went to grab them, a bolt of lightning bursting behind me. Its brilliant violet flare was enough to distract me from the kick the figure delivered to my stomach.

With a grunt, I hit the ground, twisting into a backward roll and back onto my feet. I charged, the figure clicking his fingers again.

I hit the ground on my knees, immediately springing back up again.

Demon. The bikini demon clicked her fingers to work her demonic power, and so did this guy.

“Sprightly vampire,” the mystery demon said, following up with a chuckle.

That voice...

That retched, terrible voice.

“You...” My chest tightened with iron chains of fury.

That voice. The voice of the killer of my wife and son. It seeped into my mind, stirring all the vicious memories.

I would never forget that voice.

I sprang forward, the demon clicking his fingers again. I hit the ground on my backside, my fury set to explode like never before.

Him. Him. Him. Him. Him.

After all these years.

I'll rip you apart, even if I have to die here!

But he clicked his power again, flattening me to the ground. The back of my head smacked stone, my limbs unable to respond to my commands or resist his demonic magic. His presence scrambled me, clawed at my control.

The hooded demon crouched beside me. “I can’t have you spoiling the show.”

Do you remember me, prick? “I’ll fucking kill you...” I said, fingers the only parts I could flex, meeting the rough ground.

He laughed. “I like you, Tae. I’m going to let you live for the time being.”

The magic charged around Clay, his arms outstretched as he floated above the ground. A demon, a warlock, a powerful force of Arcana.

I had to help him.

But first, I needed to beat this filth to a pulp, try and break the rule of only Arcana killing demons.

Him. Him. Him.

“I’ll kill you,” I growled. “I’ll fucking kill you.”

“I don’t think so, Tae.”

You remember me!

The demon held up a black key with a square head. “As fun as it’s been to see you stumble around this realm, Clay is ours. He doesn’t belong to you. So please get the fuck out of here.”

He drove the key into my chest, the metal piercing my lungs, buried in me up to its head.

“Fuck!” I cried out.

I rushed upward through colors and things that should be solid. My stomach roiled, and I released a tremendous roar before cold air hit me.

TWENTY-ONE



Magic ripped through the town, destroying buildings, flipping over vehicles and bodies. Killing arrows of death fired at the demons. A massacre.

Let them die.

My push spell ran riot, my body protecting me from harm. They tried to hurt me. Ha! Fuck them!

Death.

Death.

Death.

Talk about a demon reckoning.

But Tae.

Oh, God. Tae.

I screamed my sorrow as my storm of destruction intensified, raging on.

Destroying.

Killing.

Until...

Until it was over.

TWENTY-TWO



I lay on my belly, the side of my face pressed against the cold, wet concrete. I'd made it rain. I'd broken this place.

From my point of view, crippled with exhaustion, I saw the results of my anger. A leveled town, black demon ashes swirling around the square.

Not Tae's body.

Please let him be alive.

Turns out, I could burn through my energy as much as burning through spells. Especially when I lost my fucking mind. I'd snapped, the new information snapping every single piece of me.

Brother of Buttons.

Oh, God.

Tears ran down my cheeks, hot and consuming. An unstoppable deluge. I wanted to die in that moment, or at least have the ground swallow me into some netherworld where nothing hurt, where there was nothing but cold stasis and no reality. Basically, a sweet oblivion.

No such luck.

What was I going to do?

Footsteps. Buttons? Two sets of footsteps. High heeled shoes?

Buttons and the bikini demon stepped into my field of vision. I tried to move, my body's flight mode ready to get me running.

Again, no such luck. My limbs didn't match my brain.

"Hi," the bikini demon said, in a red bikini this time. "Look at you, all worn out. Have to say that was really impressive." She glanced around at the devastation. "You're one scary bastard. Anyway, I'm Princess Isobel." She winked. "I'm so pleased to meet you."

Buttons nodded slowly, as creepy as ever.

Oh, God.

"Come on, James," the princess added. "Let's get our brother home."

James? *Our* brother? What the hell?

"I..."

"That's right, brother," Buttons/James announced. "We are princes. Sons of the demon queen."

Vomit got ready to surge. "But... But how..."

"Come and find out," Isobel said.

My sister.

"No... No... This isn't... This isn't true."

"Oh, it's true," the princess replied. "It's always been true."

But how? "Please... I want to go home..." I said pathetically.

“You are home,” Buttons/James responded. “And soon we will be better brothers. We can be a family.”

I lost myself to agonized pulses ripping through my body.

Family to that monster? I’d rather hug a hungry Nile crocodile.

Please let this be a nightmare.

You guessed it: No such luck.

A hooded figure walked into view, his boot crunching on the debris. Where had he come from?

“Is it done?” Isobel asked it.

“It’s done.” He walked away as Isobel grinned.

“Okay,” the princess said, “let’s get moving.”

“No...”

“Yes, Clay,” she responded. “A great big yes.”

TWENTY-THREE



TAE

Back in Barking Park, the black key still sticking out of my chest, I ran at the tree, taking hold of the bark.

“Open!” I roared. “Fucking open!”

My pierced lung raged with agony, blood running down my chest. But I didn’t care. All I wanted was to get back inside, to get to Clay.

I yanked the key out of me, tried it on the tree. It did nothing. Useless.

“Fuck!” I roared, my senses pulsing in overdrive, my mind chaotic.

Clay.

The demon in the hood—the killer of my family.

I had to get back in there.

I clawed back a sense of control, tempering my anger as if flipping a switch. These actions would get me nowhere fast. I had to recalibrate, be smart, think of how to get back inside.

Keys. Quentin. Fairy.

Clay had mentioned sensing fairy before everything fell apart.

Grindle.

Drawing raspy breaths, my lung on fire, I made my way back to the car. Back inside, I called Archie, turning the bloodied black key over in my hand.

“What’s up?” the human answered.

I explained everything.

“Holy shit! Want me to come get you?”

“I’m fine to drive. But get me a feeder and meet me at the penthouse.”

“Doing it now.”

I hung up, starting the car’s engine.

Clay.

My poor Clay.

He was theirs? What did that demon mean?

Clay with a demonic secret... I didn’t know what to think, how to feel. My emotions were firing on all cylinders, every conflicting spark ready to blaze.

My wife and son.

Demon killer...

Clay a demon...

If they hurt him...

He’s a demon, too...

I tore off into the streets, holding onto my sanity, a lid on my rage.

First, I would feed and heal this wound in my lung, then I would be paying a visit to a certain fairy.

I’ll get you back, Clay...

Demon or not...

NIGHT TRIALS

MIDNIGHT MAGIC BOOK 3



ONE

CLAY



All I wanted was to cuddle Fizz, my silver tabby cat. Snuggle up with her under a duvet, listen to some Kylie Minogue, and tell the world to leave me alone.

If only.

“Be careful with him,” the demon princess demanded. “He’s precious cargo.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the two demon males answered.

The demons scooped me off the ground, working together to carry me away from the rubble I’d made. And, man, was there loads of it in this town square on the third level of the demon realm. A place packed with shops and restaurants and demons, and even a town hall, it now resembled, well, a mess.

Because of me.

After leveling this place that looked like a town square from my realm, I was empty of energy and spells. No longer a threat. At least for now.

The demons carefully placed me into a glass box sitting on the back of an idling pickup truck at the edge of my area of destruction. Bent my limbs gently, fitting me into the box. That didn’t make it any less uncomfortable laying like a curled-up turd and feeling like one, too.

Princess Isobel and Buttons/James looked on. My family. Isobel and Buttons were my family.

Gosh!

The demons slid the glass lid in place, my positioning one to give me a view of my brother and sister. Done with their job, the demons bowed to Isobel and Buttons, backing away to stand guard or whatever.

“Sorry about this method of travel,” the princess said, her voice clearer than expected on this side of the glass. “Luxury can come later.”

Fairy... Arcana whispered. The glass box screamed with magical fairy energy.

Huh?

Though my magic required some recovery time before I could fire off spells again, it still made readings to let me know who was who. Plenty of *demon* readings, with the *fairy* registering when Quentin had shown up just before I’d gone nuclear on Level 3.

What did that mean? Fairies working with demons?

If only I could ask Grindle, my fairy friend, for advice.

Could he be involved?

“Not very princely, is it?” the princess added. “But we have to be very careful with you.”

I’d been hit with two blows regarding my demon blood. The first blow had been the revelation that Buttons was my brother. My twin brother, his real name was James.

Blow number two came when the demon princess, Isobel, revealed that the demon queen was our mum, and she wanted

to meet her sons after years spent watching us. Letting me live my difficult life and whatever life Buttons lived before he became a serial killer.

Yeah. Not fun.

How the hell did that work? I'd been born to Adam and Maxine Christmas—warlock dad and human mother, both deceased. Which meant Buttons had, too. Hmmm. There'd never been any mention of me having a sibling anywhere, or two babies born together. Not even when I looked into my biological family with the help of Grindle, and later Tae. No brother or sister Christmas. Only me.

However much it didn't make sense, one thing kept the bullshit sticking to me—my demon blood. I'd never known where it came from, why it ran through my veins. I guess now I did. Or least was about to find out the finer details.

My stomach flipped, then flipped again as the truck's engine gunned. The moment it started moving, it'd be time to meet the demon queen.

I held onto my sanity, trying not to break down. Falling apart into tears and more rage wouldn't be good for me or for this whole process. I wanted to hold onto control, be strong and not let this crack me—despite the fissures in my soul.

I am returning, Arcana reassured me.

As exhausted as I was, the magic spoke some proper truth. My energy and spells had burned down, but from the ashes, they were rising. Piece by piece.

Just call me a phoenix.

Erm, kind of.

Isobel strutted over in her red heels and red bikini. How was she not freezing? The air here was super bitter. Did she have some kind of built-in central heating inside that beach-ready shell?

She bent and tapped on the glass.

I blinked up at her. “Please let me go home.”

“Back to your life with the vampire killing our kind?” she replied. “Why would you want to do that?” She folded her arms, tapping her long, bronze manicured nails against her pale skin.

Buttons moved up to join her. “Only kill the opposers,” he said, his voice sounding both dead and slightly elated.

He tilted his head at me, his partly-melted white buttons gleaming in the light of the moon.

Before this horrible truth, he’d been the button-eyed demon. A serial killer terrorizing London and also triggering the downfall of Brighton. A complete arsewipe of a monster in need of killing but able to resist the killing blow of my Arcana magic.

“That’s right, brother,” Isobel responded, offering him the flicker of a scowl.

Did she not like having a new button-eyed brother?

The feeling was mutual!

“I can’t wait to see Quentin destroyed,” she added. “The arrogant fuck.”

“He should bend the knee to mother. Beg for her forgiveness.” Buttons shook his head. “She is so wonderful, so special.”

Isobel threw him another dirty look. “She is.”

Yeah, she really wasn't pleased with his presence.

To me, she said, “As you'll see soon. She's excited to finally meet you.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” she returned. “You're her son.”

“Is it because of Arcana?”

The princess leaned closer to the glass, stopping shy of pressing her face against it. “She's always been watching, Clay.”

My skin itched with the desire to kill. “I... I just want to go home.”

Isobel pulled away, the engine revving. “How many times do you need to be told you're already home?”

“This isn't my home.”

She rolled her eyes. “And I suppose that vampire's fancy apartment is?”

How much did she know about my life outside of the ‘fake’ story of Tae and I dating? The one we'd sold to the rest of the world.

“It's home to me,” I said.

“Just because a hot guy plucks you off the streets and gives you a chance at comfort, it doesn't mean you've found a home.”

“It does.” Why was I arguing while in this state? “My home is with him.”

Isobel laughed, Buttons tilting his head again, behaving like the creepy arsewipe he was.

“You’re in love with that vampire,” she said. “Amazing. And there was me thinking your media crap was just that—complete crap. I wouldn’t ever put you two together.”

God, that stung. I missed Tae so much, longing to see him appear suddenly and get me out of his box because a helpless idiot like me always needed his knight to rescue him.

I’m so sorry, Tae...

Had I hurt him with my magic? I’d told him to run as my magic took hold of me, running wild through the town square. Discovering my blood truth served as one nasty trigger to tip me over the edge. And Tae finding out I was a demon, well...

He knew my secret now. He knew about my demon blood I’d been keeping from him.

A demon. The creatures he hated the most.

Oh, God.

“Is Tae alive?” I asked weakly, not ready for bad news.

“Yes. Kicked out of here,” Buttons said. “Good riddance.”

Isobel shot him a furious look. “You need to stop talking.”

“Sorry.”

“Didn’t you want me to know he was okay?” I asked.

“It’s not that,” she said, features softening. “We’re just, you know, easing into this situation with you. There’s plenty of time to go through the details.”

“That’s an important detail to me,” I countered.

“I’m sure we can get him out of your system.” She giggled. “There are so many hotties I can set you up with.”

I battled the urge to puke. Was she for real? One moment she’s having me stuffed into a box, and the next, she’s thinking about playing matchmaker? I don’t bloody think so.

This really was some fucked up nightmare. Someone kick me in the balls and wake me up!

Erm, whatever happened to a pinch or cold water to the face?

“Enough of that, though,” she said. “We’re jumping ahead of ourselves.”

Tae was alive. Not here, but safe.

Tae.

I was falling for him, that was for sure. Completely smitten. He took my breath away, worked his way inside me to take up residence beside my heart. But it was complicated. He was wrapped up in grief at the murder of his wife and son fifteen years ago. And quite rightly. I’d tried to stop myself from falling for him, for being anything but his charge and fellow demon hunter.

I think I’m falling for you, Clay.

For me. *Him*. That incredible man, telling me he was falling for me.

Not now. Not after knowing the real me. He’d walk away, stop his falling and forget about me. Why would he want me now? I was one of them, the enemy, part of the problem. The disease of demons on Earth, a link to the murdering scum who’d taken away his family.

Putting myself into my interpretation of Tae's mindset might be ridiculous, but I couldn't help it. I didn't know how to spin this into sunshine. I liked to look on the bright side, even when life didn't show me the light. It was always somewhere waiting to be found, lost in shadows. You just had to forage for it.

I was too worn out to dig. Maybe later, when I was out of this shithole demon realm.

Isobel tapped her nails on the glass again, staring down at me. "I hate this, you know."

I really want to see you become ash. "What?"

"The look in your eyes you give me, the loss of twenty-four years of your life." A woeful expression crossed her face. "I feel like we could've had a wonderful connection from the outset if we'd been allowed to grow up together." She tapped her chest where I presumed her heart was. "I know that."

How could she know that? Clearly, she operated in another plain of cuckoo. No way would we be bestie siblings. Demons scared me, and she was no exception, no matter the circumstances.

"I don't blame our mother," she continued. "She has her reasons for doing things, which you will hear about, and I understand them. You're not the same as us—you or James."

"Buttons," I responded without thinking.

"Suits him better, doesn't it?"

"Let me go." I was still trying it.

"Afraid not. But you'll come to see this isn't kidnap. This is a reunion. And just you wait until you attend one of my pool parties. You'll never want to leave again."

“I don’t want pool parties. I want—”

Isobel slammed her fist on the glass. It shook under her strike, no cracks following when it sounded like there should be.

I swallowed, truly afraid of her.

“Stop this now,” she warned. “I’m sick of hearing it.” She patted at her cropped bronze hair. “It didn’t take us long to figure out your hunting games.” Okay, sudden subject change. “Mother was impressed, not alarmed or angry.”

“True,” Buttons added.

The button-eyed creep didn’t get a scowl from his sister this time.

“I agreed with the queen,” Isobel added.

“Even though I killed your kind?” I asked.

“They’re your kind, too. But I supposed it was necessary to hone your skills. Can’t say I’ll miss any of the dead ones. Maybe Jarod Woods. He was hot.”

Man, she was insane. “You’re not safe from me,” I said, wishing for a mouth zip.

That’s it, fire them up to kill you or bury you alive!

My spells reached out to me with weak fingers, stroking my soul. They were there. They were crawling out of the dark. This was still the time for Arcana—its midnight until dawn activation period linked to my warlock nature. How long did I have? Did Arcana only play by the rules of Earth time? What the hell was the time? The skies here were dark, stuck in the nighttime, it seemed.

I asked. The princess ignored me.

“Oh, we know how unsafe you are,” she said instead. “You’re the most dangerous creature in existence for demons. But we’re not worried as much as you might think.” A smirk. “We have help.”

“From fairies?”

Cue second smirk with no answer.

This arrogance would get her killed. Fairy magic somehow on the demon’s side or not, I’d break it. My recovery was coming on leaps and bounds, thank God. An unexpected turn, yes, but one I waited to be fully realized.

Then I kill you all, relatives or not.

She should be worried, and so should the queen. They were going down. Hard. The queen wanted to take over Earth, and she wasn’t getting her hands on it. Not on my watch.

The same applied to Quentin Dawn, a demon who wanted to destroy Earth. Where the queen wanted to set up another kingdom in my world, Quentin believed it was time to let go of the outdated desire for an earthly takeover and remove the temptation. Get rid of us, open The Rift to do it—a remnant from a failed war against the witches, which also gave us toxic rivers and now river monsters.

Being a warlock with the ability to channel the lost magic of Arcana, I could kill demons. Arcana was the only thing able to take down a demon. Somehow, certain demons were resisting my killing arrows—Buttons, Quentin Dawn, probably Isobel, and the queen.

What. The. Hell.

Fairy...

Kill them all...

A shudder rocked my insides.

Kill them...

Kill them...

Kill them...

Just like I'd killed Jarod Woods, movie star and demon set up to die. A move by Quentin, who wanted Jarod out of his way.

Shit. My guts twisted.

Yeah, I had the strength of a wet sponge. No killing for me right now. Later, though. For sure.

Fairy...

A light pain throbbed at my temples, sending lines of ache streaming across my forehead. A combination of stress and frustration. My magic sat so close yet so far away, teasing the hell out of me. I knew I didn't have the right to expect it to be here, not after my crazy turn, but that was impatience for you.

And being a greedy, demanding arsewipe.

I just wanted out of here.

"The time is three in the afternoon," the princess said.

Oh. She'd heard me.

Arcana worked on earthly time, then. Well, London time. So what was the time in London? I'd lost all track of it.

I asked.

She replied with, "You don't need to worry about London right now."

Great.

Isobel walked away, Buttons staring at me for a few extra seconds before following her.

The pickup truck revved once again and started to move.

From my awkward position inside the box, neck cramps definitely on their way, I watched the ruined town square roll away, carnage under a sunset sky of orange and purple smears. I took in the smoking buildings, the masses of black demon ash whipped up by the wind, all the remains of my massacre.

Wow. I really was becoming scary.

The vehicle moved through a street with tall brown brick buildings packed together, looking to be residential. Figures watched from the window. No demon on the pavement, from what I could see.

It creeped me out that this realm resembled my own in so many ways, aside from the stars twinkling in various shades of blue. This street could've been plucked out of the parts of London not decimated by toxic rivers. A street like those I'd walked down or slept in or run from witches down, the arsewipes wanting to pick on a weak warlock.

As horrible as those days of dodging witch attacks were, and there'd been plenty of them, they were less complicated. You ran from a witch because most witches saw warlocks as lesser beings, and you hid and waited for them to piss off, and it was done. Until the next time. But I knew where I stood, what my dreams were, that I would find a better road for myself and change my life. Get off the streets, get a nice flat for me and Fizz, and maybe get to do more with my warlock tricks than use them for street entertainment. Take my skills to an arena, really bring the entertainment hard.

When I'd met Tae, things changed. I'd got off the streets, started to fall for a hot guy. A decent guy who cooked amazing food and loved my cat. My road looked brighter, if a bit scary, with the demon-hunting thing. But now, the road was lost in heavy fog, and I struggled to find it again.

What if it was lost for good?

The pickup truck bounced and rocked, turned to the right as my heart twinged with pulses of horrible anxiety.

I couldn't be a demon prince. I just couldn't be.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Just work on getting out of here.

The spells stroked me with a firmer touch, moving closer to being ready.

Come back to me, I told it. I miss you. I need you.

I don't want to meet my mum.

Two

TAE



I sucked the last drop of blood from the human feeder.

“Oh, that feels so good,” she whispered, her fingers digging into my back.

My cock was firm, as it usually was when I fed, but I felt no rush of sensation, only the hot human blood filling me up—a requirement for vampire nourishment. Her blood spread through my body, concentrating on the painful injury in my lung from where a demon stabbed me with a key.

The demon who’d killed my wife and son.

I hadn’t seen his face fifteen years ago, but I’d heard him in my Paris house where my world had come crashing down.

I’d heard *that* voice again in the demon realm as Clay lost himself to rage and magic, his Arcana running wild.

That voice.

That demon.

I licked at the feeder’s neck, sealing the puncture wounds my fangs made.

“I feel so good,” she said, panting. “Do you want to play?” Her hands slid to my sides, finding my biceps.

“No.” I gently removed her touch, backing away.

A vampire feeding is a sensual, often sexual experience. I enjoyed it, using men or women feeders to nourish or heal me. Often, I would bring my feeder to climax if they wanted it. Never kissing, never allowing them to reciprocate.

“A shame,” she said. “I’m open to anything.” She eyed the bulge in my jeans.

“The feeding is perfectly fine,” I told her.

We were at a vampire feeding club, the session quickly arranged by Archie, a human who worked for me and was the best at cleaning up messes—especially messes caused by my demon hunting.

“I’m gutted.” She was beautiful. Dark brown skin, lovely chestnut curls framing her pretty face.

But she wasn’t Clay.

With the warlock, things were different. He moved me on the inside, shifting my feelings with the force of tectonic plates. Feelings I’d believed to be dead.

I tried to resist him but gave in, lost myself in him, climaxing in him. Because he made so much different. He was the light my wife, Tae Ae-Jung, had been. A rare energy, a man not supposed to come into my life. There had only been one true love, and that was my wife. My son, Tae Ji-Hoon, was my other true love. My blood, the other part of my heart.

Not even Winter Gold, my sire, could compare. I’d loved her, yes, but not as much as Tae Ae-Jung. Every love before my beautiful wife were weak lights in the sky, not the special creatures of the universe.

Not like Tae Ae-Jung.

Not like Clay.

I never expected these feelings.

I backed off some more from the feeder, stuffing my hands into the pockets of my jeans. “Thank you for your time.”

She touched where I’d bitten. “I suppose you save the good stuff for your warlock boyfriend.” She winked at me, closing her open blouse—a garment she’d opened in expectation.

Clay and I were the subject of a media blitz. A romance between a vampire and a warlock, encouraged by us to remove the scent of our demon hunting. If the real us were in the spotlight, then the us disguised with Grindle’s fairy creams could carry out our hunting.

Hunting for *him*.

The killer.

The hooded figure.

Clay is a demon...

“I have to go,” I said and left the small room.

I hurried through the red and black décor to my car, vibrating with warmth and slight euphoria from the blood. Craving Clay’s body, his touch, even a taste of his blood.

Jumping into my car, I sped off to Raven Tower.



ARCHIE AND VICTORIA were waiting for me at my penthouse at Raven Tower, both humans having access.

I trusted them more than anyone, even if I’d been slow to reveal Clay to them initially. They worked hard for me, the

two of them having been around for the past fifteen years. I dreaded the day I had to say goodbye, when their human bodies gave up as time unwound them.

Turning them into vampires was out of the question. The turning of a human was a sexual act filled with love and desire. Not the love of friendship, but consuming love, the love of joy and pain.

Though I didn't offer the humans the warmest of friendships, they were my friends. We shared many a meal, many a story—mostly their stories, not mine. I kept my past close to my chest, hesitant of walking paths of remembrance. I'd lived a long time, witnessed many good and bad moments, experienced utter heartbreak. The past was my enemy as much as a part of my history, and a story for no one unless I wanted to tell it.

I'd told Clay parts of it, opened up to him about my sire, Winter Gold—real name Lee Min-Kyu. They'd met each other in Paris, my sire helping us get to Jarod Woods.

What an unmitigated disaster. I'd acquired the key to the third level, but events soured quickly, leaving me here and Clay in the hands of his...

Family? Is that what they were? Buttons certainly was.

"Hello, you," Victoria greeted me with weary charm, sat at my white dining table. She had some paperwork and her laptop before her, glasses perched on the end of her nose.

"Alright, mate?" Archie followed, sitting beside Victoria. Clay's cat, Fizz, sat in his lap, meowing when she saw me.

The feline jumped off his lap. The injury on her leg healed thanks to my vet contact, Elizabeth. She really was a master of animal healing.

I crouched down as Fizz rubbed herself against my leg. “Should you be jumping like that yet?” Despite her recovery, I worried.

She purred, meowed up at me. I rubbed her head and scooped her into my arms, continuing to rub her behind the ears. She really enjoyed that.

“You all good?” Archie asked.

“I am,” I said. “I tried to contact Grindle on the drive back here. Again.”

“Any luck?” Victoria asked.

“Straight to voicemail.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not suspicious at all.”

I went into the white kitchen of the open-plan first floor of the penthouse, opening a cupboard to retrieve Fizz’s treats. Little biscuits she seemed to lose all reason over. Much like I lost my sense of reason over her owner.

“I’ll get him back,” I whispered to her, opening the packet.

She meowed, always offering her cat sound as if responding to me. She sniffed the bag and licked my hand.

“I promise,” I said, glancing at the Christmas tree Clay had put together. He’d been so proud of his decorations—the multicolored lights, the baubles, and the tinsel.

Clay...

I fed Fizz a treat. “Grindle may be notorious for his bouts of flakiness, but he never turns his phone off,” I addressed my friends.

The humans nodded.

“While he could be on the phone, I don’t believe that. My instincts tell me he is aware of what’s happened, and he has answers we want.”

“You don’t just disconnect,” my lawyer agreed.

“Exactly. So, I’m going to find him, starting with his shop.”

Grindle had an antiques shop in the fading shopping center at Elephant & Castle—where Clay and Fizz once lived inside a hole in its wall. There the fairy conducted his fairy business, as well as actually selling the odd antique. I was one of his best clients, requiring a constant supply of fairy creams to disguise both Clay and me on our demon hunts.

Clay is a demon...

“How do you wanna play this?” Archie asked. He scratched at his tanned, bald head.

“There is no time to gather intel,” I said, leaning against the breakfast bar. “I want to get to him immediately. The longer he evades us, the longer Clay is stuck.”

“I can’t believe it,” Victoria said. “A demon.” She sighed. “Sweet Clay Christmas is a demon.”

I offered her no response.

“The poor thing,” she added.

Did I agree? Did I actually have sympathy for a demon? Shouldn’t my hate be switched on?

Clay makes it different...

I wouldn’t allow him to be a monster, even if his future wasn’t in my control. He did not belong to me, yet the

determination to keep him by my side flared hotter than the sun.

He makes it different...

He deserved better than this.

You are not God.

“We must be careful,” I told Archie, taking Fizz over to her bed by the panoramic windows. “We’re dealing with a fairy after all.”

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“I’m thinking stun grenades.”

Being the owner of Auto Frost, a global car manufacturer, gave me money and access to many things. Such as stun grenades, perfect tools for knocking out fairies should a fairy try to get the drop on me.

Fairies were notoriously slippery creatures, unable to lie when confronted but able to step around the truth. Unless you were a fairy yourself, fairy magic remained a mysterious, closed-off thing. A magic I’d trusted in. It had served me well until now, Grindle, a loyal man. Now doubt slithered across my trust, one of many serpents having tainted everything I knew to be fact.

Serpents to be slain.

A kernel of never-ending pain bit into the chest. A ball of agony never relenting, never giving me peace for the past fifteen years. Often it sat as a dull ache, but certain events caused it to spike. I let it hurt me, used to it now.

“Good idea,” Archie replied, sipping from a mug of coffee. “As backup.”

Victoria nodded, pulling at a piece of loose thread on her Tina Turner jumper. She looked at me, smiled. The best lawyer in existence, a tall and muscular woman with rich, dark brown skin and short black hair, always ready to help the helpless and smack down the pricks.

“Either he knows where I can get more keys from,” I said, “or he has some to take.”

The black key I’d been attacked with hadn’t worked to get back into the demon realm, which led me to the conclusion that it was some sort of exit key.

“What about Quentin Dawn?” Victoria asked, writing something in a notepad.

“Him as well,” I replied. “I’ve already made calls for eyes to be kept open.”

My other staff worked in the shadows with as much information as I saw fit to give them. From personal shoppers to spies, my network operated around the world, ready to act whenever required.

Right now, Quentin Dawn was the number one target. I may well have encountered him in the demon realm, but I believed he was back in this realm, planning its destruction. If I could trap him somehow, bring his intentions to a halt while I went back for Clay, then I’d buy the world its reprieve.

My thoughts were tangled. I paced in silence, the humans leaving me alone as I pulled at the knots and threads of my mind. To be smart, to do things better—two things I’d failed at.

Failure.

Yet again, I’d failed Clay, taken him into a dangerous situation without thinking clearly. As soon as those keys hit

my hand, that was it, my tunnel vision tripping us up. Having the key meant a closer step toward revenge, access to information I desperately craved.

And look what happened.

For all the training I'd given Clay, for all the preparation for our expedition into the demon realm, it wasn't enough. I should have taken stun grenades there, more of an arsenal, not depend on Clay's Arcana power and my strength alone.

And I'd failed Clay by hurting him, by playing with his emotions, confusing him with sex and feelings I wasn't prepared to deal with.

I never expected these feelings.

Oh, Clay. Why do you have to be you?

Falling for him. For his positive outlook on life, despite the bleakness of his upbringing. His laugh, his smile, his love of Kylie Minogue and his cat. His quirks, his rambling moments... Everything.

But he was a demon.

He'd lied to me.

Clay...

I wanted to grab and shake him and be angry with him as much as I wanted to hold him and kiss him and shelter him from the pains of the world.

I'd fix this. I'd get him back.

Grindle would help me fix this.

Quentin would, too.

The plan. As much as I craved revenge on the hooded figure, stopping Quentin must take priority, along with getting

Clay out of the demon realm. There was a hierarchy of threat, with the smug prick Quentin at the top, followed by the queen, then Buttons.

Only Clay could stop them, as much as there seemed to be problems in that regard.

Fairy magic.

I stopped pacing, formulating my plan.

Grindle first.

“Will you watch Fizz?” I asked Victoria.

“Course I will. She’s such a cutie pie.”

“I don’t think you should stay here anymore,” I added. “Not after recent events.”

“Agreed. I’ll take her to mine now.”

“Thank you.”

My lawyer closed her laptop, began to clear up her paperwork.

“What about me?” Archie said, his big muscles straining under his T-shirt. “Want me to come with you?”

“Yes, but remain on standby initially. We’ll create an open channel with ear comms so you can hear every word. But it is best I go in alone.”

Archie nodded. “Makes sense to me. You’ve got good poker face anyway.”

“Thank fuck we never play cards,” Victoria contributed, “or we’d be cleaned out by this one.” She jutted a thumb in my direction.

As much as I appreciated her light intervention, it didn't diffuse the tension crackling on my inside. I would know no relief until I had the warlock in my presence again.

"Let's move," I said.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I quickly answered the unknown number. "Hello?"

"Mr. Frost?" a male voice responded.

It was Brad Smith, the leader of the ADU (Anti Demon Unit) London HQ. A witch who wanted nothing more than to pin every piece of blame onto Clay and I. A man who did not believe a single word we'd said to him when he'd questioned us in Brighton, a man who held none of the correct facts. He couldn't know the truth, not one piece. After all, he was a witch. If he got wind of Clay's Arcana magic and demon blood, the warlock would be doomed. Witches would not understand him, see him only as an affront, an abomination to be studied and taken apart.

Never.

"What do you want?" I demanded. "How did you get this number?"

"I always get what I want. And right now, I want to talk." He sounded tired. Who wouldn't be after the devastation at Brighton? *"I've been meaning to get in touch with you."*

"I'm surprised you're so late getting in touch." We hadn't heard a word from him or the ADU since Brighton.

"I've been busy dealing with the incident." He sighed. *"It is a mess down here."*

"You're still there?"

“Of course. I’m not about to run out on my colleagues and the people of this town.”

Buttons had gotten into Brighton’s ADU HQ and caused chaos by triggering toxic rivers, playing with Synth orbs, and being the monster he was.

“Good to hear you’re doing your job,” I said.

“Insinuating what?”

“I don’t have to talk to you. I’m busy.”

“What do you know, Mr. Frost?”

“Not this again.” Victoria caught my eye. I waved her over.

“Yes, this again. I’m not satisfied. I placed you under arrest, remember?”

“I remember very well. But you can speak to my lawyer about it. I haven’t the time to deal with this nonsense.”

“You know something!” he yelled. *“Don’t fuck with me.”*

With that, I handed the phone to Victoria.

“Brad,” she said. “Nice to hear from you. What the fuck are you up to now? No. Don’t try it. I’ll swear all I want.”

My lawyer may be foul-mouthed and unorthodox, but she was the greatest. I let her deal with the witch, heading up to my bedroom on the second floor of the penthouse.

I changed my clothes, pulling on everything black, tying my hair up to fit under a black cap. Really, I should apply the fairy face cream, but my trust in it waivered. For so long, I’d used them, hidden to go about my demon-related business. Not now. What if the tables turned and the cream became something nefarious?

I added glasses to my look, the last photo of my wife and son on the nightstand by my bed catching my attention.

My pale, raven-haired loves. Bathed in sunlight, smiling, happy, lost in a period of time I'd never get back. I picked up the silver frame, the only photo up in any of my homes. With me, in the privacy of my bedroom, I sometimes let them be on display. Every night I kissed them before resting my head—not requiring proper sleep. If I had to see their faces in every corner, I couldn't function. My memories burned me enough. So I kept the white roses my wife loved around each home, the chess set my son adored downstairs, and my tattoo for both of them on my chest.

Relics of love.

I sat on my bed, caught in a whirlpool of memory. Inside the drawer of the nightstand was a drawing by Tae Ji-Hoon. His last one, droplets of his blood across the crayon piece representing me, him, and his mother.

I love my mummy and daddy so much

I traced his handwriting, the green crayon he'd written his lovely words in.

My darling boy. My precious son. How I would have loved to have seen him grow up and be brilliant, to take on the world and be incredible like I knew he would be.

My special child, a rare creature—a vampire born, not sired. There were only two living vampires born to vampires now, Tae Ji-Hoon once the third.

“So special,” I said to his picture. “My special boy.”

As it always did, my broken heart wept. I put his drawing back along with the photo, unable to look at it anymore. With

the kernel of pain in my chest gleefully throbbing, I exited the bedroom and headed back downstairs.

Victoria was off the phone. “He’s a right dick.”

“I know,” I replied. “How did you end things?”

“He’s not making any moves just yet.”

“He said that?”

“Pretty much. Said he’d find a way to arrest you, which means he’s been told to back off. Buys us some time.”

Brad may be a boss, but he’d have a witch in charge of him—his powers that be.

“I’ll do some digging,” my lawyer added. “Leave it with me.”

“Thank you. Are you ready, Archie?”

“All good.” He had a bag with him, fished out a beanie hat for himself. Despite his size, Archie could blend in and hide himself well, walk the shadows with expert ease.

I retrieved two ear comms from my study beneath my kitchen and called a car for Victoria.

“You be careful,” she told me, carrying Fizz. Archie took her laptop bag and paperwork for her.

I nodded, handing the comm to Archie. He would leave now, making his own way to the shopping center. The few press photographers and Tae and Clay fans gathered outside Raven Tower would pay them no attention as they left. And the exit to my private underground carpark was hidden, posing no problem for me to leave.

With them gone, the driver I’d summoned for Victoria having messaged me his arrival, I stepped into my private

elevator, heading down deep into the ground. To my titanium storage unit, where I kept a constant bounty of supplies.

One of many units spread across the globe.

Strip lights cast a bright glare over everything as I stepped inside, shelves and boxes and cabinets filling the space, loaded with equipment.

A secret I'd kept from Clay.

We all have secrets...

I gathered two stun grenades and a chaff grenade, placing them into a black pouch with straps. I fixed it to my chest under my coat and rode the elevator up to my carpark.

Time to visit the fairy.



I CROSSED the Thames at Blackfriar's Bridge, heading south to the shopping center through ADU checkpoints. Showed my papers, got recognized by some enthusiastic fans of the Tae and Clay lie, but never got questioned. I'd expected it, for some ADU note to be against my name.

Brad really was a lone wolf in his quest to tap my brain.

It was three in the morning, a light drizzle of rain kissing my windscreen. I kept the radio on low, listening out for any news reports that may pique my interest. Nothing came through the airwaves, only a story on Witch Queen Margarite giving a speech on the strengthening of toxic river protections, as well as offering her condolences once again to Brighton and those affected by the crisis.

I pulled up into a side street across the road from the shopping center, killing the engine. My senses tuned into the night and my surroundings, on alert for demons or other dangers.

All was quiet.

I smelled Grindle.

Exiting the car, I moved through the night, hurrying over to the center. I caught the whiff of humans on the breeze, those gathered in Clay's former residence he called Golden Lane, the light of barrel fires reflecting off tents, off bodies warming themselves in the flames.

No one noticed me. They wouldn't if I didn't want them to. I made my way to a shadowy corner of the shopping center near the railway bridge running alongside it, scoping out the building.

Beyond the bridge, the glow of toxic rivers lit up the dark—a decrepit, failing street of houses and devastation. One of many scars in the city after The Rift and that terrible war humans perpetrated against witches.

Against the power of witches and their Synth magic, there was no victory. Only pain.

Against the reopening of The Rift, a stormy scar of power in the North Sea, there could only be more pain.

The end of the world.

A low growl rumbled in my chest in response to Quentin Dawn, how smug he'd been. He knew who the hooded killer was. If he didn't, then he would figure it out after enough torture. He would be my key to finding *that* demon. I wouldn't stop until he screamed the answer for me, begging for mercy.

Eventually.

I released the chaff grenade, the explosion a soft pop that scared pigeons gathered inside the bridge, attracting no other attention. If Grindle was in there, he'd be experiencing tech failure right now.

I didn't have much time. The fairy was clever.

"Am I clear?" I spoke, pressing lightly on my right ear.

"You're all good," Archie answered via the small comm device.

Still, I waited to be sure.

Nothing happened.

Now that the chaff grenade had scrambled tech in the area, including the center's cameras and alarm system, I moved.

Scanning the building further, I deduced my best route inside to be through the roof. I ran forward, shifting the weight of my body from solid to light, climbing up the cold and wet brick with rapid ease.

Though the center was closed, I knew Grindle worked a lot. He had many clients, many fingers in many pies.

And I still smelled him in the air.

Despite my resources, I hadn't been able to locate an actual residence for the fairy. Only this location. Maybe he lived here.

On the roof, I crossed puddles and weak points, making my way to the brick block with a doorway.

Locked.

Not an issue.

I lengthened my right index fingernail, inserting the sharp point into the lock. Stronger than mortal fingernails, a tool of many uses at my disposal.

Such as slicing the clothing from Clay's slender body...

My nail found the correct points within the mechanism, easing in to separate those points, turning them to unlock it with a click.

"I'm in," I said to Archie.

"All eyes on deck," he replied.

As I opened the metal door, a boom came from the direction of the toxic rivers.

"Shit!" Archie cried. *"We have a serious problem."*

Another boom reiterated his point.

The rivers' protective glass had failed.

Not again.

The shopping center began to shake.

THREE

CLAY



The first of my spells reconnected with me—my ball of light spell. The first I'd ever performed outside of summoning the Mark of Arcana and conjuring the demon-killing arrows.

With its return, a nice slice of energy came with it. Not enough to get me up and at 'em just yet, but a bloody good sign of things to come.

I waited as the truck wove through the empty streets, passing windows with curious faces, more shops, and even what looked like a church without any Christian motifs. Lots of pretty places, all very cute and postcard-ready. But still, this was the demon realm, and no prettiness eased the fear crawling around in my guts.

As two more spells came to me, the truck arrived at a train station, a quaint brick building with too many hanging flower baskets swinging in the breeze. Quiet from what I could gather, not one single body in sight. A glowing sign of green neon read: Station 3.

How original.

Behind the building, a train waited on the tracks. I couldn't make it out properly, but it looked like a long one.

The truck's engine died, two demons getting out to lift the box off the back of the truck. Another demon arrived with a flat trolley, helping her comrades load me onto it, tying the box down with rope.

Once satisfied, they wheeled me toward the station down a smooth road forming a horseshoe shape outside the station. The pick-up and drop-off spot, I presumed. A black car sat there with tinted windows, no hint of a driver or passengers. There were a couple of houses on my left and a closed-looking burger place to my right.

Okay, so demons enjoyed burgers. Great.

I was wheeled through the double doors of the station entrance, arriving in a small waiting room. A single ticket office sat to my left, the platform and train a few feet away. Isobel and Buttons were here, too. Watching me.

Bollocks.

I swallowed, heart performing a tap dance against my chest.

More spells joined the others, more energy showing up to the party. Where it came as a slow trickle at first, the flow now quickened.

Good, good.

“Welcome to Station 3,” Isobel announced as she came over to the box. “Being a royal demon, you have the privilege of riding the royal train.” She rapped her nails against the glass. “Much more convenient than trucks.” She laughed. How was that funny?

Buttons watched me, his button eyes clawing at my nerves. He stared and remained silent, not so much showing me a twitch of his lips.

What was he thinking?

I looked away, eyeing up the red, black, and gold livery of the long train, trying my best to ignore his presence in the periphery of my vision. The carriages were fancy as hell, like something from the long-ago days when steam trains ruled the railways. There were curtains hanging in the windows, along with softly glowing lamps. What else was in there? Fine dining befitting royalty?

More spells, a big rush of energy.

I'm coming back...

Man, I loved a well-timed comeback. I still wasn't quite there to go hardcore on their arses.

"We're going to try something," Isobel said. "We want to build trust, to show you that we're on the same side. Isn't that right, James?"

"That's right," he agreed without feeling, still staring at me.

Creepy arsewipe.

Fairy... Arcana said.

Fairy magic still here, radiating from the princess.

"I want to let you out of this box," Isobel carried on, her voice grating. "I want you to sit on this train and enjoy all the comforts of the journey. But, and there is a big but." She turned around, wiggling her curvy behind. "Not as big as this butt, mind." Shake, shake, the cheeks wobbling like jelly wrapped in a red bikini. "Oh, I can't wait to get home. Anyway, the other big but is you. The rule is, you behave or there are consequences for misbehaving. Simple."

I can kill you before those consequences come into play...

“Well?” she asked.

“You want me to behave,” I answered.

“Do you think you can?”

How did I answer that?

“I think we should show you first.” She waved at someone. Moments later, a female demon dragged a human male across the platform.

Not just any human man, but one I knew.

Roy. From the shopping center.

“Oh, God.”

Roy was kind of like our guard on Golden Lane, always keeping watch, always offering up warm friendliness because he was such a nice guy.

The last time I'd seen him, though, he'd not been so nice. I'd gone down to visit Golden Lane after, offering the salary Tae paid me for being his fellow demon hunter. Having no use for it because Tae provided me with so much, I wanted to give back to my people. To help them. Roy had taken the money and sent me packing, making me feel like a piece of dog poo drying in the sun.

“What...” I pressed myself against the glass, my limbs starting to ache from my awkward positioning. “What is this?”

“Why, it's a friend of yours,” Isobel said. “Don't you recognize him? Has all that vampire cock gone to your head?”

Fuck you. “Roy?”

His dark brown face was covered in cuts and bruises. He leaned on the demon for support, his clothes filthy and torn. They'd hurt him, beat him.

“Why?” I said.

Roy looked at me, his right eye badly swollen.

“Because we can,” Isobel said. “This is called collateral damage. You fuck us over, we fuck you over. And don’t think he’s the last human we brought here for this.”

“What—”

“You will sit with me and James. You will eat dinner, you will be civil, you will enjoy the luxury as we travel to see Mother. If you so much as cough up a morsel of your magic, Roy dies. Painfully. Then more humans follow.”

Oh, God. Who were the others?

“Got it, brother?” she added.

I’ll blow your face apart. “Y-Yes.”

“Good. Also, you can’t kill either of us.” She pointed at herself and Buttons.

Her words threw me off. “What?”

“You can’t kill us. So don’t bother trying.”

Fairy...

How could fairy magic withstand Arcana? I’d broken through Quentin Dawn’s fairy disguise hiding his messed-up face. So what the hell was going on here? Buttons I knew I couldn’t kill, but Isobel... Man, this was some stinking crap.

“Let him out,” Isobel ordered.

Demons undid the ropes around the box, sliding off the lid. Cool air filled the box, and I reached up to grab the edge of it.

“Can you move on your own?” Isobel asked. “Or do you need some assistance?”

“I’m fine.” I pulled myself up, waiting for the pins and needles to clear in my legs. Caught Roy’s eye, mouthed a sorry at him.

“He is not worthy of a sorry,” Buttons said, catching me.

His voice sent shivers to my core. I ignored him, getting to my feet. Energy crashed into me harder, my inner library of spells a pleasant flood.

Since I’d sucked down the Arcana grimoires, absorbing every scrap of their knowledge, the magic changed. Accessible, easy to use, and terrifying. Too much power at my fingertips felt wrong, unnatural. My training wheels were loose, the bike facing a multitude of peaks and valleys, no brakes to help me out.

After losing my shit on the town square, should I use the magic at all? It might be safer to keep the safety on.

But that meant going to see the queen. I really, really didn’t want to meet her. I couldn’t escape without using my spells.

Was running the answer, though?

I stank of sweat, my tattered clothes in need of a washing machine or a fire. Demon ash clung to me, along with dust and dirt.

“There is a bathroom carriage,” Isobel said. “Four, actually. You can shower and change.” She grinned. “We have some clothes for you.”

Better not be a bikini. “How do you know my size?”

“We just know, Clay, and they’re designed with slits to accommodate those demon wings of yours when they burst

out. No more ruined jumpers for you.” She giggled as if she’d struck comedy gold.

Right. All of this was planned to the finest detail.

“You spied on me,” I said.

“Obviously. For the most part, at least. Don’t worry. We left you some privacy.” She winked a white eye at me.

I shivered. From the thought of being spied on, from the cold air. I rubbed at my arms, wrapped them around me to fight the cold.

“The demon realm air is always cold, some of it freezing,” the princess responded to my chilliness.

“It never gets warm?” I asked.

“Never.”

“So why do you wear bikinis and have pool parties?”

“Fake heat,” she said.

“Where?”

“Not here.”

“Aren’t you freezing now?” I asked.

“Big time, brother. Come, let’s get on the train.”

With no choice but to follow, I walked, sandwiched between my brother and sister—her in the front, him behind. I felt the button eyes on my back as if they were living things, beetles crawling up my spine, looking for a place to sink their teeth into.

Buttons seemed different, back to his old self. None of this weird happiness at being a prince and brother, but a demon who wanted to kill me despite the queen not wanting me dead.

I glanced at Roy being led away to the back of the train as we headed to the second carriage from the engine. The engine kind of reminded me of a steam train, but without the chimney and a more pointed nose. A cross between classic and modern, a soft hum coming from it.

“Electricity?” I asked.

“Of course,” Isobel answered.

If I went to see the queen, I’d get the answers I’d been looking for. Everything would slot into place, including Arcana. Maybe. There must be a reason why this long-dead magic had been reborn inside me, not just for me to be this destructive. Is that where I was headed?

I am wrong... The time of Arcana was done. It shouldn’t be here.

Arcana is not the same...

What did the queen know about it all? And did she know anything about the dreams I’d been having about a throne of vines and lava?

I sighed, stepping onto the train after Isobel. Inside, the red, black, and gold theme continued. Opulent as hell, the seats alternating between the three colors with decent legroom and tables, some of them even more like chaise lounges than seats, this was next level train travel.

At least I’d be comfy.

“The journey to Level 500 will take five hours,” Isobel said.

“Oh.”

“There are a thousand levels to the demon realm, the royal level at the heart of the realm. I’ll show you a map. First, go

and get washed up.”

The train door still hung open. My spells kept coming, my strength returning. Last chance to go for an escape.

With a knot in my chest, I headed for the bathroom carriage instead, brushing past Buttons.

“The Bright One,” he whispered to me.

I shivered again, not looking back.



THE TRAIN LEFT the station as I clicked the shower on.

I stood under hot water, the pressure high and nice for my limbs. With the water sluicing down my body, I thought of Tae, of how angry he must be with me. Pictured him naked, getting hard at the yummy memories of our sexy times, then sad that they might be gone forever.

His lips...

His touch...

His cock...

We'd both admitted to falling for each other, not acting on those feelings, just putting them out there, waiting to see what happened.

Then *this* happened.

Battling the sadness and the stiff dick, I finished showering, wishing I had my Walkman, Kylie Minogue tapes, and Fizz. I dried my body and hair with a red fluffy towel in the black and red-tiled bathroom, ran a comb through my hair.

Attached to the bathroom was a golden-decorated dressing room, complete with full-length mirror, wardrobe, and leather sofa. Inside the wardrobe, I found a pair of black jeans, a red jumper, and a gold bomber jacket. There were a pair of black boots with gold laces and red eyelets, too.

“What’s with the color scheme?” I said to myself, finding black boxers and socks.

I dressed, the clothes fitting me perfectly. I hated them. The colors, how they smelled of one of those cotton-scented fabric softeners, how they weren’t my style. And I liked bright colors, even a bit of color clash. These just looked, well, shit. But at least they were clean.

I left my manky, ruined clothes on the sofa, heading back to Isobel and Buttons, my stomach doing backflips.

The train whizzed past fields and mountains, an enormous forest stretching off into a dark horizon. The moon shone brightly in the sky now, a brilliant disc lighting up the land.

“Come and sit,” Isobel gestured to her spot in the middle of the carriage on the left-hand side.

Buttons sat alone on the right, gazing out the window.

Good. Let him bloody stay there.

I sat opposite the princess, now wearing a long gold trench coat and holding a glass of what looked like champagne.

Heaters blew warm air around the car, fighting off the cold.

“How was the shower?” she asked

“Nice.”

“You look great.”

I look like a fucked-up Christmas ornament. “Thanks.”

She crossed her legs, sipping her champagne. “Would you like something to eat and drink?”

I actually did, unsure of what to say. The belly was ready to go, the mind screaming no.

“It’s safe, if you’re worried about poison,” she said. “We don’t want you dead.” She glanced at Buttons. “Despite evidence to the contrary.”

The other demon didn’t seem to notice, stroking the window with his fingers. He’d changed into the same clothing as me but still looked grim and dirty.

Where did those button eyes come from? Something to do with the queen? What kind of life had he lived?

I didn’t care, or at least I shouldn’t. He’d murdered so many innocents in cold blood, all to please—

Wait.

“The queen wanted him to kill people, didn’t she?” I asked.

She regarded me with her unsettling white peepers. “That’s a question for her to answer.”

“I don’t understand any of this.”

“You will, Clay. But from her mouth, not mine.”

“I—”

She lifted a manicured hand to shut me up. “What do you want to eat?”

“Nothing. I want answers.”

“Don’t be boring. You won’t get them from me.”

I looked over to Buttons/James. “What about him?”

The demon remained fixated on the scenery beyond the window, more mountains rolling past.

“He has no answers for you,” she said. “I’ve already told you who does. Now sit back and relax.”

Don't be a dick. Wait. Yeah, Isobel wasn't going to hand over anything but the same response. Why waste my time?

Frustration was a real pain in the backside.

“Do you have any pizza?” I asked.

“Yes. What kind?”

“Just a plain one. Margherita.”

“I think I'll join you in one,” she said. “Drink?”

“Just water.”

She rolled her eyes. “Have some bubbles.”

“Okay.” When in Rome, I guess. Well, when in the demon realm.

Behind her hung a gold bell, a golden rope dangling from it. She pulled the rope, the bell jingled. Immediately, a demon woman arrived, dressed like a waitress in black and white.

She bowed. “Your Highness?”

“Two margherita pizzas and more bubbles.”

No please to go with that??

“Right away, Your Highness.”

“Wait,” Isobel ordered. “James? Would you like anything?”

His fingertips squeaked on the glass, his head cocked to the side. “No.”

He sounded so solemn.

“That’s all,” Isobel told the waitress, waving her away.

So flippant, so calm.

Fairy...

“What’s protecting you from me?” I tried.

“Wait, Clay. We’re not talking about this.”

“Fairy stuff?” I pushed.

“Can’t we just enjoy the journey, get to know each other?”

“How am I supposed to do that?” I countered. “I’m trapped on here, you’re holding Roy and other humans, and you’ve taken me away from my life.”

She sipped her drink. “Is that so? Wasn’t it you that stole keys and came here yourself? Wasn’t it you who not only destroyed the third level town square, as well as the village in Level 2?”

I’d forgotten about the village. “I... I destroyed it?”

“You burned it down, caused floods and all sorts of problems. It’s in ruins.”

Oh, God. “I didn’t have a choice.”

She shrugged. “If you say so. I’m not bothered. I see it more as flexing your strength, showing us what you can do.”

“Is that what the queen wants? To see what I can do?”

“Not—”

“For me to kill Quentin Dawn?”

Isobel put her glass down, folding her arms. “If you want to carry on with this, I’m going to a different carriage. You can stay here alone with James. In fact, I’ll lock you in here with him. I’m sure you’d enjoy some alone time together.”

I opened my mouth to go for a snotty comeback but swallowed my words.

“Fine,” I said, slumping back into the comfy chair.

“Fine, you want to have a Q&A session with your brother, or fine, you’ll shut the fuck up and stop bugging your sister?”

“The last one.”

She smiled. “Good. Mother will tell you what you want to know. She’s looking forward to it.”

At least someone is.

“Let’s change the subject,” she said. “Tell me about you.”

You spied on me! Why don’t you fill me in? “Like what?”

“Like your favorite musician.”

As if she didn’t already know. “Kylie Minogue is my favorite.”

She nodded. “I love to give her a spin at my pool parties. ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head’ always slaps hard.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Your favorite songs by her?”

“Hard to choose.”

“Give me a top five.”

“That’s really hard.”

“Go on. For fun.”

I'd rather snog an electric eel. "Erm... Let me think."

As I genuinely went through Kylie's fabulous oeuvre, the pizza came, followed by the champagne—brought by a handsome red-headed guy with pale skin and freckles.

Cute.

Also a demon.

Also not Tae.

He set the gold champagne bucket beside our table on a gold trolley, popped the cork, and poured the liquid into two flutes. He took Isobel's empty flute and bowed, catching my eye before he left.

It meant nothing. But to Isobel, it clearly did.

"He's cute, right?" she said.

"I didn't notice."

"Yes, you did. You like the pretty boys."

"I like Tae," I replied too quickly.

She scrunched her face up in disgust. "We'll wean you off him."

"I don't want to be weaned off him."

"I get it," she said, sniffing the steaming pizza. "I'd fuck him. But he's not for you."

Don't fucking tell me what's for me! I screamed on the inside.

My magic flared at my core, the demon-killing arrows threatening to manifest. I held them back, tempering my fury.

Who the fuck did she think she was? Telling me about myself? Thinking she had the right to make any sort of

comment.

“We can arrange a session with him,” she added. “If you like. The waiter, not Tae.”

It took everything I had to hold back the tide of rage. If I could kill her, I would. I held zero feelings for her, sister or not. As far as I was concerned, she could go lick a pylon or get killed by me. Whatever was more fun.

Darkness rumbled like a storm within me, an alien sensation. Anger mixed with the hunger to kill, a wrongness I did not like.

Gosh.

Isobel didn't seem to notice, picking up a slice of pizza. “Yum.”

Buttons watched me. Had he felt my anger? He stared at me for half a minute before returning his button eyes to the window.

My heart raced, my chest constricting.

Let me off this train.

After her first mouthful of pizza, Isobel said, “Well? What's your top five?”

Wow. Totally oblivious. “Erm...”

“Start at five, go up to one.”

I drew some deep breaths, exhaling slowly. “I...”

“I'll wait. Eat first if you like.”

The smell of the pizza turned my stomach, any appetite leaving the building. “Okay.”

“Okay what?”

“My top five.” I started from the fifth. “‘Falling.’ ‘Slow.’ ‘Jump.’ ‘On a Night Like This.’ My number one song is ‘Put Yourself in My Place.’”

“Don’t know any of those apart from ‘Slow.’” The demon princess bit into another slice.

“Oh. Well, every Kylie song is great.”

My skin felt hot, my face flushed.

“Is it too hot in here?” Isobel asked.

I nodded, pulling off my jacket.

“Better?” she said.

More deep breaths. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look it.”

Was she nuts? I mean, did she lack any sort of empathy for my situation?

Obvious answer: Yes!

The lack of jacket did feel better, my body happy to be free of that extra layer.

“Eat your food,” she said.

“In a sec.”

“Or drink. Loosen up a little.”

“I can’t. I need time.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’d think finding out you’re a prince would blow away the blues.”

I ignored her, my eyes downcast.

“Ungrateful,” she said.

Don’t argue.

“You’ve had it all handed to you, royal status and Arcana magic, and you’re acting like a little bitch.”

I looked up. “I didn’t ask for this.”

She pursed her lips together, shook her head. “Excuse me while I get my violin out.”

She wanted me to embrace this. I wanted out, or out after getting answers from the queen.

My stomach rumbled, shifting back to hungry, ready for the cheesy goodness before me. Still, I resisted.

“It’s really not poisoned,” Isobel said. “I promise.”

Her promises meant nothing.

“If I wanted you dead, why would I go to all of this trouble?”

“I don’t know.”

She giggled. “You’re crazy.”

“Tell me about you,” I said.

“What?”

“Tell me stuff.”

The princess tapped a nail on the table. “What do you want to know?”

“What...” I took a breath. “What do you get up to here? Apart from pool parties?”

She smiled. “I have many pool parties. But it’s not all about pleasure. It’s about business, too. About extending the interests of the demon realm.”

“Setting up shop in my realm.”

“That’s right. Moving into somewhere that actually works, with warm beaches and locations for pool parties. You know, sunshine with heat and able to tan this pasty skin of mine. Not like here.”

“Oh. Is it never sunny here?”

“Not really. Sometimes it is, but it doesn’t change the constant cold.” She sighed. “You’re lucky to have true warmth.”

“*Level 4,*” a soft, robotic voice announced.

This was going to be a long journey—five hours feeling like five thousand.

“I want to stop Quentin Dawn,” Isobel carried on. “I hate him. He disgusts me in his rebellion against my mother. I’m glad it hurts him to speak ill of her. I’m glad he and his followers bear the scars of resisting their queen.”

I remembered what Quentin had said about the price paid for full resistance to the queen’s wishes. Demons had to follow her, to obey her, to serve her will. Or it hurt. Literally.

Did that include me?

“What about the demons like Jarod Woods?” I asked. “Who want to take my realm, but not as forcefully?”

“Good riddance. The pussy.” Her scowl could freeze lava. “I want his lot gone, too. You can do that. I hope.”

“You want me to kill them.”

“Ask Mother.”

I winced.

She smiled sweetly, reaching out to touch my hand. I shrank back.

“One day, you’ll let me hug you. You’ll see me as your big sister.” She pulled her hand back. “I know you will because you’ve been looking for a family for so long. In us, you can have that family you long for.”

Never: “How do you know I long for *that*?”

“Please. Of course, you do. Why wouldn’t you after the life you’ve had?”

“Want to explain why the queen let me live that life?”

“She has her reasons.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit.”

I noticed Buttons slide across his seat closer to the conversation, his focus still on the window.

Outside, the scenery changed from woodlands and mountains to a cityscape. Tall buildings and their lights glistened in the night. We were on a bridge or some elevated section, getting a good view of the city. Not on the scale of London, but big enough to impress.

“Mother will explain,” Isobel replied coolly. “Mother has the best reasons.”

“How can letting me live like that—”

“What about your human family?” she cut me off. “Why did they abandon you?”

A metaphysical gut punch, reminding me of my grandmother, Beryl. “I don’t know. But they’re not my family, are they?”

“Says who?”

“Erm, says you. I’m the son of the queen, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then what are you trying to say?”

“Nothing. That’s to come.”

This princess really knew how to put bellows to my embers. “Can we stop talking now?”

“Fine with me. In fact, I think you should stay here with James after all. Think about how you speak to me.”

“Whatever.”

“Such a child.”

“Again, whatever.”

She laughed, then poured more champagne, not moving.

“I thought you were leaving,” I said.

“Maybe I will, maybe I won’t. That’s up to me to—”

Buttons lashed out, leaping over his table and punching Isobel in the side of the head with a sickening crack.

“Shit!” I yelped, knocking over my champagne flute as I jumped to my feet.

Buttons manifested his full demon form, black tentacles bursting through his new clothes.

“Don’t move,” he warned. “Don’t you dare move.”

I couldn’t kill him. But I could hurt him.

Should I use my magic, though?

“I will stop this,” he said.

Erm, yeah. I’d so be using my magic. Isobel was out cold.

Time to get off this train and... I’d figure the next bit out after. If Buttons had flipped, ready to kill me again, then survival it would be.

“They wanted me to kill, to prove myself with blood,” he said.

“The queen?” I asked, keeping him talking as the train curved to the left.

“Show her my power, my ferocity.”

He’d certainly done that.

“Mother. Oh, Mother,” he said. He focused his buttons on me. “You will hurt her. I don’t care what she says. She’s enamored with the Bright One, her curiosity outweighing her fear. You will not hurt her. You will not be her favorite.”

“I thought we were brothers, sharing in—”

He grabbed me with a tentacle. “You do not belong here. The Bright One harbors watered-down demon blood.” He smacked his lips. “Disgusting.”

What the hell are you? I pulled at the slimy tentacle, unable to get any sort of stronghold on it.

Damn. Fuck. Bollocks.

He threw me against the window, my back slamming into the glass.

“Fuck!” I choked, his grip tightening.

“You won’t—”

I summoned the Mark of Arcana, the orange-gold pentagram blazing across the roof of the carriage. His grip loosened as he looked up. My demon wings pushed against my back but stayed inside me. My hands became talons, my arms erupting in bumpy scales. Fleshy, not black like Buttons’s.

My demonic traits vanished as I fired off my push spell, the energy sending Buttons backward. He dragged me with

him. I landed on the table, straight into the pizza, sending the champagne bucket flying.

“No!” he roared.

Calling to my force of will spell, I shoved it into him. He resisted, an inner power pushing against me.

Arcana... Arcana said.

Huh? He had Arcana? Is that how he survived my killing blow?

What the hell?

Arcana...

Oh, God.

My spell slipped in, just a little.

“Get this tentacle off me!” I commanded him.

He went to release me, pushed against the spell. Hard.

“No... No...” He panted, his grip loosening despite his resistance.

I called to an elemental spell, casting fire against his slimy limb. The flames scorched the black flesh, taking hold, spreading toward his face.

He released me then, jumping back. The other tentacles flailed, slapping against the roof and seats. I ducked a swing, sending more flames at him, my determination to kick his arse its own blaze.

“Don’t fuck with me!” I roared, the lid firmly off my anger.

Soon the button-eyed arsewipe went up like a dry field, engulfed in flames. He screamed, falling backward, the fire

spreading to the seats.

This train car would be on fire within minutes.

I ran, shoving past a demon who came into the carriage. The waiter guy. He went to grab me, yelling something I didn't catch. I shoved him back with my push spell, hitting the waitress next as she came to join in.

"Your Highness!" she cried. I wasn't sure if she meant me or the princess.

The train still rolled on as I ran through the next carriage, Buttons screaming behind me.

"Your Highness," the waiter called, following.

"Don't call me that."

"Please don't run," he pleaded.

"Where's the emergency brake?"

"Please..."

"Where is it?" Oh, God. What if there wasn't one? Demon realm trains might not need such a thing.

He pointed to a spot behind me.

Ah, there it was. A gold lever above a window. I darted for it as he moved forward.

"Back off!" I sent him on his arse with my spell.

"You can't stop the train!" the waitress cried as she ran into the carriage.

"The train's on fire. I'm *going* to stop it." I pulled the lever.

Buttons burst into the carriage.

Fuck!

The train rocked violently, its wheels screaming as it slowed down. Sparks spat past the windows. I held onto a seat as a flaming Buttons set the waitress on fire. She screamed, charging at him. He picked her up with burning tentacles, throwing her at me.

I transformed into mist, her body passing through me. Thank God for that mist spell.

“You’ll die!” my brother cried, his voice loaded with agony.

The waitress set the other end of the carriage on fire, blocking my route out. Nothing a water spell couldn’t fix.

With her doused, I ran, dodging Buttons’ tentacles and the waiter. Tae’s training helped my speed. I wasn’t the Robin to his Batman yet, but I was better than I’d ever been before. And I’d been quick on my feet, dodging witches and bullies all my life.

Call me upgraded.

I ran into the next carriage, coming face to face with three demons carrying swords. These were fighters, built for skull-busting.

“Stay where you are,” the leader of the three males ordered.

I pushed them to the floor. “Don’t think so.”

Charging forward, I jumped over them, becoming mist as a precaution. Those swords looked a bit too sharp.

I reached the exit at the end of the carriage. Didn’t hang around, blowing it open with a massive burst of push magic that ricocheted in my bones. I almost went down with the shock but held steady.

The good thing about having absorbed the entire contents of the grimoires was this ability to cast spells quickly—now a scary second nature. The con was the burnout. It threatened me on the fringes, not quite ready to mess me up yet, but waiting.

I jumped off the train, landing on gravel between the train and the next railway line, glancing left and right. No other trains. A wall sat on the other side of the tracks, the city streets beyond it.

Casting my flying spell, I took off over the wall, flying over a road and series of businesses. The spell was restricted to two miles of flight at a time and more of an escape tool than anything else.

Nice and handy.

I flew past takeaway places and pubs and a strange shrine—a gold statue of a woman out in the open, candles burning around her.

“Clay!”

I glanced back as the flames licked the sky from the blazing train carriages, Buttons roaring somewhere inside the inferno.

“I’ll kill you!” he added.

Go barbeque or melt or whatever.

With zero time or desire to hang around, I flew beyond the golden shrine, following a street with no aim. Shit. And rather than use up the spell too quickly, I came to land in a dark alleyway, ducking behind a large bin, shaking to high heaven. Trying to catch my breath.

Nothing new there.

Just like old times.

FOUR

TAE



I went through the door, focused on the fairy. A third boom went off, the shopping center trembling again.

I had to get to Grindle. He was in here.

“I’m getting a closer look,” Archie said.

“Be careful.”

“You, too.”

I hurried down a staircase, making short work of it with my vampire speed. The building shook again, triggering memories of Brighton.

Another impending toxic river disaster.

Kicking down a door, forgetting about stealth, I ran across the second level walkways of the center, passing shutters and benches. Grindle’s Antiques & Collectibles was on the bottom level. I made for it, leaping over the walkway barrier, landing outside the closed establishment. A metal shutter secured the doors and windows, its tiny slats hinting at the shop beyond.

Another boom, another tremor.

“Grindle?” I called.

To my surprise, a light switched on, and he appeared in the doorway. “Mr. Frost?”

There he stood, the copper-skinned fairy in his tweed suit, his hair a mass of blond curls, his beard shorter than the last time I'd seen him. Pink fairy wings fluttered at his back.

"We need to talk," I said.

"Why?" He pushed his spectacles up his nose.

The building shook. He winced, clutching at his chest.

"I went to the demon realm, got sent back. Clay is trapped there, and fairy magic appears to be involved." I explained Quentin using it on his face and how Clay hadn't managed to kill him.

"What's going on?" I added to the end of my speech.

The ceiling cracked above my head.

He looked at me, his lips twitching.

"Tell me," I pressed.

"I..."

"Are you involved with demons?"

"Yes."

As easy as that? "How?"

The crack split further, fissuring east and west. Dust and pieces of plaster rained down on me.

"Tell me," I said.

"Not now."

"I trusted you." Why had I ever trusted a fairy?

"This is far more complicated than you think, Mr. Frost."

"Tell me."

"Not here. The building is coming down."

I growled. "I want answers. I want keys."

"You've lost your keys?"

"Do you have any?"

I staggered to the side as a huge tremor rocked the building. The crack above spread quickly to the wall, cutting through the floor toward a bench.

"Get out of here!" he bellowed.

The sensible course of action would be to run. Kick down the double doors of the exit, break through the shutters. I'd make short work of them.

But he knew things. I could tell.

"*Tae?*" Archie said.

"Yes?"

"It's bad. The glass on the rivers is broken. It's spilling all over the road."

Not again. "Get out of here."

Grindle watched me. "Leave, Mr. Frost. It's not safe."

"You're skirting around the truth," I said.

"You have to leave."

Another crack formed in the wall, then the ground. More cracks appeared seconds later, spreading around me, above me. This center really was coming down. Yet I remained obstinate, furious that this fairy was playing games with me.

"You can't get Clay back if you're dead," he said.

Green liquid spat out of the cracks, droplets landing inches away from my boots.

A toxic river was rising.

“Fucking hell,” the fairy grumbled.

The shutters opened, and he unlocked the door.

“Why me?” he said.

“Exactly,” I returned. “Why you?”

He pulled an orange glass flower from his tuxedo jacket pocket, holding it out. The ground shook, and he listed to the left, steadying himself on the doorframe.

More green water spat through the cracks. I turned to avoid being sprayed. Who knew what terrible things would happen from being touched by that toxic horror?

You’re failing again.

Grindle smashed the glass flower on the ground. Orange beams of light swirled in the form of a rotating circle, joining together to become an iridescent orange bubble.

“What is that?” I questioned as the shopping center tremored further.

River water burped up through the cracks, pouring across the floor.

“Get inside it now!” Grindle demanded.

“No!” I snapped back. “Not until you start talking.”

I always relied on my rationality, which had taken a huge dip of late. I kept running on my emotions, driven by my passion for revenge more than ever with Arcana returned, with Clay affecting my heart.

“If you die, you won’t be able to help him,” Grindle pointed out again.

His words piqued my reason. Yet I still resisted him, angry at the secrets he hid from me.

Before I could argue further, he threw another glass flower at my feet. Blue. It exploded. I flipped through the air toward the bubble, the force of the explosion propelling me forward.

I hit the bubble, landing upside down into a jelly-like substance. It clung to my body, invisible hands taking hold of me, then rotated me into an upright position.

Grindle joined me moments later.

I tried to claw out of the bubble, my hands meeting slow, gloopy resistance. “What is this?”

“Protection,” the fairy replied. “From that damn river and the building coming down.”

“Tae?”

I could still hear Archie. “I’m okay. You’d better not be in the area still.”

“I’m not. I’m up by Blackfriar’s Bridge. Phone tracker says you’re still in the center.”

“I am.”

“Get out!”

“I can’t move.”

“Fuck! I’m coming back.”

“Don’t. I’m safe.”

“What? How?”

“Thanks to Grindle,” I said with a growl.

I watched the river rise further, coming up to my shin height outside of the bubble. The green liquid churned as the building shook, waves crashing into the walls.

“Are you sure this is safe?” I asked.

“Very sure. You should’ve run.”

“So should you.”

“I was planning to. You fucked that up.” He huffed. “I really didn’t want to do this.”

“We’re stuck?”

“Temporarily. Unless you want to try wading through that green shit.”

“Not really.” I held back from breaking his neck, unsure if I could within this bubble. “Are you working for the demon queen?”

“Yes.”

“Then you better start talking.”

“Give me a second.”

“Tell me what’s going on,” I demanded from the fairy. “And speak the truth.”

“I will. But give me a sodding second!”

“Don’t speak to me like that.”

“Stop being a twat, then.”

I growled. He didn’t care. Instead, he reached for his right eye.

“This is annoying,” he said, taking a deep breath.

He pulled it out of its socket, but slowly. He groaned, didn’t scream like he should. Blood ran down his face, he grunted, he cursed my name.

“What are you doing?” I questioned.

The fairy looked at me, his empty socket leaking blood, the good eye blinking. “Wasting my time to save you.”

He crushed his eye in his hand, the mush oozing through his fingers. The bubble rippled, I smelled something sweet, and a sound followed—like a ring pull on a soda can.

Bright light blinded me. I covered my eyes, a hot breeze rushing at my face.

When my eyes recovered, they met a rickety wooden house with a veranda subsiding into a lake, dead willow trees bent over the water.

It was dark, nighttime, the skies packed with heavy clouds. The house tilted on the banks of the lake, the water vanishing into a void further out. An empty, thick darkness sent shivers through my bones.

“What is this place?” I asked.

Grindle fell to his knees. “Why can’t you just give me a second? For fuck’s sake!”

FIVE

CLAY



I ran through the streets, the pavements and roads cracked and in need of some TLC. Every building seemed to be tired, empty, or on the way to tumbling down. A layer of grime seemed to cover everything, the sky darker but peppered with blue stars, the smell of oil and rotting food on the air.

A scream rang in the distance. A woman, not Buttons.

I paused in a doorway down a quiet street, crouching in the shadows to catch my breath. My heartbeat raced at scary speed, every inch of my skin hot from running, despite the cold wind.

Gosh. What the hell was I supposed to do? Buttons had flipped again, no surprise there, so running had been my only option.

Isobel was on that train, unable to help.

Damn.

A car drove down the street at the end of this one, followed by another. For a city of this size, it was too bloody quiet.

I guess its shithole energy had something to do with it.

“Clay!”

Buttons. Time to go.

I broke out of the doorway, my boots pounding the pavement. Bursting out into another street, I turned left, picking direction without thinking. I didn't fly, the spell a huge drain on my energy. I had to be smart when using it.

“Clay! I'll kill you!”

Don't think so, you button-eyed dickhead.

The street became an incline, more crumbling buildings around me—some with lights on, others dark and dead. I leaped over holes and cracks, ducked into the garden of a house in a panic as a vehicle came roaring down. My foot slid in wet mud, and I fell into tall grass.

Bollocks!

The car sped past, not stopping. Good.

Wait a minute. Could I knock on a door and ask for help? Explain who I was and—

Yeah, I so wasn't doing that. Too much of a risk. What if the demons of this realm hadn't received the memo about their new prince yet?

I got to my feet, the arse of my jeans wet, and ran further up the incline.

“There you are!”

Oh, shit.

I didn't stop running, glancing over my shoulder to see Buttons running after me, his tentacles a fan of charred flesh around him. He wasn't on fire, but his clothes were gone, his skin badly burned. Smoke drifted from his body.

His condition didn't stop him from moving alarmingly quick.

“Get away from me!” I called back like some dumb victim in a horror movie.

I tripped over a wonky bit of pavement, going straight down onto my hands. Pain shot through my palms, a finger snapping.

“Fuck!” I barked.

Middle finger, left hand. Ouch.

“Holyfuckingbollocks!” I added for good measure.

I got up, cradling my left hand, the finger twisted at a sickening angle. Pushed through it, willing my legs to keep going.

As I ran, that arsewipe calling my name over and over again, I cast my healing spell. My hands lit up pearlescent white. I laid my right on my messed-up finger, the magic working by touch, holding them like an, erm... I pictured Tae’s cock, which I hadn’t actually held yet, only had it inside me.

Emphasis on the yet.

Seriously? This isn’t the time!

Ahem.

The magic poured from me into, well, me, knitting the bone back together, dulling the pain with a flare of itchiness. The skin flushed a bright pink, but I could use the finger again.

Yes!

Galvanized by the awesome win, I ran harder, going for the world record of whatever Olympic running sport this was. Bad comparison. The Olympics were a long-dead event, the

last one ending in tragedy when a stadium collapsed into a toxic lake opening up below it in Los Angeles.

A grunt, something smacking the ground behind me.

I glanced back again. Buttons had hit the asphalt, rolling into the path of an oncoming vehicle. The car screeched to a stop, only just missing crushing his head under its front tires.

Shame.

I cracked on with my escaping, taking a right at a steeper incline, reaching the top of a hill with an impressive view of the city. A square with another golden statue surrounded by candles. There were three benches and some railings protecting the edges of the square. A viewing spot? What the hell were these statues?

From what I could gather as I ran across the square, this hill sat in the middle of the city, the rest of it a ring around this center. I hadn't noticed from the train or when I'd been flying. The layout didn't help. I needed a map and a clue.

I made a list in my head.

Always loved a list.

Clay's Plan Ideas:

- 1. Circle back to the train for help.**
- 2. Find a key to the next level (ugh).**
- 3. Scream for help.**
- 4. Bloody hide!**
- 5. Keep running and see what happens.**

Plenty of choices there.

On the other side of the square, I jumped over the railings, running downhill and praying for no tumbles. I whizzed past more benches and grass, a couple shagging somewhere to my left. Grunts from the man, pleasurable sighs from the woman under him.

Okay, then. Bit chilly for outdoor sex, but whatever.

I felt myself losing my footing, cast my flight spell at the last moment, lowering myself back to the path when I became level again.

Phew.

“What did you just do?”

I jumped, spinning to see a fair-skinned demon with three horns on his head, wearing red jeans and a purple jumper, beige sandals on his feet. His white eyes were wide, one clawed hand over his mouth in surprise.

“You flew,” he said.

“I can’t—”

“I saw you fly.”

I turned to run. He appeared in front of me, landing in a crouch as if he’d just jumped over my head.

I leaped back. “What the hell?”

“You smell funny.” He stood straight, grinning. “A demon, but not really. With something extra.”

The fairy magic hiding my demon nature seemed to be fading. I sucked fairy lollipops to dose myself up with the magic in order to hide the demonic stain on my blood. One demon had seen through it—the first one I’d ever killed.

Grindle warned me others might be able to follow suit. Not that it mattered anymore.

The jig was truly up.

“Something bright,” the demon said.

“I have to go.” I tried to move around him.

“No. I want—”

I hit him with my push spell and carried on running along the path.

“Wait!”

I took flight again, flying over a row of houses at the end of the path, over a grove of trees separating the buildings from what looked like a multi-story carpark. Landing on the roof, I took a breather.

As hot and sweaty as I was, the cold grew colder, biting at my flesh, seeping into me. The sweat worked against me, a conduit for freezing my bollocks.

Man, did I miss that ugly gold bomber jacket.

I couldn't stay long, only for half a minute. I crouched behind a wall, one single car with me on the top level of this carpark. A sign told me parking cost two copper demon coins for three hours.

Great. Good to know if I actually gave a shit.

The frog guy landed beside me, scaring the absolute crap out of me. I fell onto my arse like an idiot, scrambling across the ground to get back to my feet.

“Leave me alone,” I warned.

“You're bright,” he said in his froggy crouch. “So, so bright. Why?”

This wasn't happening. I flung him off the roof with my magic. He made no sound as he went over the edge.

I became airborne again, flying away from my resting point. If I kept having to fly off like this, I'd soon be grounded.

There had to be a decent rest point somewhere.

Avoiding an actual busy street made up of bars and aggressive voices, my feet touched ground in a dead row of houses. Roofs were missing from most of them, the windows broken and doors either barely hanging on or gone. They reminded me of toxic river areas back home, like the road beyond the shopping center. The presence of the rivers screwed over a surrounding area badly.

The shopping center still functioned, still had some businesses inside, but because there were rivers nearby, the area was in a downward spiral. One day, the center would be gone, the last shops closing up.

I ran into an alley between two houses—a tunnel carved into the brick, ending at a closed wooden gate.

A rest spot.

Phew.

I caught my breath, leaning against the wall. Alert, ready to spring away as soon as required. Arcana remained at a healthy level, no spells burned away just yet.

Gosh. What a nightmare.

The froggy man landed at the entrance to the alley.

“Bollocks!” I yelled, hurtling the push power at him again.

Off he went, landing in the street with a tumble and a shout. I ran for the gate. Locked. I gave that a push, too. The rickety metal bolt broke open as the gate flung wide. I zipped through into a concrete garden, running past a couple of bird baths full of stagnant water. A high fence locked the garden in, one of the panels down. I considered running in that direction but took to the air again for safety.

“Wait!” Froggy called.

Leave me alone! I flew over the gardens, scoping out a new landing place.

Shfft. What the—

It hit me in the left thigh, breaking my spell. I fell, landing hard into grassy garden, my right leg taking the brunt of the crash. Breaking. A mighty scream tore from my lips.

I rolled onto my back, the pain incredible. Tears leaked from the shock, my teeth grinding together against the agony as I turned the air blue.

An arrow jutted from my thigh.

Shot out of the sky. By who?

Running footsteps, voices, Froggy landing beside me.

“You got shot,” he said.

Thanks for that. “Get away from me!”

He looked up at the approaching feet, taking a hop back.
“You got him.”

“Who the fuck is he?” a man asked.

“Smells funny,” a woman added.

Four demons arrived, eight white eyeballs peering down at me. One female, three males.

“What are you?” the female asked, holding a bow.

“In fucking pain!” I barked back at her.

“He’s weird,” Froggy said. “Smells like human and demon and something else.”

“Magic,” one of the males said, scratching a purple beard.

“Dangerous magic,” another contributed. “Good thing we shot him down.”

“Why?” I winced, helpless within this ring of arsewipes.

“We don’t get flying bodies in this level,” the female, my shooter, replied. “We were worried. We didn’t like it.”

“So you shot me out of the sky?” I countered. Why was I even trying to have this argument with demons? The more pressing issue was getting away from them.

Good luck with that.

“What are you?” the shooter asked.

“Get away from me...”

My magic reacted as water in a saucepan on a high flame, bubbling up quickly. Within a minute or so, I’d lose myself, repeat the chaos of Level 3. As much as it would save me, it could put me in heavy doo-doo, stuck here with no magic for the next round of curious demons to come and stick me with more arrows.

“I followed him,” Froggy said. “Really wanna know what he is.”

“Shall we cut him open?” a male suggested. “Might be some clues in there. He’s a demon, right? He won’t die.”

“What about the human part?” the female added. “Might kill him to cut him open. Then we won’t know anything.”

Oh, but firing an arrow into me worked so much better at keeping me alive.

“Warlock,” Froggy said. “Look at his head. By the Queen, I didn’t notice that before.”

Heads leaned in closer, voices agreeing as they examined my warlock mark on my forehead—an incomplete white circle with a tiny star at the center.

“Then he’s a demon warlock,” the female said. “How does that work?”

“Don’t think he can talk much,” Froggy answered. “Too much pain.”

“Shall we get him inside?”

The conversation went on like that, going back and forth with questions and answers, none of them coming to a conclusion.

Idiots.

The pain didn’t help my rage, but I held on tight to myself, silencing their voices. Working against the constant sharp, unbearable cries of my body. I had to bear the agony, had to be strong. Thinking, thinking, thinking. A better way out of this lingered somewhere in the nasty murk, something other than the mass destruction of these crumbling buildings.

I wouldn’t be the kind of man to destroy everything, to lose myself to blind madness.

I’m slipping...

They’d hurt me. Shoot me again. Because of them, my leg was broken, and now they wanted to cut me open.

Kill them or be sliced open like a frog in a lab.

Froggy. That arsewipe! He'd stalked me, made me run. I could've hidden better, sure, and maybe I would have without that hoppy bastard on my tail.

At least Buttons wasn't here.

"What if we open his chest?" a demon male asked.

Okay. They were all nuts, and I was hurting too much to take anymore.

I summoned the killing arrows, five orange-gold bolts of death ready to strike.

The demons immediately gasped as one, which would've been funny under safer circumstances.

"What is this?" the female asked.

"It can't be..." Purple Beard said. "No. It's not..."

"We can all shoot things," I said, my tone a cocktail of anger and pain.

The arrows flew, striking them all down dead before they could run. They hit the grass, crumbling to black ash moments later.

Slowly, I sat up, panting through the pain, my head a fuzzy hum.

I cast my healing spell. The light bloomed in my hands, flickered, and died. I tried again, making it last a little longer, but not enough to stay lit. The pain distracted me, really throwing off my casting.

Damn this!

Would this spell even help me, though? It might give me a boost, yes, and some pain relief, but it wouldn't work like it did on my finger. The spell wasn't a fix-all healing wonder

when more serious injuries were involved. A broken leg and skewered thigh fell under *that* umbrella.

“You can do this,” I told myself. Even a boost would help.

I flapped my hands, shaking off the negative energy. This garden smelled of dirty bins, the sour stench of rotting garbage wafting up at my nostrils from the grass.

“I can do this.”

The spell returned to my hands, lighting me up like a Christmas tree. I touched my thigh, forgetting one crucial detail.

The arrow.

Shit. Did I pull it out? What if my spell couldn't stop the bleeding? What if the arrow had hit some vital artery in there, and it was the only thing keeping me plugged up?

I implemented the healing touch anyway. The pearly magic spread down my jeans, soaking into the denim. It took the pain away, didn't fix the problem. Magic tickled at my broken bones, but the damage needed more. A doctor, a hospital, and more drugs.

Or a vampire.

Drinking vampire blood worked a dream on injuries. Better than this single healing spell within my entire Arcana repertoire. It'd healed me before, kicking off the Tae and Clay intimacy fest.

A big shame there wasn't a vamp around to open a vein for me.

With the pain eased, I could breathe, take in the cold air. I let it fill my lungs, garbage stench be damned, eyes on the blue stars.

Challenge number two: Getting to my feet.

I'd have to fly somewhere, maybe back to the train. In hindsight, it might have been better to have hovered nearby, wait for help. Oh, well. I'd made my choice to flee. Being chased by a crazy button-eyed arsewipe would make anyone run.

Speaking of which, he'd gone quiet. No hint of him around. Maybe I'd lost him.

Yay!

I knew better than to jump into 'yay' with blind faith.

Okay. Time to move somewhere that wasn't here.

I cast my flight spell again, lifting off the ground. Twinges of pain broke through the nullifying barrier as my leg swung beneath me. Man, this would suck when the effect wore off.

But I kept climbing, getting high enough to see over the tops of the houses. Making myself a target again, seeing nothing but an endless sea of rooftops and streets.

I lowered to the ground, the spell slipping away from me. Man, I seriously needed some help and a fire to keep warm.

With flying no longer an option until the spell's levels recovered, I crawled across the damp grass toward a house, disturbing the ash of the demons I'd killed.

I made it to a door hanging off its hinges. I pushed it aside, crawling over a step into a grimy kitchen rich with the stench of garbage. Crawled back out, resting my back against the house.

The stench was way too much in there. Yuck.

I had to light a fire, get to shelter, get found. Should I send a sign of some sort? Would there be demons out there knowing what to look for?

I couldn't believe I depended on demons to help me.

"I should be helping myself," I muttered.

Powerful magical weapon my arse.

I started a fire, moving my arms around to control the magic, conjuring up a campfire. Wrapping my arms around myself, I let the flames give off their warmth. Heat soon sank into my bones, spreading across my skin.

Toasty.

I thought back to that place with the campfire, and the elements gathered around it. A place where I'd learned some stuff about Arcana, and how different the magic was now, how it shouldn't be in the world, its time done.

How I was wrong.

So wrong...

Ignoring the gnawing doubts and fears about my magic, I scrolled through my spells, looking for something handy. I mean, there were loads of handy things, but like Goldilocks, I searched for one that was just right.

Hold on one darn second. I might have Arcana at my disposal, but I was still a warlock, the Trace magic always lingering in its own tiny corner.

Hello, old friend.

Once upon a time, I'd need to top up my magic at Trace Fall when the remnant magic of Arcana fell as snow once a month at midnight. Magic to get me cash by performing tricks

and special effects on the streets, and also to help me escape from arsewipe witches. My shimmer trick was always good for getting away. Trace was the only magic I could use before Arcana, seeing as Synth was for witches only.

I called to my old faithful power, the grey tendrils of energy crawling down my arms in spirals. God, I'd missed them. Less complicated and scary than Arcana.

"Hi," I said to it.

I cast warlock magic into the sky, conjuring up a spectacle of exploding colors higher and higher. Fireworks, fountains of bright rainbows, turning them into words.

Help! Prince Clay here!

A knot of horror manifested in my chest, tightening by the second, the admission of my royal blood awful. But it was true, I guess, a crappy fact about me. Sod it. Buttons might see this, but sod him, too. I was done with Garbage House, wanting the warm train back, the shower, the pizza, to start over again even if I didn't want to be a prince.

Sometimes, you had to be the buttercup that sucked it up.

I kept pushing magical effects into the sky, repeating the words. This had to grab attention somewhere.

"The Bright One is hurt."

Bollocks. Here came the wrong attention.

SIX

TAE



S ickly yellow light broke through the plethora of dark clouds in this strange place. A surprise, considering I'd assumed it was nighttime. The grass beneath my feet was wet, like overboiled cabbage. Dead.

Grindle walked toward the house. I followed him a few steps before a worm burst out of the ground.

“For fuck’s sake,” Grindle complained.

The worm wriggled across the grass, about the size of a large snake but pink and far more swollen.

“I thought they were all dead,” Grindle said, his hand still planted over his right eye.

“What is it?” I asked. “And don’t say a worm.”

“It’s a worm.”

I withheld a scathing response. “What does it want?”

“They’re nosy things. It either wants to chat or eat.”

“Eat what?”

“Possibly you. Don’t worry, I’ll get rid of it.”

The worm grew in size, swelling to the size of ten large snakes glued together—a disturbing thought. One of its ends

continued to grow to the size of a balloon. With a pop, two smaller worms wriggled out of the burst flesh.

“Are those eyes?” I asked, cocking my head to the side. “On both of those smaller worms?”

Yellow eyes with red irises, complete with blinking lids.

“Yes. These are worms of the Fairy Wilds.”

“Fairy Wilds?”

“There is an undead creature here,” a light and airy voice said. A male voice?

“Where did that come from?” My body readied itself for a fight.

“From the worm,” Grindle answered.

“It smells strange, yet intriguing,” the worm said. The two eyes on the smaller worms blinked in time with the voice.

Speaking through the eyes?

“Why are you here?” the fairy asked the worm.

The pink body pulsed, stationary now. “I am hungry, you fool.”

I saw Grindle roll his one eye, his pink wings fluttering. “Always so snotty.”

“Hunting is so difficult in these dark times.”

“There’s no food here,” Grindle answered. “Move along.”

The two smaller worms wriggled over the bigger one. “You and the undead thing can be food,” two new, tiny voices declared.

“We don’t taste good,” Grindle said. “You know that. You’ll be shitting for hours. Fairy isn’t good for a worm’s diet.”

And who knows what a vampire will do to your insides.”

“Food...”

“Oh, go away. We have business to attend to.”

“I will devour you.”

“Fuck off.”

“I will kill you both and suck you dry.”

“Did you not hear me say fuck off?”

The worm reared its whole body, towering above us as a mass of pink force. On its underside was an exposed, infected-looking purple sore, purple fluid weeping from its split and crusty surface.

“I will crush you!” the worm boomed.

I growled, dropping to a battle stance.

“If you could hit that purple part, please,” Grindle said to me. “I know I said I’d get rid of it, but I’m in no mood to burn calories fighting this idiot. And you’re quicker. Don’t worry, I have something you can use post-gore.”

Interesting statement.

The sooner this worm was gone, the sooner the fairy could begin his tale. So I shot forward at full vampiric speed, tearing into the infected flesh. Purple pus exploded from the wound all over me, a torrent of pink fluid following. It hit the grass with flooding force. I jumped back, now stinking of feces.

The worm thrashed and cried unintelligible words, screaming bloody murder. Evidently, the purple sore acted as plug for its insides now, spilling over the ground. Within a minute, all the internal parts of the worm were on the outside, its body nothing more than a husk floating in an acrid soup.

“That was disgusting,” I said.

“But thanks for getting rid of it,” Grindle replied. “Let me get you something.”

He walked up to the house, climbing the wooden steps onto the veranda and disappearing through the front door. I followed, waiting at the foot of the stairs.

Seconds later, he returned with a white glass flower.

I waited for him to speak.

“Hold this. Wait two minutes, and you’ll be clean. This is my last one, so make the most of it.”

“What does it do?” I asked.

“Cleans up nasty shit like the gunk all over you. And removes odors.”

“You sound like you’re in an infomercial.”

He rolled his one eye. “Take it.”

“What’s the catch?”

“Nothing. If we’re going to talk, I don’t want to deal with a poo stench. Okay?”

I took the flower. It blinked in my hand like a beacon. I held it, counting down the seconds. At the end of two minutes, I was clean, the stink gone. I’d seen nothing happen, only the blinking. Now the white vanished, the lotus-looking flower a dull gray.

“Just pop it on the grass,” Grindle said. “I’ll be back. Take a seat.”

There were three rocking chairs on the veranda.

He disappeared into the house again, taking a bit longer this time. I listened to him moving in there, tearing something, making the sound of air sucked through teeth. Pain.

Opting to stand, I waited beside one of the rocking chairs by a window with drawn curtains. I picked up on dust and damp and burned toast.

The front door opened, Grindle returning with a green eyepatch over his eye. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"No."

"Fine."

"Start talking. Where are we?"

He sat on the chair opposite the one I stood by. Then he got to talking. "The Fairy Wilds are an old land, having existed for as long as the Earth, pressed against your realm. We would use our land and yours, providing services, existing, living in relative peace. Until the demons invaded us." He sniffed, rubbing at his cheek. "They acted so quickly, taking us by surprise. We didn't get much of a chance to fight back. My ancestors certainly tried to, but the lack of preparation drove fairies out of their realm." He shook his head. "So much slaughter, so much devastation. The demon king at the time wanted to use the Fairy Wilds to extend the demon realm."

"The first I've heard of a fairy realm."

He shrugged. "Our best-kept secret."

"You have as much of a reason to hate demons as me," I said. "So why are you involved with them?"

"Complicated."

"Tell me. Now. And do you have demon realm keys?"

He sighed. “Yes. I do.”

I wanted to throttle him, to burn him alive in his tweed suit.

“You had keys all this time,” I said, not letting him explain himself. “You know my plight... I trusted you.”

I should just let him speak.

He offered an icy, unremorseful look. “You’re not the only man with vengeance in his heart. As you said, I have a reason to hate demons.”

I kept quiet.

“I have been providing fairy charms to the demon queen for years, keeping her movements hidden.” He pointed at the gray glass flower. “Those are fairy charms, each color providing a certain result. Blue to send you flying through the air, orange to provide a protective bubble against toxic rivers and shopping centers falling down.”

Still, I held my silence.

“I’m relieved it worked,” he added. “A vampire’s magical resistance can sometimes be problematic.”

That resistance didn’t work against all magic and wasn’t something to be relied upon. More of a soft defense.

“My sister provides the same fairy charms to Quentin and his followers,” he continued, “along with the creams I provide you.” He took a moment to continue. “She is his wife.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Which makes Quentin and the queen even on the playing field.”

Explained a few things. “Clay undid the magic of the cream,” I added.

“He did. He has the power to do that.”

“Quentin broke through our disguises,” I said. “With a purple glass flower.”

He nodded. “A purple charm has the power to undo other fairy magic.”

Fairy sneakiness. “How did they survive the Arcana arrows?”

“Pink charms, which you didn’t see, can provide protection from anything but have limited uses—a three-strike rule. In this case, from Arcana. My sister and I have to keep making them offer continuous protection to our respective clients. Ever since Arcana returned, our workload has increased.”

So the queen and Quentin were both safe from Clay. For now.

“Give me a reason not to kill you,” I said.

“Because I want to help you.”

“Like you helped me with the keys?”

“I couldn’t give you those keys. The queen would know. My cover would be blown.”

“You’re playing both sides.” *And your fairy brains will soon paint the ground...*

“I give her what she wants. I get what I want.”

“Like what?”

“Information. Knowledge is power after all.”

“To hit them back for destroying your world,” I said.

“That’s right,” he responded. “I’ve worked with her for many years, part of her circle, keeping her up to speed on Earthly events. When Clay came into the picture, she ordered me to keep a close eye on him for her.” He sighed. “You see, though I provide protection, and she pays me with knowledge, she still demands more from me. Which is fine when your endgame is to end the bitch.”

“And Quentin?”

“And him.”

This fairy... “She wanted you to watch Clay because of his blood?”

“Yes. And now she has him, like she wanted. But I have Clay’s interests at heart. I care about him.”

Was he really saying this? “How can you when you’ve let him fall into her hands? You knew these things. You could have told me.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“Why does she want him?” I asked.

“For his power, of course. Because of his hybrid nature. She won’t hurt him. I care too much about him to let her hurt him.”

Smash your skull in... “You cared enough to let him live on the streets?” I countered. “You didn’t ever offer him a home.”

“Because the queen did not want me to. She wanted him to endure hardship, to see if he was worthy of his demon blood.”

“This was before Arcana?” I asked.

“Yes.” He shook his head, still icy in demeanor. I suppose you could say he mirrored my energy. “She’s his mother.”

A strong jolt of shock hit me in the heart. “What did you say?”

“The demon queen is his mother, and the mother of Buttons—his real name being James.”

This couldn’t be real. “What... How?”

“That is information she hasn’t given me. All I know is that her twin sons were born to humans.”

“But she’s the mother?”

“Yes. Strange, I know.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Tell me about it. But twenty-four years ago, there were twin boys born to a human mother and warlock father. These brothers were of demonic blood—Clay and Buttons. The queen’s children. That’s all I know. She wanted to see what happened with these boys, calling on me seventeen years later to intervene.” He took a breath. “I met Clay for the first time on the streets, found him in an alleyway. He was seventeen and terrified, having discovered his demon blood, those wings of his having burst out of his skin.”

Twins...

Demon.

Lies from Clay.

Secrets...

I have to help him...

“How did he not set off a demon tower manifesting those wings?” I questioned.

“His demon blood appears to be much weaker than Buttons’. It doesn’t seem to set off demon towers. At least it didn’t that night. Anyway, I offered him help in the form of those lollipops. At a price.”

Clay’s lollipops. I thought he simply enjoyed them. “A price? You charged him money for your help?”

He shrugged. “I’m running a business, and it helped keep distance between us. The queen didn’t want us to be best friends. Anyway, the lollipops hid his demon blood from almost everyone.”

“Almost?”

“The first demon he’d killed smelled it, as did Buttons. Though Buttons would, wouldn’t he? Considering they’re twins.”

“I see.”

Twins. This was unreal.

“My magic isn’t fallible,” he said.

“Don’t tell the queen that if you’re making her protection charms.”

“She knows the risks.”

Clay...

“You’ve been lying to me,” I said. “As has Clay. He knew about his demon blood all along and said nothing.”

“We had to. Clay’s a good lad.”

“Good enough to lie?” I asked, my hands fists.

“To survive. Imagine being within your ring of hate.”

Hate? For Clay? “Imagine having keys you knew I wanted.”

“I—”

“You *couldn't* tell me,” I cut him off. “I heard you the first time.”

Clay had lied to protect himself. I understood that, but how was I supposed to feel? He was a demon. And not just any demon—but one related to the serial killer Buttons. And a prince.

The enemy.

“They share Arcana,” Grindle added. “Buttons’s reaction to Clay’s killing blow is his part of the magic in action, not a fairy charm. I don’t know why Arcana behaves the way it does with Clay and Buttons, but then the magic isn’t supposed to be here, is it?”

I ignored that cold, hard truth. “Does the queen know how?”

“No. She wants me to find out. Arcana’s return seemed to be a surprise to her and to Quentin. But I’m no expert on the ancient magic.”

I tempered my rage further. “She wants to use Clay and Buttons in her war to claim Earth and to fight Quentin Dawn.”

“That’s right.”

“I’m just clarifying it for myself.”

“Quentin wants to use Clay, too. Possibly,” he added. “To kill her.”

“And you want Clay to kill them both?”

“Yes.”

“And you are now pitted against your sister,” I said.

He blinked a few times. “It’s horrible. I love my sister. But she loves her husband more than me. Quentin is the love of her life.”

“And Clay is caught in the crossfire.”

“He is. Along with Buttons.”

That demon...

“If I give you my keys, I will have betrayed the queen,” he said.

“Are you going to give me the keys?”

“I don’t know. He’s in the right place to strike,” he countered. “We should leave him there.”

“No. There’s better ways of doing this. He’s loaded with power and can lose control.”

“Is that so?” the fairy questioned.

You bastard. “You didn’t see what happened there. I did. He can’t stay there.”

He didn’t answer.

“Does the queen know about me?” I asked.

“Your plight, you mean?”

“Does she?”

“No. At least, I haven’t told her anything about that. She knows I helped you hunt demons. I told her you’re a vigilante in need of help.”

“And she trusted that?” I asked. “Is fine with me going after her kind?”

“She found it amusing. Wanted to see what you did, especially with Clay joining you.”

“Really? Her demons are that disposable to her?”

He shrugged.

Grindle made a good point. Clay was in a great position now—the heart of the action. If he lost his control again, he could wipe out many more demons. And that was a terrible thought. The last thing I wanted for him was to lose control, to be vulnerable and scared. But I did want him to kill demons, especially the hooded one.

Killer...

I pushed a hand through my hair. “I need those keys, Grindle.”

“I know.”

“You owe me.”

“I don’t owe you anything.”

“You played me.”

“Not really. I gave you what you needed, and you hurt demons with it. Ended up killing them when Clay came into your life.” He tapped his left thigh with his left fingers. “Which may come back to bite me in the arse.”

“She doesn’t trust you, does she?”

“Probably not. Handing over my keys will break everything apart, though.”

I watched him, looking for any sort of sign to show me something. “Do you care?”

“I care about losing information.”

“How much more do you need?”

“I don’t know.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know.”

He shrugged. “Isn’t that a quirk of life?”

My poor Clay...

“You sneaky bastard,” I said.

“Don’t hurt him.”

Where did that come from?

“I won’t,” I said. “Of course, I won’t.” Was that true after his betrayal? After he knew my history and kept his lie anyway? After I told him things I never should have shared, like falling—

“You allowed Buttons to murder so many innocents,” I added, skidding away from my inner turmoil.

“I had to,” he said. “The queen wanted to see how much blood he would spill for her.”

The vile bitch. “And you said nothing to me, to anyone.”

“I had no choice.” He sighed. “How many times do I have to make that point?”

“There’s always a choice, Grindle.”

He straightened his spine. “I don’t want any demon to succeed.”

What else did this fairy know? “My family,” I said. “Do you know who killed them?”

“I promise you I don’t.”

“I’m supposed to trust that?” I countered.

“That’s up to you.”

Fairies could not lie when confronted to reveal the truth of something. But they were notoriously devious and skilled at avoiding truths. Not being a liar didn’t mean anything to me. It just told me you were clever.

My trust had taken severe damage recently.

“If you do know, tell me now,” I said.

“I don’t. I *have* been trying to find out.”

Should I believe him? “All this time, Grindle.”

“I know.”

“I can’t trust you. If I discover you know who killed my family, then you know what will happen.”

He nodded in agreement. “I promise you, I don’t know a thing.”

“Don’t make promises to me. They’re nothing but hot air now.”

“I tipped Archie off,” he added. “To rescue you from Poppy Love’s house.”

“You did?”

“Because I want to help you. I respect you, Mr. Frost. And Clay. We can work together to make things better. For Clay, for you. We can find this murderer of your family. We can end these two demon factions trying to fuck up another world. I really want to help you get what you want and to protect Clay.”

My heart contorted. It hadn’t hurt like this since losing my wife and son. It was supposed to be in a million unfixable pieces. Yet it ached for Clay, for everything between us to

return. I wanted his smile, his entire presence. His Kylie Minogue records playing, to see his face on Christmas Day when he discovered I'd had every single one of the singer's albums made on that special gold vinyl for him, not just the early present I'd given him. To hear his voice, experience his light and resilience to a world that didn't offer him the care he so deserved.

I'm sorry, Tae Ae-Jung. I should not be falling for him...

The demon queen had stood by and let Clay live in the cold, allowed him to be abused, all for the sake of proving his strength to her? Wanted Buttons to commit murder. For what? Before Arcana, what were her plans for these brothers?

My frustration was a living monster to be slain.

The fairy held out a set of three keys—two silver, one bronze.

“Take them,” he said. “Go get our boy.”

“There are only three. I need more.”

“Find Tasmin Vacquier again. She's sneakier than me. If anyone has more keys, she does.”

“Okay.”

“There are a thousand levels to the demon realm. The queen resides in Level 500.”

I took them. “That's a lot of keys to find.”

“If anyone can, you can. We'll figure out a better method to strike once he's safe. I never should've let things get this far.” He shook his head. “Revenge messes with our reason, right?”

I ignored the comment. “If we cut off the heads from both beasts, the others will fall.”

He nodded, saying nothing more on that.

I took the black key from my pocket. “What is this?”

“An exit key,” he said. “I am forbidden from having one. My meetings with the queen often take place in Level 1 or at my shop.”

The demon queen in the shopping center...

I suppressed a growl.

“It only works inside the demon realm,” he continued, “allowing a quick exit for non-banished demons. A demon such as Tasmin Vacquier would not be able to use it, seeing as she is banished from Earth.”

Talismans were wonderful for sending demons away in lieu of Arcana.

Grindle frowned at the key. “Where did you get it from?”

I told him about the hooded demon stabbing me with it.

More frowning. “A reckless move. But then it’s not like it’ll get you back inside.”

“He’s...” I steeled my heart. “He’s the killer. His voice... I’d know that voice anywhere.”

“Fuck.”

“Are you hiding something from me?” I tried again, blocking out *that* killer demon’s voice.

“No. I’ve told you I don’t know who killed your family. I’m speaking truth.”

“If this is part of a double-cross, I’ll tear you apart piece by piece. Believe me, I’ll make it a horror beyond your wildest imagination.”

Left with no choice but to take him at face value, with many pinches of salt, I pocketed the keys.

Grindle brushed down his tweed jacket. “I believe you, Mr. Frost.”

Pressure in my skull threatened to crush my brain to mush.

“When you use the exit key,” he said, “it will always take you back to Barking Park.”

“Fine. Now can I leave?” I asked.

“Give it five minutes. I’m trying to move us to a point of safety to exit into. Let me have some quiet time.”

I let him, once again counting the seconds.

True to his word, as soon as I reached the five-minute mark in my head, the house began to rattle.

He stood up. “Let’s go.”

I hadn’t asked him about his strange magic, how it worked, what it meant for him to lose that eye. Now wasn’t the time. I was done talking.

The demon realm keys were mine again.

This was the time for action.

I followed him into the house, blinding light swallowing us.

SEVEN

CLAY



I pressed myself into the wall, willing it to swallow me. I tried to find a spell to allow me to walk through walls.

No such luck.

“Leave me alone,” I said, readying my arsenal to attack. I’d gladly burn through it to keep him away from me.

Buttons/James was burned up badly, the damage worse this close. Left on the barbeque too long, taking well-done to its furthest limits.

I hope it hurts!

His tentacles were the healthiest parts of his body, covered in blisters, throbbing, and still ready for action.

Annoying.

“Oh, my poor brother,” he said, limping over, stinking of burned flesh. “Look at us, wounded and at war with each other.”

“You started this.”

“A sibling squabble.”

“More than that,” I answered. “That’s close enough, James.”

He stopped coming toward me. "I'm in pain. Your fire has ruined my body."

"You were going to kill me."

"I was."

"Then... Then I did the right thing."

He wobbled and collapsed to his backside. "I hurt everywhere."

"So do I."

"What happened?" he asked.

"Go away."

"I want to sit with you. I want to apologize for slipping."

God. If only my arrows could wipe him out. "Slipping?"

"Letting my anger get the better of me. Like you did."

"I'm nothing like you."

"We are brothers. We are alike."

I wanted to puke. "You'll be in so much trouble when they catch you."

He looked to the sky, my colorful magic reflecting off his buttons. "I know. I didn't mean to. I was angry. I'm confused. I want to know more about where I come from."

A shudder rocked my insides. Buttons had the same goals as me.

We were alike.

Like hell were we!

"There is so much I don't understand," he added. "So much I want." Button eyes back to me. "There is Arcana in

me. I feel it. I fear it. I don't understand it. But I think it keeps me safe from you without the aid of fairy charms."

Whoa. A lot to unpack there. "Fairy charms?"

"The demons use it—Mother and Isobel, protecting themselves. They are only temporary, for you are the Bright One. You are the killing blow."

Grindle? Was this linked to him? "Who gives them these charms?"

He angled his head to the left. "I don't know, brother."

I licked my dry lips, craving a big jug of water and a cup of tea. Him with a form of Arcana? A scary, scary prospect. If he could use these spells, then we were all doomed.

What the hell had happened to give us these powers?

He aimed his button eyes down at his burned body. "What are their names?" he said.

"Who?"

"The man and woman who made us."

"What are you talking about?"

"Our parents," he said.

"Erm, I thought we were sons of the queen," I countered.

"More than that. I think. I don't know." He cocked his head to the right. "I want to know."

"Adam and Maxine Christmas," I answered.

"Does that make me James Christmas?"

Oh, gosh no. "I suppose..." I didn't finish.

"I'm a Christmas, like the human thing of lights and presents."

“Uh-huh.”

“It makes no sense.”

“Tell me about it.” Much like this conversation. “So, you’ve, erm, met the queen?”

“Yes. Three times. She’s wonderful.”

“But she didn’t tell you much?”

“No. The first time we met, she asked me to prove myself as a warrior, not telling me I am her son. I was happy to oblige, killing in her name, showing her how strong I could be.” He smiled, turning my blood to ice. “Who wouldn’t want to be a soldier of the demon queen?” His smile dropped. “On our second meeting, she said there was another, one with special powers. Arcana. She didn’t ask anything of you, just watched. I hated it. Jealousy is ugly. And then you tried to kill me, awakening this strange power inside me. Protecting me.”

This creeped me out. Being watched, him being related to me... All this bullshit. Talk about a living nightmare. I wanted to scream and cry and vomit and punch him so hard in his face.

“The third time I met her,” Buttons added, “she told me who I was, and then Isobel and I came to get you.”

“Oh.” My hands curled into fists.

“She promised answers when we were all together in level 500. Yet here we are.”

Because you’re a psycho.

“My fault,” he said, bowing his head. “I’m sorry I spoiled the train ride.”

Sorry? This monster? He turned my stomach, my mouth firmly closed.

“I want to be her best son, the one she loves most. I have worked so hard to impress her, only for a usurper to come along.”

I swallowed. “I don’t want to usurp anything. Okay? I don’t want—”

“It isn’t about what you want, Clay. It’s about her.”

To kill Quentin Dawn? Be her soldier? “I wish I could go home. And don’t say I already am.”

“But you are. It can be the home we’re both looking for.” Was that sadness on his scary face? Were his lips drooping, wobbling? “A mother. A sister. A brother.”

Talk about twisted. What did I say to that? I mean, he wanted me dead moments ago and left Isobel in a burning train after punching her in the head.

“I already have a home,” I responded.

“This fire is nice,” he said, his tentacles retracting. “Very nice.” He held his blisters over it.

You’d think a fire would be the last thing he wanted to see right now.

“It’s so cold here,” he added.

He’s looking for a home. For a family.

“I know.” I looked about me, seeing if I could run.

Honestly, I didn’t have it in me to play anymore cat and mouse games. Plus, well, the broken leg problem. Anyway, the fireworks were up there sending a message for our rescue. Well, mine. He might be getting slapped down hard.

Rather him than me.

We sat in silence before the fire, the spell draining away piece by piece. Not as heavy a drain as flying, but enough to make me worry. If we weren't picked up soon, we'd be ice cubes within the hour.

The temperature dropped by the second. I shuffled closer to the fire, Buttons mirroring my moves. I kept to my side, praying he didn't scooch around and ask me to burst into song and toast marshmallows with him.

A snowflake landed on the back of my hand.

"What the hell?" I said.

His button eyes landed on me. "What's wrong?"

"I think it's..." I looked up, seeing more flakes, the clouds releasing an onslaught of snow.

It came down in heavy clumps. The cold air stirred, rising into a sharp blast whipping up the flames.

I slid back from the dancing fire, Buttons doing the same.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"I don't know." He got to his feet. "We can't stay here."

I glanced at Garbage House, snow swirling at my face. "We should get inside."

The wind really picked up, icy teeth biting at my flesh, the freezing gale stealing the air from my lungs. Bloody hell!

And it was a gale, the beginnings of a storm.

The house might not be safe. It didn't look stable. But being out in this was just as bad. This cold would mess us up. Maybe the button-eyed arsewipe would be okay, seeing as

nothing got rid of him. Not me. This bullshit was already getting to me.

So much for being rescued.

“Come on!” I cried. “Let’s get in there.”

I had to close my eyes against the snow, peepers under too much pressure.

My protective wall spell. Yes!

The fire blinked out as I cast the spell, turquoise magic cocooning me in a cylindrical shield, the wind and the cold deflected. I focused on keeping it that way until the spell’s energy said toodles, and I was left to freeze again.

“Clay?”

Oh, yeah. Him.

“Can I come in?” he added.

Fuck you.

Let him in? Was he mad? He wanted me dead, showed me nothing but unhinged behavior and contempt. I may have shared a fire with him, but that didn’t change a thing.

You’re not getting in here.

The wind whistled around my protective shell, the house behind me groaning in protest.

“Clay, please.”

A crash from a neighboring house. “What was that?”

“The chimney fell down,” he responded, the wind killing most of his volume. “Please let me in.”

Reminded me of *The Three Little Pigs*—him the wolf, me the pigs. Yeah, well, I wasn’t being turned into bacon.

Man, a bacon sandwich and a steaming cup of tea would be so awesome right now.

“Please, Clay. I’m so cold.”

Damn him. Damn my conscience for putting doubt in my brain. He was a monster, a murderer, a complete piece of shit. Why should I help him? How many innocent people begged him for the same mercy before he butchered them? How many people had died in Brighton because of what he’d done with those Synth orbs?

Screw him. Screw our blood connection. Let the cold kill him, or the wind whip him away to somewhere dark and scary. Trap him, make it hurt. Yeah, if he couldn’t be killed, let him hurt. Let him suffer.

A Christmas like me...

So? It didn’t change a thing.

Family.

Nope. Not my family. I’d choose my family, thanks. Find those deserving of my love.

Like Tae.

Only, I’d lied to him and tainted our relationship so I could just kiss that goodbye and stop thinking anything would happen now because I was a demon, and he hated demons and

And I was bloody rambling to myself.

“Clay. The cold hurts.”

Good! I closed my eyes, mind full of way too much.

“Clay. Show me mercy.”

My eyes snapped open. “You don’t deserve mercy.”

“I’m your brother.”

“You want me dead.”

“I lost my temper.”

“Bullshit.”

“I did. I must work on my...” He stopped, covering his face with his hands. “My jealousy. I’ll change.”

“Fuck you,” I said aloud now.

“Please, Brother. I can’t stand this cold. First, you burn me with fire. Now you let me burn again with cold.”

And just like that, he set my anger free.

Arcana responded, a dozen solar flares in my soul. “You’re begging me?” I said. “You’re actually begging me for mercy? You’re something else. What mercy did you show me? Huh?”

“Please...”

“Answer me!”

Arcana took hold, flooding every corner, its strings fixing to the ends of my limbs. It picked me up, my body lifting off the ground, claiming control of the wheel. My wings burst out of me, not ruining my top as Isobel said. My demonic traits were on full show, my magic ready to rage.

Like before.

“Help him, he says. Help the button-eyed demon because he’s scared of the cold. Poor him. Poor monster.”

Up I went, the barrier still locked around me.

“Clay—”

“Don’t say my name.”

“Brother.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, looking down on the pathetic creature he now was, shivering in the brutal wind. The snow was settling quickly. Soon he'd be buried beneath it.

I could do better.

"I'm not your brother," I said. "I'll never be your brother, no matter how hard you try and spin it to me. I want you dead. I'll make it happen, trust me."

"Clay... You're losing yourself again."

My arms shot outward, my broken leg a distant problem. I turned my hands upward, fingers dancing as I churned magic, calling to the elements once again for storm number two.

Oh, man. This snowstorm had nothing on me.

My anger continued to rise as I did, stirred by memories of his torment, of the shit I'd been through, of finding out about him and the queen and Isobel. A sensitive spot poked, ripples of fury the consequence.

I should calm down...

Hell no!

I can't do this again...

It was too late to put the lid on now, no matter how hard the reasonable part of me tried. And why did that part get to have a say? That stupid part making me consider letting him into my protective bubble. Yeah, so he could turn around and stick the knife in.

I didn't want to test my mortality, especially with this arsewipe.

The air crackled with magic as I swept my arms in grand gestures, churning the magic, calling to wind and rain and

snow and the ground. All of them, mixing them together in my blender of chaos, laughing as they hummed and buzzed.

Arrows manifested, ready to try and break through Buttons's defenses. I mean, if at first, you don't succeed, always try and kill the button-eyed creep again and again.

Stop...

I laughed, the sound like thunder. It really was too late now, the crimson mist you always hear about smothering me. Lost to rage and not giving a shit. Anger was better than offering help to him.

Fuck him. Fuck all of them. Where was the cavalry? Oh, I'm so important to the queen, and she wants to meet me, and I'm a prince and all that fucking bullshit. Yeah, important enough to be out here, having run from Buttons and a bouncing wannabe frog demon and almost taken apart by some others.

"Fuck you all."

I snapped, the magic letting rip. My head snapped back, eyes fixed to the sky.

"Yes!" I cried. "Yes!"

The arrows hit Buttons, bursting into a raging orange-gold fire that swallowed him, died down to leave him standing. So I hit him again, and again, and again.

One of them might stick.

The ground cracked and shook, the sky lighting up with lightning that tore at the houses, thunder punctuating it. The wind blew harder, the snow hitting thicker. Bolts of energy ripped out of me, my own kind of lightning. Pure, terrifying blue claws of power—a spell called *Beam of Energy*.

Destructive. It blew off most of what remained of Garbage House's roof, teaming up with the other lightning to do some decent damage to the neighboring buildings.

Buttons's screams egged me on, making me pour more into the storm, not giving him a break from the arrow strikes.

"Fucking eat it!" I screamed.

I'd never felt so much hate, so much rage, so much power.

Too much.

Hurts. Liquid heat running down my lips. Blood. My blood? Nosebleed?

"Clay!" the demon roared. "Stop!"

It only made me hit harder.

Arcana's energy drained, spells shutting down for a recharge. Whatever. I didn't need them. If it wasn't hard and heavy, I didn't give a shit.

Arcana...

Huh?

Arcana...

Arcana...

Arcana...

A different kind of Arcana energy radiated from below, from Buttons. New, unknown to me. Was I feeling his protection working against me for the first time? Yeah, must be.

Unless...

Magic broke through my defenses, shattering my protective wall. Struck me in the chest like a bullet, pushing

me through the air. I crashed-landed in Garbage House's exposed top floor, landing on a bed, the wind knocked out of me. The bed collapsed, spilling me onto a dirty floor, nasty garbage stench hitting the back of my throat. I felt another bone break, but God only knew where. The pain didn't wave its flag yet.

What the hell happened?

My magic waivered, the storm losing its strength. And I couldn't get a hold on it again, a coldness seeping into my skull like brain freeze.

Taking me into darkness.

No...

Something else...

A different place.

A different time.

A boy. About nine years old. Brown hair, hazel eyes, pale skin bathed in summer sunshine. Looked just like me, crouched beside a river with a fishing net. He caught stickleback fish, smiled at the thrashing bodies in his net. He put them back, said something to them I couldn't catch. I heard his soft tones, but they came from far away, not direct from his mouth. Weird. Disturbing.

This little boy was Buttons, playing on a riverbank in the middle of the countryside somewhere. Alone. A peaceful place.

He continued to dip his net into the water, the sun rippling on the surface. He laughed, gathering fish, putting them back, not doing anything but existing in his own little happiness.

"James?" I spoke, my voice silent.

However, he froze, looking back at me over his shoulder. He'd heard me. No, not me. He wasn't looking at me but someone else. He got to his feet, dropping his net. His smile died, his eyes widening with fear. A wet patch spread across his pale blue shorts, his body shaking.

"Leave me alone," he pleaded.

What the hell?

I looked behind me, seeing blurs of shadows, smears against the summer day bounding toward us. They passed through me on the way to him, cold blasts against my body. I shivered, going to move forward to protect the child.

He screamed, his voice an echo in the distance. He tried to run, jumping into the river. But he slipped and tumbled to the side, landing in the shallow water. He thrashed and screamed and tried to get away. Those shadows were unrelenting, didn't give him any chance. Bigger, consuming, scooping up the poor kid and carrying him away, no one here to help him. His eyes flared with the demon white, black scales erupting over his arms and face.

It made no difference.

"What are you showing me?" I asked.

Buttons had hit me with a spell, pushing me into his memory.

The day blinked out of view, replaced by a white room and a chrome bed, Buttons strapped to it, a dozen tubes and cannulas stuck into him. Sedated, eyes closed as doctors in white coats moved around him. They spoke. I couldn't hear them.

The scene flashed forward in broken fragments. Blood. Black demon blood. Eyes being cut out of the kid. So much

blood. Buttons. White buttons fixed to his face, that tiny body mutilated.

I wanted to puke.

James in bed, waking up. Groaning.

James weeping, black tears running from behind those button eyes.

“Why?” I spoke again. “Why did they do that to you?”
And who were they?

“The buttons are powerful eyes,” Buttons’s voice said in my mind. “They are an experiment.”

I couldn’t see him—the *now* him. Only the little him crying in the bed, strapped down still.

“An experiment for what?” I asked.

“To test me.”

“Who did this?”

“It is always about her,” he replied.

“The queen? She did this.”

“To test me. To make me better. I know that now. For so long, I wondered why, and then I learned of her, of her wants.”

The white room crumbled, his Arcana spell releasing me.

“How does having that done to you make you better?” I asked as I drifted back to myself.

“Because it does. Because I am undying. Because these button eyes see so much.”

From a boy with a fishing net to a monster. What had been his path to madness and murder? Having his eyes cut out for

one, but what else? There was more. I could feel there was more.

I blinked myself back into reality, on my back in a broken room. Snowy winds howled above me, around me, flakes landing on my face and exposed flesh. The walls of Garbage House took some of the brunt even if the ceiling and roof were gone.

Reaching up to wipe snow from my face, my ribs screamed. My leg added to the painful greetings, along with the base of my spine and my neck.

“Gosh...” I breathed, getting a mouthful of snow.

Movement to my left. A badly burned body lying beside me, on his back, his button eyes turned toward me.

“I’m tired,” he complained, blisters around his mouth breaking and weeping. “So very tired.”

He really was my brother, the reality properly sinking in. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that was me fishing in that river, enjoying the summer sunshine. But that wasn’t my memory, not something I remembered doing.

Shit. The same face, the same hair and eyes. Me.

I’d burned through my spells and my energy, the metallic taste of blood in my mouth. A nosebleed from using Arcana.

Not good, but not a shock. Going that wild was too much.

Way too much.

“What did you do to me?” I asked.

“I showed you things.”

“Your memories?” It hurt to talk, more agony in my ribs. But adrenaline pumped away, keeping the worst of the hurt at

bay.

For now.

“Fragments,” he said. “Things I remember. Tiny things. Not the whole story.”

I drew some raspy breaths. “The queen had your eyes removed.”

“For me to be better. Stronger. I didn’t... I didn’t understand as a child, not until I learned.”

“It’s terrible.”

“The queen is not terrible. She’s our mother.”

I groaned, unable to sit up. Poxy snow! “What else do you remember?”

“Nothing. That’s it.”

“Why did you want to show me?”

“To stop you,” he said. “You were about to blow everything apart.”

I felt my forehead crease up. “Says the demon who fucked Brighton over. I thought...” Damn this pain. “I thought you loved the chaos.”

“In its rightful place.”

Arsewipe. “Do me a favor and roll away.”

“I’m too tired to roll.”

I’d push him out of here if I had the magical juice to hit him with. “You’re trying to make me feel sorry for you.”

He didn’t answer.

“It stopped me, though,” I added.

“Good.”

“Depends on how you look at it.”

“You want to destroy everything?”

“Right now, I want painkillers and sleep. And for you to fuck off.”

He stared at me.

That pissed me off. “What? You want me to be all, ‘Poor you’? Not happening. Look at what you’ve done.”

No answer, only staring.

“I don’t care that we’re brothers. I don’t care how many sob stories you try to show me. I don’t care whatever the fuck your Arcana skills are. All I care about is getting answers and getting away from you. I won’t play happy families. I won’t be a prince. I won’t be anything but me. So, please, don’t talk to me anymore.”

A pang of guilt got to me, just a little bit. And I hated myself for letting it come at me. I was speaking the truth, telling this piece of shit how it was. Why would I suddenly change tracks because of some awful memory? He wanted to kill me, for God’s sake!

But there the guilt sat. Unkillable.

Damn.

The snowstorm raged on as silence fell between us. Of course, the arsewipe stared at me because he had a creepy image to keep up. I ignored him, eyes closed, waiting for Arcana to come back. Trying not to move, concentrating on resisting the pain. With the adrenaline gone, the longer I lay there, the harder the hurt hit. Really hurt. No amount of breathing exercises helped because the snow kept getting in.

Eventually, when the pain got too much, I passed out.

Damn.

EIGHT

TAE



The bright light gave way to a familiar road and buildings—the road opposite the shopping center. Half of the building had collapsed, the remaining half barely standing with a green arc of river spewing from the top of it. More river ringed the center as a moat, with no sign of river monsters as of yet.

Grindle was gone. The bastard. But I still had the keys, and he'd saved me from potential death. For now, I wouldn't hunt him.

Clay...

There were blue lights flashing everywhere. Emergency services, ADU vans, the area blocked off. I stood at the edge of red warning tape, ADU agents patrolling it. The rivers under the railway bridge were fully exposed, the magical glass destroyed.

A man, an ADU witch, stopped to look at me, confused. "Where did you come from? Oh. You're Tae Frost." He shook his head. "Can't go any further than this, I'm afraid. It's a horror show, as you can see. These rivers are awful, aren't they? And it's getting worse. London's going the way of Brighton."

Golden Lane sat on the side of the building that'd been destroyed.

“Are there any survivors?” I asked.

“None so far. There was some monster activity,” the witch said. “They broke through.” He glanced around, moved in closer. “We failed to strengthen the glass here. Delayed it. Not just here, either. So many areas are still waiting for glass strengthening. It’s bad.”

“Is that so?”

“I never said that, though.”

“Where are the monsters now?”

“Dead. No more have come through.”

A woman, looking like a supervisor, stomped over. She pointed an angry finger at him. “Get out of here,” she barked. Then to me, “You too. This is a restricted area. Oh. Hello. Tae Frost, right?” She looked around me. “Where’s that adorable warlock?”

Inappropriate question amid this incident. “He’s not here.”

Her smile became a look of suspicion, an eyebrow raised. “What are you doing here?”

“I went for a drive to clear my head.”

“Right. Well, there’s nothing here to see.”

“I beg to differ.” I offered her a beaming smile, a tool I used often to win people over. “There is plenty to see, but I know what you mean. I’m sorry, I won’t bother you anymore. I’m simply a concerned citizen.”

She blushed. “It’s okay. It’s nice that you care.”

“Be safe, won’t you? You have all of my best wishes.”

“T-thanks so much. It’s lovely to meet you.”

“If only under better circumstances,” I said.

“I’m Donna.”

“Stay safe, Donna.”

I shook her hand, and walked away, tapping my ear to speak into my comm when I was out of her range. “Archie?”

A crackle. No response.

“I just met Tae Frost,” I heard Donna say.

“Really? Where he is?” someone asked.

“Gone.”

“Ah, shite! What was he like?”

I headed back to my car, moving quickly across the pavement.

“Archie?” I tried again.

“Tae? Oh, thank fuck!”

“Where are you?”

“Scoping the scene. You?”

“Heading back to my car.”

“I’m coming over right now.”

I heard an engine start. Once I reached my car parked in the side street, his vehicle pulled up.

He jumped out, seemingly going for a hug. We didn’t ever hug, the action not part of our friendship. The same stood for Victoria. He stopped short of it, instead going for a pat on my left bicep.

“You scared the shit out of me,” he said, his tanned complexion glistening with sweat. “I thought you were dead.”

“I’m fine. Grindle saved me.”

He looked behind me. “Where is he now?”

“I have no idea.” I offered him an explanation of what’d transpired.

He wiped at his bald head. “That’s crazy.”

“It is. I’m going back in. Now.” I showed him the demon realm keys.

“Now?” he said. “Shouldn’t we plan a bit?”

“What’s to plan? It won’t help. I have to go in, figure things out once I’m in there. At least by myself I can draw less attention.”

Clay was all bells and whistles, his magic undoing our efforts at stealth quickly. That was simply the consequence of going into the demon realm with him.

Unstable...

Archie rubbed the back of his neck. “Shit. I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say. I have to do this. I’m not leaving him in there. It’s my fault.”

“It’s—”

“It’s *my* fault, Archie.”

He left it there.

“Now it’s up to me to get him away from the queen.” I tapped my belt with the stun grenades. “I’ll take these with me.”

“Okay. That’s good.” He puffed out a breath. “I can’t believe he’s a demon prince. That’s...” He didn’t finish the

sentence. “What do you want me to do?”

“Keep your focus on Quentin Dawn. Find out all you can.”

“What about the fairy?”

“Him, too. But Quentin is the top priority.”

He nodded. “Whatever you say.”

“And help Victoria look after Fizz,” I added. “Tell her I’m bringing her father home.”

“Sure.”

I jumped into my car and sped away, heading back to Barking Park and the demon realm gate.

NINE

CLAY



The throne of vines, sat on an outcrop, a ring of lava cutting it off, surrounding me in this strange cavern.

No clues.

Rocking.

Dreaming of this place again, waiting for a revelation.

Nothing.

Rocking.

“What are you?” I asked it.

The black vines slithered across the throne, the lava moving in a slow crawl around me.

As short as the gap was between the lava and the throne, I wasn't attempting to jump over the damn thing. I pictured a lava wall bursting upward at the last minute, me passing through and melting to nothing in seconds.

I'd no ambitions to be the wicked witch from *The Wizard of Oz*.

Nope.

Rocking.

Rocking.

Rocking.

A charred smell.

Rocking.

I woke up to soft lights and warmth and rocking. My mouth did an impression of a sandbag, my head pounding, my body exhausted.

Arcana was asleep, the time for spells now over until midnight, dawn taking over in the demon realm.

As much as I wanted Arcana to wake up right now, my body literally itching for its presence, I... I was glad it was resting. Especially after my losing it... again.

Shit. What was happening to me? How much damage had I done this time?

Buttons. Buttons and his memories and his stopping me with his version of Arcana. Damn. Just, well, damn.

I rubbed at my eyes, yawning wide, dozy but not in the same pain as before.

The train. I was back on the train. It hadn't burned down, rocking away as it moved through dark scenery of trees and mountains, a full moon and blue stars in the inky sky. No snow. Maybe it hadn't snowed in these parts. Was this still Level 4?

I sat upright on a bed, a red blanket over my legs. I pulled it back to see my right leg in plaster, gold shorts on me, a black jumper covering my top half. It was tight there under the material. Bandages for my ribs, something warm on my lower back.

Rescued.

With another yawn, my brain still fuzzy, I took in my surroundings properly. A carriage of four beds, mine the only one in use in the middle of the carriage. My position faced a door to another carriage.

“Hello?”

The door opened, a demon coming through to greet me—the waiter with the red hair.

“Hello again,” he said. Nothing about him hinted he’d been in a train fire.

“What happened?” I asked, a dizzy wave stopping me from moving much.

He smiled. “Your colorful display helped us find you.” Goodbye to the smile. “We were picked up by a new train, the other one a loss.”

“Oh.”

“James has a lot to answer for.”

“I’ll say. Where is he?”

He gave me wide, curious eyes. I so didn’t want to know. “He’s being dealt with. How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been better. Can I have some water, please?”

“You can. Anything else?”

“Just water.” I’d grill him when he came back.

Which was seconds later. “Here you go.” He held out a bottle with a straw in it. “Do you want me to hold it for you?”

“No, I’m good.” I took it. “Thanks.”

The cold liquid was pure heaven on my throat. I gulped down half the bottle.

“Better?” he asked, standing a little too close to me.

“Thanks.” I handed it back to him. “Where’s Isobel?”

“She’s in the next carriage. Thankfully, we got the princess to safety before she suffered serious burns. She has a few, but nothing like...” He swallowed. “Nothing like James.”

“Can I talk to her?” I asked.

“She told me to say she’d be here soon.”

I nodded.

He moved closer. “I’m pleased to see you safe and sound, Your Highness.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“But that’s what you are.”

Ugh. “Can I have the water back, please?”

He handed it to me. I finished it.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“No.”

“You should eat.”

“I just said I’m not hungry.” I tried to move, getting hit by more dizziness. “What’s wrong with me? Aside from the broken bones?”

“You’re on a lot of painkillers,” the waiter answered. “I wouldn’t try to move. Rest. You’ve been through so much. Princess Isobel will be with you soon.” Another smile, a twinkle in each of his white eyes. “I’ll leave you in peace if there’s nothing else you need.”

“I’m good. Thanks. What was that snowstorm about?”

“We get them all the time here,” he said. “Awful, wasn’t it? Once or twice a week they come, blowing through every single level.” He shivered as if it were blowing in here now. “It’s always cold here. It’d be nice to see somewhere that has natural warmth for once.”

“Like my realm.”

Being careful, from what I could make out, he didn’t answer. “Are you sure there isn’t anything else you need?”

Not from you. “No.”

He nodded and bowed, heading back through the door.

He could give me the flirty eyes and sweet demeanor all he wanted. There would never be anything there, no matter how much crap Isobel fed him and herself. I wasn’t sleeping with demons, or dating demons, or trying to get Tae out of my system.

Isobel strode into the carriage, wearing a shiny red trench coat and matching heels, clip-clopping her way over to me. There was a burn mark on her left cheek, but the rest of her seemed okay, although most of her body was hidden under the coat.

“There he is,” she said. “Safe and sound.”

I squirmed a little as she came close, her energy a repelling power.

“How are you?” she added.

“Fine.”

“Fine as can be, eh?” Her white eyes were full of anger. “No thanks to that little shit.”

“Is he onboard?”

“He is. Way at the back, under heavy guard and sedation. Don’t worry, once burned, never a-fucking-gain.”

“Good motto.”

She placed her red manicured nails on my head. I recoiled. She giggled.

“He’ll be punished appropriately, Clay.”

I went to ask her about him as a child, what she knew. Thought better of it. She’d only defer to the queen thing—her mum would fill me in, blah, blah, blah.

Our mum...

“*Level 63,*” the train’s robotic voice announced.

“Making progress,” I said, developing a sudden craving for cheese on toast.

Golden and bubbling on white bread, sprinkled with Worcestershire sauce to give it that zing. Washed down with a proper cup of Builder’s Tea, kicking back on the sofa with some Kylie playing and Fizz next to me, chilling away on a Sunday afternoon as the rain fell. Cozy and lost in our own little bubble.

Hot tears glistened over my vision. I caught them as they leaked, holding back any sound.

“What’s the matter?” the princess asked.

I missed my cat so bad. Here was me thinking about cheese on toast when she wasn’t here, back on Earth without me, wondering where I’d gone. The first day I met her, I made her a promise we’d be together forever. I’d never abandon her, always put her first. I kept that promise and would continue to do so for as long as air found its way into my lungs. My best girl deserved nothing but the best, all the goodness of a safe

and soft life. While this bullshit was going on, I couldn't give her that.

I have to disappear. I have to get back to her.

“Clay?” Isobel questioned. “Talk to me.”

I shook my head, taking a deep sniff. Ugh. Messy. “I'm good.”

Her gaze moved up and down my body. “Could've fooled me.” She frowned. “Bleeding again.”

“What?” I felt it, then, hot across my top lip and filling my mouth.

Blood.

“Bring me cottonwool!” the demon bellowed.

The redhead waiter hurried into the carriage with the cottonwool as if he were a genie granting wishes.

I could do with a genie right about now.

The waiter, who was more like a valet or butler or whatever, handed me the cottonwool. I took it, put it over my leaking nose. He stepped back, bowing. Waiting.

“Dismissed.” Isobel waved him away.

Alone with her again. Bollocks!

“This kept happening while you were sleeping,” she said.

“The nosebleeds?” I asked in nasal tones.

“Got messy. Must be from your outburst.” She folded her arms. “Which I completely understand. Dealing with James will do that to you. He really knows how to push buttons... Pardon the pun.”

Pardon the shit pun, you mean? And was it even a pun?
“That’s not who I am.”

“Oh, babe. You don’t need to explain yourself to me. I loved it. You’re so dangerous. Anyway, who cares about Level 4?” She chuffed, patting her hair as if to check it was still there.

“What’s wrong with Level 4?” I wondered.

“You didn’t smell it?”

“I, erm, did.”

“A dump. Not the worst, but up there for the title.” The demon came closer, touched my arm. I recoiled, the sensation of slime on my skin. “And that’s the warden’s fault, not Mother’s.” She took her hand away.

“Warden?”

“Each level has a warden to look after it, ruling in mother’s stead. She sends them money each month, and the warden is charged with budgeting their finances to make things run smoothly on their level. Some are better at it than others, but that’s life. If you can’t make it work, then you shouldn’t be doing the job. The demons you’re supposed to look out for will let you know.” She chuckled. “Warden Den is in hiding. He’s the Level 4 warden. Had the audacity to beg the queen for more money after fucking things up so badly. Even sent his staff to plead in his name. That didn’t impress Mother at all. Those demons got locked up in the prison at Level 505, Warden Den got away. The mob will find him. I only hope someone films it when they do.”

“Oh.”

“Sooooo…” she said, getting in a mischievous grin.
“Phillipe.”

“Who?”

She wriggled her brows. “Our cottonwool bringing servant.”

Here we go. “What about him?”

“I don’t know, *you* tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“I know, I know. I’m moving like a bullet. I just really think you and him are a cute match. And it’s fine that he’s the help. That doesn’t matter. A few of my exes have also served me breakfast.”

I’m actually plotting your death. “No interest.”

She shrugged. “All in good time.”

“All in *no* time. Thanks.”

“Whatever you say. Anyway, I’m going to put my feet up. If you need anything, just ask.”

“Is Roy okay?”

“Yep. No damage to him or the other humans.” A wink, and she sauntered off to the other carriage.

I sat watching the demon realm roll by, cottonwool pressed against my nose, as helpless as a paper bag caught in a tornado.

Maybe I had to remain in this place now and be the queen’s son. Join her, take out Quentin Dawn, usher in a new kingdom on Earth. Embrace my demon blood, the Clay Christmas of the past done, Prince Clay rising from the ashes with a crown on his head and demonic fires in his heart.

Bollocks to that.

TEN

TAE



Level 1 of the demon realm. A park the size of a football pitch surrounded by black walls, tall lanterns casting light across the grass, reaching a playground at its center. A bitter breeze touched my face, the sky cloudless and dark, full of blue stars.

My third visit here.

I made my way toward the point in the wall where the second level entrance waited, only to find it open, a hooded figure standing there.

The hooded figure, holding a pet carry case.

I froze, staring into the dark void of his hood.

“Clay caused some serious damage back there.” He gestured behind him to Level 2.

A soft meow came from the carry case, Fizz’s face pressed against the caged front.

I took a step forward.

“Move, and the cat dies,” he warned. “As does your lawyer friend.”

I smelled her on him, then. Victoria. He had Victoria.

“Where is she?” I growled.

“Exactly where she needs to be. Your other friend is on his way.”

Archie.

His voice, that wretched sound. My blood became molten lava. “Put the cat down.”

“As in kill her?” he asked. “I hate cats, so I’m happy to snap her neck.”

“Touch her and—”

“And what? Die?”

“I’ll tear you apart.”

“Worked out well before, didn’t it?” He angled his head to the side. “You’ve been looking for me, haven’t you?”

I growled.

“For fifteen years,” he continued, “desperate to find the demon who killed your family.”

“Hold your tongue.”

Fizz meowed softly.

Every inch of me ached with dark tension, hungry to rip his arms off, leave him nothing but a pile of skin and bone. The kernel in my chest threatened to erupt through my ribcage.

But Fizz...

“I saw you that night in Paris,” he said, not bothered by my warning. “Watched your grief play out before me. The shock, the horror at that bloody scene. Your headless wife and son, their vampire blood painting the walls, that wonderfully soft carpet.”

I shot forward, almost on him. He rattled the cage violently, jumping back.

Fizz yeowled in fear.

I stopped.

“That’s right, vampire. You may think you’re quick on your feet, but you’re not quick enough to save this little cunt.”

A growl, a further intensifying of my lava blood. No words. He wanted me to act. He was goading me to push him to kill her.

Memories of the Paris house, memories of our happier days, of a life undone. An earthquake of grief shook me, threatening to destroy my foundations, to lose myself in rage as Clay had.

Exactly what this demon wanted, I was sure.

“Why?” I asked the question always on my lips. “Why them?”

There was something in his other hand. “Because I could. Happy with that answer? No? It’s true. I can do what I want, and I did do what I wanted. Your wife was my sport, your son too. Vampire game. I’d never tried my hand at hunting vampires before.”

His words were vicious poison, my fury the antidote. Any second now, he’d be receiving a dose.

That was it? You saw them as a game in a blood sport? I kept quiet, my words not his to hear. He’d already taken enough from me.

“A real beauty, your wife. I did think about having my way with her at first, seeing as I had vervain on me. I could have,

but it didn't feel right for the moment. It was all about the kill. Sometimes the kill is enough of a pleasure."

My family died because of the vile proclivities of this prick, this disgusting stain on the universe.

"Your son called for you as I sliced through his tiny neck."

I broke, charging at him with all my force. He threw the carry case over my head, running down the stairwell to the second level. I snatched it out of the air, darting after him, his hood flapping but not falling. Almost within reach, my pace not at full pelt being mindful of Fizz.

Put her down, come back for her. Catch this demon, break every bone, rip out his tongue, bathe in his onyx blood.

"Chase me, vampire!" he roared.

Fizz reiterated her fear inside the case. My heart pounded in my ears, my desires drenched in bloodlust.

Meowwww....

A lamenting wail. She was so scared, this cat. Helpless and undeserving of this.

Clay's cat.

Clay.

Clay.

Clay.

I slowed down to a walk, at war with myself. If I put Fizz down on the stairs, she'd be okay. I wouldn't leave her there for long, only until I—

"Vampire," Killer called from below, just around the corner of the spiral stairs. "Why don't you come down and see what's really at stake here?"

I remained still.

“Come down and save your friend. I’m sure you’d rather she lived.”

Victoria. I took one step.

“That’s it,” he said. “Come, come, come.”

Failing again, Killer slipping through my fingers when he should be begging for mercy he’d never receive.

Another step, another, another, until I followed them down to the second level, passing through the veil of spider webbing onto the hillside spot with the apple tree. The village below was a mess of burned buildings and churned, flooded land. Beyond it, the lakes and the greenery were intact where Clay’s magic hadn’t hit, the mound with the Level 3 doorway still intact.

Victoria stood on a wooden stool under the tree, a rope looped around her neck and tied to the tree. Beside her was another woman—the feeder who’d helped me after Killer stabbed me with the exit key. I didn’t know her name. I never knew their names.

Both of them had their hands and feet tied together, gags in their mouths. Terrified, my muffled name coming from behind the feeder’s gag. Both bore bruises on their arms and faces, their clothes torn from a struggle.

“I forgot to mention the other human,” Killer said. “Surprise.”

I held tightly to Fizz’s case. “Cut them down.”

Slowly, he shook that hood from side to side. “Patience, vampire. Let’s talk this through.”

“There’s nothing to talk through. Let them go along with the cat, and you can have me. I’m sure you want to add me to your list of vampire kills.”

“To complete the set,” he replied.

Only in your dreams. “Yes.”

“Wrong, vampire. I’ve no interest in killing you. I’ve moved on since then.”

My eyes flicked between the two women. “Then what do you want?”

“For you to be a good boy for the queen.”

“The queen?”

“That’s right, vampire. Glad to see you’re keeping up.”

No relation. “Care to clarify?”

“You’re key in getting what she wants from that warlock.” I heard him sigh ever so lightly under his breath.

“Then use me and let them go,” I said.

“Don’t make demands, vampire. They won’t work. These are my rules in Her Majesty’s game. You’ll do whatever I say, got it?”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now, this is what will happen. You’re going to come with me on a trip to visit the queen and the warlock. She wants to meet you, she wants you to see your... What is he to you? Friend? Lover? Piece of arse?”

“Then I’ll come with you,” I answered.

“I’m glad to see you get it so quickly. Good.” He fired a gun he pulled from his jeans, a dart hitting me in the arm.

Loaded with vervain.

The vampire poison got to work instantly, flooding my bloodstream and bringing me to my knees. Coldness moved through me, a burning cold, nausea striking next. Breaking my strength, suppressing my senses. I collapsed onto my side, the stun grenades on my belt digging into my hipbone, useless now.

I should have thrown one...

“Poor vampire,” Killer intoned.

Fizz meowed, Victoria and the feeder moaning their horror.

I rolled onto my back. The nausea rising as an ocean swell, the cold becoming heat, returning to cold, bringing sweat to the surface of my skin.

“Did you think you could come in here again and get what you wanted?” Killer asked, standing above me. “I told you the last time the warlock belongs to us now. You really need to let that sink in better.”

I gathered my thoughts and speech, trying to release them. “Show...” was all I could manage.

“Show you my face?” He laughed. “That’s not happening today.”

So weak, so sick. Body ravaged and poisoned and letting me down.

Killer crouched beside me, taking my head in his hands. “Listen, there’s conditions to this. I know you’re being a good vampire now, but you might try to not be, despite the vervain. Who knows what you’re capable of?” He moved my head around in a circle, sliding the pads of his thumbs across my

cheeks. “I have to demonstrate the conditions, so you’re aware of how not to behave. Clarify the seriousness of the situation because it really is serious. Any funny business has consequences attached.” He angled my head to face the women. “Like this.”

Killer walked over to them, their cries calling to me behind the gags. Humans deserving better, needing me to get up and stop this.

“Now then,” he began, “isn’t this interesting? I have here a dear friend of yours, Clay’s cat, and a woman you drank from not long after we met.”

He’d had me followed.

“Do you know her name?” he asked. “No? Well, it’s Jenn.” He shrugged. “I could play this by letting you choose who lives and who dies. But the answer would be obvious, wouldn’t it? You’d choose her to die.” He jutted a thumb at Jenn. “Let’s be fair instead. See where I land.” He hummed the tune of ‘Eeeny, meeny, miny, moe,’ pointing between the two women and Fizz.

He landed on the cat. “Not you. Lucky pussy.”

The humming resumed. One of them... One of them would...

No. I couldn’t allow this to happen.

Get up. Stop him.

Vervain’s powers were unbreakable to a vampire. Only a feeding would help me now.

Stop. Please, stop.

Begging him. Pleading with him, even in my thoughts. With this thing, this murderer, this demon whose voice

haunted me, ripped apart my love and hope, took everything from me.

I'd fallen so low so quickly.

His finger landed on Victoria, and the world seemed to slow to a crawl, Jenn's eyes widening more than they already were, shaking so much the stool rocked beneath her feet.

Don't do this...

"You're the chosen one," the demon told her and kicked the stool away.

I watched her body thrash, never taking my eyes off her, willing her to somehow break free, for the apple tree to collapse and spare her life.

It took too long for her to die.

"There, now that's over," Killer said.

Jenn swung gently in the chilly breeze, the tree creaking.

Victoria sobbed behind her gag. The demon patted her on the side, telling her not to worry for the time being.

"Unless certain vampires decide they're cruel enough to let you swing next," he said. "But that's up to him." He faced me, permanent darkness in his hood. "I must confess, I cheated. I didn't want to kill the decent property first. Jenn was what we call cannon fodder, to show you what can happen if you don't comply. You fuck up, Vicky here swings, the cat gets fried, and your other friend suffers. No more leniency like this. Okay?"

He called murder leniency.

"Now we leave," he said.

Footsteps in the grass, demons trudging up the hill.

“Cut her down,” Killer ordered, his focus still on me.
“We’re going on a train ride.”

ELEVEN

CLAY



In the end, I asked for cheese on toast because I couldn't take anymore. Phillipe made it using cheddar from Level 32, which apparently was the best cheddar you could find in the entire demon realm. Something about the grass the cows ate.

After I ate the amazing food, which blew my mind with the flavors, though I didn't admit it out loud, I asked him about cows. He showed me pictures. Yep, just like our cows, but all of them were black.

"We have all sorts of creatures here," he said. "From the mundane to the terrifying."

Like Buttons. "Got any pictures of those?"

He showed me some floating blob with ten humanoid hands sticking out of its brown jelly body.

"Yuck," I responded.

"Level 776 residents," Phillipe said. "Demons, but not like us."

"Us?"

"I..." He blushed, pulling at the collar of his shirt. "Apologies, Your Highness."

“Don’t worry, I guess it’s true. I mean, I have demon blood.”

“I’m sorry it’s been hard for you,” he said.

“So am I.” I sighed. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

He smiled shyly. “Finding out you’re a prince can’t be all bad, can it?”

“It kind of is.”

“I think you’ll be surprised by what’s going to open up for you.”

Arsewipe. “You don’t know me.” The atmosphere went from relatively relaxed to grrrr.

“Sorry, I—”

“You don’t know my life. You’re not from my world, my city, my fucking universe. Who do you think you are?”

“I meant no offense.”

Once again, my anger got fuel thrown over it. “Leave me alone.” I so didn’t want to kick off. Arcana might be asleep, but that only left room for me to lose my shit in other ways.

Not happening.

Phillipe was doing his job, making me happy, arse-kissing a prince. To him, I suppose being a prince was an awesome prospect. Would be to me without the demon context. But he wasn’t in my shoes, dealing with my brain.

And that wasn’t his fault.

“I am deeply sorry, Your Highness,” he said, turning to leave.

My mood shifted. “It’s okay. I don’t blame you.”

Another shy smile, then he left.

*Whatever crap Isobel's filling your head with, drain it.
You'll never win me over.*



I SLEPT A BIT, dreaming of the throne again and then of Tae.

I couldn't see his face at first, his lovely features blurred as smudged ink across a badly printed photograph. But I knew it was him coming out of the ether of dreams, my pulse quickening, my body so ready for him.

“Hello, Clay,” he greeted me in his deep voice of sex and honey. The vampire came into full focus now, naked, not one piece of fabric hiding his magnificent body.

“If only you weren't a dream,” I told him.

His alabaster skin shone like it always did, his black eyes flooding with crimson—an indicator of either his killing mode or sexy mode activated.

The dark edges of this imagined place lightened up with moonlight, the shadows peeling away like wallpaper. Inch by inch, they showed a night sky, no blue stars, but the regular kind of Earthly stars.

“No demons,” I said. “Apart from me.”

Dream Tae didn't speak to that, his long, dark wavy hair moving in a non-existent breeze.

“I am here, Clay,” he soothed me with his sensual words.

Dream he might be, but him being here in any capacity was good for me.

I took his hand and walked through the peeling dark, stepping onto moonlit sand. My clothing fell off me, fluttering off into the sand dunes surrounding us.

“Where are we going?” I asked him, my fingers entwined with his.

I wish you were real.

We were in the desert, walking, walking, walking until we reached a bed. A four-poster bed in the middle of these moonlight-painted dunes. White drapes billowed around it, around us as we climbed onto it, a blanket of stars and a desert moon glittering in the sky.

Perfect.

He placed his hands on my neck, his fingers caressing the nape, breathing in my scent, and then he made love to me. No foreplay, only a fast-forwarding to fucking, but soft and beautiful. Kisses and touches and amazing pleasure. All that was missing was the string quarter to swell as he thrust, some montage of bottle caps popping and rockets launching into space. Maybe throw in a thunderstorm and some rain and him telling me he loved me as he climaxed.

Hmmm...

I let the dream roll over me. Me under him, his cock inside me. My hands on his lean and powerful body as he thrust with care, wanting to last until the moon became the sun, and still thrust some more. Because this was a dream. We could bang for forever if he wanted, or at least for the dream equivalent of eternity.

I so don't want to wake up...

“I wish I could see your face,” I said, breathless. “Your real face.”

His vamp fangs appeared, and he kissed me, moved that kiss down to my throat, sliding to the throbbing vein in my neck, his fangs scratching the skin...

I woke up with my cock in my hand. Aching, slick with pre-cum.

“Oh, Tae,” I breathed, stroking myself. “I miss you.”

I worked my shaft, closing my eyes, summoning his image again. That body, that dick, his fangs buried into my neck, drinking my blood. His eyes, his lips, the sweet memories, the memories I wanted to make in the future. My balls tightened, my toes curling as I took myself to the edge, my breathing frantic. With my free hand, I took my balls and massaged them, squeezing lightly. Moved down to the strip beyond them, pushed my fingers into it, stroked, inched closer to my arse, fingers on the edge.

“Oh, God,” I breathed. “I need your cock in there. I want... I want...”

I moaned as I came, jolting upward, eyes flying open as white jets burst from the tip of my cock. Big arcs spraying the blankets, making a mess. So much of it, more oozing over my hand.

“Fuck, yes,” I moaned with the final bursts. “Wow.” My limp body bathed in the afterglow, everywhere tingling, ignoring the fact I’d just wanked on a demon train.

Screw it. I needed the release.

I laughed to myself, sadness creeping in. “I miss you, Tae.”

Then I saw him. Not the vampire, but Phillipe, standing over by the carriage door with his jaw on the floor, eyes on my dick.

I froze, euphoria snuffed out. Had he seen the whole thing?
Had he been watching me?

He didn't give me time to say anything, darting out of the carriage with scarlet-flushed skin.

Ugh. Just great. I'd given the arsewipe a peepshow.

I tucked myself away and called for some help.

Phillipe came back, purposely not looking at me. "How can I be of service, Your Highness?"

"I, erm, need to clean myself up."

"Not a problem." He kept his gaze firmly averted, grabbing me a cloth, soap, and bowl of warm water.

"Thanks." I quickly washed my cock and hands, some of the water spilling out of the bowl.

"You're welcome, Your Highness."

Covered up and clean, I announced, "I'm done, thanks."

"Not a problem." He went to take the things away.

"Phillipe?"

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

"It's... It's fine."

"I, erm... I forgot myself. Again. In a different way, not the destructive way, which I suppose is better than—" I stopped myself. "I'm just sorry."

His eyes met mine. "You must have needed it."

"I, erm, did. Next time I'll wait until I'm properly alone."

"I..." He licked his lips. "I could..."

“You could what?”

“Help you the next time. If you like.”

I sighed, feeling grubbier than bedsheets left on too long.
“Not going to happen. I’m spoken for.”

I was?

“You are?”

According to the fake narrative in the press, I was. “I guess so.”

“You guess so?” Isobel’s voice. I hadn’t heard her heels on the floor.

Phillipe backed off.

“Where did you come from?” I asked.

“We’re on the same train,” she replied with an eye roll.
“Or are you too distracted to notice me?”

“I’m not—”

“You’re not spoken for, Clay. That’s such a lie, no matter what you peddle to the masses.” She turned to Phillippe. “He’s free and single but smitten with a vampire. Give it time.”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m—”

She snapped her fingers, my mouth closing tight. “I’ll talk about what I like, when I like, and how I like. I’m speaking so much sense here.”

I tried to prise my lips open with my fingers.

Isobel giggled. “Not until I say, idiot.”

Damn this!

“And get this into your head,” she added. “You’re not going anywhere. You’re not running off to be in his arms again

or doing anything you used to do. You're my brother. You're a prince. You have duties and rules to follow. This isn't about you or your vampire fantasies anymore." She inched closer. "It's about power."

Oh, may a huge anvil land on your head right now.

"So, Phillipe, my darling. Once Clay gets over himself and wakes up to smell the better coffee, then the door will be open for you to slip into."

This was dark matchmaking. Non-consensual, creepy, gross. I could see where Buttons got his craziness from.

The train hit darkness, a tunnel, lights whizzing by. The air popped in my ears, the sounds of metal wheels on metal tracks were a loud hissing in the dark. I winced, always hating that sound on London trains. Especially when the train slowed down, the brakes applied to really add to the screaming levels.

Another similarity to my world.

"Level 500," the robot voice announced. "The Royal Heart. Long live Her Divine Majesty, Queen Imelda."

Imelda.

I watched the window—a better view than Isobel and Phillipe.

The train traveled around a curve, heading up an incline. The tunnel vanished, giving way to starlight and twilight. I gasped at the purple and pink sky, mother nature, or was that demon nature, really slapping on the vibrancy.

The familiar blue stars twinkled away, brighter here. Pretty. A lot of what I'd seen of this realm, minus Level 4, was pretty. Cold, yeah, but not exactly an eyesore.

I suppose weekly snowstorms weren't fun, though.

The locomotive slowed down, passing under a glass canopy covered in flowers and pretty lanterns of various colors. Shimmering butterflies or moths or whatever fluttered around the lights, hummingbirds working the flowers.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Isobel said, my bed moving. She perched herself at the end of it, barely missing crushing my broken leg.

Imelda...

"Okay," the princess said, getting off my bed. "Let's get you ready to meet Mother."

Oh, man.

"Your nose is bleeding again." She groaned. "Get the cottonwool, Phillipe."

TWELVE

CLAY



Another shower on the train, instructions left to comb my hair back and spray it with some liquid thingy to keep it slick. For the queen, because no queen wanted to meet a scruff bag son.

Hmmm. And what about Buttons? I was pretty sure he'd not been model material when he'd first met mother bloody dearest.

Imelda. Her name made her real. Being 'the queen' meant nothing. Scary, yes, but distant. Now shit got too real.

Ah, bollocks.

There were no more nosebleeds, my energy back to a healthy level. Yeah, still injured, Arcana asleep until midnight but doing okay, loaded up on pain meds.

Nosebleeds. Something was wrong inside me. I mean, I knew that already, but what was going on in there? What was the powerful magic doing to me? Already the cravings started for Arcana's return, my hands shaking, my skin itchy.

I miss you...

I tried to ignore it, finishing up my shower. At least there were plenty of handrails in the cubicle, and a slip mat.

I miss you...

Irritation affected my breathing. I needed that magic back, to feel it in my body again, at full strength. Channel it and cast and bring about another storm of energy to rip the world apart.

I miss you so much...

My Arcana. My purpose...

What purpose? Without the goal of hunting demons, and finding the killer of Tae's family, what was my direction? To be a tool for the queen? For Quentin Dawn? Nothing but an instrument of death and destruction?

Gosh. I couldn't stand that idea.

I am pure power...

According to Bitchface, I mean Isobel, we'd be at the queen's throne within the next two hours, which gave me plenty of time to get scrubbed up.

In the adjoining dressing room, I got dressed in fresh clothes—gold jeans this time, with a black tunic shirt and red leather jacket. There were red canvas shoes provided, with gold laces, and even a perfume I didn't spray. It smelled too sharp for me.

It took a while to get decent, my injuries a hindrance. But I did it alone, refusing any help from Phillipe, relieved to be in the provided wheelchair at the end of it.

A knock at the door.

“Ye—”

Isobel burst into the room before I got out my response.

Rude!

This time she wore a gold trench coat with red heels.

“Oh, good. You’re dressed.” She came up behind me, wheeling me out of the room. “Once we get to the palace, you can have a healing bath.”

“Erm, okay.”

“You’ll be up and running in no time.”

I got wheeled out of the train, down a slope onto the platform. About twenty, maybe more, demons surrounded us, armed to the teeth with a variety of weapons, some of them sporting horns or spikes or other appendages on their bodies to get stabby.

Annoyingly, I gulped, nervous of them all. My skin tingled with Arcana cravings, my palms sweaty with fear. I chewed on my bottom lip, a complete messy ball of anxiety and bubbling anger.

Fucking demons. I hated feeling this way.

At the end of a slope, the pretty canopy ended. We came into the open air, a few traces of snow on a cobbled walkway. My wheelchair rattled along the bumpy ground, not doing much good to my mood.

The station sat on an island in the middle of a wide river. A low brick wall closed us in, a boat bobbing at the end of this oblong-shaped place, moored to a dock. A decent-sized riverboat waited to carry us away.

I looked behind me, trying to spot Roy. There were only more demons, the number more like forty now. Phillippe hung back, smiling at me.

It was my turn to blush and cringe. My wank session would be forever ingrained in his mind.

Damn.

“Where’s Buttons?” I asked Isobel, done with looking back.

“Don’t worry about James,” she said. “He’s under control.”

She wheeled me onto the golden boat, taking me to the deck at its rear. There were lounging chairs, benches, and a table with champagne and nibbles. She placed me by the table, facing the river.

Streets lined the water, complete with trees and four-story houses. More prettiness, very European looking. Before Tae took me to Paris, I’d never been to Europe, but I’d absorbed pictures of it. Now I was determined to do more of it one day. Traveling was another dream of mine, one really out of reach right now.

Not impossibly out of reach.

If you put a positive spin on it, you could say I was getting to travel being here. Seeing new places, experiencing a different culture. Though the culture here wasn’t much different to my own, just with a few tweaks. I mean, there were demons in my world, magic, and nasty arsewipes aplenty. Oh, and champagne.

“Some bubbles?” the princess asked me.

“No, thanks.”

“Suit yourself.” She picked up a flute and sipped it daintily.

I sat in silence, watching the dark water flow by, mesmerized by the lights rippling on its surface. Drifting into calmness a little, snapped out of it by the persistent itching across my body and me biting my lip too hard.

Demons filled the deck, chatting with Isobel. From the corner of my eye, I saw Phillipe standing feet away. I glanced over, met his grin, looked away.

Like a fly around shit.

The river was the safest place to look, at least until the head broke the surface. A gray head with white eyes and ropy black hair emerged.

“What is that?” I asked, leaning forward.

Demon, sleeping Arcana whispered, that one part of it always working in the background.

The demon’s eyes bugged out, rolled, pulsed like an egg sack ready to burst.

Yuck.

“Water demons,” Phillipe said. “Some demons live on the ground, some the water, others the sky.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“Not to us, no. They’re just curious.” He checked the watch on his left wrist. “It’s their feeding time. They come up from the deep every day about this time to get their fill of fish.”

“Oh.”

“We’re a complex breed,” he added. “Of many shapes and sizes.”

What was his point?

“When we take over Earth, the complexities will only grow,” Isobel said, appearing on my other side.

I loved how she said it as if I was going to nod and accept it, then follow up with taking Phillipe’s hand and asking him

out on a date.

Man, I'd certainly had enough of this wonderland.

The boat's engine kicked in, three more water demons popping up to get a look. Then we were moving, my heart skipping a few beats.

Oh, God. It was almost time to meet the queen.



AFTER HALF AN HOUR, the boat came around a bend in the river, revealing an intimidating view as the river widened further.

“Whoa,” I said.

A huge red palace sat on the west riverbank, enormous and as bright as a freshly painted red London bus. Domed towers jutted out of a conical-shaped middle, each of them a different height. It was probably the biggest building I'd laid eyes on.

Over on the east bank were two more large buildings, one gold that looked like Buckingham Palace, the other a black tower like something out of an epic fantasy novel. Made me think of *The Dark Tower series* by Stephen King. Man, I hadn't finished those books by my favorite author yet, three more left to go.

“The Royal Heart,” Isobel announced. “Impressive, right?”

She wasn't getting any more reactions from me. But, yep, it was impressive, clearly built to make an aggressive statement like most of these places. Yeah, we're the baddest and the biggest, so don't even try to mess with us. Okay? Good.

The boat sailed on, Isobel giving up on me, laughing and getting back to chatting to the other demons. Part of the river broke away into a smaller canal, feeding into a gate beneath the palace. Machinery whirred, clunk clunking as the heavy wooden gate lifted, leaving an opening wide enough for us to sail into.

Isobel slapped me on the shoulder. “Welcome home.”

THIRTEEN

CLAY



I tried keeping my mouth closed, staring up at the huge ceilings. Gosh, you'd never need to dust up there. I mean, who'd see the cobwebs at such a height?

"How many feet is that?" I asked.

"A lot," Isobel replied with a giggle.

The walls were made of real gold. Sparkling ruby and obsidian stones carved into triangles were set into them, adding to the glamorous vibes.

"Expensive," I said.

"Very."

Fancy light fixtures shone on the walls, a chandelier hanging from a long chain, dangling above the center of the floor. The floor itself was a series of hexagonal tiles, alternating between gold, red, and black—the royal colors.

Serving demons milled around, offering refreshments, bowing, giving me slightly wary eyes.

You should be afraid, an icy inner voice said.

There were five spiral staircases, each one gold and wide enough for ten people. Between each of them was a gold

statue, like the ones I'd seen out and about in the demon realm. Candles burned around them.

"Is that her?" I asked, pointing at one.

"Shrines to our mother," Isobel said. "That's her captured loveliness."

A yes would've sufficed.

"Phillipe?" she called. "Can you take Clay to the healing baths, please?"

"With pleasure."

Stick that pleasure up your—

Hmmm.

"I'll see you in a while," the princess said, strutting off in the direction of a staircase. Two female demons followed her, dressed in red dresses. They giggled together, turning back to look at me and giggle some more.

Blatant gossiping.

"Are you ready, Your Highness?" Phillipe asked me, standing too close again.

"Yep."

He wheeled me toward a different staircase, going past the stairs to an elevator of pure, blinding gold.

Gaudy, and not in the fun way.

Phillipe pushed buttons, got the thing moving upward. "How are you feeling?"

"Can we not talk right now?" I said.

"Whatever you need."

I need you to fuck off. Could I tell him that?

The elevator came to a stop, the doors sliding open. A demon waited there, another servant in a black and white suit.

“Phillipe? Your Highness?”

“What’s wrong?” Phillipe asked

“You must attend the throne room at once. The queen wishes to meet her sons now.”

“But—”

“Do not question the queen, Phillipe. Go. Now.” The demon bowed. “Your Highness. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

The doors closed.

“The healing bath will have to wait,” Phillipe said, looking nervous. He pulled a golden card from his pocket, tapped it on the button panel. With a ping, the elevator went up again.

“Oh.”



THE THRONE ROOM.

Wow.

Even bigger than the entrance hall, a circle of ruby walls, black and gold triangles imbedded in them. Enormous panoramic windows surrounded us, golden drapes tied back, revealing a three-sixty view of a city, of mountains and that amazing sky. The best seat in the house.

Speaking of seats, a golden throne waited at the top of a dais, steps leading up to it. There were four other seats below it, two on each side. On either side of them, two fires in large

gold pots burned, granting pleasant heat to the room. The rest of the space was empty, Isobel's heels echoing as she walked.

The princess had joined us outside the entrance, annoyed to be summoned here. Moaned about not getting five minutes to herself.

We formed a line before the throne, no seats for us. Servants gathered, armed demons, everyone quiet.

The doors opened. I braced myself for her face, for my heart to stop. No queen came, only Buttons. Still badly burned, limping over to join the line beside Isobel.

She wrinkled her nose. Yeah, he smelled of charred flesh and dirt.

We waited some more, my nerves a riot of panic before the doors opened again. This time, slow footsteps echoed in the room. Heels like Isobel's.

“All hail Her Majesty, Queen Imelda of the demon realm, first of her name,” some guy announced.

A tall woman stepped into my eyesight, drawing a gasp from me, my heart definitely stopping for a moment. Her pale skin glistened with a sparkling sheen, kind of like body glitter, and as smooth as silk.

Decked out in a gold pantsuit that appeared to sparkle under its own spotlight, she made her way slowly to the throne. There were slits in the legs of her outfit, showing off amazing pins, low cut at her chest, looking like something a pop star would wear.

Gold heels on her feet, a gold crown set with rubies and obsidian in her long, black hair, she really worked the look. A supermodel at a fashion show, everything about her on point, giving us all the glamor.

If she wasn't a demon queen, I'd be so here for it.

When she reached the throne, she gave us all a once over with her white fire eyes, then took her time on the stairs to get to the throne. She paused up there for another once over of her gathered demons, then took a seat.

She crossed her legs, locking her fingers together, resting her hands in her lap. "Good morning."

"Good morning," everyone said, apart from me.

"I am glad to see you all here." Her voice was soft, smooth, with a slight huskiness to it. "At last."

Demon... Powerful demon...

No shit, Arcana.

"My weapons, my sons of power," she said, compelling my instinct to flee. "I have watched you for so long. I have tested you to see what you can do." She faced Buttons. "James, you have more than proven your worth. You have shown me obedience, savagery, a brutal hand. Those of the Earth realm call it murder. I call it necessary. When the time comes to fight the final battle, I know you will do me proud."

I couldn't help myself from speaking up. "You're proud of a serial killer?"

She didn't look at me. "I am, Clay. Very proud. James has been subjected to many tests, endured so much in the name of progress."

"Like button eyes?"

"Better eyes than you'll ever have."

James smiled. "Thank you, Mother."

Idiot. “Okay, what about him burning the train?” I questioned.

The queen wasn’t smiling now. “Indeed, he failed there. I do feel let down, James.”

Buttons lowered his head like a naughty boy. “I’m so sorry.”

“You have disobeyed my word several times, and you have been punished for it.” She steepled her fingers before her. “I think you have received enough punishments for the time being. I trust you will behave now?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he said.

The princess huffed. “Mother, this is—”

All Queen Imelda did was throw a look at her daughter. Isobel went down to her knees with a sickening crack, her jaw slamming shut to stifle a scream.

Man, that must’ve hurt.

Good.

“If you want me to snap your spine and leave you paralyzed for a week, then please continue with your insolence,” the queen said. “I am speaking. You do not speak when I do.”

Tears of black ran down the princess’s cheeks. She whimpered, staying on her knees.

Isobel might get busy with finger snaps, but the queen had some killer glares. Well, knee-crunching ones.

I swallowed, keeping my opinions to myself.

“May I continue?” the queen asked, looking at me.

I nodded.

“That is not good enough,” she said. “I want to hear it.”

Another dry swallow. My kingdom for a whisky or five!
“Yes, erm, Your Majesty.”

“Now without the ‘erm’ and the ‘majesty.’”

Huh?

She waited.

What did she... Oh. Oh, hell no.

Oh, hell yes! Just do it.

Okay, listening to rational Clay was always good. “Yes, Mother.”

My tongue felt like it’d been dipped in dog shit soup.

“Much better. James?”

He repeated what I said.

“And now Isobel.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” She then sucked in a deep breath.

“Good. Now, as I was saying, I watched you both endure the challenges of your lives. My sons, my first ever set of twins. A curiosity that grew and grew and grew.” She cast a slow look between us. “Both growing up, both surviving where others failed. James displayed more demonic energy, stood out as the one to enhance with greater demon power, with those wonderful buttons that see things so clearly. A triumph, I must say.”

“I can see through walls sometimes,” Buttons said.

“You can, my dear son,” she replied. “Wonderful. But keep quiet now.”

Through walls? What the hell? Creepy wasn't the word for it. He really was built to be a serial killer.

Nothing was safe.

“James has the more potent demon blood of you both, now fully blooded after years of filling him up, granting him powers. His body could take it, seeing as he was born on the purer side of demon.” She gestured to herself. “And from that, I have, with the help of my brilliant team of alchemists and doctors, built a vessel of deadly potential.” Another smile for the golden child. “But you, Clay, were different.” A smile for me now. Was my golden child moment coming? “Your demon blood is thin, your body weaker and unable to take the transfusions and surgeries, destined for something else.”

Surgeries. Buttons's tentacles and hand spikes he'd killed most of his victims with... They were added to him?

God, I wanted to puke.

“My two bright boys,” Queen Imelda continued, “Clay and James Christmas. Surviving, always stirring my curiosity. I knew you were special, and I was right, wasn't I? Arcana returned in you both. James has his dose, but you have the lion's share of that terrifying ancient power.” She looked at me as if she were a lion and me a vulnerable zebra ripe for the slaughter.

“But I'm not convinced by you,” she added.

Should I ask why? There was plenty to ask, like about these other children.

“I need to see more. From you both, but more so you, Clay.” She looked at her gold-painted nails. “Which of you is the one?”

“The one?” Gosh! Me and my mouth!

She laughed. “Yes, Clay. Now, do not misunderstand me. You are both my soldiers, and I will use you as such. But there can only be a true *one*, my ultimate weapon, regardless of the skills you possess.” She pointed at me. “Don’t get me wrong, Arcana will be useful, but it is a bonus. I require a more focused power first, then your spells can help take down the witches, James assisting if he can.”

Erm... Nope. As much as I didn’t like witches, they kept our world safe from demons. I had no intention of going up against them. Anyway, there was only one of me and loads of them. But I didn’t backchat her. I liked my balls *not* in a vise.

Unless Tae controlled the vise.

Erm, no. Not even him.

I waited. We all waited for the penny to drop, or at least to get a look at the penny first.

“Your dreams,” she said. “The ones you share.”

I looked over at Buttons. “The throne? James?”

“We share the dreams,” Buttons said, his voice practically a whisper.

“That’s right,” the queen answered. “You share the dreams of the Throne of Vines in the Level 1000, buried at its deepest point and the deepest point of the demon realm.” Her smile lit up her face and terrified me at the same time. “The first of my children to be potential candidates.”

“For what?” I asked.

She stood up, slowly making her way off the dais.

I swallowed, once again my head in a complete spin. “The demon who claims the power of the Throne of Vines is blessed with the power to break down the walls between this realm

and Earth. No more gates, no more keys. With the walls gone, the banished demons are freed, and we can claim the lands we seek. Not like those Fairy Wilds.” She sighed. “Oh, Grandfather. What a disaster.”

Fairy Wilds?

She didn’t elaborate.

“Every demon learns the story of the chosen one claiming the power of the Throne of Vines. But only those who dream of it can attempt to claim it.” She paused at the bottom step. “Like me. Unfortunately, I failed in my endeavors like so many before me.” She walked our line, pacing back and forth. “So many centuries, so many failed attempts. I’m so tired of disappointment.” She smiled at me, then Buttons. “But you have given me hope. Only one of you can sit on the throne and claim the power. Think of it. Think of you with your Arcana and what possibilities it may bring.” She stopped by me, placing her hand on my chin and lifting my head. I flinched but didn’t push her off. “Imagine you, the wielder of all those spells, with the wall-breaking power. What a creature you will be.”

Talk about lofty ambitions.

She released me, heading for James, taking him by the chin next. “Arcana may finally bring our dreams to life. One of you will succeed. Otherwise, what was the point of you both being seen as you were?”

That wasn’t a question for either of us to answer.

“Which one of you will be the queen’s hand? Which one of you will serve me, bring in this new world for me?”

Okay. So despite everything, she was still in charge, regardless of this throne’s power.

Gosh, my stomach lurched over and over as if I was in the back of car on a road made of hills. Her revelations felt like a dream, but I'd learned that thinking that way didn't help anyone but Denial Clay. And he could fuck off.

I don't want this.

“Either way, I get two weapons, do I not?”

No!

I thought I heard something come from Isobel, something like annoyance. But the queen didn't react, and nothing else happened.

Jealous princess?

“There will be trials to determine the winner of the throne,” the queen revealed, making her way back to her throne.

I don't want this.

Queen Imelda's eyes met mine. “I suppose you are wondering how I can be your mother when a human gave birth to you.”

A dry mouth, a brain trapped in a storm, I replied with, “Ye-yes.”

She looked over to Buttons, then back to me. “I took Adam Christmas to bed, let him impregnate me. He wasn't the first warlock or the first Earthly male I bedded. I wanted as many men as I could claim, having child after child, to see what would happen. Some were born with demon blood of various potencies, others not, some dying in childbirth. Experiments were conducted. Many died or weakened, failure after failure, useless in the end. A constant stream of disappointments. But

not James, and not you, Clay. You survived and then delivered to me the Arcana plot twist.” She laughed softly.

This was too much, my skin crawling with goosebumps and beetles. “But—”

“I haven’t finished. Please don’t interrupt me.”

Fuck. You. “Sorry.”

“Let me just say that demons possess various gifts, our own version of magic. You have seen Isobel’s, and you have seen some of mine performed on Isobel. When it came to my pregnancies, I wasn’t about to put my body through it again after having two full-blooded demon children.”

Two? Who was the other one? Isobel and who?

“So, with my special skills,” she said, “I passed on my pregnancies to various vessels. In this case, your birth mother—Maxine.”

What the actual hell?

“Call it a transference of energies,” she added and winked at me. “Passing on my afflictions—a convenient skill.”

Her children were afflictions? “That’s...” I didn’t finish.

Deadly shadows seemed to manifest behind her, crawling in the air. “That’s what, Clay?”

“No-nothing.”

“Monstrous? Is that what you wanted to say? You think I’m a monster?”

Hell yes! I kept quiet.

“Maybe to a small-minded fool like you, I am. Those without vision fail to see the colors outside of the black and white binary. But you will see. You will learn.”

Her arrogance and condescending tone stirred the bear that lived inside me. I should keep quiet, especially with my magic resting, but my tongue had other ideas.

“You gave those women no choice,” I said.

“Your point?”

“You forced your will into their...” Oh, God... “Into their wombs. That is evil.”

“Is that so?”

“You’ve been banging guys, messing up the lives of women by making them pregnant, and making a hoard of kids?” Hang on a second... “Where are those kids?”

“Your brothers and sisters? Dead.” So cold, so empty of feeling.

“D-Dead?”

“I told you, they were failures. What can I do with failures? Feed them? Clothe them? Love them? No, Clay.”

A bitter taste sat on my tongue, my stomach acid curdling. “You killed them.”

“The same with any cattle.”

“Cattle...” Her presence now made my skin want to turn inside out to get away from her.

“Yes, cattle. Experiments. Nothing but tools to serve a greater agenda. This agenda. You and James, after so many years, you both shone brightly, both dreamed of the throne, and both acquired Arcana.” She chuckled. “I only wish someone knew why Arcana is back within you, how it came to be. Do you?” She directed that last part at me.”

“No.”

“Oh, well. A matter for another day.”

“You—”

Her power slammed into my head, punching the air out of my chest. It glued my lips together, kept me cemented to the spot. Much like when witches used Synth on me to stop me from running. Gosh!

She came down the steps again, taking her sweet time. Eventually, she stood before me, a tower of expensive fashion and hair, her white eyes as deadly as the rest of her.

“Clay,” she said, “there is no need to be so rude to your mother.”

You're not my mother! Only, she was, in the most fucked up way.

“Because rudeness toward your mother is disrespect directed at your queen. And demons cannot behave in such a manner toward their queen.” She ran a golden fingernail down my left cheek. “For you, my weak-blooded son, these consequences will not come the same as they do for Quentin and his ilk. Do you remember his face?”

I couldn't answer.

“A strange creature he is, wrapped up in this nonsense with The Rift and breaking away from Earth. Why wouldn't he want my dreams to be realized? He knows the facts, yet rebels.” She sighed. “I don't understand. But then there is much I don't understand, such as insolent children.” She hissed and clawed my face, raking her nails into my flesh. I felt the blood pour, unable to yelp or whimper, nothing but a scratching post to her anger.

Then she grabbed my face, crushing my cheeks. The pain stung and throbbed, waving hello to the rest of my injuries.

Damn.

“Does that hurt? Good? It’s nothing compared to what I can do to you. I can make you suffer. I can break your heart and soul. I am the demon queen, and you will respect me.” She grabbed my hair, pulling my head back. With her other hand, she placed a fingernail against my throat. “I have not spent years working for the better of this realm to endure your unintelligent words. My tolerance for disrespect is low.” She grinned, digging her nail into my Adam’s apple. “I see what you’re thinking, darling son. You think I won’t hurt you because why would I hurt my potential weapon? But you’re wrong. Pain can make a soul stronger, kill any fanciful notions, meld you into a better instrument.” She released my face. “And I’m not only talking about physical pain.”

The queen let me go and went to sit back on her throne again, freeing me from her magical thrall. She clicked her fingers, her attention on me.

The doors opened.

Bodies. Familiar. It took my brain a while to catch up, not really believing the possibility of them being here. But there they were.

Archie.

Victoria.

Fizz in a carry case for cats.

I lunged forward, tumbling out of my wheelchair. Fuck the pain. My baby was in the hands of a female demon.

“Get off her!” I roared, longing for my magic. “I’ll fucking kill you all!”

The queen laughed. “I love his fire.”

Demons grabbed me. I struggled. “Don’t hurt her!”

Archie and Victoria were there too, and I meant for them not to be hurt either. But this was Fizz, my furry soul mate, my gorgeous girl. No one hurt her and lived. My goal in life, above all others, was to keep her safe.

Angry tears exploded, heartbeat thrashing wildly in my ears. A dozen horrific scenarios played in my head as grim reels, each one worse than the one that came before it. Violent ends, devastation on my heart.

I weakened, allowing myself to be carried back into my wheelchair.

Defeated.

The queen didn’t mess around. I’d behave. I didn’t want that kind of hurt. I could take nails to the cheek, wet sensation of blood still there, and as much abuse as she could dish out. But not her hurting Fizz.

My girl meowed, her paw poking out of the bars.

“I’m here,” I said. “I’m here, honey.”

“I gather we’re on the same page,” the queen said.

I looked up, eyes smothered with the film of tears. I blinked them free. “Yes. Please don’t hurt her.”

“I won’t need to if you do what I want, which is to be a good son and embrace your future.” She stood up. “You can be great. You both can. Accept this. Take it into your hearts. You are my children, and I love you. We have so much to look forward to.” Back down the stairs. “But, Clay, I have one more cherry to top the cake. Just to make sure you keep your word.” She clapped her hands in command. “Bring in the vampire.”

Oh, no.

FOURTEEN

CLAY



Tae. Looking worse for wear, his usual alabaster glow sickly like the time he'd been poisoned with vervain by Poppy Love.

Oh, gosh. Was he poisoned again?

The hooded demon I'd seen in Level 3 dragged him in on a cart fixed to a chain, parking up right in front of me. The hooded demon left the room after bowing to the queen.

"Tae..." I went forward again, grabbing his arm dangling out of the cart. It was slick with sweat, feverishly hot.

"Oh, God," I breathed.

His dark eyes met mine, his lips trying to move.

Every part of me weakened, ready to crumble at this second hard hit. The queen properly had me over a barrel.

A gold collar sat around his neck, adorned with red and black jewels like the damn walls of this palace.

"What's going on?" I kissed his hand because it was there and he was here, and the secrets and lies didn't matter for that moment.

They'll matter to him...

"So sweet," the queen said.

From weakened to tense, my free hand flexing with fury. I buried it, scared to piss her off or force her to do anything to teach me a lesson.

Yep, just like that, she had me firmly under a manicured thumb.

“It begins with him,” she declared. “The moment you refuse or try to hurt anyone within the Royal Heart, he dies. Keep your anger in check.”

Easier said than done when arsewipes like you exist.

“That collar around his neck is a blade mechanism,” she added. “The moment I am displeased, I activate it. He loses that handsome head.” She didn’t say with what. A button? Some switch tucked away out of sight?

“I... I won’t displease you,” I said, the words sludge.

“Now that is more like it,” she replied. “Good boy. James?”

“Yes, Your Majesty?” he answered.

“Thank you for being a good son.”

“Always.”

I squeezed Tae’s hand, wondering what was running through his head as he looked at me. Hate? Disgust at my flesh on his?

“This realm suffers because of Earthly mistakes,” she said. “There are toxic rivers here, having leaked into the deeper parts of the realm, affecting our climate. The snowstorms, monsters rising from the green waters. Levels 900 to 977 are out of bounds now because of those horrible creatures. Yours is not the only realm with this problem, but maybe we can find a way to end it when our work is done.”

She actually believed there was a solution to this river problem? Yeah. Right. Breaking down the walls would probably make things worse.

“May I ask a question, Your Majesty?” Buttons asked.

“Of course.”

“How will we get to the Throne of Vines if those levels are closed?”

“With a special elevator, James.”

“Okay.”

Emptiness started to suck away my emotions.

“The trials begin in two days.” Queen Imelda got to her feet. “You will both be healed now. Start to prepare yourselves. Think about keeping limber and clear of mind. But also, do make sure to enjoy this palace, as it is your right as my children. The prisoners will be offered comfort, even allowed to access you, Clay. I know you will all behave suitably because none of you want death.” She smiled at me. “I am a kind mother, if I am given the chance to be. Forgiving, even, despite you and the vampire going on your demon hunts. It’s in the past now. Let us move forward.”

Yeah, with these awful conditions. Still, it was generous of her. She could simply kill everyone off and break me down to be, well, Buttons Version 2.0.

Isobel grunted. I turned to see her dumbfounded by that. Tae allowed to be with me? The satisfaction of seeing Isobel’s shock felt good. For once, her jaw hit the floor, confusion all over her face, mine firmly in place.

Ha ha, bloody ha! Allowed to see my, erm, vampire and not have the possibility of a demon shag rammed down my

throat.

There would no ramming of any kind with demons. Isobel's fantasy world didn't apply to real life or mine.

Ha ha again!

But it wasn't funny. It meant Tae and Fizz would be the first to die if I messed up. The pressure pushed down on me along with the queen's thumb. Compliance all the way. This wasn't about me but them. Keeping them alive. Whether I wanted this or not was beside the point. This demon queen got what she wanted. Hard. If I had to become this wall breaker for her, then I'd gladly take that throne's power.

Shit. Help her take over the world to save Tae and Fizz? Was that horribly selfish?

I didn't care. They weren't dying for this, and neither were Archie and Victoria.

Burn the world for the sake of your own heart?

Yes. Yes, I bloody would.

"On that note, I bid you all good day," the queen said.

Once again, I looked up at my mother.

She really was my mother.

A demon took Tae away, another placing Fizz in my lap. I opened the case and pulled her out, knocking the damn thing to the ground.

Her meow was sorrowful. I kissed her head, held her tight to me. Wrapped my body and soul around her tiny body, refusing to let her go even though I'd have to at some point.

"I'm here," I whispered, tears rolling free again. "I'm here, honey."

So many meows.

She'd been through a lot.

Kill them all... Arcana whispered.

A demon, not Isobel, wheeled me out of the room, following Tae in his cart through grand corridors, me sobbing into the fur of my best girl.

FIFTEEN

TAE



He'd held my hand, kissed the skin.

At once, joyous heat bloomed in my core, unseal the rain clouds to spoil it.

I wanted nothing more than to get him back, but seeing him in the flesh again with these new facts was...

...strange.

The demon dragged the cart in silence, making a right turn. From the angle of my head, I saw Clay taken in a different direction, sobbing into Fizz.

My heart twinged for him. He was helpless. One false move and this collar ended me, took away Fizz, destroyed Clay's world.

I couldn't stand by and allow whatever was planned to reach fruition. I didn't have the details yet. When I did, I'd end them.

Clay. The demon prince.

A liar.

My friend.

My... My something else. The one who made it different.

Clay Christmas.

I was taken into a room with gold wallpaper, red swirls painted across it. The skirting boards were black, and a gold statue of the queen sat beside a window, candles flickering around it. A medium-sized room with orchids and two three-seater sofas, a wardrobe tucked into the corner. Both gold, with too many alternating red and black cushions.

An open door just in my line of sight revealed a bathroom.

“Wait here,” the demon who’d wheeled me in said.

What else could I possibly do?

I lay in the cart, ravaged by the high dose of vervain, left to my endless thoughts and my contained rage. I let it remain in its box, despite the voice of Killer ringing in my ears. Without Clay onboard, killing Killer was impossible. Would he still be able to give death to that evil prick? Or was my warlock too deep in the demon mire to surface ever again?

My warlock?

The door opened, Archie and Victoria led inside.

“Sit,” a demon commanded them.

The humans sat, facing me. Victoria’s eyes were puffy and red from crying, covered in dirt. There were cuts in her dark brown skin and fatigue in every corner of her face. Archie was the same, his tanned complexion ashen, defeat in his sagging shoulders.

“Tae,” Victoria said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Feed from them,” the demons said. “There’s clothes in the wardrobe for each of you, and a shower through there. Make yourselves respectful.”

The demon left.

The humans sighed, Archie getting to his feet.

“Are you sure?” Victoria said, taking his hand. I’d never seen her be so soft with him.

He squeezed her hand, nodding. “Take a shower.”

“Gladly.” She got up, approached me. “It’ll all be better soon.”

I’m sorry they did this to you. The skin around her neck was inflamed from the rope.

My lawyer shuffled toward the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

“This is fucked,” Archie said. “I can’t believe they killed that woman. What did she have to do with anything?”

My thoughts exactly.

They’ll pay.

When? The demons were winning in every aspect.

“Here you go.” Archie put his wrist to my mouth, holding it above me. He reeked of sweat and fear.

My fangs reacted to the contact, sliding out to meet his skin. They pierced his flesh, blood dripping onto my tongue. Enough to give me a dose of strength to pursue the rest of the healing.

I fed from him, slow at first as the vervain relinquished its grip, speeding up my consumption as my strength returned, taking my fill with a throbbing between my legs.

A hard cock for Archie.

Funny.

I released him when I was done, licking at the puncture wounds to seal them. I sat up in the cart, body a buzz of sexual energy.

I need Clay.

“Bloody hell,” Archie breathed, staggering back to the sofa. “That was... Bloody hell.” The crotch of his jeans indicated his excitement. He pulled at it, pushed. “Go down.”

“I think you should use the bathroom after Victoria.”

He looked at me, his face bright red. “This is awkward.”

“It will pass when you pleasure yourself.”

He cocked his head to the bathroom door. “Gonna be long?” he called.

“Yes,” Victoria called from under the veil of shower sounds.

“I can leave the room if you like,” I suggested.

“That door will be locked.”

“I know.”

“Then why say it?”

“To make you feel better,” I said.

“It doesn’t.”

“I know.”

His left brow lifted. “You lost your marbles?” He blew out a long breath.

The amusement of the moment died, the sexual hum with me nothing more than that. Without Clay, I didn’t care.

The mood of the room plummeted into shadows and grief.

“Tell me what happened,” I said to Archie.

The bathroom door opened. “They came for me and Fizz,” Victoria said, wrapped up in three towels—one below, one across her chest, one covering her hair. “I didn’t have time to blink. Burst into my house, had us in a van. Jenn was already there. I don’t get why.”

Archie hurried into the bathroom.

“Why her, I mean,” Victoria reiterated. “It’s not like she’s involved at all.”

“Because she helped me,” I said. “Because I was watched.”

“Cannon fodder.” She shook her head and sat down, shaking. “What a terrible thing to happen.”

“I won’t lose anyone else,” I said.

“I wish that worked,” she replied, “but it doesn’t make me feel better.”

I sat beside her, wanting to offer comfort. “I’m sorry for this.”

“It’s not your fault. We work for you. We’re with you in all of this.”

“But you shouldn’t be here.”

She placed a hand on my thigh, giving it a gentle pat. “And neither should you.”

I sighed, standing up. Loathing this room, this containment. Wanting to be free, to get out into the palace and solve this problem.

Impossible.

For now. I latched onto positivity like Clay did, hoping for a better outcome than submission to the demon queen.

The shower clicked on again.

“You have to behave,” my lawyer said. “You can’t be reckless now.”

“I know.”

“You can’t die.” Tears streamed down her cheeks. “I can’t lose you.”

I sat back beside her. “I’m not dying. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?”

“If only I could.”

She wiped her eyes with the corner of a towel. “I know it’s not possible to promise that, but do your best.”

“I will.”

“And maybe we can go home.”

If there will be a home left for us. I got up, heading for the wardrobe. There were clothes inside for all of us, designed to suit our different sizes. Red and gold and black—a dress, jeans, jackets, a shawl.

They planned everything, knew we’d end up in this room.

When Archie returned, and I took a shower myself, we dressed in the clothes.

“I hate dresses,” Victoria declared, scowling at her striped frock.

A demon entered the room, pushing a tea trolley laden with cakes, sandwiches, crockery, and a teapot. Much like

afternoon tea. A male demon with red hair, freckles, and those dreadful white eyes. Dressed as a waiter, his fair features smooth and boyish.

“Hello,” he greeted us with a smile. “How are you all?”

We all remained silent.

“I’m here with food and drink for you all,” he said. “By order of Her Majesty. She wants nothing but comfort for you all.”

The weight of my neck collar could argue against that.

A buzz came to my ears, like two flies trapped inside my ear canal. The sensation lasted for a couple of seconds. I noticed my human friends react to the same thing, touching their ears curiously.

“Can you hear me? Don’t say yes. Think it.” The demon waiter’s lips didn’t move.

“Yes,” I thought-spoke.

Archie and Victoria followed my lead.

“What is this?” I questioned as he poured tea and asked us aloud what we wanted.

“Play along,” he said in our heads.

“I’ll have one of those eclairs,” Victoria said out loud.

It went like this: Mundane food talk, the more interesting variety kept to within our heads.

“I don’t have much time,” the waiter said. “Five minutes at most. I’ve hidden this skill all my life, and I intend to keep it hidden.”

He served tea to my lawyer, prepared a scone for Archie.

“I’m Phillipe. I met Clay on the train here. Served him, helped him. I couldn’t speak to him like I wanted because, well, he’s a prince. Had to flirt to please the princess?”

“What?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, I’m not interested in him like that. The princess wants us together, but then she’s like that. I play along to keep her sweet.”

“I see.”

“Clay is too much of a risk for me to approach as the queen prepares to make her move with him.”

“I cannot let that happen,” I said.

“It’s happening, vampire, whether you like it or not. The question is, can it be a route of peace or a route of chaos? The queen’s way is dangerous. She wants either Clay or James to harness the power of the Throne of Vines.” He explained the throne, the power to break down walls. The trials.

Did Grindle know about this?

“The Earth is not for demons,” I responded.

“Let’s not waste time with this,” Phillipe countered. “Aim for the lesser evil where walls stay up.”

For now... “Should you be telling me this?”

“Clay will only tell you when you meet up with him. It’s fine, but better to pretend you don’t know when you speak to him.”

Clay... “What do you want from me?”

“I’ll help you get Clay out of here.”

“How?”

“I have ways, vampire. But we have to play this carefully. One false move, and you die, and I’m tortured for centuries.”

I wasn’t sure if he was serious or not.

“We’re taking a risk talking here,” he added. “We won’t be able to discuss things beyond this moment. I’ll approach you when I’m ready to move. When that happens, you must follow my lead straight away. *Always* follow me, don’t try to be a hero.”

“Okay.”

“Good.”

As if I would trust this creature. Was he planted here by the queen to play games with me? It sounded like it. Demons didn’t speak against their queen without physical consequences.

I put this to him.

“I don’t speak ill of my queen,” he said. “I love my queen, and I want her to continue her reign. But this wall-breaking method is a thing I disagree with. Like Jarod did, like the Peace Order do.”

“The Peace Order?”

He busied himself at the tea trolley, his actions smooth. But the sadness in his expression was evident. “All Jarod wanted, all we want, is peace and an extension of this realm. To have the chance to have breaks from the constant cold and the snowstorms, and then work together with your witches to stop the rivers.”

“I don’t know if they can be stopped.

“We have to try.” He winced. “I do have a constant stomachache.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s my consequence. I push through it. Jarod always had a tight chest.”

“You were friends with Jarod Woods?” I asked.

He nodded. “Really good friends.” A deep breath, further sadness tainting his boyish features. “Lovers. I really loved him.”

I remained quiet.

“I know Clay killed him,” he said, “but I don’t blame him. Quentin Dawn manipulated the whole thing, wanted Jarod out of the way. Jarod didn’t commit those crimes. He wouldn’t.” Phillippe shook his head. “Quentin wants the Peace Order gone, along with those demons who follow the queen fully. I’m afraid more demons are starting to flock to his cause.”

“If Clay and Buttons leave the demon realm, they’re not a threat.”

“Only, the queen will go after them,” he said. “She wants one of them to succeed, and to keep them both as weapons. But here is how we stop it from happening.”

I listened.

“The Throne of Vines chamber has to be destroyed with an explosion. The throne will drown in lava. Will it melt? I don’t know. But there’s plenty of the hot stuff beneath it to keep it out of reach for good.”

“An explosion?”

“Yes. But we need to get an explosive in place, and you need to get Clay out before he or James reaches the throne. We can work together to make this happen. While the trials are

taking place, we will have a window to act. As I said, I'll approach when it's time to move."

"And the queen?" I asked.

"She'll be waiting for the results of the trials. Distracted."

"How are we supposed to pull this off?" Archie stepped in. "Sounds mental."

He handed Archie a scone. "I can get you out with the cat," he said to Archie and Victoria. "Give you some exit keys. For you, vampire, I can get you out of that collar, give you an exit key as well. I'll take you where you need to go, I'll get you to Clay." He made more tea, handed it to me. "We're almost out of time here."

"I can't trust you."

"Fine. But I'm your only hope, vampire. It's either this or you lose Clay. And you lose your realm to a heavy hand."

What to do? There was no other choice but to follow this plan—the only plan.

But Phillipe was a demon.

"We're done now," the waiter said. "Wait for me to come to you. Don't question, and don't tell Clay anything. Play dumb to everything. He can't know a thing. You'll be allowed to visit him shortly. Someone is coming to escort you to the healing bath. Is that everything?" He said the last part out loud.

"Yes, thank you," I spoke for us all.

"Good. I'll leave this trolley here for you. Enjoy." He bowed and left.

I looked at my friends, said nothing, let them eat cake, waiting to see what happened next.

Play dumb with Clay. Did I tell him about Killer? Would it make a difference yet? If we got out, the hooded prick lived. Back to square one, his continued breaths endless ghosts to haunt me.

But Clay had to be removed from this realm.

Was I about to get burned by demons again, or was Phillippe being genuine?

Only time would tell.

SIXTEEN

CLAY



S till in the wheelchair, with Fizz in my lap, I found myself in a bathroom facing more panoramic windows overlooking the river, a steaming pool of water at the center of the room.

“Door over there is for changing after,” the demon told me. Another door sat on the right corner of the room.

“After what?” I asked.

“Healing. Get in the water, fix yourself. It’s nice.”

On closer inspection, the water was warm milk with flecks of gold leaf floating on the surface.

“Is that milk?” I asked.

“It’s healing potion,” the demon replied. “Soak in it, Your Highness.”

The demon left the bathroom.

Alone, I could take in the space properly.

“Wow,” I said.

Fizz meowed in agreement.

The room looked like something out of an epic film set in Roman times. Red and gold mosaics covered every inch of it, with black borders to set it all off. There were four pillars around the bath.

Running along the left wall was a soft bench, two cabinets, and a towel rack with rolled-up towels. On the other side sat another golden queen statue and a vase of orchids—red, gold, black, of course.

“Really fancy,” I proclaimed.

Another meow from my best girl.

I kissed her head. “You want to head over to that bench?”

I took hold of my wheels and moved over, lifting her up and placing her on the bench.

She jumped back onto my lap instantly.

“I’ve got to get better,” I said, giving her more cuddles.

Meow. Purr.

The last thing I wanted was to be apart from her. If I could make it work, she’d be glued to me forever. Unfortunately, that wasn’t possible.

“Come on, honey. Off you get.” I removed her again.

She sprang back again.

Damn.

I smiled. “Okay, in a little while.” I held her in my wheelchair, desperate to heal, but she trumped my needs.

Fizz purred, curled up, so warm and lovely. I gazed out of the window, exhausted from being hit with so much detail.

The queen made me sick. What she’d done to Maxine Christmas, to those other women, her own children... I looked down to see my hands gripping the arms of the wheelchair, turning white with the force of my hold.

As soon as I claimed that breaking power, and I'd make sure I did, she was going down. I would use it against her, cause merry hell. I'd take her out, stop her and Quentin Dawn. Earth suffered enough without these arsewipes vying for more pain.

I felt nothing for my mother or my sister, or even my brother. Much like the human members of my family, they weren't a part of my life. I'd grown up to survive without them. I wanted a family, sure, but these blood connections weren't what I was looking for. Fizz was my family, and Tae could've been if I hadn't fucked it up with my lies.

Still can be. There I went, spinning shit into sunshine.

Yeah, well, he might not want any of me now.

"Oh, Fizz," I whispered, following a sigh. "I really messed this up."

"Clay?"

I almost jumped out of my skin, Fizz on her feet. She meowed, jumped off me. I turned to face *him*, the vampire always on my mind.

There he was, bending to pick up my cat, who loved him so much, his onyx eyes pricked with crimson.

Gosh. My breath was properly taken away. Just like that old song.

"Hi," I said, voice a weak rasp.

"Hello, Clay."

"I... You're here."

He was dressed in a red tunic shirt, black trousers, and gold brogues. As always, he made the clothes work for him

with his supermodel magic. His long, black hair was tied into a ponytail, not a stray curl breaking out of it.

Beautiful, so beautiful, his skin a radiant alabaster again.

The gold collar remained at his neck.

He stroked Fizz's head. "How are you feeling?"

"Not great, but now I'm free to, erm, take a bath."

"Fizz held you up," he replied coolly.

"She did, but in the good way." I offered him a smile. He didn't give one back. "How are you?"

"Fine." Oof. So cold.

"What about Archie and Victoria?"

"Fine," he said again.

I've really messed this up. "Okay, I'd better do this."

"Do you want some help?" he asked, to my surprise.

"No. I'm fine. I'm just going to slide in."

"I'll give you some privacy."

"Please don't. I can't stand not seeing her face or yours anymore."

He didn't react to my cracking voice, the Tae of before with his cold demeanor and unreadable face fully back in all his chilly glory.

He took Fizz to the bench, taking a seat. She rubbed her head against his chin, really in her element.

Lucky her.

Slowly, I stripped down to my underwear, dumping the clothes on the tiled floor beside me.

Tae wasn't looking. It didn't matter if he was, even if I blushed a little as I undressed. He'd been inside me, for God's sake. Still, I appreciated the privacy. I climbed out of the chair, wincing at the dull throb in my leg and ribs and back, but got down to the floor okay. I peeled off my underwear and crawled to the water.

"You should let me help you," Tae said, making me jump.

He wasn't looking at me.

"I'm fine." I turned myself around, sliding on the floor so my legs reached the milky water first. With one push, I went into the pool, the heat consuming me in one big swoop of relief.

The milky stuff smelled like fudge, sickly but quite nice, and it got to work on my body. It moved as a shed load of fingers massaging my entire body, paying extra attention to my injuries, putting me back together again.

I leaned back, finding an underwater seat, stretching my arms out across the edge of the pool, eyes closed.

"Are you humming a nurse rhyme?" Tae's voice made me jump... again!

"Huh?"

"*Humpty Dumpty.*"

"Erm..." Actually, I had been. "Yeah. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry."

I turned to look at him now looking at me. "This pool is putting me back together like that eggy guy."

"I see. That makes sense." There was zero humor in his tone.

He got up, carrying Fizz across the room. Leaned against a pillar, fussed her some more, watched me.

His gaze stirred my cock, despite everything. Stole more of my breath, even set my nipples on edge. The man had awesome sexy powers.

The man I'd lied to.

"I'm sorry, Tae," I said, my nerves dragged through a thistle bush. "I never meant to lie to you." That didn't sound right. "I mean, I did mean to lie to you, but only because I never wanted you to know I was one of *them*, that I had demon in my blood. Especially after you told me what happened to your wife and son, and I never wanted to be this because I'm not a demon in my heart, I'm just me, and I want to be me and keep on being your friend..." I couldn't finish, all relaxation gone. The bath felt cooler, less luxurious. He'd seen my scales, my demon wings, my talons, and he'd forever see me as a monster.

No response from him, so I carried on. "I'm falling for you, like you're falling for me. You're always on my mind, and I can't stand that I lied to you. But I own it, I take accountability for it. I should've told you the truth from the outset."

I stopped, requiring oxygen. He watched me. Would he ever answer?

"You were afraid," he finally said.

My heart fluttered, the guilt expending like a hiss from my mouth. He got it, he—

"But I'm untangling the details," he added.

"Oh."

“This is a lot to comprehend, Clay.”

“I know,” I said. “I get that. And I get if you can’t forgive me.”

“You willingly lied to me. You are everything I loathe in this world.”

My sharp intake of breath stung my lungs. “I... I am?”

“I don’t mean I hate you, Clay, it’s just...”

“You need time.”

“I gave you so much. I trusted you.”

Oh, God. “And I’m so grateful for every single part of it.” Tears welled up. “I’m so sorry.”

“I know you are.”

“You’ve every right to be angry with me, to walk away, to go off on me. But I don’t want you to walk away.” Here came the waterworks. “Sorry. I can’t help this shit.” Deep breaths, catching tears. “I’m making this about me.”

“This is about you.”

“Not just me. You have feelings too.” *Like feelings for me, right?*

He took a moment. “I could walk away, leave you to whatever comes next. I didn’t pick up on the full picture.”

“The stuff about the throne?” I asked.

He nodded. “Would you care to fill me in?”

“Sure.”

So, I talked, explaining everything from the moment we parted up until now, which helped stop my crying and him from saying anything else that might hurt.

I just wanted him to see me as pre-demon truth Clay again.

“I see,” he said.

“Scary, right?”

“Yes. But I will say it is a little satisfying to know this realm shares our river problem.”

“Yep. I guess it is. But Earth gets screwed the hardest no matter what.”

He walked back to the bench. “I have things to tell you.”

“Let me get dressed first,” I said.

“Are you healed properly?”

“Yes.”

I climbed out of the pool, water sluicing down my slender frame. He tried not to look but held me in his gaze, those incredible eyes drinking in greedy doses of me.

Naked. Exposed to him. Ready for him.

Let's fuck the bullshit away...

He looked away.

“I'll be back,” I said, padding across the room to the other door.

Much like on the train, this room was a changing place, only bigger. Clothes were laid out for me, another royal themed outfit—black underwear, red jeans, gold jumper, and a black leather jacket. Oh, and some gold high-tops.

In the mirror, I touched my cheek where the queen cut me. No marks now, just my slightly flushed skin.

If only we could run now.

I combed my hair and returned to Tae and Fizz, taking a seat beside them on the bench.

“Okay?” the vampire asked me.

I nodded, rubbing my baby girl’s head. “Yeah. What do you need to tell me?”

I leaned forward when he was done, elbows on my thighs. “Fuck.” Those people at the shopping center, my people, gone. “Oh my God. No, no, no. That poor woman... poor Jenn.” I drew a deep breath. “And Grindle...” Fairy Wilds and charms and secrets being revealed. “This is so bloody crazy.” My temples were ports of pain, throbbing under the weight of yet more information, more sorrow. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

A hand on my back. His hand. He actually touched me. I leaned back into it, and he took it away.

A demon entered the room. I jumped to my feet.

“Your Highness,” she said, “I have a message from the queen.” She held a folded piece of paper in her hand.

I took it, not even saying thank you. Bollocks to her. She’d barged in, and right now, the last thing I would be offering was politeness.

She left. I unfolded the paper.

Dear Clay and Tae,

I would like to offer my apologies for the loss of Jenn by hanging. This was not on my order but an action of a demon now being reprimanded for his recklessness. Rest assured, there will be no more of this unless there is failure in compliance from you both.

Queen Imelda

I handed it to Tae, lost in disbelief.

He folded it up, saying nothing, but the corner of his lips twitched ever so slightly—a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it moment. Had I really seen it? Was he hiding something? He was well within his rights to now play the secrets game.

Silence, so horrible and thick and awkward I thought I’d have a breakdown.

Tae destroyed the silence. “I don’t hate you, Clay, but that doesn’t mean I’m not disappointed, even wary of you.”

“There’s no more secrets. I promise.”

“I need time.”

“I... I get that.”

“You’ve hurt my trust.” His words should’ve sounded vulnerable, would have from anyone else. Not him, no emotion there.

“I’m sorry, Tae. All I can do is say sorry and try my best to make it better.”

“Don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t keep trying, okay? You’re sorry, and I believe you. But it’s going to take me a while.” He shook his head. “I look at you, and I see a demon. I look at you, and I see a liar. I look at you, Clay, and I see a man I’m still falling for.”

He was still falling for me. Oh, gosh. He was still there, caught in that lovely plunge. For me.

I didn’t deserve him.

“Wondering if I should be,” he added.

Wham. Bullet to the guts. “Oh.”

“I’m being honest,” he said.

“You’re better than me.”

He closed his eyes for a few seconds. “I can’t help these doubts, but you are my charge, and I swore to protect you.”

“But things have changed now.”

He looked at me, not speaking. A glint in his eyes spoke to me, as if trying to get me to read between the lines. He was planning something. I think. Were we on the same page? I had to behave, to keep him and Fizz alive, Archie and Victoria too. No speaking against the queen, nothing to hint at going up against her.

There were secrets again. I couldn’t tell him my plan to take the throne’s power. For his own safety. I hated it, hiding something from him again. But what choice did I have if I wanted him to keep his head? Anyway, he might be laying down plans of his own.

Once I stopped the queen and Buttons and Quentin, things would get better.

Buttons. James Christmas. My twin. How did he feel about all this? Was he scared? Was he hurting and confused too?

Why do you care?

I don’t...

Still, his story was a lot more screwed up than mine. Buttons on his eyes, blood experiments, and then having all this dropped on his head. That little boy by the river was so scared, so alone. But...

But that didn’t change the fact he was a killer.

Just like it didn't change the fact I was a liar.

Man, I craved Tae's shoulder. To rest my head there, feel any part of his body connected to mine.

I didn't try it. He needed time. I was selfish to even think of trying it. Instead, I held onto the hope I hadn't burned bridges, that his time-taking would conclude with forgiveness, not moving on.

Anyway, people were dead, the future bleak. Never mind my heart right now. I had a job to do—stop this madness.

Tae handed me Fizz, our fingers brushing in the furry exchange. Pausing, flesh on flesh, the crimson in his eyes expanding.

Take me...

Just take me...

He got up, didn't leave. Phew. But he gave me a wide berth.

Sullenly, I said, "You can go if you want."

"I don't want to go." He went to the window. Fizz meowed for him.

I followed, taking her over so she could see the city lights. Giving him space. A melancholic cloud hung over everything, summoned by me, completely my fault. But too bad. My sadness didn't matter. People were dead. I'd dragged Tae and his friends into this. The only thing that mattered now was tipping the scales back in our favor.

I watched the lights on the river, the mountains capped with snow beyond the city. Gosh, these demons loved their mountains.

“River monster,” Tae said.

I blinked. “Huh?”

“Down there.”

“A river monster?” I looked, following where he pointed.

There it was, a green figure, running toward the palace. Another appearing seconds later, bounding into demons on the pathways.

Then the alarm shrieked.

SEVENTEEN

CLAY



Fizz howled in fear. I covered her ears, my own taking a battering from the high-pitched wail.

Tae rushed to the door, yanking it open in full fight mode.

Two demons greeted him. “Stay where you are!” they cried, pointing swords at him.

I didn’t hear the rest of the conversation, the door slamming shut.

Returning to the window, I watched demons swarm the paths like an army of ants, taking the monsters down. At least, it looked like they were taking them down. We were so high up.

“They’re down,” Tae said, standing beside me again.

The alarm stopped. The door opened.

“Everything is secure, Your Highness,” one of the demons, a female, said.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Two river monsters broke through, but the situation is contained.”

“Broke through?”

“Arrived here undetected, Your Highness.”

“All the way from those lower levels?” I asked.

“Yes, My Prince.”

“How often does this happen?”

“Not enough for you to worry,” she replied cheerfully.

A river monster getting this close to the royal palace seemed like a huge deal to me.

“Your pool party can still go ahead,” the male demon said.

“Erm, what?”

The female groaned, ushering him away. “Don’t listen to him.” The demons left.

I faced Tae. “What pool party?”

“I don’t know, Clay.”

Damn. Not a bloody pool party. This was Isobel and her scheming, wanting to set me up with Phillippe.

“I’m not going,” I said. “After everything that’s happened, the last thing I’m doing is attending some shitty party.”

Fizz meowed. I kissed her, soothed her after that awful alarm.



ATTENDANCE at the party tonight was mandatory.

After being shown to my opulent room higher up in the palace than the pool room, I sat on the enormous bed with the gilded paper invitation in hand. Much fancier than the note about Jenn from the queen, the writing elegant, requiring my

presence at a pool party. Hosted by the queen, in celebration of the impending trials.

Bollocks.

Tae stood on the balcony beyond the open windows, brooding at the horizon. Golden drapes billowed, framing him. I itched to wrap myself around him, rest my cheek against his back, tell him a million sorrys and maybe kiss things better.

I stayed on the bed, Fizz grooming herself beside me.

Another room done up in royal colors, this time with red walls, gold and black stones embedded in the stone. A plush gold carpet met every corner, pine-like drawers and a wardrobe sitting on it. There were more orchids in vases, a dresser, and an ensuite bathroom attached to the room.

I hated it, but at least it was comfy on the bed, despite the bitter air blowing through the open windows.

Whatever. Let Tae stand there, as long as he was here, my heart remained stable. Cold air kept me sharp, anyway. It wasn't anything I wasn't used to after living on the streets. Decent warmth was always a treat.

Soon, Tae would be sick of my presence, begin his distance-keeping, his taking time to think. Away from me.

Should I get the ball rolling? The sooner it kicked off, the sooner it ended, and he reached his decision.

“Bloody pool party,” I muttered. “I’m not having fun, Fizz. Nope. I’ll stand in the corner, let everyone else fanny around in their swimwear. I’m keeping these on.”

Five minutes later, after two gold boxes tied with red and black ribbon were delivered, I sat looking down at a pair of black and gold striped swim shorts, with a gold vest to boot.

Oh, and gold sandals. That was in my box. Tae had red shorts and a black vest with gold piping. Another invitation said the vampire had to come as my plus one.

No ifs, no buts.

Damn.

“I’m not wearing this.”

My determination to not wear it was pointless. Demons came to escort me, giving me a twenty-minute heads up to be ready.

Shit.

I changed in the bathroom, staring at myself in the mirror. The shorts were tight, revealing every shape of my front and back, leaving zilch to the imagination. The vest, to my horror, was sheer when on. Showed off my nipples and stomach. I felt so naked, so... so sexy.

Ha! Me? Sexy? Just look at my skinny body and my stupid hair. Look at it! Sticking up at the front in a cowlick that wasn’t there before. Sure, now it decided to misbehave when I had to go to a party.

“Bollocks,” I moaned.

With so many deep breaths, I returned to the bedroom and almost collapsed.

The tight shorts and sheer vest were amazing on Tae’s body, setting off his sculpted perfection. The man could seriously wear anything.

Losing control of my senses, my eyes wandered to his shorts, his big bulge a treasure in the cotton or whatever the material was. His hair was down, dark waves dusting the top of his chest, and the rose and thorns tattoo on his right side.

A creature made from wet dreams, a tall powerhouse of toned flesh and muscle. A beautiful, tortured soul.

“Oh, gosh,” I didn’t mean to say.

The vampire kept his reactions to himself. “Shall we go?”

“But...” Damn. How was I supposed to concentrate? “But Fizz. I don’t want to leave Fizz here, and I don’t want her at the party.”

“We can take her to Archie and Victoria.”

I swallowed, eyes fixed to his vest. *Look away!* “What if they’re made to attend the party, too? I’m not leaving her alone.”

Peeling my eyes from Tae’s amazing body, I spread out on the bed beside my girl. Got to rubbing her head as she got to purring, happy to stay put and not face demons.

But when my twenty minutes was up, I had no other choice.

EIGHTEEN

TAE



The demons came to escort us to the pool party, and I barely noticed.

I watched the warlock spread out on the bed, his poolside clothing an incredible layer upon his slender, lovely body. Making him more enticing, his vanilla scent sinking into me, my body still not cooled down from the feeding.

When he sat up in response to the knock on the door, the vest rode up, revealing a small piece of hips. He spread his legs, shuffling off the mattress. The shape of his cock showed itself through those tight shorts, his buttocks next, wonderfully snug.

I licked my lips, roaming his body, taking in the details from the hairs on his legs, to the more explicit parts, to the shape of the back of his neck. Craving to bite and drink, to fuck him against the door.

But my mind played tennis, the ball never dropping. It didn't know where to land, how to feel. His secret sat as a heavy lump, too stubborn to move, too raw an issue. It joined my irritating kernel, burning away and granting me no peace.

What if his shoes were on my feet? Fear clouded judgment, and I hadn't made it easy for him by... By seducing him, confusing him with various signals. One moment I gave

into my temptations, then buried them, only to unearth them again and again. Until this.

Demon. Liar. Not quite lover. Most fascinating person I'd ever met, so full of sunshine. Buttons may call him Bright One, and he wasn't wrong. Clay was sunlight *walking, and right now, its light was dulled.*

I have to get you out of here, demon prince.

Demon.

Clay.

“Tae?”

Liar.

Lover.

“Tae?”

He was standing before me as I blinked the haze of my thoughts away.

“Yes?” I asked, a fluttering in my chest only he seemed able to summon.

“They're not invited,” he said.

“Who?”

“Archie and Victoria. To the pool party.”

“I see.”

“We can leave Fizz with them.”

“Good.”

He gave me an inquisitive look. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, walking around him. Cold. Maybe cold is best. Cold keeps the heart safe, and with Tae Ae-Jung. Love died

many years ago.

Love...

Fire in my blood. Desire for him, my skin an inferno of
cravings.

Clay...

NINETEEN

CLAY



Multicolored lights strung across a large garden with a swimming pool at a high point of the palace, a decent view there to be enjoyed by all. Music played at a pleasant level, an odd blend of pop and classical music. Nothing I'd heard of, and completely instrumental.

Not Kylie.

I stood at the entrance with Tae, waiting under an arch of flowers that smelled like roses but looked like orchids. More of those butterflies and moths fluttered around it, two demons standing either side of it to greet us. A woman and man, dressed skimpier than us. They bowed, and wait staff in swimwear came and offered us drinks.

“Alcohol free,” a waiter said. “We are under strict orders for you to not drink.”

Then why take the risk by throwing a party? “No worries there.” Kind of. I could've done with a stiff drink.

And a stiff Tae!

Ahem.

“Fizzy apple something,” Tae said.

“Great.”

The pool was a rectangle going all the way up to a gold trellised edge. A half-moon-shaped jacuzzi was attached to it, bubbling away for demons and their cocktails. Heaters blew heat across everything, creating swimsuit temperatures. So weird when it was actually a bitter night. There were bars everywhere, seats and sun loungers, despite the lack of sun, and one chaise lounge of gold, raised up on a dais for the queen.

She lay on it, a male servant on hand with grapes, a complete cliché. Decadent and glamorous and kind of awesome, if it weren't for the side of bullshit to go with it.

Evil creature. Child killer.

Monster.

Isobel appeared, strutting over to me in an extremely skimpy bikini. One false move and hello to the naked.

“Welcome,” she said, holding a glass filled with pink liquid.

She came in for a hug and an air kiss. I tensed up. She giggled, batting me playfully on the arm. “Silly brother.”

Ugh.

The princess looked Tae up and down. “My, my. What a dish.”

“I’m Tae Frost,” he said.

“I know.” She offered him her hand. “I’m Princess Isobel.”

He kissed her hand. “Your Highness.” Was I suddenly trapped in a regency novel?

“What a charmer,” she said to me with a wink. “I’m so glad you came. You look fab. Sorry about the no booze rule

for you. Mother's orders."

"It's fine."

"You can have a big old drink after the trials." She leaned in, her breath reeking of strawberry milkshake. "Make sure you get the throne, not that dick."

"Oh."

"Where is he?" Tae asked as smooth as good butter. The silky kind, perfect for spreading on crumpets or all over me. Call me the crumpet to his butter, let him melt into me and—

"He's here," my sister said, smacking reality into me.

Man, I so wanted a crumpet right now—to eat it off Tae's abs.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Isobel pointed to Buttons over by the trellis, his creepy eyes on the sky. Dressed in exactly the same outfit as me, his body shape just like mine. Even his hair was styled to mimic mine.

I dropped my drink, not a bad thing, the liquid splashing my legs. Amazingly, the glass didn't break, just rolled off across the red stone tiles.

That got all eyes on me.

Buttons. James. My twin. He actually looked like me and was looking at me, and even waved.

A slimy, freezing pulse went through me.

"Come here, Clay." It was the queen, her voice a bell of the highest order.

Wonderful.

Holding back a groan, I left Isobel and Tae alone, heading over to the number one demon, turning heads in the wrong way.

“Hello, Your Majesty,” I said, bowing like a good boy when I reached the dais.

She enjoyed it. “Hello, son. Are you feeling unwell?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Is that so?” Queen Imelda wore a black bikini encrusted with rubies beneath a golden net dress. “Why the dramatics?”

Her aura had the power to make me feel mousey. “I, erm, I dropped my glass. Sorry about that.”

“Why did you drop your glass?”

“A mistake.”

“Don’t lie to me, Clay.”

Why couldn’t she leave me alone? “I, erm...” Honesty it was. “Buttons surprised me.”

“James.”

“Yeah, *James*. He looks like me.”

She smiled. “Well, he is your twin brother.”

“I know.”

“Something you don’t seem too happy about.”

Why would I be happy?

“I suppose it is early days,” she said. “One day, I will see you all getting along.”

Dream on, queenie. “I’m sorry to cause a scene.”

She looked beyond me. “No one cares now.”

“That’s good.”

The queen took a grape. “Try to enjoy this party. It is for you, after all. A chance to unwind before the trials.”

“Thank you.”

“Go and relax. No more dramas.”

Fuck you. “Yes, Your Majesty.” I bowed.

“Wait.”

I waited.

“Did you get my note?”

“I did.”

“Good. I am sorry for the loss of that woman.”

Her name was Jenn! “Thank you.”

“I have punished Isaiah appropriately. As always.” She popped the grape into her mouth.

“Isaiah?” I wondered.

“Prince Isaiah,” she said. “Your brother in the hood.”

“Oh.” The other child. “I didn’t realize.”

“You wouldn’t. He’s left out of most of my loops.”

“Oh.”

She plucked another grape from the tray. “He managed to get himself banished a year ago. No royal demon has been banished before. So he suffers as an outcast as I suffer in the shame of his actions. My subjects share my shame, the utter disappointment in the prince. I loathe disappointment, Clay.”

I swallowed. “Okay.”

“Just okay?”

“I mean, I don’t want to disappoint you.” Lies, lies, and more lies.

“That warms my heart.”

Let it be a toasty organ until I kill you.

“How did he get my cat?” I asked.

“Though he cannot travel to Earth, Isaiah isn’t without his uses. He runs...” She paused. “Should I tell you everything?”

“Erm...”

She stared at me for many long beats. “I offer transparency so you can see I am on your side.”

I’m not on yours...

“Isaiah runs a network of spies, of demons moving through Earth. When I deem it suitable, I will introduce you to your other brother.”

So many dead siblings because of her. Murdered children, broken mothers and fathers. Had my dad been broken further because of her? Left to his drug addictions, unable to cope. My mum too? Did the queen cause their final downward spiral?

“Off you go,” she said, waving a hand. “We’re done here.”

Off I went, back to Tae, the vamp still talking to Isobel. She was giggling. He smiled, his charm switched on. That billionaire light everyone was drawn to.

“Can you believe that?” the princess said.

“I can’t,” Tae responded, his eyes on me as I approached. Still flecked with red.

“I do love her, but she’s an idiot.”

“Who is?” I asked.

Isobel turned to me. “Oh, some friend of mine. Ditzzy as they come, but loyal to the end. She’s not here tonight because of a stomachache.”

And I care why? “Oh.”

“How was Mother?”

“Fine.” I couldn’t be bothered to go into the details with her.

She threw me a skeptical look, then insisted we come and meet people. “Both of you.”

Suddenly she was Team Tae, not Phillippe, who wasn’t around at the moment. At least from what I could make out.

Mingling. No thanks. Give me a bed with my cat.

Nope. Mingling it was, always by Tae’s side, listening to demons talk and blow hot air up Isobel’s arse. Once or twice, my arm bumped Tae’s, and he tensed, and I stole glances of his profile or his muscles.

Yum.

I’m sorry, Tae.

Damn melancholy bullshit.

Thankfully, Buttons got left out. He didn’t come over, his button eyes still on the blue stars above, and Isobel never took us over to his little lonely point.

A twang I so didn’t want to give any sort of attention to made itself known. A weird mixture of guilt and sadness for him. Sympathy—the last thing he deserved.

He caught me looking at him. But this time, he only stared back for a few seconds, his focus back on the sky. I glanced

up, wondering what was so interesting up there. Nothing. But then my eyes weren't super buttons/telescopes.

Laughter and drinks, clinking glasses and music. Tae being charming to creatures he hated, playing his role to keep things cool. My sister laughing, Buttons nearby, the queen on her throne. It was all too much, closing in on me, driving my anxiety through the roof. I needed some space, some quiet time.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Where are you going?" Tae asked.

"Just for a walk."

"A walk?" Isobel questioned.

"Yeah. I'm taking a breather. I'll be back."

I left them alone with no push back from either of them, weaving around the pool, smiling at bowing demons, offering quick hellos, coming to a spot two corners away from the pool. An alcove with an ornate black trellis. A dead end. Well, despite the open window leading into what looked to be a laundry room. A floral smell wafted from beyond the window.

So not really a dead end.

There were two hooks in this alcove—one above the window, one on the other wall. To hang a washing line on maybe? It was a breezy place. If it weren't for the heater, I'd be freezing my balls off.

I leaned against the trellis, drinking in fresh air beyond the touch of the heater. Happy to be alone.

"The world is too upside down," I said to myself.

"I agree."

I jumped back, heart leaping into my throat. “Bloody hell!”

Tae again.

“You always do this,” I said.

“Sorry.”

He blocked the only route in and out of this alcove.

“You followed me,” I said, gripping the trellis.

“You want to be alone?”

“That’s right.” Gosh, his eyes were as red as the palace walls.

“I should leave you alone, then,” he responded, a huge bulge in his shorts.

“You can stay if you want.”

“I shouldn’t. This is good. Let us take time alone to think. I need to think about things.”

The temperature went up, butterflies in my chest and stomach. “O-okay.” Those crimson eyes...

“Clay...”

Oh, gosh. “Tae...”

He stepped closer. I backed away, inching closer to the wall. Scared, rock hard, flushed with need.

“Tae...” I said again. “I—”

Tae pinned me against the wall, his hands planted either side of my head, his breath on my lips. So close, so hot, warmth radiating from that luminescent body.

“What... What are you doing?” I asked shakily.

His eyes shimmered with scarlet. Slowly, he raked that delicious gaze down my chest, back up to meet my willing eyes.

“Tae...” I breathed, body a galaxy of sensual stars. Trembling with anticipation, the places he’d touched before ready for more.

He brushed his lips against mine, holding back from a full kiss. Moved to the side of my face, tasting my skin with his tongue. His hair fell across my cheeks, brushing my flesh as raven-black silk, his lime scent arousing every sense.

I kept my hands down, afraid to touch, lost in this spell he wove. He took me with taste, with smell, no hands, a beast having found its mark.

I’m your prey.

“I’ve missed you, Clay,” he said, kissing my neck.

“Oh, gosh... I...” I couldn’t bloody speak.

He lapped at my throat, nipping me, sucking on flesh. His hands went to my hips, pushing up my vest.

“This is in the way,” he spoke into the crook of my neck.

His deep voice was pure sex wrapped in baritone, primal, full of dark promise. My cock quivered, standing at aching attention in my shorts.

Tae pushed himself closer to me, pinning me harder against the wall. His hardness ground into mine. I looked down, seeing it straining against his clothing. I wanted to reach down and touch it, something I hadn’t done before. Not properly. It was always him stroking me, or sucking me, or fucking me. And I liked it. A lot. But, gosh, did I crave a taste, a touch, to

feel it somewhere other than buried in my, well, I liked to think of my backside as a tunnel of love.

I laughed, cheeks nuclear. Ugh. Mood killer! “Erm, I, erm, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh because it’s not funny, but I was just thinking about my arse and how I call it a tunnel of love which is silly, and I don’t think about my arse really because I’m not like that and—”

He kissed me, crushing those amazing lips to mine.

That did the trick to shut me up.

I did touch him then, hands burying into his hair, grinding back into him. My tongue slipping out to meet his in a wet wrestle, the friction between lips and skin burning and wonderful. I could kiss him forever.

Coming back up for air, ready to be pounded, I stroked the side of his face, licked at the traces of him on my lips.

“Thanks for stopping my waffling,” I said.

“Anytime.” He pressed his forehead to mine.

“That sounds shady.”

He smiled, breaking my heart. “Take it as you will.”

I breathed in more of his lime yumminess. “I didn’t think you’d want to kiss me again.”

His smile faded, but his forehead remained on mine. He didn’t speak, his labored breaths melding with the beat of the music outside of this pocket.

“I always want to kiss you, Clay.”

I shuddered, a shiver of sadness catching me off guard. Tears welled and ran free, causing him to remove his forehead.

“Don’t cry,” he said, catching the tears with his thumbs.
“It’s okay.”

“None of this is okay,” I replied, mood-killing some more.
“I... I just...”

“No more tears,” he whispered and kissed me again.

He’s here. He’s kissing you.

He doesn’t hate your guts.

The tears slowed down, my stomach doing backflips. I kissed him right back, though, with greater passion, my hands on his sides.

At the end of the kiss, my face in his hands, I gazed up at him. I wiped at my eyes.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m a drama queen.”

“You’ve been through so much.”

“So have you.”

His eyes were still red, his desire still active. “Let’s not talk about the darkness, Clay. Let’s have this.”

I touched the gold collar, wishing I could break the damn thing.

“I want this,” he added. “I want you.”

“I want you, too.”

More kissing, turning into groping, his hand cupping my cock, rubbing me through my shorts.

He stopped again, tugging at my vest. “This is still in my way.”

I chuckled lightly, stomping down on the darkness. I needed this joy. “Then get rid of it.”

He stepped back, inspecting me. “You’re so beautiful.”

Man, did I blush. I covered my face, giggling like a teenager. “Stop.”

“You are, Clay. You’re so beautiful.”

I dropped my hand, exposing my bashfulness. “So are you.”

The nail on his right index finger grew long and deadly sharp. “I want to see all of you.”

At any moment, someone could walk in on us, end this bliss. No, not end it, only pause it while I yelled at them to get the hell out of the alcove.

Closer again, a predator looming over his prey, he used that fingernail to slice through my vest. Starting from the bottom, working up to the collar. Slow, teasing me until the material fell away.

The vampire stepped back to admire his handiwork, the nail retracting. He went to his knees, fingering the waistband of my shorts, pressing his face into my cock. Breathed in deeply, even kissed it.

Oh, gosh.

As slowly as he removed the shirt, he pulled the shorts off me. I stepped out of them at the end, fully exposed to his wants.

He stood up to take me in again, and I didn’t blush. Didn’t shy away from his gaze because there was no reason to. We’d been here before, and here we were again. Despite everything, he wanted me still, and he could take every inch of me, do whatever he wanted. I was at his sexy mercy.

But what about after?

He removed his clothes, his cock rock hard and delicious, ready to skewer me.

Wow.

He came back in for another round of hot and heavy kissing, my lips and skin tingling, my hands on his hips, considering a reach down. Yes. Down to his cock, finally touch it, maybe taste it. Grab a handful of his butt first?

Yum.

Tae stopped me as I went in, taking both of my hands and pinning them above my head. Okay. Fine.

He pushed in closer, his dick on my stomach. Kissing me, holding me with one hand as his other went exploring. Rubbing my hardness, my balls, teasing me.

With that free, powerful hand, he grabbed my right thigh and lifted my leg, holding it firmly as he freed my hands. I buried them into his hair, locking my eyes with his. So dark yet so red, so full of hunger.

For me.

He still wanted me.

Tae sucked the end of his finger, slicking it up with his vampire saliva—which basically acted as lube. He teased me on a trip to my backside, the leg up position enough to give him easy access.

“Keep your eyes on me,” he said.

“O-okay...” I breathed.

He slipped his finger into me, digging deep, making that beckoning motion to strike the sweet spot. My cock crushed against him, his on me, precum leaking from mine.

“Oh, fuck...” I said. “Oh, fuck yes.”

Our faces were inches apart, our eyes locked together. I kept my focus on him, never breaking his command.

A second finger entered me. I gasped. He lifted my leg higher.

“You like that?” he asked.

“I love... I love it...”

Gosh. My body fired off so many sparks. His fingers digging into my flesh added to the pleasure, the crimson storm in his peepers another trigger of yum. He went so deep, those fingers highly skilled at exploring.

He glanced to the side at the open window, back to me, then released me, withdrawing his fingers.

I gasped as he disappeared into the apparent laundry room, returning later with a dressing gown belt. White and fluffy.

“What’s that for?” I asked, desperate for his fingers to get back to it.

“Fun,” he replied.

It twigged. He wanted to tie me up.

“Out here?” I asked.

He nodded. “You see that hook?” he said.

“Which one?”

“That one.” He pointed at the hook on the wall above my head.

I gulped. “You want me tied to that?”

“If you want to play.”

“Should we—”

“Don’t ask those questions, Clay. You either want this, or you don’t.”

Screw option two. “Will it hurt?”

“I’ll never hurt you.”

That did hurt, though. Because I’d hurt him, hadn’t I?
“Erm... Yes. You can tie me up.”

His predatory grin tightened my balls.

He moved in a blur of speed, my hands above my head, bound to the hook by the dressing gown belt before I could think any further. The balls of my feet barely touched the ground, my toes taking up the standing responsibility.

At his mercy.

A reasonable person would stop him, get back to the party, not run the risk of being caught in the act by peeping demons. Gosh, if Phillipe turned up, he’d—

Fuck the demons. Fuck everyone.

“Remember the safe word,” he said.

“Glitter,” I answered, smiling at it.

“The moment this becomes too uncomfortable, use it.”

Never! “Okay.”

I prepared to wrap my legs around his waist, but he surprised me. He turned me to face the wall, the belt tightening around my wrists as he did. Not too painful, but a little bite.

The good kind.

He cupped a butt cheek, squeezed it. My face cheek was pressed to the wall, my vision limited. I could make him out, but only just, waiting to feel what he did next.

Wow.

He gave me a little spank, then harder, then harder again. The sharp pain was super-hot, a delicious kind of burn. He rubbed the spanked skin next, then touched it with his lips, kissed it, licked it, soothed it better.

“Clay Christmas,” he said against my arse.

I laughed.

He spanked me. Gently. Kissing me there again.

“This is a gorgeous backside,” he proclaimed, playing around the edges of my crevice.

Wet. Hot. His tongue slid into me, exploring the nerve-rich area, a startling yet invigorating sensation. The next step up from a finger, something much more intimate. He held my cheeks open, going in deeper, driving me wild. My toes curled, my hardness brushing the brick. I strained against the belt, helpless under so much pleasure.

He released his grip on my cheeks, kept on eating me, stroked the backs of my legs. Devour, devour, and then his tongue moved out of the hot spot, tracing up my spine, his hands on my thighs.

“Fuck,” I said.

He growled, worked my butt again. Slicked me up with his saliva, pressed the tip of his cock to me. Pushed a little.

“You want this?” he asked.

“Yes...”

“Beg for it.”

“What?”

“You heard me, warlock. Fucking beg me.”

Erm, did this get him off as well? Or was it his way of working out his frustrations with me on, well, me?

“Please, Tae,” I whined, playing along. “Give it to me.”

He spanked me. “I don’t think you deserve it.” A growl.

“Please. I *so* want it. I need it. I’ve missed it so much.”

“I bet you have.” He licked the back of my neck.

“So much, Tae. So damn much.”

“Good.” He shoved himself into me, taking me by surprise.

“Holy fuck!” I cried.

He gripped my hips, thrust into me hard and fast. I forgot to breathe at the force of him, at his frenetic speed. He hit the target like he’d done with his fingers and tongue, almost going too deep.

So fucking good.

“Yes, yes, yes...”

“Take it,” he growled into my ear.

“Fuck, yes.”

“Fucking take it, demon.”

He threw me for a loop. “Wh—”

Before I could finish, he bit my neck, his fangs diving into my flesh. He drank, the amazing heat setting my body aflame. Drove my pleasure right over to oceans of nirvana. With the pounding and the feeding, my senses shut down, replaced by raw sensuality, coming to an explosive end. Without him or me working my shaft, I climaxed, screaming it out. He slapped a hand over my mouth as I convulsed, muffling my orgasm.

He didn't stop thrusting until he growled his climax against my neck, pulling his teeth away. He filled me up, his cum a molten invader I never wanted to leave. He panted, licked at my neck.

Fucking take it, demon...

It *was* his frustrations being worked out on me.

Gosh.

"Fuck," he said, pulling out of me. "I'm sorry." He untied me. "Are you okay?"

I turned to face him, breathless. "I... I'm fine. That... That was really good."

"I'm sorry I said *that*." He actually looked regretful, his expression sagging slightly with it. I'd never seen anything like it on his face before. It made him look human.

"The demon thing?" I questioned, knowing what he meant.

"I... I forgot myself." Dare I say he looked a bit shaken?

"It's okay," I said. "Really."

"I was too rough."

"Really, it's okay. I like it rough." I scooped up my shorts, the vest done for.

"I'm sorry."

"You've got nothing to be sorry for. I liked it." I pulled the shorts on. "I don't mind a bit of rough, and I could've glittered my way out of it if I wanted you to stop."

A curt nod from him.

I touched my neck. "Definitely what the doctor ordered after all the drama."

“But the demon line... My frustration slipped out,” he said.

“With me.”

“With you.”

It was an angry fuck. Kind of. “I guess I am a demon, though. I mean, I know I am.”

“Partly,” he corrected and touched the side of my face. I leaned into his touch. “Yet again, we let our desires take over.”

The way he said desire had me ready to go again. “I’ve been called worse things, believe me.”

He took hold of my wrists, inspecting them. They were a little red from the belt but fine.

“I’m okay, Tae,” I reassured. “Really. And you’re allowed to be frustrated. Whatever helps.”

“Saying that isn’t helpful.”

“Then neither is shagging our brains out.”

He stepped closer, hooking a finger into the band of my shorts. “I needed it too, Clay. I had to feel you again, to know that...”

Oh, gosh. “To know what?”

“I wish your secret didn’t leave a stain,” he answered.

“My turn to be sorry again.”

He released my shorts, averting his gaze to the scenery beyond the alcove. “I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“I did that to you.”

He shook his head.

I took his hand. He tensed a little. “You have every right to feel however you want to feel.”

“But not pour out my frustrations during sex.”

Man, the s-word got my cock ready again. “Did it help?”

“No. Only made me feel guilty.” He touched my face again with his free hand. “If I didn’t want to trust you again, I wouldn’t have come after you.”

“Oh.”

“I wondered if it was because you’re the only one who can give me what I want.”

Not my body, but revenge. “And I will. I promise.”

The backs of his fingers traced my cheek. “Let’s put this back together.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Clay...”

“I mean it. If you really don’t want to fix this, if I’ve really messed it up, I really get it. So many people have been hurt because of me, and I’m a walking time bomb. You’ll be safer getting out of here, staying well away. I don’t deserve—”

“What don’t you deserve?” he questioned, cutting me off.

I took a breath. “I don’t deserve you. After everything, after you gave me your trust, I—”

“Enough.”

“But—”

He kissed me, a soft collision on my lips. Now both his hands were cupping my face. “We’ll fix things. I care about you too much to let this destroy what we have.”

What do we have? “O-okay.” I sighed deeply. “Okay. That’s good to hear. And I really am so, so sorry.”

He rested his forehead on mine. “We can keep going back and forth with the apologies, or we can start with a new beginning.”

“I like new beginnings.”

He chuckled, his breath a lovely breeze against my lips. “I’m glad. Are you sure I didn’t hurt you?”

“Tae, why do we have a safe word?”

“I take your point. I just—”

“I’m not made of glass.”

I still haven’t touched you...

“Again, point taken.” He pulled his forehead away, giving me space. “I didn’t do too well at taking time out, did I?”

“Thank God.”

He smiled, melting my heart. “Shall we return to the party?”

“I guess so. Unless you want me to...” I held back.

“To what?”

Touch you. “Nothing. I’m thirsty. Let’s go and drink some apple crap.”

He laughed, the sound as sensuous as the rest of him. “Lead the way.”



THE QUEEN GAVE some speech about me and Buttons and how things were going to change. I listened, I panicked, then she told me she'd see me tomorrow. She ordered servants to bring me a new vest and left the party.

I followed suit ten minutes later, much to Isobel's annoyance.

Yeah, boo-bloody-hoo.

"I'm not looking forward to waking up," I said to Tae as we walked back to the bedroom with a demon escort.

"Don't say that."

"Not in an 'I don't want to live' way, but in an 'oh shit' one."

"I understand." He put his arm around me. My legs threatened to buckle.

"That's nice," I said.

"Good."

We walked on in silence, heading over to pick up Fizz.

As soon as I walked in the room, Victoria flung herself at me. When I'd dropped Fizz off, she'd been snoozing, only Archie awake to shake my hand and ask me how I was doing.

"Oh, Clay," she said, planting several kisses on my cheek.

Wow, she really had a serious bear hug on her. She squeezed the air out of me, soaking my cheek in saliva.

"I'm so happy to see your face."

"I can't breathe..."

"Sorry." She released me, smacking me on the arm.

Ouch. “Good to see you, too.” I rubbed where she’d whacked. “How you doing?”

“As well as can be, sweets,” she said. “You know, considering.”

I gave her another hug because, well, just because. “I hate that you’re trapped here.”

“Part of the job, sweets,” she replied gently, rubbing my back. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Archie held Fizz, bringing her over. “Here’s your daddy.”

I broke my Victoria hug and took my baby girl off him. “How’s she been?”

“Good as gold, mate,” Archie answered. “She’s always a good girl.”

I kissed her head. She purred and licked me. “Thanks for looking after her. You’ve become her official babysitters.”

Both Archie and Victoria laughed.

“You’ll get our bill,” the lawyer said.

“Can I pay you in chocolates?”

“You can pay me in doner kebabs when we get out of here.”

I nodded, chuckling. It felt good to chuckle. “You’ve got a deal.”

She stroked Fizz, who thrummed away in my arms.

“We can’t stay long,” Tae said. “We have twenty minutes.”

“What is it with them and twenty minutes?” I wondered.

“It’s hog’s piss,” Victoria barked.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Hog’s piss?”

“First thing that popped into my head.”

“Oh. Wow.”

She shrugged, went to sit down on the sofa. “At least we have some time together. What about you?” She aimed the last part at Tae.

“I’ll be staying with Clay,” he answered.

“That’s a relief. Don’t like the idea of him sleeping alone.”

I blushed a bit with no idea why.

“We’ve got your back,” she added. “Always.”

“Hundred-percent,” Archie jumped in. “We’re your triangle of trust, remember.” He pointed at himself, Tae, and Victoria.

“Thanks. That’s great.”

“No worries, mate.”

Bless him. Bless them. Still being supportive, still awesome. What did I do to deserve no harsh judgment from them after breaking the triangle of trust? After dragging them into this.

Stop piling this on!

We couldn’t talk about much, especially not plans to get out of here or overthrowing the queen. So we spoke about food and books and movies.

“You like Stephen King?” Victoria questioned.

“He’s my favorite,” I replied.

She shrugged. “Not my thing, really. I love a good old crime book, especially stuff by Val McDermid.”

“Cool.”

“Don’t read much,” Archie contributed. “If I do, it’s gotta be a biography or something with plenty of facts in it.”

“Non-fiction all the way?” I said.

“That’s right, mate.”

Something wasn’t being said here, between the words. As the conversation went on to the joys of roast potatoes, I watched them with a scrutinizing eye, trying to peel back the layers.

Scheming. Good. I mean, I’d love to know what the hell the scheme was, but glad one was being put together. Written on notes? Communicated by some sort of winking or hand gestures—code these guys had down after the years spent working together? I didn’t notice, no matter how hard I looked.

I stifled a yawn. At the same time, Fizz let off a huge yawn, showing off the inside of her mouth.

“You must be knackered,” Archie said.

Stupid body. “Yeah, could do with a snooze. But not yet.”

“We have five minutes,” Victoria said. “And then we’re done.” She shook her head.

“It’ll be okay,” I tried. “The trials...” I didn’t finish.

None of this was okay. I was doing this for the queen, so why couldn’t she just let them go? Yeah, I know, for insurance, but what difference did it make if they were here or not? She’d be able to get at them no matter the location.

Damn.

“You take care, mate,” Archie offered. “Be safe.”

“You, too. Make sure you get plenty of rest.”

“Rather have a real cup of tea,” he said. “Not this swill they keep peddling us. Made the proper way in a teapot.”

Victoria snorted with laughter. “Since when do you use a teapot?”

“All the time.”

“You’ve never pulled one out when I’ve been at your place.”

He folded his arms. “You never come over.”

“I didn’t see a teapot,” I jumped in. “But then I wasn’t, erm, looking for one.”

How was that helpful?

“When do you ever come over?” Archie asked. “You always moan about the fried food smell.”

“Well, it’s true,” the lawyer countered.

“Then you don’t get to see my teapot.”

“He does have a teapot.” It was Tae’s turn to join in. “A red one.”

Victoria quirked an eyebrow at him. “Really?”

“Yes.”

She looked at me. “How did we get onto this subject?”

“Archie fancies real tea,” I said.

She laughed. “I think we all do.”

Our time together ended, two demons letting us know. They waited as Tae and I said goodbye.

“Take care,” Victoria said. “Make sure you finish those trials in one piece. This little one needs her dad.” She stroked Fizz.

“I...” I tried to not get choked up. “I will.”

She hugged me, mindful of Fizz, then Archie did, and I really had to fight against losing myself to a sob fest.

Get through this, end it, let them go home.

It will be okay.

TWENTY

TAE



I held him as he slept, his back pressed against my chest. Keeping him close and safe, racked with guilt over the sex, the word I'd used.

Demon.

Take it, demon.

As I'd told him, I'd been frustrated. Everything simmering under the surface, the force of our activity wrapped up in it. I enjoyed playing with ropes and chains, and we'd used chains before when I'd first tasted his blood. But this time, it felt different. Make up sex, yes, but with too much anger behind it. His lie had galvanized my thrusts, come out in *that* outburst. I could have said worse and had been thinking darker thoughts.

For a moment, he disgusted me, twisted every feeling, his body breaking down to a demonic base. And I'd continued, the allure of his demon blood tempting, disgusting. Fucking the enemy held so much thrill.

Until I climaxed, and he returned to me. The real Clay with the vanilla in his scent and blood. My Clay, the warlock I'd been falling for. My frustration departed, leaving me behind with a chance to rebuild, to learn to trust him again. Because one lie to protect himself didn't represent the whole.

I'd never say that to him again, never feel those traces of disgust. They were released, despite my guilt. Gone. He made everything so different. He was special, a one-off, a bright light in the endless night. The sex freed me from doubt. If that made me a fool, so be it. I wanted him with me, never to lose him.

"Rebuild," I whispered.

Fizz purred at my feet.

I stroked Clay's hair, playing with the brown strands. He stirred, resettled. Safe in my arms until morning.

Tae Ae-Jung and I enjoyed sex with ropes and spanking, too.

Tae Ae-Jung...

A memory surfaced, one from before my son was born. Laying in a beach hut in the Maldives one beautiful night, my wife in my arms. Newlyweds, lost in the glow of exchanging rings, of declaring our undying love for one another.

"Until death do us part," I'd told her, then added, under my breath, "and beyond that."

I saw her standing there radiant in her stunning white dress, holding white roses, smelling so fresh and floral and incredible. Her heart for me and mine for her. A private wedding for us. No one else mattered, only our love.

The first time I'd seen her, the world stopped. Our eyes meeting across a crowded Paris art gallery as if from a romantic novel or film. The gallery held an opening gala for a new artist's exhibition, my wife a great lover of art.

"Tae Ae-Jung," I whispered, drifting into the past.

From the moment we met, we spoke all night, went for a walk through the Paris streets, lost in each other, finding an all-night café for coffee. She was still human then.

Each following day we grew closer, talked late into the nights. She went to work at her job in a different gallery, having come to Paris from Seoul, South Korea to work.

I met her after each shift. Took her to dinner, to my Paris apartment, then around the world. I bought us houses, showered her with gifts, but none of that mattered. It was comfort and wonderful, but only frivolous. Our love was the true core of what held us together.

She left her job but kept her hand in the art world, making work of her own, a patron of the arts the world over. I was so proud of her ambition, her creativity, her passion. I asked her to marry me one Christmas in Aspen, married her two months later.

After buying the Paris house of our dreams, though she loved the Brighton house more, I turned her into a vampire. Death would never tear us apart. Death would not touch her. I was her shield against death and hurt and pain. No one or nothing would ever harm her.

When she fell pregnant, our love swelled, transformed, our son a gift from the stars. In all my life, I'd never believed in a love like that. Love hurt, love resided in those stories on page and screen. A thing not for me. Then it hit me like a meteor, breaking down my walls, filling me with endless joy.

Until it died. Until all the lights went out and love showed me its dark side once again.

Love hurt.

Love destroyed.

Never again.

Now the real guilt struck as Clay's breathing pulled me out of my memories.

Clay. The one who made it different when he shouldn't. I gave Tae Ae-Jung a vow beyond death. We were to be together in this life and the next. I intended to see her again, to be with her and Tae Ji-Hoon, my dear boy.

I missed them so much. My beautiful family. Killed by that hooded demon scum. Who was he?

Clay stirred in my arms again.

I pressed myself closer to him, drowning in his scent and the feel of his body against mine. My lips were inches from his neck, my desires palpable again. I ran my hand down his side, mesmerized by his slender lines within his pajamas, the fragility of his mortal life. The strength of his character, how he'd survived so much, even this revelation about his lineage. Never beaten, never broken.

"I admire you so much," I whispered into his neck.

Again, he stirred but didn't wake. He slept for thirteen hours. I stayed with him, never moving, a vampire not requiring sleep, here for him.

Rebuilding.

He turned to face me. I removed my arms, letting him stretch and sit up.

"Hi," he said, his hair messy from sleep. He rubbed his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Ten in the morning."

He looked to the darkness at the window. “Thank God for clocks, eh? I would never guess otherwise.”

“Absolutely.”

His hazel eyes returned to me. “Did you, erm... Wait. You don’t sleep. Have you been there all night?”

“I have.”

“Wow.” He snuggled back under the covers.

Meow. Fizz awoke, stretching her feline body, padding up the bed to say hello. I stroked her, and she rubbed against me, releasing a series of meows.

“Feeding time,” Clay said.

The cat responded to that, going over to place a paw on his face.

He laughed, and the sound warmed my soul.

“I know, I know,” he told her as she patted his face with a paw and meowed.

“She won’t stand for this lounging around,” I said.

Clay looked at her with one eye open, laughing again. He vanished under the covers, giggling as his cat chased him under there. A moment of happiness. The calm before the impending storm.

I got off the bed, heading to the bedroom door as he played with Fizz. I paused with my hand on the doorknob, watching them come out of the covers, play wrestling. She pinned him down, standing on his chest. Batted his nose, then rubbed herself against his hand and rolled onto her back, spreading out across him. He tickled her belly, then told her it was time for food. Kissed her.

A beautiful sight to see. Him so caring, her so lovingly responsive. It reminded me of my son when I would come to him in the mornings—when he wouldn't get out of bed. Lots of tickling, blowing raspberries on his stomach, or getting into his bed with him. Which always made him giggle. His daddy was not built for tiny beds at all.

“Daddy,” his voice echoed in my mind, a revenant to break a man. “I love you.”

What I wouldn't give to hear him say those words to me again. To be the oaf in his tiny bed, to take him out for walks, to spin him around the room, cuddle up with him as I read to him from *The Hobbit*.

His tiny hand in mine...

His love for me so pure.

Him. My wife.

My family.

I wanted them back.

I wanted Clay.

I wanted the hooded demon dead.

“You okay over there?” Clay asked.

“Yes,” I responded quickly, opening the door.

A demon stood there. “What can I do for you?”

“His Highness requires breakfast,” I answered. “As does his cat.”

Clay hurried over and ordered pancakes with fried eggs and syrup, some coffee, and tuna and water for Fizz. The demon went off to make it happen, a different demon stepping into his place.

I closed the door.

“Feels like I’m ordering room service,” Clay said. “Feels wrong.”

“You have to eat,” I replied. “To build up your energy for tonight.”

“I know, but still.” He sat on the bed, Fizz on the floor grooming herself.

I sat beside him. “Remember your training, Clay. We don’t know what these trials consist of yet, but I’m wagering there may be some physical challenge involved.”

“Hopefully, just running. I can cope with running.” He scratched the back of his head.

“If you do have to take part in combat,” I said, “which I hope doesn’t happen, implement what I taught you.”

Combats skills, building up his strength. He ran fast already, but we added to that as we trained.

“And your magic,” I added.

He sighed. “My magic.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I... I’m scared to use Arcana again.” He scratched up and down his arms, his face. Started to gnaw his bottom lip. “Cravings are getting to me, and that’s twice now that I’ve lost my shit. What’s this throne going to do to me?”

Nothing. It will be lost. “I don’t know. But better for you to take it rather than Buttons.”

He picked at his nails, his fear an invisible energy cutting through the room.

If he knew Phillippe's plan, it would play on his mind, apply pressure to an already heavy situation. Let him focus on what he was doing. I'd get him home. It would soon be over. I had to believe that.

His sunshine rubbed off a little. I smiled, touching his arm. "I believe in you."

"You believe I can take that power?" he asked.

"I believe in *you*."

He blushed. His bashfulness was sweet.

"Aw, stop it, Tae. I haven't had my coffee yet."

I put my arm around him, pulling him close. I let him rest his head against my shoulder. He nestled into it, releasing a long and heavy sigh.

"I can't believe this," he said. "How did we get here?"

"Because the universe has a dark sense of humor."

"Yeah." He placed a hand on my thigh. "Stupid universe. Speaking of which, it decided to throw me another curveball at the pool party."

"What happened?" I asked.

He sat up straight, yawning again. "The queen told me I have another brother. A prince. It's that demon with the hood. His name's Isaiah."

I tensed immediately, beating away a wave of dizziness. "Your... Your brother?"

"Yeah. Apparently, he's on the naughty list right now because he got himself banished." His features contorted with disgust. "Hopefully, he'll stay on it for a long time after what he did to Jenn."

Isaiah. A prince.

Killer.

“Tae?”

Isaiah the demon prince.

“Tae?”

Clay’s eyes bore into mine like hot lasers. “Yes?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

He reached over and took hold of my chin. The action shocked me so much that I yielded, let him turn my head.

“No secrets,” he said. “At least, let’s try not to have any, and I know I’ve got some bloody nerve saying that to you because I—”

“Clay. Stop.” His rambling was a brief distraction, paper against a tide.

Isaiah.

He licked his lips. “What’s the matter?”

Tell him about Isaiah now? No. It would be a distraction, and he would take it badly. I knew that. With his guilt fragile already, and so much riding on getting him out, the last thing I wanted was to throw a spike in the road.

A spike in the head of Isaiah.

Instead, I said, “I’m fine, Clay. Really.”

A lie. A secret. Not great for rebuilding, but a tool to protect him with.

My how the tables turned.

“Is it the Isaiah thing?” he asked. “That I have another sibling? Shit. It is, right? You never react to things like this. I mean, you’re... I, erm, I...” His face burned beetroot.

It made me smile. “I know what you mean, Clay. I’m as cold as ice.”

“Well...” He scratched at himself again. “Not always. You’re not cold in the bedroom.” His scratching intensified, his latter comment falling away into irrelevancy. “Gosh!” He jumped to his feet, now scratching himself from head to toe. “I can’t stand this.”

“Clay. Stop. You’ll peel your skin off.”

“It itches!” he yelled. “Shit! Get it off me!”

“Get—”

“Get it off me!”

“There’s nothing on you.”

“Out... Out of me.” He drew blood.

I grabbed his hands, pinning them together. “Stop. Now.”

He struggled, demanding to be free. “You don’t understand. It itches. I need it. I need it back. I can’t wait until midnight!” He released a terrifying scream, startling Fizz.

“Clay!”

“The itching...” he whimpered, unable to break out of my hold. “So much itching. Get it off... Get it out.” He snarled, lunging at me. I held him back. “Never get it out! It’s mine!” He tried to kick me. I stopped him. He began to weep. “Please... I can’t...”

Blood ran from his nose in two heavy streams, pouring over his lips.

Arcana.

“Clay, we need to—”

The door burst open, the demon running into the room.
“What are you doing to my prince? Get off him. Now.”

“He’s not well,” I growled over my shoulder. Clay sagged, sobbing. I steadied him, held him against me.

Something sharp dug into my back. “I said get off him.”

I reached around and grabbed the demon’s sword, disarming him before he could draw another breath. I angled myself to hold his sword to his neck. He stood there shocked, his hands up.

“Move, and I’ll cut your head off,” I warned. Having no head while still being alive did not strike me as a pleasant experience.

He obeyed.

“Your prince isn’t well,” I said. “He needs to rest and be cleaned up. You’ll leave us be. I can look after him.”

“I am sworn to protect him.”

“So am I.”

TWENTY-ONE

CLAY



*S*o am I...

Tae's words shut down the vicious itching across my skin, calming down the cravings for Arcana, the aches in my bones.

"I'm okay," I wheezed. I pushed myself against Tae, steadying myself into a sitting position.

"Your Highness?" the demon said.

Tae's hair fell across my face. I pushed it aside, peering around his body. "Honestly. I had a funny moment, but I'm okay. Nothing breakfast won't fix."

The demon looked at me, then the vampire. "Are you sure, Your Highness?"

"I'm sure. It's fine. Sorry for the racket."

It took a few moments for the situation to rectify itself, but Tae gave the demon back his sword, and the room was ours again.

We sat together on the bed, me taking liberties with his shoulder, holding a tissue to my nose. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be."

"I bled on you."

"I'm not bothered."

Man, did he seem tense. Scratch that. Intense. More than usual, and it started when I mentioned Isaiah.

“Are you—”

The door knocked.

I groaned. “Breakfast. Worst timing ever.”

“You need it,” he said, getting up to answer.

A female servant wheeled in a gold trolley with pancakes and coffee and the stuff for Fizz.

“Stay there,” Tae said as I tried to get up.

“What?”

“Let me sort this out.”

“Oh. Erm, thanks.”

He served Fizz once the demon left. She tucked into the tuna and lapped up some water. My turn came next. He fluffed a pillow, making sure I was comfy on the bed, then handed me the pancakes.

“Fancy plates,” I said. Gold with a ruby trim and a black swirl around the edges. Kind of ugly, kind of not.

The pancakes were thick and fluffy, topped with eggs and maple syrup. Just how I liked them. I sipped coffee between bites, the caffeine a blessing.

“These aren’t like yours,” I told Tae.

“No?”

“Not even close.” The vampire really knew how to cook, no matter what it was.

I missed it.

He stood over by the windows, staring out at the city beyond. Not saying much, regressing once again to mystery Tae.

What was going on in his head?

I should ask. We were rebuilding, keeping no secrets. Easier said than done. But it was healthy to talk, right? We were a team, partners in this. At least until I went and, well, ended up here.

“What’s wrong, Tae?”

He didn’t turn. “Nothing. I’m just thinking.”

“Something is wrong.”

“Everything is wrong, Clay. This situation, this realm.”

“I don’t know what to do.” Another lie. I knew what I was going to do.

I’ll fix it. I’ll take the power, and kill them all.

“You have to win,” he said.

Something wasn’t right. But how many times could I press the issue with him before I pissed him off? Not that he’d go off in a huff. That wasn’t him. I just didn’t want to upset him anymore.

“Tae?”

“Yes?”

“Will you stay with me until I have to go?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks. Oh. There’s an envelope under the plate. How have I only just noticed this?”

With breakfast came a note from the queen telling me I'll be picked up from this room just before midnight, Level 500 local time—the same time as Greenwich Meantime, apparently. Dinner would be delivered to my room at six, along with some trial clothes.

“It's all getting really real,” I said.

Tae came over, sitting next to me. He read the note, glanced down at my empty plate. “Did you enjoy that?”

“I did. But I repeat, not as much as I enjoy yours.”

He smiled, the move nothing beyond a tiny lift of his lips.

What's wrong?

Nope. Not bugging him. For the time being, anyway. Instead, I stretched, pondering a shower.

“How's the grub, Fizz?” I asked down to my cat.

She was too busy with her eating to give me a meow.

Tae removed the plate from my lap, taking it to the other side of the room. Then he climbed back on the bed, slipping under the covers...

Between my legs.

“What the—”

“Something extra for you,” he said from down there.

“Erm...”

“Unless you'd rather not.”

My cock firmed up, ready for his amazing mouth. “I'm not saying no.”

He pulled down my pajama bottoms, devouring my hardness. I grabbed handfuls of the sheets as he worked me,

my head thrown back, my hips arching. He kept to a steady, blissful rhythm until my toes curled, and I came down his throat.

A quickie, and definitely needed. I went limp, sinking into the luxurious comfort of the bed.

“That was nice,” I breathed.

He reappeared from under the covers, spreading out next to me. “Good.” He wiped the corner of his mouth.

Shall I do you now?

“I’m here to help you in this downtime,” he said.

He switched from brooding to fun, that sexy playfulness for when he wanted to be fun Tae.

Fine. Even though I’d just cum, I was ready for more. My nerves were a mess about the trials, my insides churning with fear. A lot of distraction was required. Nothing too strenuous, but definitely some tension-easing stuff.

I threw back the covers, sliding off the bed. “Follow me.”

His dark eyes flushed crimson. “Where to?”

“I feel like getting wet.”



WE STOOD naked together under the shower head, hot water sluicing down our bodies. My back rested against his chest, his arms wrapped around me as he kissed my neck. His wet hair brushed my shoulders, his hard cock poking into me.

A hand slid to my cock, cupping my balls, playing with me. Gosh, did I want to return the favor but held back once

again. Instead, I let him please me. Selfish and greedy, yet he wanted to do it. So I let him. I wasn't going to turn down his touch.

He stroked me, sucked on my neck. No biting and drinking, groaning into my skin. Driving me to the edge. I buzzed all over, desires rising.

I spun around to face him, looking up at his six-something frame, mine five-nine. His hands fell off me. I'd caught him by surprise. I wrapped my arms around his neck, stretching up to kiss him. He pulled me close, crushing his lips to mine.

His hands were on my hips, my butt. He crouched, palms sliding lower, and he lifted me up. My body responded, legs wrapping around his waist.

Yum.

Within seconds, he was inside me, fucking me in the middle of the large shower cubicle. A steady rock with no risk of slipping over as he held me tight, doing me deep and slow. Taking his time, setting my body on fire.

Oh, yes.

I burned in hotter heat than the water, consumed by it, by him, climaxing hands-free again, all over him as he did inside me.

Afterward, he held me in position, kissing my breastbone, then put me down.

I kissed him. "That was great." My hand brushed his cock, and he flinched.

He can bury it in my arse, but that was it? Again, I should ask the question, talk about it, take a healthy approach.

Fuck it. I felt good, enjoying the buzz. Those complications could wait. For now, I enjoyed being back in the fold where he wanted to fuck me, where he might tell me he'd fallen for me harder than before. That he... No. Too much. It was all about the pleasure, the reignition of our physical relationship.

The yum before the bullshit.

TWENTY-TWO

CLAY



After an afternoon of chilling, a lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches, exercise to limber up, and another blowjob from Tae, time approached the *moment*.

Gosh.

I stood before the mirror, looking at myself in my trial outfit. A red leather number—a catsuit hugging my body. Comfortable and breathable, to my surprise. Add to that a pair of fingerless gloves and a pair of sturdy gold boots, and I could pass as a superhero. Kind of. I needed a cape for that.

“You look amazing,” Tae said, coming up behind me. He wrapped his arms around my waist, kissed the side of my neck.

“Not again,” I whispered.

What were we doing here? Amorous Tae had taken over the one hiding something that’d rattled him. He’d been fawning over me all afternoon, almost starry-eyed. Or was that in my head? Yeah, my imagination. Tae wasn’t the starry-eyed type. More like starry lips and amazing skills in the language of sexiness.

I felt like his boyfriend. My heart fluttered with happy butterflies at the prospect.

Man, these niceties were awesome and helped me get through the hours. But when would he freeze up again? Could there ever really be anything between us? I tried not to think about it, but it sat there waving an annoying red flag. After losing his family, being so broken and consumed by finding their killer, how would he ever be able to be with anyone else? And why would he want to be? Especially with a guy like me. I just... Gosh. I guess I was letting the negativity, the doubt roll over whatever this was between us. His body told me yes, but then everything else told me no. Too complicated, too much weight on his soul.

How dare I make assumptions?

He'd come after me. To save me, to honor his promises despite my lies. He wanted me around. He'd told me he was falling for me, and we were good again. Brushing those things under the carpet was stupid, right? Me just being a glum guy, thinking the worst. I hated thinking of the bad stuff, especially when I wanted him so much.

Insecurity made me its bitch. Big time.

"Tae?" I said.

"Yes?" he breathed his honey and dark chocolate voice against my skin.

"Thank you for everything." I angled my head to face him. He leaned in and kissed me softly on the lips.

"I..." I went to make a brave move, ask him questions about where things were going. But I held back. I mean, I was about to undertake some trials and head into serious danger. My mind required clear focus. If I messed this up, I screwed over Earth.

The *talk* could be the goal for after. Properly sort it out and...

...ruin the vibe. Turn him off me. Make him realize it was time to stop.

Or not. Could be amazing.

He released me, taking a few steps back. He took in my appearance, folding his arms across his chest. I watched him in the mirror, feasting on his physique myself, admiring his red jeans, black shirt, and golden boots. He looked so damn good, his long hair tied up in a ponytail.

“You’re welcome,” he finally said. “I’m here for you.”

I smiled. “You’re awesome. I don’t dese—”

“Stop. Now. We’ve been through this. I forgive you, Clay. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here.”

Translation in my world: You’re more to me than a weapon to kill a killer.

Yay!

Didn’t ease my insecurities.

“I’ll never do it again. If I can help it.” No one was that perfect, but lessons were there to be learned to better your actions.

“Thank for you for forgiving me,” I said.

He smiled. “What do you want to do before its time?”

I turned to face him properly. *I want to get on my knees and devour you. Then watch a movie.*

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Waiting is the worst.”

He regarded me for a moment. “Come and sit with me.”

I obeyed, taking a pew on the bed beside him.

“I want to tell you a story from my homelands,” he said.

“Oh?” My thigh rested again his.

Fizz jumped up into his lap.

Lucky girl.

“*Kongjwi and Patjwi*,” he said. “A romantic Korean tale with a strong moral message. It comes from the Joseon Dynasty, which lasted from 1392 – 1897.”

“You were alive for some of it, weren’t you?” Tae was born in the 1700s.

“I was.” He told me the story, which kind of reminded me of *Cinderella*.

When he finished, I said, “I was worried about a sad ending for a moment. But I liked it, and I got the point—be positive, work hard, and you’ll get what you want in life.”

“That’s right. And that’s you.”

“Oh.”

“The path you’re always on,” he added.

“Yeah, that’s true. I like to strive for the better.”

“I told you that story because it reminds me of you a lot, and I wanted to remind you of who you are, what you’ve been doing. How you’ve always fought to survive, kept an admirable attitude no matter what. I cannot speak for you, for your experiences. Ever. I’m simply speaking as an observer.”

Hot cheeks time. “You’re making me blush again.”

He wrapped his arm around me. “You’ll have the living heaven you deserve, Clay. The happy ending.”

Gosh. That got me uncomfortable. “What about you?”

He didn’t answer.

“Tae.”

“I don’t know, Clay.”

So my living heaven wasn’t with him? “Okay. Well, thanks for telling me the story.”

I leaned against his shoulder.

“Would you like to hear another?” he asked.

“Sure.”

This time he told me one called *Heungbu and Nolbu*, and by the time he finished, the door knocked to announce the realest shit of all.

“You can do this, Clay,” Tae said. “I believe in you.”

“No pressure.”

“Don’t take it as pressure. Take it as motivation.”

With a deep breath, I got to my feet.

Gosh. This really was happening.

TWENTY-THREE

CLAY



Queen Imelda, Buttons, and I stood in the center of a circular chamber with high ceilings and windows. Much higher in the palace than anywhere else I'd seen.

Funny. You have to go up before you can go down. At least, I assumed we were going down. Who bloody knew?

It was too high to see much. The river and buildings below were minuscule, like one of those LED Christmas villages, their tiny existence twinkling away.

Pretty.

At the center of the room was an indent of a circle, plus a pole with a red button at the top. The queen pushed it, a soft buzz vibrating through the soles of my boots. The elevator was on its way.

Arcana was awake, waiting for me to summon the Mark and kill these two demons. Burn this palace to the ground.

Not yet...

Buttons/James wore the same outfit as me, my doppelganger aside from his button eyes, reminding me again that we were twins.

Damn.

The queen wore gold and looked amazing as always.

“The trials will begin as soon as you step off the elevator,” she said. “I’m not sure what you will endure because those of us who took part experienced different things, always tripping at the last hurdle.” She smiled. “But not my dear sons.”

We weren’t her dear anything. She didn’t care about us. She didn’t love us. Even if there was love buried under her menacing shell, I didn’t want it. My mum died a long time ago. As far as I was concerned, I missed that boat to have a mum. It hurt, sure, but I’d resolved to live a life without her. The reality of Queen Imelda changed nothing. The more I thought about it, the more it failed to bother me.

Not my family. Not my life.

Made things easier for when I hit the kill switch.

Kill, Arcana whispered.

Sometimes sunshine had to freeze.

Buttons stood next to me, too close, and as still as stone. He didn’t say anything. His buttons locked onto the circle.

“You will make me proud,” the queen carried on.

Uh-huh. Whatever.

She walked over to Buttons first, touched his face. “My warrior of sacrifice.” Then she did the same to me, saying, “My magical son.”

Get your hands off me.

I didn’t hate much, not that hard. But I hated her. Nothing about her, aside from her fashion game, was good. Nothing warm or nurturing. Okay, so Tae resembled an ice cube now

and again, but he wasn't a creature of cruel shadows. Not like her. The things she'd done... The children, the mothers...

The elevator arrived, a glass tube with room for two.

"And so it begins," she said. The glass cylinder slid open with a hiss. "Get in."

A tremor rocked the tower, dust sprinkling our heads from above.

"What was that?" I said, hurrying over to the windows.

It might be tiny down there from this POV, but the river wasn't supposed to be green.

"What... Oh, shit."

A demon hurried into the room. "Your Majesty," she said. "I must evacuate you immediately."

The queen's body language radiated with deadliness. "What is happening?" she demanded.

"The river..." I said. "It's green."

No. No. No. No. No.

"River monsters," the demon said. "It's bad."

"I have to get back—" Before I could continue, she had me by the throat. Moved faster than Tae.

She slammed me into the wall. "Don't even think about it."

"But—"

She crushed my neck harder. "I didn't wait all this time for you to go running off. No. You're going down to the trials. Both of you."

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Buttons said, his voice completely void of feeling.

She put me down, keeping me pressed to the wall. “Fuck with me, Clay, and the vampire dies first.”

The room shook again.

The queen let my neck go.

“I just—”

She slapped me hard across the face. “Nothing. You are nothing but my instruments of power. Know your place.”

Again, I tried to speak, clearly bloody stupid.

I got another slap, pain exploding in my jaw. Not a good sensation for someone about to be tested in a trial.

“I tried to be nice, to show you comfort,” she said, despite the second, more violent tremor in the room. “How foolish of me.”

“But—”

She didn’t slap me again. “I thought we had a deal, Clay. You do this, you get to keep your friends alive. Obey and don’t suffer.”

Well, she showed her true colors big time. Unfeeling in all aspects. I wasn’t shocked, but she was a wall I couldn’t get past.

“Condition your weapons to be deadly, sharper, destructive,” she said. “I’ll remember that when you return.”

A life without squishy beds and Fizz and Tae and my friends.

No. She’d never get them, never have me. She’d be losing things herself when I cut her the fuck down. God, I couldn’t

wait to smash through her bullshit protections and wipe the arrogance off her face.

My hands curled into fists. She noticed, grinned.

“Get in that elevator now,” she demanded. “Or your cat becomes my supper.”

“You touch her and—”

“Careful, Clay. I have the power here.”

“Don’t hurt her.” I just had to keep talking. Damn me!

“Please don’t misunderstand me for a demon who gives a shit,” she returned. “Get onboard. Now.”

Shit. I’d done what I wasn’t supposed to do—rebelled against the status quo. Now I’d fucked it for Fizz and Tae. No. I hadn’t. If I obeyed now, she’d leave them alone. But why? What reason did she have? She could kill them and start conditioning me into—

Stop!

I stepped onto the elevator, my neck and cheeks throbbing. Nothing broken. She hit hard, but I felt her hold back. Her full force would’ve probably taken my head off.

With no choice left and dread an iron ball in my belly, I stepped into the glass cylinder. It shook as more dust rained down from above.

Toxic rivers. Monsters.

Oh, God.

Buttons stepped on.

The rivers. Tae and Fizz and the others. They were going to get hurt. Oh, shit. Nope. Not having it. I’d take my chances

and save them. Arcana was mine to use. Demons were scared of Arcana.

Tremors...

Fuck it.

As I went to dart out of the elevator and summon the Mark, the door sealed me in. I hit the glass.

“Wait!” I called, slamming against the barrier.

But the demon hurried the queen out of the room. The elevator beginning its descent.

“Fuck!” I roared, thumping on the glass. “Fuck!” I screamed, my lungs burning. “No! Let me the fuck out!”

Blood poured over my lips. I called the Mark to life, the pentagram blazing across the glass floor. “Let me out!”

But it was too late.

TWENTY-FOUR

TAE



I burst into Archie and Victoria's room with Fizz in my arms. The palace shook violently, a series of muffled explosions in the distance.

The large river flowed green.

"What do we do?" Archie asked.

I went to the window, looking down at the toxic green river. Monsters broke the surface, climbing out of the water. Demons got to work, fighting back. But so many monsters were coming. Too many.

"You get out of here."

I spun to see Phillipe. He closed the door behind him. The room rumbled, the ceiling cracking. He staggered forward, keeping his balance.

"The situation has nosedived," he added.

An understatement.

"Can we still do this?" I asked, not caring about our words being out loud.

"Yes. But we have to move now." The demon fished a black key from his pocket. "Here."

I took it, handed it to Victoria. "Get home."

She looked down at it. “But you—”

“I said go.” I handed Fizz to Archie.

“Mate, I can’t leave you here,” he said, backing off.

“Take her, Archie. Be safe. This isn’t a fight you can survive.”

“And you can?”

“I’m ordering you to go,” I said.

“I can’t.”

“Go, Archie. Don’t waste time. I have to get to Clay.”

“But—”

“Listen to the man,” Victoria intervened. “He’s built for this shit, not us. No matter how many hours you spend in the gym, you’re human. He can’t be worrying about us, even if we worry about him.” She was shaking.

“But—”

“You can’t die,” I said, grateful for my lawyer’s lecture. “I have to know you’re safe.”

“But—”

“Please, Archie.” I held Fizz out to him. “I can do this, but not if I have to worry about you. And I know you’re strong and good at your job. Any other time I’d have you with me. But not here.”

Archie was good at what he did, could hold his own, and cleaned up messes like no other. As Victoria liked to say, they were both tough as old boots. The most trustworthy and loyal humans I had the pleasure of knowing. But they weren’t vampires. They didn’t move like I moved.

I knew Archie understood that, but his loyalty to me made him stubborn.

Fizz's meow seemed to soften him.

"Okay," he said. "I'll go."

"Thank you."

The ceiling split further.

"Come on," Phillipe stepped in. "We'll miss the window. Clay's already in the elevator."

How do I get to him?

Archie took Fizz and got close to Victoria.

"I'll see you back in London," I said.

"You better," they both said at the same time.

I smiled, giving Fizz one last fuss of her head. "I'll see you soon," I told her.

Meow.

"An amazing holiday is on the horizon," I added.

"Good," my lawyer said. "It better be somewhere hot with hot men and too many cocktails."

"I hate leaving you," Archie whispered.

Victoria linked arms with him and turned the head of the exit key. Their bodies blinked out of the room. Back to London. Safe. Out of here.

Okay. Now I could focus.

I followed Phillipe out into the corridor, hurrying through the palace as walls and ceilings and floors cracked from the violent tremors. The green of the toxic rivers lit up the dark

outside. Demons ran past us, paying no attention, too busy in a panic or running to join the fighting.

One even declared, “We can’t let them breach the palace!”

The corridor collapsed under a heavy boom. Rock and debris flew at us. I grabbed Phillipe, leaping backward. His body changed under me within half a second. A black shell engulfed us. We hit the ground and rolled, a constant banging outside the confines of the darkness he held us in.

We stopped moving, him panting, me waiting.

“Interesting skill,” I said.

“And convenient.” He dropped the shell. It rolled back to vanish into his body, bearing similar markings to a common garden snail.

I jumped to my feet, scanning the ruins of the corridor. Debris was scattered everywhere, the area completely broken and exposed to the elements. We were at ground level, the river having risen, not stopping. It would soon flood this space.

But that was the least of our worries.

“Oh no,” Phillipe said, looking up.

Looming above us, standing at about fifty feet tall, toxic river churning around its ankles, was a river monster. Far bigger than the ones I’d encountered. A luminous, metallic-like green creature with a sexless humanoid body, its large green eyes staring ahead.

Brad Smith stood on its left shoulder along with Quentin Dawn. Both of them were fixed in place with heavy metal boots, Quentin holding onto some chains like horse reins.

An interesting turn of events.

TWENTY-FIVE

CLAY



The elevator suddenly moved quickly, plummeting through the dark. I stopped screaming and banging on the glass, instead trying to keep the food in my belly as it lurched in the descent.

Yikes.

Of course, Buttons remained still and calm and did nothing but stare at me. No nausea for him.

When the elevator began to slow down again, my despair began to rise again.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” I wiped at my nose, fresh blood leaking again.

“You,” he said.

“Stop.”

As if he’d stop. “There is nowhere else to look, Brother.”

“The floor’s there.”

“I don’t care for the floor.”

“And I don’t care for your buttons on me.”

Silence.

“Well? Look away.” I said, waving my hand at him snottily.

“The Bright One,” he responded, angling his head to the side.

I hated it when he did that.

“Bright One. Magical. You have *her* eye more.”

“Stop talking.”

“The master of Arcana.”

“Hardly.”

His arms moved to rest across his chest in a death pose.
“The glory...”

“Are we going down that road again?” I asked.

“The usurper road,” he said. “The one to take my glory.”

“You can have it. I just want this over with so I can—”

He turned his head, sniffing the air. Nothing but darkness rushed past us, but he pressed his face to the glass.

“Can you see anything?”

“I smell. I hear. Can’t you?”

“No.” I looked, saw zilch.

“A sign of the outcome?”

“What? That you’re already in favor of winning?” I chuffed. “Dream on. It’s not over until it’s over.” God. Listen to me. I only wanted the throne’s power to use it against the demons. Not the glory. Sure felt like I wanted it, though, a new craving coming to life.

Mine...

I rested my back against the glass, pinching my bleeding nose. Thinking. What if I was the one to take it, the one with the watered-down blood? It'd show them up. It would really make me the Bright One. Better than them, better than any other creature. The ultimate power.

No... That's not me...

But it can be...

Oh, gosh.

If the queen wanted to shove me into a trial, I'd give her a show. James was the lesser prince. Who gave a crap about the experiments he suffered or how much blood he'd spilled? He was a wanker, his Arcana pitiful. I'd leveled buildings, shown what I was made of. I lingered on the edges of utter destruction, ready to break this realm apart level by level.

You should've left me alone, Mother...

And she called herself a queen? She was a fly to my mite.

Kill them all...

I caught myself stumbling in dark places, dragged myself back into the light. Gosh. There I went again, going too far, scaring myself. I wanted to hurt the demons, sure, to protect my world and stop the incoming suffering to my world. But not at the expense of my sanity.

I am wrong...

Arcana should not be here...

I just wanted Fizz and Kylie Minogue and for Tae to tell me I was his boyfriend.

Okay. New plan. Ha! There wasn't one. The only way to stop Buttons was to not let him get his hands on the breaking

power. *He* was the worst-case scenario, not me. I'd, well, I'd deal with it, I'd fight to be good. And win. Selling myself short didn't get things done, only made me panic. I'd work through it, use it to my advantage, and put an end to the madness.

Maybe have ice cream after.

Rivers. Toxic rivers in the demon realm. Damn.

"I'll save you all," I whispered to Fizz, to Tae and his friends. My triangle of trust.

Time to be strong.

Music. A strange tune. *Plinky plonk...* Carnival music? Oh, and the smell of popcorn. Huh?

"Can you hear carnival music?" I asked Buttons.

He grinned. "I like carnivals."

Creepy git. "Can you smell the popcorn?"

"Yes, yes. Delicious."

"It must be part of the trial." I groaned. "I hope it doesn't involve clowns. I hate clowns."

Buttons didn't answer.

The smell and sound grew louder and stronger. Candy floss scents wafted around the elevator, some other mechanical sounds joining in. My pulse went wild, my hands opening and closing. I shook them, drew long breaths, shaking out the fear only for it to come rushing back.

"This is it," I said.

The elevator crawled now, slowly making its final journey.

“The end,” Buttons responded and drove one of his hand spikes into my stomach.

TWENTY-SIX

TAE



S maller river monsters continued to climb out of the water, dashing off in various directions. Demonic screams and booms rocked the night, the monsters themselves operating in silence.

The red energy of Synth magic swirled around Brad's fingers, yet he wasn't himself. The whites of his eyes were exposed, his head hanging slightly too forward. Alive, not in control. My vampire senses took in the finer details from down here, saw the drool oozing from the corners of his mouth, heard his slow heartbeat.

"Well, look who it is," Quentin announced beside the witch.

"We have to run," Phillipe whispered. "We don't have time for this."

I growled up at the demon prick chuckling on the monster's shoulder. He'd clearly come to fight his queen, his ashen skin covered in weeping sores and wounds to show his painful disobedience. A red scar divided his face, his left eye black rather than the usual demonic white. Thin, wispy black hair rippled on his scalp. The real Quentin Dawn was on display, not hiding behind fairy face creams provided by his wife.

Grindle's sister.

Those creams would pose a problem when it came to hunting him down later. And it would be later. He had a great upper hand here.

Prick. As much as I wanted to climb up there and rip out his tongue, this wasn't my fight. Clay was. Burying the throne might help Quentin's cause, but one problem at a time. First the queen's ambitions, then his.

How Brad had ended up here, clearly in the demon's thrall, he wasn't part of my fight either. I harbored no duty to help him. He was the enemy as much as his demon master.

But how did this happen?

"Come on!" Phillipe hissed.

"Where's the star of the show?" Quentin asked.

A growl rumbled in my chest in response.

"At his trials already? Hiding in the palace." Quentin's grin revealed his broken teeth, the wounds on his face splitting. "I have decided he is nothing more than a burden. Too chaotic, too dangerous. I don't need a weapon that can fire against me."

"If you lay one hand on him, I'll—"

"Sorry, I have no interest in conversing with a vampire." He roared with laughter. "I'm far too important for bloodsuckers." From somewhere, demons laughed. They were out of view but there for him. I even thought I heard Tasmin.

"We have to go!" Phillipe seethed.

I reacted instantly, following Phillipe back the way we came, taking the left at a junction where we'd initially gone right. I kept my eyes on the windows, demons running past, the river churning, the big monster standing there.

What hand did Brad have in this? Magical control of the monster, under the orders of Quentin?

The monster swung its arms downward, smashing the corridor behind us. I lurched forward into a roll, coming out of it and diving into Phillipe. We tumbled into an alcove as huge rocks flew past seconds later.

He gasped. We got back to our feet, covered in dust. He carried on running, taking us up some stairs.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Longer route,” he answered. “We’ve no choice. I wanted you to meet Clay at the end of the elevator ride, but now that’s changed.”

“Where now?”

“We can still get to him, but his location will depend on his success in the trials. He’ll either be outside of the throne chamber if he fails or inside if he succeeds. Come on.”

Up and up and up, still with a view of the river and the huge monster attacking the palace. Its heavy hands smashed through stone, rocking the structure, with no blows in the direction we ran in for now.

Demons attacked the beast, Quentin’s laughter a booming sound. Showing his true, destructive colors, was he?

I’ll stop you...

“We will rebuild this realm!” Quentin cried, his voice amplified for all to hear. “Those of you who are too scared to go against the queen must reconsider. Flee the Royal Heart now while you can. Summon your bravery to run, to hide, to let this be done, and await a new fight. The fight for all demonkind.”

Civil wars were awful things, as were all wars. I'd witnessed many, experienced firsthand the suffering and the hollow hell of endless bloodshed. War was the stain of existence, an undying cycle tearing through history. There could never be true peace because everyone had their own ideas of what was best, their own issues, their own lusts for power. The demon queen and Quentin Dawn were no different, both tyrants.

"Quentin Dawn!" I heard the queen roar.

"Your Majesty!" he cried.

I spotted her through a window. We were higher than the monster now. She stood in a chariot on the riverbank opposite the palace, pulled by a golden horse, demons surrounding her with weapons drawn.

Was she holding a wand of some kind? It looked metal, a curved thing with a black glass flower at the tip.

A fairy device?

Grindle...

We came to the highest point of the tower, crossing a wide floor to reach another set of stairs, heading down this time. I kept my eyes on the image outside the slanted windows, tuned into the action as it whizzed past in fractured scenes.

"I am so glad to see your lovely face again before the end comes," Quentin said.

"There is an ending coming," Queen Imelda replied, her voice much fainter than his. She didn't have a microphone or whatever it was he used, but my ears still picked her up clear enough.

“I love you, my queen,” the demon proclaimed. “I always have, and I always will. But your ambitions are a folly, the old ways antiquated. I blame you and those before you for the suffering we endure. For the river problems, for the decay in so many of the realm’s levels.”

We reached the torso of the monster. I glanced up to see Quentin spit blood, clutching his heart, wincing with pain from his words to the queen.

“Blame is easy,” she responded. “Taking responsibility for your own actions is harder.”

“You’ve failed to provide for the lesser demons,” he said. “You have the power to make the Wardens better, but you would rather dream of Earth. I have to remove it from your dreams, take your power.”

He couldn’t kill her, though.

“And make me your prisoner?”

“Yes. You will be comfortable. Surrender and make it easy for yourself. The last thing I want is to hurt you more than I have to.” He sighed. “The lake is a final resort.”

Lake?

She smiled. “Then you will know nothing but endless suffering.”

What were they talking about?

“We’re almost there,” Phillipe said.

“Then the lake it will be,” Quentin said.

But the queen fired her wand, a terrific blast of obsidian energy ripping through the air. It blew a hole in the monster’s

chest, green ichor bursting from the wound. It swayed on its feet, Quentin and Brad with it.

“You bitch!” the demon barked, grabbing the witch.

The queen fired again, taking off the monster’s head. It popped like an egg, spraying green innards everywhere. Quentin and Brad were gone.

“No!” the familiar voice of Tasmin cried.

Demons charged from hidden places, coming for the queen. She unleashed her weapon on them, her soldiers charging at the growing army.

The monster tumbled forward, crashing into the river. The ground tremored, green water sprayed in violent fountains. It didn’t hit the queen, bouncing off invisible walls around her. But it hit the windows of this tower, fizzing on the glass, eating through it.

At the last window of the tower, I saw Quentin again, rising into the air on a cloud of red mist with Brad fixed to his side. Then the fight was lost to my sight as the explosions started, and we vanished into a deeper level beneath the tower.

“Oh my,” Phillipe said. “This is not what I expected to happen.”

He stopped before a heavy metal door, unlocking it with a key.

“What were they talking about?” I asked. “This lake?”

He dragged the door open, slipping inside. “There’s a frozen lake in Level 666 where demon kings and queens sleep, their power gone. A demon monarch either steps down willingly or is taken to the lake and buried in the ice and the

dark forever. There is no exit from the ice as we understand it.”

“Quentin will take her there, if he wins.”

He closed the door behind us, locking it. “He will. Just like she did to her father.”

“Is that so?”

“She wanted power. He wouldn’t give it to her. So she took action. Quentin is doing the same thing. He has held many meetings with Her Majesty and her counsel, coming away with greater dissidence every time. They disagree so profoundly.”

Demons weren’t so different from humans and their spats.

A tunnel lit by small glowing stones in the black walls stretched ahead. I followed the demon in silence, muffled sounds of battle coming from above aside, twisting and turning through the murkiness until we met a female demon.

“Is it safe?” Phillipe asked.

She nodded. “All clear.”

“Thank you.”

We moved on, meeting more demons, Phillipe asking the same question and receiving the same response.

The tunnel ended at a large chamber with three more tunnels, their big entrances waiting as dark mouths. Rail tracks vanished into the shadows of each, the middle track playing host to a small locomotive. Black with a steam chimney, white tufts pouring out of it. The chamber reeked of coal.

A demon stood in the driver’s cab, burning the coal, prepping the train.

“You use coal in the demon realm?” I asked.

“For service trains, yes,” he said. “Not for the royal trains. Too offensive for royal noses.”

“I see.” I approached the locomotive. Its black livery was battered, worn, a train that’d seen a long working life.

“This is how we move goods around the levels,” Phillippe said. “It’s a hard-working network that doesn’t get much appreciation. How else do these demons think they get their stores stocked and their bellies full?”

I didn’t answer that, done with lessons of the demon realm. “And this will take me to Clay?”

“Not the train, no,” he replied.

“Then why are we here?” I countered impatiently.

“From here, we can access the service elevators to Level 1000. There are demons appointed access to maintain the throne chamber and its surrounding areas, to make sure everything runs smoothly for access to the trials and the throne chamber. We had to go slightly longer than I planned, but we’re here.” He flashed me a red key. “This is the access key, and it took a lot of seedy behavior on my part to acquire.”

“Thank you for getting it,” I said.

He nodded and spoke with the train driver.

“All clear.” He pulled another key from his pocket—small and gold. “This one is for your collar.”

I’d forgotten about that.

“Crouch down,” he said.

I came down to an accessible level for the demon. He slipped the key into the device at my neck, twisting the key.

After several clicks, it came open, my skin tingling with the loss of the weight.

“Thank you,” I said, rubbing at my neck.

He took the collar to the train, handing it to the driver. “Now, let’s get moving. As soon as we’re down there, we’ll find Clay. But we have to move quickly. Once I set the explosive, it’s over.” He pointed to the left tunnel. “Come on.”

A figure stepped out of the dark, blocking the entrance, his face hidden by a hood.

Killer.

Isaiah.

TWENTY-SEVEN

CLAY



The elevator doors hissed open. Buttons gave me a look with his button eyes and stepped out into the dark alleyway beyond.

Carnival music rang in the air, the popcorn and candy floss smells thick and cloying. Lights hinted to more at the end of the alley, suggesting a carnival waited just around the corner for those not bleeding on the floor like me.

Bollocks.

Man, the pain in my guts. The blood. He really got me good. How much damage? Fuck, I couldn't tell. I called up my healing touch, patching myself up. The spell eased the pain but didn't repair the damage. A quick patch-up was enough to get me on my feet, though.

Start the clock...

Shit.

Long, deep breaths. I applied more of the healing touch, layering on the magic.

"I can do this," I said. "Cry about it later."

I looked down, inspecting the wound. No more bleeding. Good.

More deep breaths, steeling myself against the dull throbbing.

“I can do this,” I told myself again. I kept up the mantra as I put one foot in front of the other, stepping out into the alleyway.

A dark sky of blue stars and a bright, full moon spread above me, hints of a city beyond the tall alleyway walls. I caught glimpses of tall buildings cresting the limits of my point of view. But no city sounds, only the carnival music.

Just keep on bringing the creepy.

With each step, I gained speed, adrenaline driving me forward. Had to love adrenaline and its placebo powers. No need to lean on the wet walls to steady myself. I had this.

It'd been raining here, the metallic scent of rain beneath the layers of the carnival smells. I walked through shallow puddles, a drain grate in the ground sucking away a tiny river of rainwater.

“Where are you?” I whispered, walking closer to the spill of light at the corner. “I’ll kill you.”

Whatever lens you looked at Buttons with, be it as James and his fucked-up life, or the serial killer, maybe both, the results were always the same. He was an arsewipe who wanted the Throne of Vines and for me to be dead. End of. And for that, he deserved my demon-killing bolts and an arse kicking.

I’ll find a way to kill you...

I turned the corner, immediately walking into a street. Empty terraced houses greeted me, some half-collapsed, a street of ruins, with bones littering the road and pavement. Apart from the section I faced, the bones were cleared,

shoveled like snow to give me access to the other side of the street. To where a park waited with a massive carnival on it.

Oh, gosh.

Red and yellow lights danced in a horseshoe arch signaling the entrance to the carnival, the meat of it sparkling through the trees, a huge red and white circus tent looming at the far end, a Ferris Wheel turning beside it.

I crossed the road, eyes on the bones, making it to the other side without some bone monster leaping up to cut my head off.

“Let it try,” I muttered to myself.

Riddled with fear and adrenaline, I walked beneath the horseshoe arch, boots squelching in wet grass. A wooden sign on a spike sat next to the arch, driven into the ground. In red letters, it said:

It’s not the winning but the taking part that counts.

I beg to differ.

There were rides laid out everywhere from bumper cars to a ghost train. Between them were arcade tents packed with games, popcorn stands, a candy floss booth, and various other games tents of the shoot things and win a teddy bear variety. All with no people and no staff. Just me and, I presumed, Buttons wandering around. I couldn’t see him.

Let the trial be on the bumper cars, and I’d knock ten tons of shite out of him.

“Hello!” a voice called.

I yelped, spinning to meet the sound. My stomach shrieked with pain. I sucked in air through gritted teeth, mouth dropping open as I clocked who’d spoken.

A felt clown puppet in red and white dungarees with crazy orange hair, waving at me from a games tent. He danced across a counter holding water pistols, calling me over.

“Come on, Clay!” The puppet sounded like a little boy. “Come and test yourself.”

Applying a touch more healing magic to myself, I went over.

Each pistol sat in slots attached to tubes, all different colors. Beyond the guns was a wall of stationary yellow rubber ducks, a shimmering wall of water behind them. Hanging from the ceiling, and tied to the walls, were the prizes. Stuffed toys, plastic toys, even a few bags of fish swimming in water.

“I thought those were against the law,” I said, pointing at a fish. Then checked myself. “Sorry, not got my rational brain on.”

The puppet giggled, performing a cartwheel. “Funny, funny. Tell me another.”

“I don’t have another.”

The clown waddled up to me, pointing one of his three beige fingers at my head. “Then let’s get down to business.”

Creepy clown music began to play, the ducks moving across the wall in a continuous loop.

“Shoot ten ducks, and you win a prize,” the perky clown said. He smiled, revealing white felt teeth.

I shuddered. “I don’t really have time to play games.”

“No? Is that so? What a shame for you, but not for me.” He jumped up and down. “Hooray! A new friend!”

Bloody clowns. “What are you talking about?”

He stopped jumping. “You see, Clay, there are rules in the trials. If you don’t play, you stay until I say. That could be a few hours, a few days, or even a few years.”

It’s not the winning but the taking part that counts.

The sign made sense.

“Erm... I’ll play.”

“Woohoo!” The clown did a backflip.

“Give me a gun.”

He giggled. “Take your pick. What’s your favorite color?” His voice deepened on that last part, bringing the ominous energy.

I swallowed. “I think I’ll take the pink.”

“Good choice.”

So, I drew the pink gun. “I shoot the ducks?”

“Yep. Ten ducks.”

“In a row?”

“No. Just ten. Make sure you knock them off.”

“Okay.” My hands were shaking. I mentally slapped myself to calm down. “You don’t know where the other guy is, do you?” I tried.

“Focus on you,” the clown countered.

Right.

Curbing my shakiness as best I could, I lifted the gun, aiming it at the ducks. They weren’t moving too fast or too slow. I so had this.

I fired a powerful jet of water, hitting a duck. It fell off, disappearing into the wall of water.

My chest screamed with sheer agony, as if I'd just been hit with something super heavy. I staggered back, all the wind knocked out of me.

“What...” I managed, needing a moment to gather myself and work through the stomach pain, too. “What the... hell?”

The chest pain didn't ease.

Giggling, the clown actually twerked as he spoke. “Hurts, doesn't it?”

“Yes. Why?” I straightened, rubbing at the pain.

“Share the pain,” he said. “Ducks and shooter sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s... Oh, you know the song.” He giggled and cartwheeled over to the other side of the tent.

Share the pain.

I fired again, hitting another duck. This time, the blow to my chest sent me tumbling to the wet ground, arse meeting it hard. My stomach wound split open, and I screamed. Vicious agony ripped through my insides, spreading through my body like liquid heat.

“Fuck!” I roared.

The clown giggled.

“This is fucked!” I added for good measure, rolling onto my side.

Oh. My God.

In the distance, I heard Buttons scream.

He's suffering, too.

It took me a good few minutes to get to my knees, applying the healing spell to my stomach again. Another

couple of minutes, and I was back to my feet, ready for duck number three.

“This is madness,” I said.

“Keep on going for the grand prize!” the clown cried.

No need to be so bloody cheerful...

The creepy music played on as I lifted the gun.

Oh, shit.

I fired, missed a duck. No pain.

“Try again!” the clown sang repeatedly, twerking—a disturbing thing to see a puppet get down like that.

I did try again, hitting another duck.

The force striking my body sent me flying. I hit the ground with a scream, rolling across the grass, crashing into a popcorn stand. The glass box opened, spilling hot popcorn over me.

“Shit...” I wheezed.

My ribs were either broken or bruised, blood pouring over my lips, more leaking from my stomach.

This time, with copious amounts of healing magic applied, it was ten minutes before I could move.

There had to be a spell to stop this. If I timed it right and cast either the mist spell or the wall, I’d not take a hit.

Ready to go again, I staggered back to shoot.

“Go, Clay! Go, Clay!” the clown cried.

Oh, piss off.

I focused, readied my spell, and fired.

The mist spell came up just in time, turning my body to fog. I felt the blow pass through me, causing no harm.

“Yes!”

The clown cartwheeled over, frowning. He looked super mean and horror movie-like. “No, no, no. This will not do. You’re trying to cheat.”

“I’m trying to not get hurt,” I said.

He shook his head. “Cheating is not allowed in the trials. There are no special circumstances. Now, what to do.”

Oh, crap.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know.”

The clown puppet thought about it, his hand on his chin. “Hmmm. I’ve got it!”

“What?”

“You lose a duck, this one you’ve just shot not counting as a hit.”

“What?”

“Fair is fair. You lose a duck.” He was happy again. “Two ducks down, eight to go .”

Bollocks!

TWENTY-EIGHT

TAE



“**W**e meet again, Tae Frost.”

Images of my wife and son flared behind my eyes, dead and headless...

The crimson mist descended.

I charged at him, throwing a lightning-quick punch. He blocked me, none of my blows landing as we danced, spinning around the chamber in a flurry of battle.

“I said it before, and I’ll say it again,” he said. “You’re so sprightly. You have more energy than your dead family.” He spoke with a sardonic tone.

Prick.

Fighting harder, intensifying my attack, he continued to block me. I wouldn’t relent, wouldn’t end this. He was here, right now, after all these years.

Blood. Death. My wife, my son. Victims. I failed them...

Failed you...

Forgive me...

He clicked his fingers, his power sending me to my knees. I got up, trying to sweep his legs out from under him. He clicked again, spinning me away with a shove of energy. My

slight resistance to some magic, a vampiric trait, didn't work against his demonic skill. But that didn't stop me. Nothing would stop me.

Isaiah almost landed a blow of his own, swinging a punch at my face. I leaped out of his trajectory, rushing back into the fray.

Failed...

Blood...

Cannot kill him...

I saw *her* face, *his* face. They ran across white sands, a sparkling azure ocean their backdrop. Full of joy and fun, the two pieces of my heart laughing, jumping, skipping, calling for me to keep up.

"I'm coming..." I whispered.

Every part of them lost, gone forever. Memories were all I had, the only comforts, nothing more than air and images. I longed to hold them, to kiss them, to run on that beach again.

A strike to my side. Isaiah.

End him.

I grabbed the demon's fist before it met my face. Twisted his arm, snapped it, then his other. He groaned, kicked me in the shin. I kicked back, breaking his shin bone. The force sent him to his knees. With vicious speed, I broke all of his fingers before he could click again.

His scream was delicious.

End him.

I swam in crimson seas. Nothing else mattered but broken bones and suffering for the killer demon. He may not die, but

he would suffer. He would know nothing but endless pain. I'd take him to a dark place, just him and I, the light of the blue stars never touching him again, nor me. A vessel of torment, a nightmare for him. Isaiah must pay the price for his crimes.

I had eternity to collect the toll.

Clay...

I broke the surface of my inner seas.

Clay...

Time was running out.

A cry in my ear. Blood. I smelled demon blood.

“You traitorous fuck!” Isaiah cried.

Phillipe stood behind the demon prince, holding a knife. He'd stabbed Isaiah, the weapon buried between his shoulder blades.

The demon servant trembled, wide-eyed. “I'm sorry...”

“You'll pay...” the prince warned.

I yanked off his hood, ready to see his face for the first time.

Pale, white eyes. Greasy black hair to his chin, stubble covering his jaw. Handsome, resembling his mother. He grinned at me, black blood oozing through his teeth.

“Look at you,” he said. “So brave.”

I grabbed him by the neck.

“Do what you must, vampire. You cannot withstand the might of this realm. You're nothing but a blip, a flea on a magnificent beast. Whatever you do, whatever you believe, it has no merit.”

I didn't engage, didn't so much as breathe as I twisted his neck, splitting the flesh. I removed his head, his spinal cord coming with it. Black blood sprayed me, Phillippe jumping back in horror as the prince howled.

The demon in the train gasped, his hand over his mouth.

I held their prince's head aloft, his blood running down my arm. He'd stopped screaming, though clearly in a terrible amount of pain.

"This is much less than you deserve," I said.

Despite his predicament, he managed to chuckle. "Oh, Tae. This will never be over for as long as I live. This isn't death. This isn't peace for you. As long as I remain living, so does your desire for revenge." He opened his mouth, moaning in agony. "I live. I still see the living world. I am more than *them*. Your precious family dead, lesser than me."

I smashed his head into the wall until it was nothing but pulp, a destroyed watermelon. Bone and gore attached to a spinal cord.

"Try living now," I told the mess.

"Oh my..." Phillippe said. "Oh my."

Isaiah would be whole again, I was sure of it. But for now, he was nothing but gore.

I looked up at Phillippe. "Show me where to go."

"Oh my."

"Now."

He was a leaf in a hurricane. "I have to leave this realm."

"Fine," I replied icily, drifting in emptiness. "Get me to Clay first."

“I—”

“Now.”

“Y-yes. Of course. Follow.... Follow me.” He glanced at the train driver, then led me into the tunnel.

I wiped bloodied hands on my clothes.

Not dead. Isaiah was still alive.

The kernel burned.

This isn't enough.

TWENTY-NINE

CLAY



Eight ducks down, a broken leg, a broken hand, cuts all over my face and arms, and gouges in my back. Blood leaked out of me in so many places, my body nothing but a conduit of pain and suffering.

Two more to go.

After what felt like forever on the ground, I managed to get to my feet yet again. I leaned against the counter, woozy from the blood loss. Fading fast.

I fired. Missed. Fired again. Missed. Fired and hit duck number nine, my teeth smashing in, my body hitting the ground again.

I didn't sob from the pain. Well, not since duck number five. What was the point? It wasn't ebbing yet, not until I hit all ten.

Fingers crossed, I got my teeth back.

Spitting teeth and blood, I lingered on the ground for a while. Time ticked by, the carnival singing its song.

I got to my feet, grabbing the edge of the counter, pulling myself up as far as I could go. Aimed my pink gun and missed. I slipped back to the ground, banging my head on the edge of the counter. Took the blow, heaved myself up again.

Come on. One more to go...

Fired and missed, fired and missed.

This is for Fizz and Tae and the world...

Hit the tenth duck, my kneecaps giving up, my other hand snapping backward. All my fingers broke, the wrist bone letting off a loud crack. I hit the dirt, smacking my head off the ground.

“Congratulations!” the clown declared as I drifted toward unconsciousness. “You’re a winner!”

“Doesn’t feel... like it...”

Before I fell into the blissful dark, the pain vanished. Not in my stomach, only what the ducks had dished out.

Slowly, I got to my feet, plastering on the healing magic to my belly wound. The levels of that spell were beginning to dwindle. Soon I’d be screwed.

“You passed the first trial,” the clown said. “Now pick your prize.”

I went with it, so worn down by the whole carnival saga already. “I’ll take the starfish.”

“Excellent choice.”

The starfish appeared in my hand, soft and velvety with googly eyes. “Thanks.”

Not the kind of prize I’d been expecting, but then there was nothing but toys and bags of fish.

“Clever Clay advances to the next part.” The clown music stopped, the ducks coming to a halt.

“I—”

The clown fell over, no longer dancing.

“Oh.”

Now what? I scanned my surroundings, trying to decide whether to walk on or wait to be told what to do. I opted for the former, happy to get away from the damn ducks.

Slowly, I passed the tents, aiming for the big top at the end of this lane of carnival, erm, things. Maybe the big tent was the next trial.

As I walked, I listened out for Buttons. I passed a claw machine constantly missing the goodies it tried to grab. Ha! Typical claw machine. I looked beyond it into the arcade tent, so many things going off at once. Penny drop games, racing games, even *Space Invaders*. They let off their bleeps and annoying music, bathed in bright light from megawatt bulbs above.

“Let’s play.” The clown puppet was back. Taller, about my size, twerking between me and the rest of the carnival.

“Play what?” I asked.

“Hot, hot, hot!” he cried, performing one of his cartwheels all the way out of view.

“What?”

Heat at the back of my neck. I turned to see where it was coming from.

A huge man in a gimp mask, and I mean huge, sporting some medieval armor, stood there with a massive flamethrower. He exuded slasher movie vibes, set to burn everyone at Camp Whatever to a crisp. Heatwaves rippled off his body, the constant flame at the tip of his weapon flickering.

Oh, shit.

He roared and released a jet of fire into the air.

Double shit.

I ran, dropping the starfish toy. He followed, stomping heavily after me, roaring all the way. Fired the flamethrower, flames licking at my heels. I broke out into sweat in every corner, the heat kind of painful. Any closer, and I'd be barbecued.

My stomach wound split as I gathered speed. I patched it up, bearing against the agony, terrified of slipping over in the wet grass.

I did slip, staggering forward and landing on my hands. I turned as the arsewipe roared, rolling to avoid his fire. I went to cast a spell, stopped in fear of the consequences. What would they be? Have a limb charred for cheating?

I managed to get up and away, avoiding the fire again. Well, aside from the little flame on my left arm. I quickly beat it out, aiming for the big top.

“Run, run as fast as you can!” the clown sang somewhere off to the side. “Can you?”

My chaser bellowed my name in a terrifying growl.

Oh, gosh.

I glanced back. The carnival burned, the way back an inferno, and the flames were spreading across the tents, moving quickly. Wouldn't be long before it reached the main tent.

Ah, must be the name of the game. Don't get sizzled, and reach the big top before it went up.

Fine.

My legs pumped, boots splattering in the wet grass, my adrenaline an entity of its own. I pushed myself as hard as my body could take, jaw clenched, sweat running wild. Chewed up the distance, dodged the flames, activated my tunnel vision. Only one way out, only one solution.

The chaser gained on me, picking up its speed. I zigzagged, putting out fires on my arms, reaching round to slap some out on my back. Even my butt. On and on I went, the distance between me and the big top seeming to extend. No fair! Actually, it wasn't getting longer, only my desperation making it seem that way.

“Clay!” Chaser boomed.

“Fuck you!” I called back.

Almost there. Almost done. Where was Buttons? Already finished, parking his backside onto the thorny throne?

“Clay!”

The flames consuming the tents took over me as I approached the final stretch toward my goal. Racing, crackling. Chaser fired again, and I poured every drop of energy into my final speed run. I yelled, a real throaty cry. Now or never. If I fell, it was over.

I burst through the tent flaps, falling forward into a roll, landing hard on my back. My stomach protested, my chest tight as hell, but I'd made it.

“Wow...” I breathed, the words hurting.

I lay on my back on drier grass, gazing up at the red and white stripes of the tent ceiling. Trying to get my breath back, relying on my healing spell once again—not much of it left to use now.

Not to be defeated, once my breathing went from labored to proper, I got to my feet again. Determined to win.

“I can do this,” I told myself again.

Inside the big top, it looked like any other three-ring circus. In-the-round performance area with, well, three rings, sloped audience seating surrounding it. The plastic chairs were empty, alternating red and white and really grubby. Someone needed to come in with a cloth and some bleach.

I’d acquired myself a limp, so I limped toward the rings, trying to be quick about it.

The puppet burst through a beaded curtain from the backstage area, dancing his way over to the three rings. One was blue, one yellow, the other red.

“Welcome to the circus of your dreams,” the puppet said. “There are three rings here. Each one contains a gift and a consequence.”

“Okay.”

“Let me tell you what’s within each ring.” He cartwheeled to the blue one. “In here, is a ticket home, back to your life you were living before you came here.”

“Which life?” I asked.

“With the vampire, in his tower.”

“Raven Tower.”

“That’s right. You can go right back to it, along with your pussy cat and friends.”

“At what price?”

“You fail the trials, and every other human here in the demon realm dies.”

Gosh. Roy. “How many are there?”

He shook his head, giggling. “Stop trying to cheat.”

Okay, well, that was the blue ring ruled out.

The puppet danced over to the yellow ring. “Here we have a special ring, the most special of all.”

“Go on.”

He backflipped first. “Oh, I love this one. It’s full of answers. Every single answer you’ve ever wanted. From why Arcana is in your body to what will become of you in the future. And not just your future but everyone’s. You’d understand everything, every detail.”

“Tempting. But what’s the catch?”

“Your vampire dies.”

“Then let’s move on.” Easy.

Here came the red ring.

“The final ring,” he said. “This one is simple. Step into the ring and be taken to the throne.”

I waited for the consequence.

“If you choose this, your pussy cat dies.”

I knew that was coming. But wait...

“So every option screws someone over,” I said.

“You can walk away, Clay. Through the beaded curtain backstage. Then it’s over.”

“This is impossible,” I said. “I can’t choose any of these.”

“Are you sure? Everyone makes a choice.”

“These prices are too high,” I said.

“Then the curtain it is. Bye, bye.”

James couldn't win. That wasn't an option. But neither were these.

“I can't... I can't do this,” I said.

The puppet shrugged comically. “That's down to you. But the tent will die.”

“Huh?”

“This tent will die.”

“This tent?”

“It will die, a price paid for staying.”

“There's a price for hanging back?” I asked.

“Lost in the dark,” he replied.

Another one on the *nope* list.

“Tick tock, Clay.”

Shit. “But I can't pick any of these.”

“Five options. One for home, one for everything, one for the throne, one for goodbye, one for the dark.” He twerked as he spoke. “The universe exists on cause and effect. You cannot get anything for free. Maybe coffee refills, but you have to buy a coffee first. The first one is not a freebie. You have to choose, face the consequence.”

Yeah, thanks for that.

I stood before the rings, staring at them. Whatever I chose, someone died, or Buttons won. Damned if I do, damned if I didn't.

Those demons before me all walked away, failed the trials. Wouldn't they pay this toll either? It wasn't worth it. But they

didn't have the Buttons issue hanging over their heads. Him having the wall breaker power was like putting peanut butter on steak—just wrong.

The middle part of the seating on my left collapsed with a gunshot bang, making me jump. It sank into the ground, swallowed within seconds.

“It begins,” the clown said.

Piece by piece, the seating area sank, and I was running out of time. Pick a ring or walk through the curtain. Take something, give it all up, or get lost in the dark for God knew how long.

Enough thinking. There was an option, and it was the beaded curtain. It had to be. Those things offered so freely to me weren't mine to take. Not at the expense of life, as tempting as they were.

I may not be perfect because that word is bullshit, but I knew myself. I had morals and tried so hard to not be selfish. I was better than temptation, for the most part. Stick a naked Tae in the ring, and it'd be another story.

Let Buttons take the throne, then. I'd find a way to stop him because that was my job. Nothing was impossible. Life was full of loopholes.

Done. Decision made. With my anxiety tap dancing on my soul, but my morals intact, I limped over to the beaded curtain. Didn't look back, didn't question. I brushed those red beads aside and stepped into intense heat.

For a moment, I thought the flamethrower arsewipe was back, but then my brain caught up.

I stood in the chamber with the lava and the Throne of Vines.

Buttons stood beside me, the clown dancing before us.

Oh. My. Gosh.

THIRTY

CLAY



I glanced over at my twin, holding my stomach. It twinged in response to its attacker. He was covered in cuts and mud, his breathing shallow. Exhausted.

He turned his button eyes to me. “And here we are, Brother.”

“Here we are.” Every part of me tensed, ready to run for that throne so close. Take it. Kill him. End this. I itched and ached, and blood ran from my nose.

So close to the power.

My power.

“Here you both are!” the clown interjected, cartwheeling. “Well done. You are the first demons to resist temptation. Everyone always chooses the throne and kills a loved one, but that’s the point. Being selfless is. Give yourselves plenty of pats on the back for that virtue.”

Buttons virtuous? Really?

“Selfishness fails a trial,” the clown said. “As does the lack of determination. But each of you has plenty of both.”

Neither of us said anything. Focused on the throne, sensing its energy, its devastating power.

So much power.

The black vines slithered across the stone as a nest of black snakes, smothering the throne, calling to me. The lava ringing the chamber bubbled and hissed, beckoning us to try our luck

“Now is the time to pick a final winner,” the clown said. “Let’s see which of you is quicker.” He giggled. “Oh, that rhymed!” He twerked.

The sooner he disappeared, the better.

Twerking over, the clown announced, “On the count of three, you go. No cheating unless you want to eat lava.”

Nice.

“No magic,” he added, “no demon abilities. Just you and your speed, and possibly your fists. Let’s see.”

Here we go. I readied myself, bending into a runner’s position.

“Three.”

Buttons mirrored me.

“Two.”

The clown disappeared.

“One.”

A bell clanged, and we were off, sprinting toward the throne. Boots pounding stone, closing in fast. Overtaking him. Closer, closer, closer.

Come on!

So close now. Inches away! Yes!

Buttons spun and punched me in the side of the head. I should’ve anticipated it, seeing as he stabbed me. I listed to the

side, and he came at me, driving a kick into my stomach.

I hit the rocky ground, landing heavily on my back.

“No!” I cried.

Buttons, with a vacant expression, loomed over me, the lava’s light gleaming off his button eyes. The lava spat and hissed, my head close to the edge.

“It is mine,” he said and stamped on my stomach.

I screamed, trying to sweep kick his legs from under him.

“You can’t have it, usurper.” He kicked me in the side, running for the throne.

No.

No fucking way.

Arcana raged, threatening to spill out and rip the chamber apart. I kept it just below the surface, enough for it to drown out my pain, to get me on my feet.

Buttons jumped onto the throne, landing on his knees. He twisted his body to sit properly, the vines coiling around his arms, holding him down.

“Yes!” he cried.

“It’s mine.”

The lava drained away, replaced by a black mist, swirling and slowly moving toward Buttons, crawling up the throne, across his body. Tendrils of black smoke curled upward from him, resembling his tentacles. He convulsed and laughed, and his buttons turned black for a brief moment before returning to white. A wind rose and blew through the chamber, carrying his laughter in a vortex of aggressive air around me.

I don’t think so.

I snapped, throwing caution to the wind—or was it losing all reason? I sprang forward, leaping at him, landing on top of him. Slipping on impact, I managed to pull myself up to straddle him.

“Fuck you!” I drove my fist into his face. He didn’t react, just kept on laughing.

Another punch, then another, right hook and left hook, pummeling that face that’d haunted me and London. The last thing his victims had seen before he took their lives.

“You psycho!” I cried.

Black blood burst from his nose, his split lip. I carried on, offering no let up, ready to blast him with a spell.

He thrummed beneath me.

The power...

Demon-killing arrows manifested around me. Ten of them, floating, waiting to strike.

“I’ll kill you over and over again...”

It grabbed me, iron fingers locked to my heart. I gasped, frozen in place, the throne’s power flooding me, holding onto him. Splitting in two. An invading force Arcana did not accept.

Oh, shit.

I lit up, blazing bright with orange-gold energy. The black mist threw itself into the cocoon of light engulfing me. My magic pushed back in waves of aggression, straining against the force of the invading demonic energy.

Buttons and I stayed glued together, trapped within this storm of demon and Arcana at war. Pieces of magic broke

away, gliding through the storm. Buttons got inside my head, filled me up with his laughter and his suffering. He called for me to stop.

I dove into his mind giving it right back. I saw him. He saw me. Our Arcana clashed, the throne's power wrestling it.

Something strange was happening.

The mist shrieked, sucked away by the wind. Out of range, out of concern.

The demon power smashed into Arcana, shattering it. Arcana still fought back, overwhelming the demonic energy. It snapped, and our bodies vibrated with sickening intensity, bones rattling, the strain of it seizing up my muscles.

I couldn't speak, couldn't even think words. Only endure as the intensity increased, as the wind thrashed around us violently, as Arcana exploded outward.

The blast ring of orange-gold energy threw me across the chamber. I braced myself to hit the wall, the ground, flying so fast yet so slow. Depleted, confused.

What had I done?

This was going to hurt...

But I didn't hit anything stone, snatched out of the air by a familiar presence. Held in strong arms, enraptured by the scent of limes.

"Tae..." I managed to say.

He held me, gazing down at me. His forehead bled, rivulets of blood trickling down his face.

"You're here," I said as Buttons howled.

I turned my head, seeing his button eyes now shimmering with the red-gold light of Arcana, sliding off the throne.

Something had changed.

What about the demon energy?

“It’s gone,” Buttons whimpered. “It’s lost, Mother.”

“Go!”

Was that Phillippe’s voice?

“Now!” the waiter cried.

I saw the black key flash in Tae’s hand as the explosion hit my ears. My head swam, ears ringing as the chamber rushed away, colors speeding past me until rain hit my face.

“What...”

Tae started running.

Catch up, brain...

“We’re...”

“We’re getting you home,” he said.

Barking Park. London. Earth. Oh, gosh. We were out.

Relief rocked me, bringing tears to my eyes.

“Are we really out?” I asked with a tremble in my voice.

“We’re out,” the vampire said. “And so are Fizz, Archie, and Victoria.”

Shock and relief, and so much pain. “We’re out...”

I winced at the pain in my stomach, back to have its moment again.

He laid me down on the grass, quickly slicing open his wrist with his long fingernail. He held it to my lips, his blood

hitting my tongue. Heat flushed across my skin, through my veins, down to my cock. Amazing. Healing. The pain in my stomach ebbed, my flesh knitting back together.

Vampire blood and its magical healing that also left me so horny.

His eyes were crimson, boring into me. We could fuck right now, find a tree to burn away the urge, scratch the itch.

“Later,” he said, helping me up.

Aside from the ache between my legs, I was back to normal. “I could’ve done with you earlier.”

He yanked me into a hug, crushing me to his chest. “Clay.”

I held him back just as hard, ready to cry again. “You got me out.”

“That was the plan all along.” He smoothed the back of my head.

“It was?” I asked his chest.

He explained the Phillippe plan.

“Wow.”

“It worked.”

“Buttons... He’s gone?”

“I hope so.”

“You blew up the chamber?” I said.

“Not me. I got you out.”

I broke the hug, looking up at him. I touched the side of his face, a few of his curls brushing the back of my hand. “You’re the best.”

And I...

“The queen is busy fighting Quentin,” he said, gesturing for me to move.

I did.

“He attacked the palace. It seems he’s controlling Brad Smith,” he added as we ran across the grass. “And river monsters.”

“What? I mean, I saw the toxic river in the main river before the trials. The queen made us leave, though.”

“Come on, let’s keep moving.”

I ran beside him, full of beans. The good kind of beans.

He pulled out his phone, calling Archie for a car.

“You’re already here?” he said. “That’s great. We’re crossing the park now.” He hung up. “Are you okay, Clay?”

“I don’t know.” Honest answer. “This has been a nightmare. I’ll wait for the crash.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I thought things were going one way, only to end up here with me back on my feet again. Back here. I feel weird.”

What came next? What’d happened to me and Buttons? I called to my magic, and it barely responded.

“I think I’m broken,” I said. “But I don’t know. Arcana isn’t right. It’s there, but... different. I shouldn’t have jumped on Buttons like that.”

Yep. A total dick for doing that. But the demon power was gone. Buttons said it was lost. What’d happened to it?

Commotion behind us.

“Stop right there!” the demon queen cried.

THIRTY-ONE

CLAY



We kept running, didn't stop until forced to. She slammed on our brakes with her stupid power, forcing us to turn and face her.

There she was, livid and immaculate.

Not bad, considering she'd been in a fight with Quentin Dawn. I guess some were lucky enough to never have a hair out of place. Like a *James Bond* movie I saw once where the man himself and a woman climbed a burning tower, immaculate when they got out.

The red warning lights of demon towers came to life as mother dearest manifested her full demon side. They were supposed to suppress the power of demons, but she didn't seem bothered. Her clothing shredded, falling around her like golden snowflakes as she grew.

Man, did she grow. Up and out, her arms bulging along with her thighs, taking the form of a bodybuilder. Bigger than that, covered in obsidian scales, her hands huge talons, her feet claws. Fangs like a saber tooth tiger's protruded from her mouth, dripping with saliva. She was both grotesque and amazing, her black hair still on point—sleek and finished to perfection.

ADU sirens screamed in the city.

“Did you think you could run?” she said, voice coming at me like a roar. It’d deepened to a cartoonish growl. Only, it wasn’t funny or colorful like a cartoon villain. My mother was scary and charging at us.

Arcana being awake still changed nothing. I tried to cast a spell, getting nothing. A killing arrow appeared, and I fired it. No luck. It bounced off her fairy protection.

Damn Grindle! The dirty, sneaky arsewipe.

Arcana? I tried.

There, yet out of reach.

What’s wrong?

Changed...

Something has changed...

“You’re ruined everything!” she bellowed, stomping toward us. “Everything is lost.”

Her hold on us broke. Thank you, towers! For once, I was grateful for Synth, though I sure wouldn’t make a habit of being thankful for it.

Tae grabbed me, taking the opportunity to sling me over his shoulder. He ran at full pelt.

She stopped him, holding him in place again, spinning him around.

The queen laughed. Her power, some telekinetic thing, unpeeled me from Tae, lifting me into the air.

“My darling son,” she said.

The towers flared, and she groaned. Ha! Yes! Okay, so they didn’t stop her, but I was just happy to see her crack.

“That must hurt,” I said, surprised I still had the use of my tongue.

Her fangs looked nasty.

“You gave me so much hope,” she retorted. “So much came so close, this realm almost in my grasp. But you took it away. Why? I would’ve given you everything you wanted. You’re a prince. Was it jealousy?”

“I never blew it up,” I countered.

She visibly started to struggle against the demon towers. “It’s lost.”

“Good.” Man, I was being a brave little soldier, wasn’t I?

“Good, is it? Will it be good when I pull your insides out? Because I will. You’re coming back with me. First, the humans will suffer, starting with Roy.”

Oh, no. The humans. I hadn’t been thinking about them. “No...”

“Yes,” she responded. “Say goodbye to—”

“Put him down, Imelda.”

Grindle?

THIRTY-TWO

TAE



The fairy in his tweed suit drew level with me. He glanced my way with his one good eye, his green eyepatch still in place.

“You,” the queen said, struggling against the Synth emanating from the demon towers.

“Me,” he said. He pulled a banishing talisman from his pocket—a silver disc with a red sheen to it.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Guess.”

The talisman flared with Synth power, red flames exploding around the queen’s feet. They spread quickly, swirling around her in a cyclonic inferno. She screamed with ear-splitting ferocity, cast out of our world and back to her wretched realm.

Gone.

And so was the fairy.

Clay dropped to the ground, landing in a crouch. “Did that really just happen?” he said.

“Grindle’s gone,” I answered.

“Huh?” He did a three-sixty-degree turn. “He’s gone? Did you see where he went?”

“No. Let’s go.”

“Isobel will come after me.”

“Let her. We’ll be ready. Come on.”

The ADU were almost upon us.

Queen Imelda, Clay’s biological mother, was banished. Trapped along with Isaiah, her headless son. Her still-living son.

What direction to take now? Returning to the demon realm was out of the question, the chance to let Clay kill Isaiah gone.

The scum got to live. He’d been right. No matter what, he lived, and my family didn’t. There would never be closure.

I usually have the utmost control over what I say. In this moment, I lost that control.

“Isaiah killed my family, Clay.”

The worst time to reveal this.

He stopped, staring at me. “What did you say?”

“I didn’t mean to blurt that out.”

“He... He killed them?”

“Yes.”

“My... My brother? The other prince?”

“Clay...” I went to hold him. He backed off.

“Oh, God.” He looked ready to pass out, complexion taking on a sickly green sheen. “He killed... I’m so... I’m so sorry. Oh, shit.”

“I took off his head.”

Surprise on his face chased away the green. “Huh?”

“I ripped off his head.”

“And he’s alive? Of course, he’s alive. But... I have to go back in.”

“No, Clay.”

“But that’s the point of this. Kill him, get revenge.”

The point slipped away, nothing but water in my palms. “You’re never going back there again, demon prince or not.”

“But—”

“Never, Clay.”

“But I have to kill him.”

“Impossible.”

“But—”

“Come on, we’re wasting time. It’s my fault.” I encouraged him to move. He did.

“I’m so sorry, Tae.”

“We’ll discuss this at home.”

“Isobel will come for us at Raven Tower,” he said.

A definite future event. “She’ll come for us wherever we are. This isn’t over.”

“We can’t run,” he added. “We can’t leave London.”

“We won’t.”

“The humans trapped there,” he whispered. “Roy. The queen... She’ll kill them.”

We cannot be the superheroes... I kept that to myself.

Life carried a scorpion's sting. Unavoidable, one we all had to endure at some point. Those humans were no different. Saving them was impossible, a danger greater than ever before.

The demon realm was off-limits.

"I have to help them," Clay said.

Of course, he did. "You can't."

"So we give up on them?" He slowed down.

"The ADU are almost here."

"I can't abandon them."

"They're probably dead already."

"But... No."

"We have no keys. By the time we find them..." I refrained from finishing the obvious point.

"How can you..." He stopped. "How can you say that?"

I grabbed him by the shoulders. "Stop this. You're not a superhero." There, I let it loose. "You can't save everyone. I... I couldn't."

The scorpion's tail hit hard. Again. Stab after stab. I couldn't save my wife and son, and Clay couldn't save the humans.

He bowed his head, wracked with sorrow. "This was all for nothing."

His sunshine dwindled, but he was right.

No. He wasn't. "Things have changed, but our quest isn't over. The wall-breaking power is lost, and Buttons is trapped."

He looked up, eyes glistening.

“I don’t believe Quentin Dawn is finished,” I said. “Call it a hunch.”

“You’re probably right.”

Those sirens were dangerously close. “Come on.”

We ran into the street outside of the park, an idling car waiting for us. Tae opened the back door for me, then slid in beside me.

“Good to see your faces,” Archie greeted us.

He sped off as the ADU almost landed on the scene.

THIRTY-THREE

CLAY



I waited for the next turd to hit the fan. But nothing did. Even passing through ADU checkpoints went smoothly. That didn't stop my unease.

It wasn't just the guilt over those humans or the fear over Isobel's retaliation. Something else gnawed at my insides, a terrible sense of dread.

Banishing the queen had been too easy? No. Something else. Something worse.

Tae took my hand as we sped through the streets. Squeezed it, held onto the silence. Even Archie kept quiet, navigating us through London.

We made it back to Raven Tower without incident.

Victoria hugged me and put the kettle on. I scooped up Fizz and carried her over to the sofa.

"We're home," I said. "We're finally home."

It wasn't safe. Nowhere was safe. But at least it wasn't *there*.

Tae flicked on the TV, turning it to the news channel. The sexual heat from his healing me died away, fading to a sputter.

London suffered, namely my old stomping ground at Elephant & Castle. Images on the screen showed the shopping center destroyed, drowning in a toxic river. The witches had it under control, but that didn't matter. The rivers were getting worse, monsters running wild.

The world was changing again.

Like me...

I cuddled my cat, legs tucked under me. Rain battered the panoramic windows. Everything began to press against me, bearing down. The demon realm, the revelations, Buttons, the change in me, the human losses, what lay ahead... All of it.

Silent tears rolled down my cheeks. I went to war with them before they dragged me into a sobbing fit. Fizz licked my hand.

“Thanks, honey.”

Victoria brought me over tea and cake. I thanked her but stayed quiet, not wanting to talk, just wanting to be still and tiptoe through the storm in my head.

They all spoke, their voices muffled, figuring out our next moves, mentioning Grindle, wondering if Phillippe would make it out, the rivers, demons, witches, Buttons...

Not touching my tea or cake, I lay down on the sofa, Fizz purring against me. Too much to sit up. Too much to be awake.

I drifted into sleep.

THIRTY-FOUR

CLAY



He screams in liquid fire, clawing for an edge, anything to get him out.

Agony like no other...

His flesh melts to the bone, but the bone does not die. It resists, it endures, it does not give him peace from the pain.

He tries to call my name, our mother's name, but his vocal cords are burned away, his lungs melted into the lava.

Dark and alone. Buried, lost, begging for mercy. He has withstood so much, yet this breaks him like no other thing. Take the button surgery, all the surgeries and the fears as he ran from the strange men as a child, and stuff them into shadows. Take his loneliness, his longings, those tiny voices dying in the wilderness after years of having them silenced, and add them to the shadows.

This was different. This was true hell.

Because of you...

His voice wanders through my dreams.

You did this to me...

Broken, I say. I'm broken...

The demon power is dead. You... We broke it... Arcana...

Buttons screams.



I WOKE up to heavy rain and dawn creeping above the cityscape beyond the penthouse.

Fizz was in her bed over by the window, the room silent apart from the downpour. The TV was on mute, running the news.

A dream about Buttons. Was it in real time? Was I seeing what he was experiencing?

I stretched, rubbing sleep from my eyes. “Gosh...”

“Good morning.”

Tae’s voice made me jump. I shot up, spotting him sitting on the other side of the large sofa.

Too far away.

“Hi,” I said. “What time is it?”

“Almost six.”

I yawned. “Fell asleep.”

“You needed sleep.”

I stretched some more, the tension in my back and shoulders almost painful.

Arcana slept.

I didn’t itch, didn’t experience any cravings. Yet. I’d only just woken up.

I told him about my dream.

“A connection, maybe?” he offered.

“Possibly when I landed on him,” I said. “Things aren’t right.”

“As long as he is in that place and the power is gone.”

“Yeah... I... Shit.”

“What?”

“Why do I feel a bit guilty?” I said. “He’s my twin, has been through... No. That doesn’t change a thing. He’s a monster.”

“Would you like some breakfast?” the vampire asked.

“That’d be great. Thanks.”

He got up, Fizz meowing and following him to the kitchen. I watched them, taking in the open-plan space of gray walls, black tiled floors, and white kitchen. The Christmas tree glittered, granting the place a whole load of warmth. My... My home. I guess.

How long before my sister shat on it?

Screw her. Screw all of them.

I headed over to the breakfast bar, pulling up a stool.

“What’s the plan?” I asked

He prepared an omelet. “Find Grindle. Again. Keep an eye out for Quentin and Isobel. Explore what has happened to you. Be ready to fight.”

“Thought so.”

As the egg cooked, he poured me coffee, toasted bread, and fed Fizz a tin of posh chicken cat food.

“Thanks.” I drank the magnificent caffeine.

“You’re welcome, Clay.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine.”

He didn’t seem fine. He seemed super tense. I mean, Isaiah... Fuck. Another layer to me being a demon. His family’s killer was related to me.

I let him do his thing in silence. When he dished up the brekkie, he excused himself and retreated to his private study beneath the kitchen.

This is so messed up.

As much as I wanted to follow him and comfort him, I left him alone. Fed and watered, I hit my bedroom on the second floor. Showered in my bathroom, slipped into navy sweatpants and a white jumper, and dumped myself on the bed. Fished out my trusty yellow Walkman, popped in the earbuds, and let Kylie Minogue fill me up with her magical music.

The *Aphrodite* album.

Hands behind my head, I tapped my foot on air, leaving my door open should Fizz want to come join me. Let the music take me on a euphoric journey as it always did. My queen made things better, blew the clouds away, if only in the moment. The best therapy, the best treatment for nastiness, for sorrow.

When the album finished, I found a different tape—her self-titled album—and let that soothe me. Went through five albums before Fizz arrived and conked out beside me.

“Good girl.”

By the seventh album, I heard the piano playing downstairs.

Tae.

I took out my earphones, moving off the bed. Fizz didn't stir.

The Christmas tree I'd decorated glimmered beside me, the lights still on against the gloomy day.

"Tae?" I said, slowly approaching him.

He turned his head toward me, continuing to play. "I wrote this for Tae Ae-Jung."

"It's beautiful." I'd heard him play it before.

"A beautiful song for a beautiful woman."

I came to stand beside him. "Tae..."

He stopped tickling the ivories and pulled me into his lap. "Clay..."

"I'm so sorry."

His dark eyes were mournful, flecked with vampiric crimson. "Can I kiss you?"

I took hold of his face. "You can always kiss me."

We kissed, our lips touching softly. His tender embrace warmed my heart, heated my groin. I felt him firm up beneath me, his hands sliding under my jumper.

Sex to chase away the dark again. We had unfinished business, not having ridden the horny wave properly after he healed me with his blood.

Lusty me was back.

He picked me up, surprising me.

"What's this?" I asked against his mouth.

"I'm taking you upstairs."

"To your bedroom?"

“Yes.”

Wow. Unexplored territory.



HE PUT me down on the white bed. The walls were white, the carpet gray, and the view showed off London in all its glory. There were no pictures of his family in here—I thought there might have been. Nothing but the bed and a nightstand.

I inched up the bed, backing up into stuffed pillows. Still dressed. He stood at the foot of the bed, watching me.

He didn't pounce, didn't come to join me. He looked like he wanted to say something.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

He said nothing.

“Tae?”

“I...” He sighed.

“What? Talk to me. If you want. I mean, you don't have to, and if I'm being pushy, tell me, and I'll leave right now because I really don't want to—”

“Clay?”

“Yeah?”

“Stop.” He smiled.

“Sorry.”

I caught my breath.

“I've been thinking.”

I waited.

“How do I reconcile you with my wife?”

Wow. Shit. “Erm...”

“You don’t need to answer this, but I need to say it.” He paused for a moment. “I think I would’ve loved for you and Tae Ae-Jung to have met, and Tae Ji-Hoon. I picture us all together sometimes, within the happy times I lived with them. Just slot you into those pictures because you’re in my...”

Gosh. “In your what, Tae?”

“I...” He moved onto the bed, sitting cross-legged before me within a flash. I sat up to meet him.

“I don’t know how to deal with us,” he said.

“Oh. Do you still need time? The demon thing? I knew we’d rushed through it—”

“Not that, Clay.”

“But Isaiah...”

“What about him?”

“He’s my brother. He—”

“That means nothing.”

“But it does.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then it means nothing,” he said. “You cannot help who you’re related to, Clay. Let’s not talk about *him*.” He sighed again.

It did mean something because Isaiah was alive, headless or not. But I didn’t poke the situation.

My horniness subsided. “Tae?”

“You weren’t supposed to happen,” he whispered. “But you did. You make it different. But how can I keep doing this?”

Oh, God. I could practically feel his guilt washing off him. “We don’t—”

“I want to, Clay,” he cut me off. “I want you.”

A delicious tremor passed through me.

“I’m falling for you more every day.”

“You are?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Of course.”

I laughed, blushing. “That told me.”

He didn’t laugh, though. No cracking of a smile. “But this isn’t right.”

“Oh.”

“Not us. I mean this imbalance. I need to find a way to...”
He stopped, lowering his gaze.

I took his hands in mine. He looked up, hypnotizing me with those magnificent peepers of his.

“What, Tae?” I asked softly.

“My wife is the love of my life, as is my son.”

“Absolutely.”

“My soul mate and my son.”

I nodded, feeling heavy. “I think I know what you’re saying.”

“What’s that?”

“That there is only one soul mate and—”

“Stop making assumptions.” The corner of his mouth lifted.

My lips echoed his moves. “Sorry.”

“This is confusing for me, Clay, as I’m sure it is for you. I loved my wife more than anyone, other than my boy. She was my one great love. I can’t move on from that, and I have no idea how to navigate what lies beyond it.” A long beat, staring into my eyes. “But I know I want to navigate it with you, if you want to.”

“Navigate...” My skin erupted in goosebumps. “With me?”

“I want to court you.”

A laugh burst out of me like a bottle of soda going pop. “Did you really just say *court*?”

Wow, could his eyebrow arch. “Is there something wrong with that?”

“Not at all.” I cleared my throat. “It’s just, well, it sounds funny.”

“My wanting to court you sounds funny?”

For someone who’d been alive a long time, this really went over his head. “It’s not funny. I’m just used to the d-word.”

“Dick?”

“Oh. Erm... Shit. Why didn’t I just say *date*?”

He smirked. “Fine. I want to *date* you, Clay. Do this properly.”

Hello, butterflies. “Date me?”

“Officially move from a ‘professional’ relationship to a courting.”

“I kind of like courting now.”

“So?” He ran the pads of his thumbs across my knuckles.

There were still issues, still complications—so many of them. But this was mind blowing and amazing, and why shouldn't we go for this? Why shouldn't there be some good within the masses of bad?

“Are you for real?” I asked.

“Why wouldn't I be?”

What if you change your mind tomorrow?

“Clay?”

“I want you,” I said. “I want to be courted. I'd love that.”

He leaned in and kissed me. Wow. The transition from the heavy subject to this beautiful lightness. He hadn't said boyfriend because this was dating. Courting. With shagging. I'd take that, see where it led.

What if he doesn't want it in the end?

Then I'd cross that bridge *if* I came to it. For now, it was the one thing in my life that made sense.

“Do you mind if we don't have sex right now?” he asked.

“No worries at all.”

He got off the bed, offering me his hand. “May I court you with my cooking?”

I giggled, taking his hand. “Court away.”

THIRTY-FIVE

CLAY



C hristmas Eve. That time of year again.

On the approach to the festive days proper, nothing happened. The world continued to turn as it was, with no further incident, no sign of the demon princess or anyone acting on her behalf. Grindle was missing, still, and I kept up with my training in the gym.

I did dream of Buttons, the same one of lava and pain. And I couldn't shake the guilt over those humans trapped in the demon realm. Roy, all of them. Dead now. Man, that sucked so badly. I had to keep striving to save our world in their name. It was the least I could do.

Tae and I did head to the abandoned Sugar Factory a few times to try out spells, and I managed to cast my ball of light and the mist and push spells. I fumbled constantly for my other spells, finding nothing but emptiness. I even checked the grimoires again to see if the spells were back in print. Nope. Still empty from when I'd sucked them dry.

I didn't understand.

"Here," the vampire handed me a hot chocolate.

"Thanks. Ooo, you put in marshmallows."

"Of course."

We sat under a blanket on the sofa, Fizz between us, watching Christmas movies. Enjoying the peace and the festive cookies he'd made—decorated and baked to perfection. How did he get them so bang on?

I checked my phone. My uncle Craig texted me, my birth mum's brother, promising me we'd meet up in the new year. Wished me a happy Christmas. I didn't need family answers from him now, and I doubted he had anything to say about Arcana. I wouldn't bring it up because that was too much of a risk. But I'd meet him. I was curious, despite having my fill of so-called family.

I sent back a quick reply and refocused on the movie. Tae put his arm around me. I snuggled against him, so bloody happy for this warm moment.

“What time are Archie and Victoria coming over?” I asked.

We'd decided to have Christmas dinner together. Why not? I'd been surprised when Tae agreed so fast to have it, but yay. I couldn't wait.

“Around one,” he answered.

“Cool.”

Fizz meowed her input.

Things were too easy, too quiet. My dread didn't ease and wouldn't until our enemies made their move. The longer they held off, the worse the twisting in my guts. Sexy times with Tae helped, as did being home and Kylie and Fizz, but when would the trigger be pulled?



I HELD TAE'S BACK, beneath him on his bed, my legs wrapped around his waist. He thrust into me, deep and slow, his hair draped over me as he kissed my neck. Taking his time. Making... love.

Man, I loved it when he kissed my neck.

My body sang with delight, enjoying this long session in the early hours. It was officially Christmas Day, snow falling outside. So romantic, so pretty.

“Oh, Tae.”

This was new, this version of sex. Much more tender.

“Clay...” His voice vibrated against my neck.

I reached down to take my cock in one hand, stroking, the tip rubbing against his abs.

His head lifted, eyes locking me down. “You’re amazing,” he said, thrusting deeper.

“Oh, Gosh,” I purred. “Oh, so are you.”

We kissed. He sped up.

“Cum for me, Clay,” he whispered, taking me to the doorstep of paradise. “Cum all over me.”

“Yes... Oh, Gosh.”

I flew over the threshold, soaring into paradise. My cock released over his abs, over my hand, unstoppable as he fucked me.

He came inside me, kissing me as he did. Moaning against my lips, driving me wild. Man, hearing those noises was one of the hottest things ever.

Staying inside me, he lowered his body flush to mine, kissing me more.

Amazing.

“Merry Christmas, Clay,” he said.

“Merry Christmas.”



WE SHOWERED TOGETHER WITHOUT BANGING, him getting out first. I stayed a bit longer, enjoying the hot water, though not the washing him off of me part.

I smelled of Tae limes.

Yum.

Eventually, I did step out of the shower and pulled on sweatpants and a T-shirt. Tae wasn't in his bedroom.

I sat down on the bed, skin still humming from his touch.

He returned, shirtless, wearing a pair of gray sweatpants. “Come with me.”

“Oh? Where?”

He beckoned with a finger.

“Okay.”

I checked on a sleeping Fizz in my bedroom, then followed him the rest of the way to the first floor.

There were presents under the tree—all flat squares wrapped in expensive wrapping paper.

I beamed from ear to ear. “What's this?”

“Your other Christmas presents.”

“Wow. They're for me?”

“Yes.”

Vinyl. He’d given me an early present before all the drama of the demon realm.

“I haven’t wrapped yours yet,” I said.

“You bought me a gift?” he questioned.

“A few, yes.”

“Interesting.”

“But you’ll have to wait,” I teased.

“I enjoy delayed gratification.”

“Oh? When are we trying it?” Gosh! Bold of me.

“Unwrap your presents first.”

This was so surreal. Again. Christmas presents from the vampire were the best.

I sat down and opened the first one. Screamed with the kind of joy that went beyond elation. I jumped up, twirled around, clutching the vinyl copy of *Fever*. A gold pressing, the only gold pressing of the album in the world.

It didn’t stop there. Miss Minogue’s entire album discography in gold vinyl. The whole lot of them.

Man, did he get the biggest of hugs.

I looked up at him. “This is amazing. Thank you so much.”

He stroked my face. “I’m pleased you like them.”

“I bloody love them.”

We kissed.

“Clay?”

“Yes?” The side of my head was pressed against his chest, listening to his heartbeat. This vampire was getting all the Christmas hugs—and I mean Clay Christmas hugs, not the holiday. Okay, the holiday as well.

“Can I ask you something?”

Reluctantly, I peeled myself off his skin to make eye contact. “Go for it.”

Oh. His eyes were sexy-time red.

“Would you like to taste me?”

I pushed back off slightly. “Huh?”

“Will you taste me?” he said. “Will you take things to the next level?”

“You mean, do something to you? More than intercourse? Actually, let me take the lead?” Too far?

He nodded, and stroked himself through the gray fabric of his sweatpants. “Taste me.”

The vampire wanted me to give him head. Gosh. The Christmas cheer kept on coming.

This might not be a big deal to anyone else, but it was to me. Clearly to him as well. Being the dominant one in the bedroom, doing all the touching and stuff, kept him at a distance. Weird, I know, when he’d been inside me, kissed me and sucked me off and all that fun stuff. But this was him opening up, a lovely alabaster flower trusting me.

He really did trust me again.

“I... I will,” I said.

The lights of the Christmas tree played across his body, painting shadows and multicolored light in the right places.

Rather than ask any more questions, mainly if he wanted to do it before the tree, I slowly approached him. Placed a hand on his chest, fingers splayed on his tattoo. He bent his head, his breathing nervous. My fingers slid across his skin, lingering on the firmness of his stomach, slowly inching down.

I'd make this special. Take my time. Make him feel so good.

He took my chin, lifting my head. We kissed again. I slid my hands into his hair, pressing flush against him.

"I can't wait to taste you," I breathed into his mouth.

He moaned pleurably, grabbing a handful of my buttocks.

"Yum."

He laughed, and his damn phone rang.

End of kissing.

Tae growled this time, striding over to his phone sitting on the dining table.

Here came the dread.

Who'd be calling at this hour?

Shit.

"Victoria?" he said. "What?" He moved to the TV. The news channel came to life.

We were on the screen, training in the sugar factory, me summoning the Mark of Arcana.

The Mark of Arcana was on the news.

What. The. Fuck.

A breaking news story.

“How...” Dizziness hit me. I gripped the back of the sofa, unable to believe what I was seeing.

“What you’re seeing,” the female news reporter said, “is footage of what appears to be Tae Frost watching Clay Christmas as the warlock, if you can believe it, uses Arcana.”

No. This wasn’t possible.

Tae was beside me, off the phone. “This is Quentin’s doing.”

My mouth was dry, brain struggling to process. “Wh-what?”

“He wishes us a Merry Christmas. He sent an email to Victoria.”

“What... What’s happening?”

“We have to leave immediately,” he said. “The ADU are about to arrive. We can’t be here when they do.”

Words were hard, but I managed. “Everyone... Everyone knows. They know. About me. The witches... The witch queen and king...”

“Clay, we have to leave. Now.”

This wasn’t happening.

Unfortunately, it was, and we barely managed to dress and get out of Raven Tower with Fizz in time.

“The checkpoints,” I said.

“I know.”

“How we will get through? Our faces will be everywhere.”
And where were we going?

“I’m thinking,” he replied.

Forget the demon trials and all that business. This was the real test.

Oh, God.

Hi, I'm Clay. Number one target of the witches.

NIGHT TREMORS

MIDNIGHT MAGIC BOOK 4



ONE

CLAY



Fleeing the authorities wasn't how I'd expected to spend the early hours of Christmas morning. Not when things were getting steamy by the Christmas tree with my billionaire vampire lover, Tae Frost. But that moment was now dead in the water.

Damn.

I finished applying the fairy face cream to my face, my skin tingling, Arcana reminding me fairy magic was here in the car. As much as we didn't know what to make of Grindle the fairy at the moment, Tae and I were left with no choice but to use the tools we had. Fairy cream changed your appearance, at least this Grindle-made concoction did. All you had to do was tell the magic what you wanted to look like.

Anything but *my* face right now.

Tae applied his cream with one hand, expertly driving without breaking a sweat, being Mr. Perfect at everything. Within seconds, he was done, making a right turn. Considering the heavy snowfall, this vamp went above and beyond in the impressive driving stakes. I'd have crashed by now.

I added a beanie hat to my head, pulling it down to cover the warlock mark on my forehead— a glowing white,

incomplete circle with a tiny star at its center. The fairy cream didn't hide the mark, unfortunately.

Damn.

I cradled my silver tabby cat, Fizz, close to me as Tae tore through the streets, the sirens of the ADU (Anti-Demon Unit) screaming behind us. She meowed, trembling at the speed of the car, at the howling around us.

“It's okay,” I whispered. “We'll be okay.”

If only I could truly promise her that. I didn't know what would happen, how this fleeing would end. My heart beat too fast, thumping to break free of my chest. I sat in the passenger seat, scared out of my mind, completely helpless. Sweat pooled at the base of my spine, and my scalp prickled constantly.

Please let us escape this...

Since the Throne of Vines trials in the demon realm, and the fight with Buttons/James (my twin brother), my Arcana magic hadn't been the same. Broken, you could say, with my previous knowledge and skill in all spells, after draining the Arcana grimoires, now gone. Only a handful of my spells remained now—my push spells, the ball of light, and the one that turned me into mist.

I still had my warlock powers. Ha! As if they'd do anything but piss off the witches. I faced facts—the likelihood of being screwed was a sure bet I'd lay money on.

Shit.

I tried to spin negativity into something sunny, to always look on the bright side of things. Being homeless and a warlock weren't easy parts of my life to deal with, but I'd

always strived to live my life, to get to a happy place come hell or high water.

Finding the sunshine right now was proving difficult. I mean, running was one thing, but running and facing ADU checkpoints all over London made it a billion times worse.

We'll never make it out of the city...

I glanced at Tae, his obsidian eyes on the road. Though the rest of the city would see two different men, we saw each other's real faces, the disguises for everyone else, not us. The glare of streetlights illuminated his handsome features, his pale skin emitting its own special glow. Even in this situation, his anger a crackling, invisible energy. He looked so beautiful.

My lover. My friend. My savior. He'd forgiven me for hiding my demon blood from him, didn't think of me as some disgusting creature in need of taking out. After all, a demon killed his wife and son fifteen years ago. And not just any demon, but Isaiah, my other demon brother.

I mean, things were seriously messed up. Not only was the button-eyed demon my twin, but I had a demon mum, a sister called Isobel, and Isaiah sharing a bloodline. Adam Christmas was my dad, a human warlock, and Maxine Christmas, a human, had given birth to me via surrogacy/horrible demon skills belonging to Queen Imelda.

Yeah, crazy, awful, totally screwed up.

Tae's eyes flickered to mine, pinpricks of crimson in those dark orbs—indicating either anger or horniness.

“They won't get their hands on you, Clay,” he said.

His rich, honey-wrapped-in-chocolate voice was a balm to my senses, if only for a few fleeting moments.

God, I can't lose him...

"I mean it," he added.

"I'm just so scared," I answered, sounding like a child.

"I know."

He turned left, then left again, speeding up.

I wanted to tell him to save himself, to leave me to get snagged by the witches. Then at least he could carry on, work to stop Quentin without me in the way. Although, he wouldn't have me and my power to kill demons—an Arcana thing.

I'm sorry for everything...

Yeah, me and my self-pity party were wild, but I just felt so low, so defeated. God, I had to get a grip and be strong. Sinking into despair wasn't my idea of fun.

"First checkpoint is coming up," Tae said, his tone icy steel.

"O-okay..." My words barely passed my lips.

This was Quentin Dawn's fault—the demon in opposition to Queen Imelda. His grander plan was to destroy this world by using The Rift. The Rift was a mile wide, fifty miles tall, a scar of red storm clouds floating in the North Sea. A remnant of the stupid war with the witches twenty-five years ago. For now, it did nothing but serve as a reminder of stupidity, of the damage done—the toxic rivers the worst part of the legacy.

How Quentin meant to use The Rift was anyone's guess—it seemed like total insanity to me. But his goal was to separate Earth from the demon realm and then overthrow my mother, ruling in her place in a new demon realm free from the queen's lust for conquest.

With Queen Imelda being banished, Quentin was at the top of the hit list. He had to be stopped before he killed us all.

Tae slowed down, two cars ahead of us crawling toward the checkpoint. Up until now, he'd managed to weave a route through a series of backstreets from Raven Tower to here, avoiding checkpoints, inching south toward London Biggin Hill Airport.

Archie had already organized a plane for us to Tae's private island off the west coast of South Korea.

For me, that seemed like too far away from London with everything going on. But Tae insisted it was the best place for now, the most secure property he had.

My stomach performed a few flips to add to my frayed nerves.

One of Tae's right-hand people, like Victoria, Archie could always be counted on to get things done. He was the guy to clean things up, to make sure the machine ran smoothly while Victoria rocked hard at the lawyer stuff.

God, I hoped they were both okay.

Tae's car boasted fake papers and a fake license plate number. Since the checkpoints had been put in place, we'd gone about our demon hunting business like this. Always prepared with our disguises and papers, ready to blend in with the masses. There was no reason this tried and tested method wouldn't help us this time. Only, this was the first time we were running from the ADU.

The overbearing sense of dread sucking at my soul, well, sucked.

One car down, one more to go until our turn.

“Shit...” I breathed.

Tae put a hand on my thigh, squeezing gently. I closed my eyes, drawing in a deep breath.

“Take it easy,” he said.

“I’m trying.” The damn ADU sirens didn’t help, their disconcerting shrieks rusty nails dragging across my nerves.

“I’m right here, Clay.”

Opening my eyes, I faced him, basking in the presence of his pure gorgeousness. My rock in this storm. If it weren’t for him, I don’t know how I’d have dealt with the revelation of being a demon prince, of everything that’d gone down afterward. He could’ve walked away, left me behind, the dirty demon-blooded liar, but he didn’t.

He wanted me.

I wanted him.

We were officially dating or courting, as he’d called it. He’d even asked me to taste him, to do things to him for the first time. Yes, we’d fucked loads, and kissed, but it always felt one-sided, him in the driver’s seat, never submitting himself to my control. I got that, and it seemed things were changing. Well, until Quentin played his awful move against us, dropping footage of me using Arcana into the lap of the witches.

Arsewipe.

“Before you know it, we’ll be out of here.” Tae went for reassurance.

It bounced off me, my attention on the two male witches at the checkpoint, dressed in their white ADU uniforms, examining the papers of the occupants of the car in front.

It was taking forever.

“Haven’t they got anything better to do?” I said, a bite to my tone.

“You would think they’d be tucked up in bed, seeing as it is Christmas,” Tae replied.

I couldn’t help but smile at him agreeing with me. “Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

I giggled, my anxiety slightly easing. Tae kept his hand on me, saying nothing else as we watched and waited.

The windscreen wipers sliced through the snow, splattering the glass, rocking back and forth in a constant glide. That damn car still sat there, the witches still examining the papers.

“Are they being too thorough?” I said, realizing how stupid I sounded. “Course they are. They’re looking for us.”

Fizz meowed as if part of the conversation. I rubbed her behind the ears, her purrs vibrating against me. “I know, honey pie.”

She licked my hand, still shaky.

I bent to kiss the top of her head.

“We always seem to be running,” I whispered. “It’s not fair.”

Me wielding the ancient magic of Arcana, which shouldn’t be around anymore, muddied the waters of everything, as did my demonic blood. The witches wouldn’t let me crack on with life. Oh, no. They’d lock me up first, test me, interrogate me, do God knows what before they then used me or killed me or —

I shut my bullshit down, kissing Fizz again.

Stop this. Just stop.

“Listen to me, Clay,” Tae said. “We’re getting out of this. The witches will not get their hands on you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Maybe not, but I’m not losing you.”

I sighed, a heavy weight crushing my soul. “What next, though? Do we keep running, waiting for Quentin to strike, dodging witches forever? It can’t last.”

“It can.”

“How? We’ll burn out or slip up, and that’ll be that. Plus, Princess Isobel will be on our trail.”

My royal sister wasn’t banished like the queen, as of yet, and she’d come after us at some point. After all, I was her brother with the power of Arcana. The whole wall-breaking power of the throne thing might be dead in the water, but there were still goals of extending the demon realm into Earth to be met.

Two demon factions, two different goals where Earth lost in both endings. Actually, there were three as a group of demons wanted the same extending-into-Earth dreams as the queen, but by taking a more peaceful route.

Queen Imelda’s banishment complicated those dreams. What now for mummy-bloody-dearest?

“If we have to run forever,” Tae said, “then we will. As long as we’re together.”

Man, he knew the right things to say. “We’re living in our own *Thelma & Louise* moment.” I frowned at myself. “Without *that* ending, though. Actually, forget I said anything.”

His smile could melt icebergs. It lit up his usually brooding face, made my heart dance.

God, I was falling so hard for this guy, positively smitten.

“Do you really want to be running all the time?” I asked, killing the brief moment of nice.

“Of course not,” he replied. “We’re supposed to be courting, to be enjoying our time together after so much drama.”

“But the drama never dies.”

“I’m striving to slay it.”

“Me too.”

Oh. Was that a glimmer of hope from Moody Clay? A beam of light breaking through the dark clouds?

The car in front finally moved on.

Ask me about that glimmer later.

“Here we go,” Tae said. “Breathe. Stay calm.”

We drove up to the twin booths, standing like sentinels either side of the gap. A closed barrier blocked us off from the rest of the road ahead. The two witches waited outside the booths, looking mean as hell, sporting faces that didn’t seem to know how to crack a smile.

Tae opened his window. Snow got into the car, the air bitterly cold. I held Fizz tightly to my chest.

The pale-faced guard leaned closer to Tae, a big gun hanging around his neck. “Lower your window,” he said to me.

I obeyed. The guard on my side leaned in, his dark brown features a lot more bored than the other guy’s. If only he’d

been alone, he might have waved us through easier. He looked like he wanted to be home in bed or by a fire—anywhere but here.

“Papers,” Tae’s guy demanded.

The vampire handed them over.

My guy rubbed his hands together, saying nothing.

“What’s your business?” the witch asked Tae. “Not the best night for driving, is it?”

Please don’t ask me to take off my hat... If they saw my warlock mark, even with a non-Clay face, suspicion might get roused.

“Coming home from a friend’s Christmas Eve party,” Tae replied smoothly. “Went on much longer than expected.”

The guard looked behind us. “No presents?”

“No.”

“But it’s Christmas, and you were at a party. Shouldn’t you be leaving with presents or at least some food that wasn’t eaten?”

Ugh. Had ourselves a detective witch, did we? Great.

“No leftovers worth having,” Tae said. “Unfortunately. And we’re not really present-giving friends.”

“Why’s that?”

“Me and my buddy never bother with that stuff. Haven’t since we were kids.” Tae was a master of disguise, having played so many roles in his time demon hunting. Wore so many faces, weaved so many tall tales. And he was super good at it.

“That’s a long stretch,” the witch said, still clutching the papers.

“We grew up together, went to the same schools and university,” Tae answered. “John and me are basically brothers.”

The witch looked at me. “This isn’t John, is it?”

“No, this is Mike. My other half.”

I tried not to swallow too hard.

The witch scanned the papers again. “Ah, yes. Mike. And you’re Stephen. Married three years.”

“That’s right,” Tae said.

Gosh, it felt like there was a boulder in my throat, blocking every swallow.

Okay, maybe not a boulder.

Married for three years... What a nice thought.

The witch’s eyes slowly moved between us. “Mike and Stephen leaving a Christmas party with no food or presents. Seems like a shame.”

“We have enough food at home,” Tae said.

My witch—Witch B—joined in with the chit-chat, “Cute cat.”

“Thanks,” I replied, my voice a little too high.

Witch B didn’t notice, looking to his left as a motorbike pulled up behind us.

“Bloody hell. Nothing better to do,” he muttered to himself.

“I’d be claiming all the freebies I could,” Witch A carried on. “Love snagging party leftovers.”

“I do if they’re good,” Tae agreed. “Only egg mayo sandwiches and prawn cocktail crisps left.”

Witch A wrinkled his nose. “Yuck.”

“Exactly.”

“This John bloke needs better crisps.”

“I’ve been telling him that for years.”

Witch A laughed, his mean face changing into a friendly one. “Good thing he didn’t buy you a present.”

Tae shrugged, chuckling. “He can’t buy gifts without sinking to tat levels of crapness.”

Witch A liked that, laughing. “Oh no.”

“I’ve still got the pen he gave me with a cock on the end.”

“You what?”

They laughed some more, exchanging more stories about the made-up John’s lack of taste, and moved on to Witch A’s girlfriend and her love of blingy things. Such as a sparkly gold toilet seat and matching toilet brush.

I quite liked the sound of both, actually.

“What about you?” Witch B asked me, making me jump.

Fizz meowed at my jolt.

“Sorry?” I asked.

“You good at buying presents?” God, he sounded so bored.

I tried to bury my fear. “Not really. Hate shopping.”

“Same.”

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes from the winter version of his ADU uniform—big coat, lots of layers. He lit up, paid me no more attention as the other two men chatted away.

Were we really sitting in this car like this, with some ridiculous conversation about rubbish presents going on while the sirens of the ADU dominated the night?

Apparently, yes.

Fine. I'd take it over drama.

I heard wheels approaching. Witch B blew out a stream of cigarette smoke, head turning at the sound.

“Another one.”

I turned to look behind me, spotting a new car.

“Be careful out there,” Witch A said, still laughing. “We live in crazy times. Did you hear about Clay and Tae? You know those guys, right? Famous for being into each other?” He rolled his eyes. “Overexposed.”

Tae looked at me. “Remember them?”

I pulled my best disgusted face. “Overexposed is the right word for it.”

Witch A nodded. “Right? Did you see the latest?”

“No.” Tae shook his head.

“Turns out Clay's been using Arcana.”

We both performed our best, realistic shocked reactions. Tae even coughed.

“That's fucking mental,” the vampire declared.

“I know,” Witch A said.

“But how?” Tae asked.

“God knows. But that’s why the ADU are hunting them down.”

“Wondered why there were so many sirens.”

The motorbike driver honked their horn. Couldn’t say I blamed them. This time-wasting took the piss.

Witch B grumbled under his breath, lifting a hand.

“Impatient idiot,” Witch A moaned. “Anyway, you two get on. Get in the warm and think of us.”

“Will do,” Tae said, shaking the witch’s gloved hand.

We were about to move on when a voice rung out from behind. A familiar one, loud and clear, suited for giving speeches and stuff.

Quentin Dawn.

Two

CLAY



Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

This wasn't happening. That wasn't Quentin's voice I'd just heard. Please tell me I'd imagined it, my fear getting the better of my imagination.

Ha ha! Tell another one, idiot!

Tae tensed beside me.

“Stay in your car, sir,” Witch A called to him. “We'll get to you.”

I twisted in my seat to see for myself.

It was him, hiding behind a thick layer of fairy face cream. I saw right through the lie, Arcana itching to strip it back for all to see.

This time, Quentin wore the face of a man with golden skin, brown hair blow-dried into a quiff with golden highlights. Beneath that veneer was his real demonic self. An angry red scar sliced his face in two, one eye white, the other black. Pocked scars marred his skin, and two of his front teeth in the bottom row were missing. Injuries from disobeying the queen—it really hurt a demon to go against my mum.

Arsewipe. My guts lurched, the hairs on the back of my neck standing to attention.

“Hello there,” he said, striding through the heavy snow. His blue coat was so long it dusted the road.

“Get back in your car, sir,” Witch B said this time.

I looked to Tae. He kept his eyes ahead, his grip tight on the steering wheel.

“I will return to my car,” Quentin said, “but only after I share a secret with you.”

“What secret?” Witch A asked, readying his gun.

“You’ll like it.”

Quentin stood a few feet away from the car, his hands in his coat pockets.

“Get your hands up,” Witch B ordered.

The motorbike honked again. Witch B lifted a hand, told the rider to wait.

What was Quentin up to? Him being here risked banishment. ADU witches carried talismans with them at all times. Unable to kill a demon, banishment did the job of removing the worst boils. Plus, there were demon towers nearby to suppress demonic power. Two of them, dark at the moment until he or any other demon manifested its true form to set them off.

Quentin, being married to Grindle’s sister, offered him a shed load of protections, including from me, in the form of charms and face creams, and God only knew what else.

Fairies were slippery tricksters.

Fairy... Arcana pointed out regarding Quentin.

Yeah, yeah. Tell me something I don’t know.

“I’m unarmed,” Quentin declared.

“Get your hands up,” Witch A barked. “Won’t tell you again.”

I watched, still twisted in my seat, my palms sweaty against Fizz’s fur. The snow kept on falling, the car’s front and back wipers working overtime.

“There is no need to be so hostile, gentleman. I’m here to help.”

I groaned at the demon’s smooth tone.

Idiot.

When I glanced at Tae, I caught his eyes on the rearview mirror, watching the scene play out behind us. At least the engine was still on.

“Get your fucking hands up now,” Witch A growled.

“I thought you weren’t going to ask me again?”

Quentin’s hands were in the air in a flash, too fast when staring down the barrel of two guns. In one hand, he held a purple glass flower.

Purple. Fairy charm. The last time he’d been holding one of those, our disguises melted.

Oh, no.

I felt the secret fizzle off my face, the charm a pretty festive light in the snowfall.

Rather than riddle the demon with bullets, the witches asked him what he was doing.

“A Christmas gift for you both,” he said.

“Tae...” I whispered, my voice cracked with panic. “What do we do?”

“We have to run,” he answered. “Be ready.”

“Can’t we smash through the barrier?” I wondered.

“It is infused with Synth to stop that from happening.”

Synth was the magic witches used—a powerful, synthetic power warlocks couldn’t tap into.

“Arcana can break Synth.”

“I know. First, we need to clear the area. We don’t know what that demon prick will hit us with.”

He was so right.

“Trust me, Clay. Go with my flow.”

“I trust you.”

“Look in that car,” Quentin intoned, nodding at us. “I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

“Use your warlock power,” Tae said.

Boots crunched in the snow.

I got Tae’s meaning straight away, handing him Fizz. He popped her on the backseat. She meowed, her eyes wide.

Tendrils of gray energy rippled down my arms, the warlock power ready to act.

Witch B arrived as Tae killed the engine. His eyes widened when he saw my face.

“Cla—”

I unleashed a flurry of colorful fireworks at him—the warlock variety without gunpowder.

The witch yelped and stumbled backward under the torrent of color and explosions, slipping in the snow.

Fizz meowed in horror.

“Sorry!” I called to her as Tae leaped out of the car, moving with terrifying vamp speed to my side of the car.

“Tae Frost!” Witch A cried. “What the fuck?”

Quentin roared with laughter. “Surprise!”

Tae had the passenger door open. Fizz released another cry of fear from the backseat.

“It’s okay, baby girl,” I told her.

I hated putting her through this shit.

Once again, I expected bullets. They didn’t come. Probably wanted us alive and unhurt.

“Stay right there!” Witch A commanded, red Synth energy coming to life in his hands.

My turn to move. I slid out of the car, summoning the Mark of Arcana—a necessary move to use my magic properly during a midnight till dawn window.

Seeing my face dragged a “Clay Christmas!” from Witch A.

Good. His shock bought me seconds. I fired off my push spell, sending the witch to the ground like his comrade. I slammed the same spell into Witch B as he tried to get up and hurried over to the barrier.

I wrapped my hands around the white metal. Synth energy flared across it, straining against the closeness of real magic. My hands throbbed with a series of aches, the pain spreading up my arm. I grunted, holding steady as the Synth kept trying to fight for its, erm, life.

The red power snapped like an overstretched rubber band.

Done. Magic removed.

I peeled my hands from the barrier, waving them to try and shake out the ache.

“Are you okay?” Tae asked from beside me.

“I’m fine.”

“Back in the car.”

The witches clambered to their feet. I sent them back on their arses.

“The bike rider is on his phone,” Tae said. “Reporting us to the ADU.”

“What is he?”

“Human only,” Tae answered.

Quentin watched on, his hands back in his pockets. My orange-gold demon-killing arrow flared to life, waiting to be unleashed.

“Hello, Clay,” he said softly. “You know that won’t work, don’t you?”

“One day, they will.” I fired the arrow at him, an incredible explosion of spinning fire engulfing him.

It didn’t work. He still remained, though his hands were out of his pockets, up as if to steady himself from falling over.

I hit him with some push spell to help him fall over. Threw out some more to the witches as Tae charged at the bike rider, taking his phone and crushing it in one hand. I mean, it was too late, the call already placed, but Tae had to make a point, I suppose.

The sirens were getting closer.

Quentin laughed, sprawled on his back. He even made some snow angels. “Brave Clay.”

I fired another arrow at him.

All boom, no demon death.

One fun fact I did know was that the fairy charms wouldn't last forever. They would fail at some point, not a complete failsafe. I tried for a third strike. No luck this time. Oh, well. Third try wasn't the charm, but it wiped the smile off his face.

Not wanting to hang around, and with the coast seemingly clear, I jumped in the car. Tae tore off, crashing through the barrier. After he made a sharp right turn, I grabbed Fizz from the back seat, showering her with kisses and reassurances.

If only I could be reassured the bullshit was over.

Ha ha! You're really dropping those funnies!

THREE

TAE



Q uentin Dawn.
Demon.

Master of this inconvenient turn.

I kept my cool, tempering my frustrations for the sake of getting Clay to safety. For us to succeed in stopping Quentin and any other demon was for Clay to stay out of the hands of the witches.

Any other demon being Isaiah, the killer of my family. His face haunted my every step. His voice, his arrogance, everything about him lingered in my mind, threatening to break my focus.

Quentin might be the biggest threat to Earth, but Isaiah was my ultimate target.

The endless kernel of pain in my chest flared—pain for my lost wife and son, burning on in the wake of failing to get vengeance for them. I may have beheaded Isaiah and smashed his head open against a wall, but he still lived. Only Clay could administer the true final blow.

As long as the demon scum lived, I'd remain restless.

Clay's brother... Clay's other brother. They may share blood, but it ended there. Clay's blood relatives didn't bother

me because they were simply related by circumstances engineered by the demon queen. Yes, at first, it had bothered me. Clay hiding his secret was the main part. But I'd truly forgiven him. I understood why he felt he had to hide his demon blood from me. It was survival, to protect himself from my wrath.

I'd never hurt him, never let anything come between us. Out of the ashes of his lie, we were reborn as something new, something better than before with our back and forth, with my confusing behavior. I still didn't know how to reconcile him with the memory of Tae Ae-Jung, my wife, but I knew I wanted him.

If only the world left us alone to explore our relationship.

When those key demons were dead, perhaps. Or at least banished, with Isaiah being dead.

He had to die above all others.

I reached over to pet Fizz, Clay's adorable cat. A brief rub of the head as I sped down a straight stretch of road.

"She likes that," Clay said.

"She'll like it better when we're on a plane."

"A hundred percent true," he replied.

A euphoric warmth unfurled within my hate-filled darkness. Clay kept me going, stopped me from finding demon realm keys once again, and hunting Isaiah through the many levels.

I called Archie, my phone connected to the car's speakers.

"Hey," he answered. "*All looking good here.*"

He'd made it to the airport. "Is Victoria with you?"

“Yeah. She’s dealing with constant calls from the ADU. Trying to get shit through their thick skulls.”

“They still don’t believe her about Quentin.”

“Nope. Fucking idiots.”

My lawyer would fend off the baying hounds for as long as she could. But she, like Archie, had to be taken out of the city. And with witches clearly not interested in real facts, we had nothing else to fight back with.

“Witch Queen Margarite and Witch King Lawrence have sent out a royal summons, apparently.”

“Already?” I wasn’t really surprised, though.

“Victoria will go through it with you when you get here.”

Archie cleaned up messes, organized escape plans, and threw a mean punch. He hated laws and paperwork and anything of that nature.

“There has been a change in the plan.” I relayed the new problem.

“What the fuck?”

“To avoid the final checkpoints, we’ll take the rest of the journey by foot.”

“We will?” Clay asked.

“I’ll carry you,” I replied.

“It’s so cold... I’m not complaining I’m just worried about Fizz and the snow and falling over or God knows what, but I get that we have to focus on getting away, and I’m fine with walking and—

“Clay?”

He took a breath. “Sorry.”

“I said I’ll carry you. I’ll be quick. We can’t risk any more checkpoints or being on the road.”

He nodded, not going off on another ramble.

He was adorable when he rambled.

“Stay safe,” Archie came through the speakers. *“They’re closing in. The news is jam-packed with your faces.”*

“You stay safe, too,” Clay said.

“Thanks, mate.”

“We’ll see you soon,” I said, cutting off the call.

“Wow,” Clay breathed. “Just wow.”

“Sorry, I came up with the plan as I dialed Archie,” I offered.

“It’s fine. I’m just, you know, freaked out.”

“Completely understandable.”

“It really does make sense, though.”

I turned left. “I’d rather go all the way by car.”

He kissed Fizz. “Think of the plane. Manifest it.”

A smile crept to my lips. “You and your positive thinking.”

He sighed. “Yeah, well, it’s not holding up so well at the moment.”

“Do you want to talk?” I asked, sad for him.

“Not right now. Let’s stay focused on being in the clouds.”

“A good idea.”

He faced me. “Thank you.”

I met his lovely hazel eyes. “For what?”

“For everything. For this, for being you. If I’d been by myself when Quentin’s bombshell dropped, I’d have gone to pieces.”

“I don’t believe that. You’d take action to protect Fizz here.” I reached over for another quick fuss of her head. “Because you’re strong.”

His fair cheeks flushed with crimson. “Thanks.”

“No need to thank me. I know it. I know you. You’re a fighter in so many ways.”

He sighed again. “I guess we all wish we could fight that bit harder.”

Absolutely... “Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Why not take your own advice?

“I just want him stopped,” Clay said. “Quentin. Once he’s out of action, I’ll breathe a little easier.” The sigh he emitted drew a soft meow from Fizz. “I don’t see how we can stop him by hiding.”

Clay made a good point about running. I didn’t want to run. I’d rather stay in Raven Tower and fight. First, though, we needed to think and regroup. The last thing I wanted was to hide on my island, but it was the one place we’d be hidden well.

“It’s the safest option,” I said.

“It seems so far away. I mean, from here it is, but... I don’t know. There’s witches in South Korea.”

“There are.”

“I know this is the smartest thing to do, but what... It gives Quentin time to play around, doesn't it?”

Should I take him somewhere else? Stay in Europe and be closer to London—the epicenter of activity with better access to Quentin? After all, The Rift sat in the North Sea, so the demon needed to stay close by, as did we.

I turned the car left, taking a dark country road when the snow overwhelmed the asphalt. I had no choice but to slow down, which was why we'd be running the rest of the way to the airport soon.

“There is somewhere else we can go,” I said.

“Oh? Where?”

“Ireland. Possibly. I may be able to arrange a place for us. It's a remote cottage.”

Clay nodded, pressing his chin to the top of his cat's head. “Okay.”

It wouldn't be as safe, but it made better sense than flying thousands of miles away. We had a demon to fight, and he wanted us to run, for Clay to be in hiding or in the hands of the witches so nothing would stop him.

I thought about turning the car around, confronting the witches, telling them they were after the wrong targets. But if they didn't listen to Victoria, they wouldn't listen to me.

Did Quentin hold some kind of power over them? After all, he'd been using Brad Smith, the head of London's ADU headquarters, as a tool to control river monsters in the demon realm. How far did his manipulation spread? Did the witches know anything about Brad's possession?

My hands tightened their hold on the steering wheel, my frustration potent. Being unable to see the woods through so many dark trees poked at my rage. As I often did, I mitigated it and found a spot to park, a hidden side street under a thick canopy of evergreen trees. Perfect for hiding a car.

I killed the engine, the snow still finding its way through the dense foliage.

“This is it?” Clay asked.

“It is.”

I watched the dark, my acute vampire vision breaking through the night, scanning for enemies and other dangers.

“I’ll move as fast as I can,” I said.

Clay had a coat with him, and there was a blanket in the car. I made sure he had the coat on before he got out of the vehicle.

ADU sirens continued to scream in the night, far enough away to not be an immediate threat. There were checkpoints nearby, a lot more of them on the way to London Biggin Hill, including one at the airport’s entrance.

Archie would’ve taken care of that one.

I cupped Clay’s chin, gently turning his head to face me. “Are you ready?”

“I’m ready,” he replied softly.

Stepping out into the snow, I sent a silent prayer to a god I didn’t believe in and hurried around the vehicle to open Clay’s door.

I offered him my hand. He took it, snowflakes landing on his fair skin. His eyes spoke of so much fear. He gasped at the

bitterness of the air, immediately shaking, Fizz wrapped up in the blanket, her head poking out of the end.

“It’ll be okay, baby girl,” he said, kissing the top of her head. “Everything will be okay.” He handed her to me.

She meowed at him, looking up at me.

“This cottage has a roaring open fire, right?” Clay asked.

“It does.”

“Thank God for that.”

He climbed onto my back as he’d done many times before, wrapping his arms around my chest. His closeness sent many sparks dancing across my skin. His breath tickled the back of my neck, a delicious warm wind against winter’s grip.

Ignoring my desires, I secured Fizz with one arm, then took off across a field of snow with my vampire speed, the icy air whipping past us.

FOUR

CLAY



Tae carried us across fields, through patches of woodland, the snow getting in my mouth and eyes. I kept both closed, for the most part, opening my peepers for a brief look at the action before having to close them again.

My ears were frozen and ready to drop off, my face as stiff as a post-botox frenzy. Not that I actually knew what *that* felt like. Keep the needles away from me. Thank you, please.

Man, his super speed scared me, got my adrenalin pumping. Poor Fizz. Her meows being swallowed up by the wind and speed triggered my parental instincts. She was my little girl, my charge. I should be making it better, offering her so much comfort and reassurance.

When we were safe, she'd be getting so many kisses and cuddles until she got sick of them.

Fizz had a high threshold for fusses.

Tae didn't take long to get us to the road lined with trees, the entrance to the airport directly across from us. The road stretched from east to west, free from snow—a lot of gritting salt littered the tarmac.

Amber light from tall lamp posts bathed the entrance and the two security booths, no bodies around to guard them.

Phew. Good. A witch-free space was always great in my book.

Tae called Archie. “Is it clear?”

I didn’t hear what Archie said in the brief exchange. As long as it was positive, then yay.

Tae ended the call. “We’re moving again.”

The vampire dashed across the road, past the booths, aiming directly for the airfield and a private jet waiting there, the runway completely free of snow.

We were really doing this. We were really getting out of here.

Standing by the jet’s stairs were the reassuring figures of Archie and Victoria. The lawyer grabbed me into a bear hug as I slid off Tae’s back to greet her.

“It’s so good to see you.” She landed a wet kiss on my cheek, then stepped back, her hands on her hips. “Those wankers really ruined our Christmas plans, eh?”

“Sure did.” I smiled at her in her all-black outfit. She was a tall, muscular woman with rich, dark brown skin, short black hair, and a bite just as bad as her bark. If you got on her wrong side, that is.

And she loved Tina Turner.

Archie wore black, too, a beanie hat covering his bald head. He was just as tall as Victoria, with a bodybuilder’s physique and scarred, dark brown skin. He shook my hand vigorously, his expression serious.

“All tech systems are down,” he said. “We’ve got twenty minutes to get out of here.”

“Is that the window?” I asked.

“Yes, mate. And that’s an estimate, so the sooner we take off, the better.”

Tae nodded, handing me Fizz and heading off to inspect the plane. I noticed the silhouettes of the pilot and co-pilot in the cockpit, both members of Tae’s silent team. He had a lot of people working for him in the shadows. I’d probably never meet most of them.

Victoria shivered, tapping away at her phone.

“How are things?” I asked, head still spinning from Tae’s speed run.

“Not good,” she said. “I’m dealing with so many dickheads.” She looked up, Tae by my side again—I hadn’t noticed his arrival. “Doesn’t matter what I say, the witches won’t hear it. Well, they say they’ll hear it if you meet with the king and queen, hand yourselves in peacefully.”

A low growl came from Tae. “I don’t believe that.”

The lawyer nodded. “Same.”

The vampire turned his attention to Archie. “I’ve informed the pilot of a change in the plan. We’re heading for Ireland. He’s getting us clearance to land in Dublin now.”

“Right you are.” No shock, no questioning his boss’s decision.

Tae’s hand came to my shoulder. “Five more minutes, and we’ll be ready to fly.”

The good news didn’t untense my muscles.

The vampire leaned in, bowing his head to kiss my forehead. His lips left a warm buzz there, the rest of my body wanting a turn.

Later!

“Let’s get on board,” his voice was pure silk. The cold didn’t bother him, didn’t so much as make him shiver a tiny bit. In fact, his body heat felt like a radiator on a gentle heat, enough to touch my bones.

I blinked snow out of my eyes, ready for the plane. “Okay.”

His hand moved to the base of my spine, guiding me toward the stairs. Archie and Victoria followed. I waited for the twist, the nastiness to come and break this smooth escape.

It didn’t. I entered the plane with its four seats, small bar, gray and white décor, no spanners being thrown into the works.

“We’re really onboard,” I said out loud without meaning to.

“We really are,” Tae answered.

Victoria was the first to slump into her seat, her eyes glued to her phone. “Warmth at last.”

“Amen to that,” Archie chimed in, not taking a seat.

Beside one of the seats was a blue bed for a cat—big and puffy and inviting. I popped Fizz down on it, rubbing her head.

“How about that?” I said, letting her lick my hand.

She meowed for good measure, showing me her pure joy at being in the warmth.

“There’s plenty of food and drink on board,” Tae said, “including things for Fizz.”

I wrapped my arms around him, gazing up at his lovely face—him standing six-something to my five-nine. I'd never actually asked him his height.

He kissed me, soft and light.

“What was that for?” I asked, cheeks flushing with heat.

“For being amazing.”

Even his kiss didn't ease my worry or undo the knots in my guts.

His dark eyes bore into me, seeing into my soul. “You'll relax when we take off.”

“I hope so.” I held him closer. “I'm getting that sense of dread again.” The last time I'd felt this way, the whole witches-hunting-us thing kicked off.

Bollocks to dread. It sucked. It made things worse and gave me a headache.

Tae brushed my hair back from my forehead, running his fingers through the rest of it. Then he kissed me again, our lips connected for longer.

God, this man.

I smiled as he broke the kiss, resting my head against him, breathing in his rich lime scent. His clothes were a little wet from the snow, but I didn't care. He could be on fire, and I'd never let him go.

Okay, maybe I'd put him out first.

I chuckled at the stupid thought.

“What's funny?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

He kissed the top of my head. Then he released me, heading to the cockpit. He was gone for about thirty seconds, returning to say we were leaving within a minute.

“Take your seats and buckle up,” he said.

As I went to sit, an engine roared outside. I ran to the window, almost tripping over. Arcana stirred, whispering the word *demon* to me.

No...

Tae and Archie were already outside.

“Stay here, sweets,” Victoria said, her eyes on her window.

No way was I sitting on my hands. I hurried outside to join the two men on the tarmac as a black jeep came roaring toward us, skidding to a halt a few feet away.

I readied my few spells, Arcana reminding me again there was a demon in that vehicle. Actually, there were four, and they all jumped out with guns and sneers, Quentin the last to slide out.

Fairy... Arcana added. Okay, so they were all protected by fairy magic. Fine. Wouldn't stop me from going for the kill.

Four demon-killing bolts manifested. Not wanting to mess around, I let them fly, the demons going up in a raging vortex of orange-gold fire.

All four survived, sagging from the impact once the flames died down.

Damn.

These idiots were clearly hungry for more. I went for another round, the Arcana fire lighting up the shadows.

When the fire cleared again, Tae and Archie took a demon each, leaving Quentin and one of his cronies for me to fire at.

The more I hit them, the more my rage boiled. I wouldn't stop until they were dead, black ash on the ground.

I'll kill you all...

Darkness licked at my soul, a blood-thirsty energy growing with each strike, with each passing minute. It'd been there since I'd consumed the knowledge of the grimoires, a hunger to hurt these demons, to show everyone my might, my power. But with it came a terrible craving for magic.

During its shutdown, I craved Arcana as if it were heroin or something, missed it so hard it left my skin itching at almost unbearable levels. Even now, with the magic awake, I craved the rest of it, called it to come back to me with so many silent, desperate pleas.

I want all my spells back...

I faltered in my next strike, one bolt fizzing away, the other striking Quentin's friend/follower/fellow arsewipe.

Still no demon death.

I wiped snow from my face with the sleeve of my coat, feeling too hot inside it.

Give me my magic...

I don't know where it went!

Quentin laughed as Tae and Archie overwhelmed the demons. Man, they moved well together. Lots of spinning and punches, perfectly choreographed like a martial arts movie. The two demons went down with bloody faces, Archie taking down the weakened demon I'd hit.

I scratched at my face, irritated by Quentin's laughter. Even if his shoulders were slumped from all my attacks, his audacity to laugh enraged my inner beast.

"That's it, you laugh your arse off," I hissed.

Tae moved on him, going for a knockout punch.

Quentin ducked the swing at the last moment. I yelped, not expecting it. Tae grunted as the demon got in his own attack.

What the hell? How did that happen? And why was Tae looking down at his chest like that? Why wasn't he kicking ten tons of shit out of this creep?

Quentin laughed again, facing me.

My brain put the pieces together, observing the syringe buried into my vampire lover's chest.

Syringe. Vervain.

Oh, no.

Vervain seriously messed up a vamp to the point of incapacity.

Tae staggered back, falling onto his backside.

"Tae!" Archie and I yelled at the same time.

Archie reached him quickly, holding him upright.

Quentin stopped me from moving, holding a gun to my head.

I froze, eyes on Tae. His limbs were limp, his moonlight complexion taking on gray hues. For him to be fixed, he'd need to feed on blood, or he might need to be bled and then fed. It all depended on the dosage and the time spent infected by the nasty stuff.

Archie went to try and feed him.

“The moment you cut a vein, I blow Clay’s head off,” Quentin warned. “And that goes for you too, Victoria.”

I angled my head slightly to see the lawyer standing in the plane’s doorway.

“Now then,” Quentin said. “Let’s sort this mess out.”

I snarled at him. “*You* made this mess.”

He smacked me in the face with the butt of the gun, breaking my nose. I staggered back, tripping over my own feet. I went down like Tae did, the impact of my arse meeting the hard ground rattling my teeth.

“Fuck!” I barked, blood seeping into my mouth.

The pain in my nose was horrible, but my anger shoved it aside.

“Use magic on me again, and I kill Archie.”

“I won’t let you.”

“Can you stop me, Clay?”

I might be able to rough him up, but he had me by the balls. God only knew what surprises he held up his sleeve.

Going against my instincts to tear him apart, I held back from striking out with the push spells waiting in the wings.

I spat blood at his boots.

“How disgusting,” he said, gun aimed at my head again.

The ADU sirens sounded like they were getting closer.

“You’ll wait there so the authorities can take care of you properly.” His smirk twisted his ghastly face into something, erm, ghastlier. “What a stir you’ve caused, even reaching the

minds of those royal witches. What is it with you and ruffling royal feathers?” He chuckled.

Fuck you...

“Have you heard from your family, Your Highness?”

Fuck you!

“Not your mother after her banishment, of course, but what about Princess Isobel? Any news on her?”

I could take him. Knock that gun out of his hand, shoot his kneecaps out. It wouldn't kill him, sure, but it'd really hurt and make me feel so much better.

Damn him. He knew the power of fear, how it worked when people you cared about were involved. He might have snipers lined up, demons waiting to put bullets in skulls. I didn't sense anyone, but that didn't mean anything. I was hardly *Superman*, and my powers weren't exactly running smoothly.

“This is what will happen,” the arsewipe added. “You'll be going with the ADU as soon as they arrive, thanks to another tipoff from me. That will keep you out of my hair for a while.”

“Why?” I said, more blood pouring into my mouth. I spat it out. “Why not kill me now? Get it over with?”

“Do you want to die?”

“Answer the question.”

“I'm the one with the gun.”

“Thanks for making that clear.” I spat more blood.

“The truth, Clay, is that I don't know if I want you dead.”

I offered him my best frown. “But I thought you did.”

“I did, I do. I’m not sure.” He shook his head. “I normally pride myself on making clear decisions, but you confuse me. Are you a boon or a hindrance? Can you help me destroy my enemies, or will you only get in the way? The answer will come to me, but while I think on it, the best place for you to be is with the ADU. They won’t kill you, and I can come and get you if I need you or let you die with the rest of this realm.”

It was so hard not to blast him again. “Bit extreme to wipe us all out, isn’t it?”

“Not to me. Not when the only way to be better demons, to embrace a better future, is to break the shackles of this wretched realm.”

“I’ll stop you.”

He laughed again. “One bullet puts that threat to bed. One bullet ends an amazing weapon.”

What a serious arsewipe right at the top of the arsewipe pile. “You’ll never get me away from the ADU. Especially with the king and queen involved.”

“Of course, I will.”

“We’ve told them about you,” I said.

“I’m sure.”

“You might want to run.”

More laughter. “Oh, Clay. Stop being so simple-minded.”

Fuck you... “Are you in with them?”

Clever demons worked their way into high society, low society, and positions of power, hiding their true selves to worm their way into our lives. It was all part of their many

plots to take us over, worker bees for their queen. Only, Quentin saw himself as a rebel bee with his own goals.

Yeah, it stood to reason he'd have his fingers in ADU pies.

Really not good.

I had to do something. Sitting here only let him win, let the sirens come closer. God knows what the witches would do to Tae. So many dark thoughts ran through my mind, all of them ending with Tae being ripped from my life and me trapped in some cell or lab, chained down and poked and prodded and cut open, never to feel the fresh air in my lungs or hold my cat again.

What would they do to my baby girl? Would Archie and Victoria be able to get away and take her on?

Stop this!

Man, talk about spiraling.

I fortified myself against my gloom with some weak defenses, trying to free my mind to think better.

The roar of an engine, the appearance of headlights in the distance. Another vehicle arrived, speeding its way over to join in with the fun.

Great.

Quentin grinned at me. Could I break the fairy magic and expose him to the silent demon towers around us? Yeah, that would mean being useful in the midst of a magical crisis.

Whatever happened between me and Buttons down in that throne chamber had seriously screwed around with my inner circuit boards.

Do. Something.

The driver's door opened, a witch stepping out. Two more followed from the back doors, with the front passenger door opening last.

Brad Smith slid out of the car, his eyes scarily vacant. He stared ahead, not at me, not at anything, walking with the gait of a human, his expression more like a zombie. Red Synth energy swirled around his outstretched palms, the rest of him reading fairy and demon. Fully under the control of Quentin, the demon showed off that control by ordering the witch to stop. In turn, he ordered the other witches—two men and a woman—to halt. I noticed their zombie vibes next, under the control of Brad Smith under the thrall of Quentin. A Russian doll of mind control.

It was weird seeing the usually poised Brad Smith like this. His white suit was fresh and pressed, but his askew silver hair and ashy golden complexion made him look like, erm, a well-dressed member of the living dead. Kind of satisfying but really unnerving.

Demons controlling witches was as fun as putting your hand in a blender.

The pain in my nose flared, in need of painkillers. If only my healing spell was around to patch me up.

Man, I really was in mourning for my spells. Another wave of itchiness passed over my skin, a cold, icky sweat at the back of my head, running down my back.

“Take the vampire,” Quentin ordered a witch. “I’ll deal with the others.”

“No...” I breathed.

“I didn’t say your friends or your cat were getting out of this alive, did I?”

My magic twitched. “You touch her and—”

He cocked his gun. “I wouldn’t threaten me.” He turned his gun toward Archie. “I’m a good shot.”

He was also a prat. He’d made a big mistake taking his eyes off me.

Done with sitting and waiting to be taken, I fired off a push spell, the bigger one called *Round Push*, the impact flinging him and the witches away like insects. The gun flew from Quentin’s hand. I scrambled to my feet, hitting them again with another round of the push spell as I ran for the gun.

Quentin roared with rage, taking his turn to hit me with his power.

I froze before I bent to grab the weapon, his voice in my head.

Stop... Stand up straight...

I obeyed.

Ah, bollocks.

Some demons had their own magic, their own abilities. Like my ‘family’s’ skills of body control by literally clicking their fingers.

So annoying.

I shuddered, remembering Isobel and the queen clicking their fingers to mess me around.

Not fun.

Quentin’s skills were also about taking control of a target but seemed to work from the inside rather than the outside, using some sort of mystical voice planted inside my head.

Also annoying.

Face me... he commanded.

I faced him. He was powerful but not as good as my mum and sister. Arcana blazed, boosting my attempts at resistance it never achieved with Isobel and Imelda. I slid into those cracks of his, offering more defiance to his magic. I saw him feel it, my push against him. He winced.

Ha! You're not strong enough!

He wasn't of the royal bloodline.

Okay, now wasn't the time to get cocky.

"You will..." Quentin struggled, his teeth exposed and clamped together. "You will... You will..."

Obey... he added in my head.

I broke free of his hold just enough to hit him with my push spell. He fell onto his back and bellowed for the witches to snag me.

They tried to hold me in a locking spell, the red power shooting at me. But it melted to the ground, unable to glue me to the spot like back in the day when witches tormented me for sport. Arcana broke Synth. It wouldn't be enough to hold me.

So why was I scared? Why was I running? They had nothing on me. They weren't blessed with the ancient power of Arcana. Witches lost that power, having to make a poor imitation in Synth. I was the real deal, unstoppable.

My scalp prickled at the arrogance, at the strange fearlessness wanting dominance.

This isn't me...

Two witches broke free of Quentin's control. The man and the woman immediately sprang into action, aware of what was

happening.

The demon had spread himself too thin.

The two witches drew their talismans—silvery metal discs with a swirly pattern on both sides. The red energy flared around those swirls, ready to banish. Talismans were dangerous things, terrifying, consigned to the ADU use only—unless you were Tae.

Brad hit the witches with magic, much like my push spell. The witches hit the car they'd arrived in so hard I heard their bones break under the loud crash. The two of them slid to the ground. Dead. Necks snapped, limbs twisted. They'd dented the car, shattered the windows.

Quentin smirked. "I warned you, Clay. Not to—"

I hit him once again, sending him into the car with all my might. Brad turned to fire magic at me. For safety, I became mist, a red bolt passing through me. Just because I broke Synth, it didn't mean it couldn't hurt me. I mean, a bolt like that wasn't the same as a locking spell. It would sting like hell.

Quentin was down, bleeding black blood from the back of his head. He groaned, struggling to get to his feet.

Brad Smith went for me again. I misted up, sending him flying into the other witches still bespelled by Quentin. They went down like bowling pins.

I was weakening, the magic burning out too quickly. Great. Not only did I have fewer spells, but less energy.

Time to wrap this up.

Archie was still with Tae, not knocked out or hurt. He could get Tae to the plane, and we could take off, and we'd be safe and away and—

Yeah, only we wouldn't be because Quentin slowly started to get back to his feet. There would be no rest until he was dead or... A glint of silver caught my eye. The talisman sat a few feet away. A witch must have dropped it.

Goody for me.

I moved quickly, practically diving for it. As soon as my fingers grazed the metal, the power within thrummed, the talisman sticking to my fingers like iron to a magnet.

Whoa.

Power met power. Rather than Arcana breaking the witch-made energy, the Synth bowed down to Arcana, the red turning orange-gold, the disc igniting in a swirl of flames.

Oh. My. God.

Quentin yelled something, trying to get to his feet.

“Clay!” Quentin roared.

The power of the talisman exploded in a stream of flame, breaking apart into four streams, crashing into each demon. The fires become vortexes, swirling and roaring with terrifying force.

Demonic banishment had never been like this before.

Quentin called my name once again before the flames exploded upward in mushroom clouds of flame, dissipating seconds later.

The demons were gone.

Quentin was gone.

I blinked, trying to be certain. Even rubbed my eyes as if to clear wishful thinking from them.

“He's gone,” I said. “He's really gone.”

“Clay!” Archie barked.

I snapped out of my trance, hurrying over to him and the vampire. “Oh, God. We have to heal him.”

Archie scooped Tae into his arms. “Get on the plane. The ADU will be here any minute.”

“But—”

“We’ll heal him onboard. Let’s go.”

I kept pace with him, holding Tae’s hand with every step.

Quentin Dawn was gone. Banished. I’d used a talisman, beefed it up...

...whoa.

“Hold on, Tae,” I whispered. “Just a few more minutes.”

The plane’s turbines were ready to work. We climbed on board, Victoria holding Fizz. She looked ready to pass out.

“I thought...” she tried. “I’m so glad you’re okay.” She licked her lips. “Quentin... He’s... He’s gone.”

Coming down from my high brought the pain back to my broken nose. I struggled once again with a craving wave, needing to sit but refusing to do so until Tae was better.

“Let me get you some ice for your nose,” Victoria said, putting Fizz down.

I was already working on Tae, slumped in a chair.

“Here we go,” I said gently, slicing my skin open.

He would be okay. As soon as he drank, he’d be up and running.

Wait... “Does he need bleeding?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” Archie said. “Try.”

I put my wound to Tae's lips, the blood trickling in. He drank, his fangs making an appearance as blood oozed over his tongue. He bit down, drank deeper, the bite of pain sending blissful pulses to my cock. His dark eyes flooded red, his hands grabbing hold of my arm as he took his fill.

My toes curled in my boots, my body erupting with pleasure and pain. Feeding a vampire, or having one feed you their blood, always resulted in extreme horniness for both parties. I tried to ignore the swelling between my legs, the vibrations everywhere else.

I want you inside me...

He finished, his skin back to being living moonlight, the vervain gone without the need to bleed him. Within seconds, he opened a vein for me.

I drank. My nose healed, the bone returning to normal, the pain pissing off.

All better again with a raging boner.

I panted, trying to catch my breath, my eyes locked on him. They roamed his face from the crimson of his eyes to his sharp jawline to the lock of long curly hair falling across his face as a strand of inky silk. I almost reached out to touch it but drew back. The contact might set off too many sparks.

I wasn't about to bang him in front of Fizz and our friends.

Gross.

Later...

I backed off. "Thanks. Are you okay?" I was shaking, drunk on vampire blood and the wonder of Quentin being gone.

The plane began to move.

“Are you okay?” he returned.

“I asked first.”

“I’m fine. Are you?” He got up, moving past me to the cockpit. He opened the door and vanished for a few seconds before coming back. He pushed his hair back from his face, the epitome of sex on legs before me.

God, if only I could throw my legs back and let him do whatever he wanted.

Yummy.

Gosh, my priorities were really skewed.

Tae, Archie, and Victoria all took a seat, a moment of silence following. The lawyer handed me Fizz from her spot opposite me, and I buckled up, holding my best girl tight.

“We’re going to the island,” Tae said as the plane positioned for takeoff.

“We are?” I asked. “South Korea?”

“Quentin’s gone,” he said. “He’s banished. That doesn’t stop the ADU. I can hide you with no concern of that prick attacking now.”

Leaving London, my city of birth? Head to a new country to live on an island for who knew how long?

Butterflies danced in my stomach as the plane sped down the runway. “We can... We can live...” The plane left the ground, nose tilting to the sky. “We can live there?”

“Yes...” Tae whispered. “I’ll keep you safe.”

I closed my eyes as the plane gained altitude.

With Quentin banished, it did leave the Isobel problem. But her power had been reduced—both me and Buttons/James

were now out of her reach, the queen stuck. It didn't mean this was over, but things sucked for the demons right now.

I'd take the win. I'd take this time of peace.

Call me idealistic. Call me an idiot. Whatever. For now, I'd sit back and breathe. Really, truly breathe with relief.

It didn't kill the dread.

FIVE

CLAY



He lingers in the fire, trapped in a cycle of agony within the lava beneath. He can't die, but he can't live. He wants to die, to be free of his demon immortality.

He's given up clawing for freedom. Doesn't hope to be found, to find a route out of this damnation.

This is what it is—eternal damnation. Hell. Endless suffering for all his actions.

But he had to kill in the name of his mother. He had to do these things to survive, to be a warrior for the queen, to be special.

He always wanted to be special, to be loved.

You took it away from me, brother.

He wants to see his twin brother again.

He wants...

He wants...

He wants this suffering to end.



“CLAY?”

I woke to the sound of my name, my eyelids heavy.

“Clay?” Tae’s voice, deep and soft at the same time.

“Are we there yet?” I managed to open my eyes fully, keeping them open. I yawned and stretched, Fizz purring in my lap.

“Not yet. I just wanted to check on you.”

The plane hummed around me, a soothing sound. I looked out to the night sky, so incredible at this height. So clear, so many stars.

“Oh. I’m okay.” Another stretch for good measure.

“We’re flying over Italy,” he said.

“Wow. Really?”

Through the haze of sleep, I registered my lingering horniness from the blood exchange. I really needed some release. Tae’s eyes were still red, hungry for sex.

“Have you ever been there?” I asked, so tired.

“Yes.”

Here came an almighty yawn. “Did you see all the...” Another yawn. “All the sights?” Gosh, my body couldn’t take being awake.

“Go back to sleep,” he said.

“Buttons... I dreamed about him again.”

“You did?”

I was fading. “Yeah...”

“You’re exhausted,” he replied. “We can talk about it later. Sorry for waking you. I’m a worried fool.” He stroked my face.

“You’re a sweet fool.” I giggled through a yawn, lids drooping. “A gooseberry fool.”

With that, I drifted off.



LAVA IS the worst torture he’d ever experienced. Worse than the experiments, the demon blood being pumped into him, all of those cuts and injections, and even having his eyes removed, the white buttons fixed on. At least the button eyes gave him powerful eyesight, a gift worth the suffering.

Hell was different.

I want to be free.

I want to be free.

I feel you, brother. I feel you watching me.



I WOKE up again to the sound of Tae’s voice.

“Are we there?” I moaned, opening my eyes.

“We just landed.”

I sat up straight, stretching. “I slept through the whole flight?”

“All twelve hours,” the vampire answered. “We’re at Seoul Air Base.”

“Oh.” Damn me for missing the landing views.

“You must have really needed the sleep.”

Arcana was now switched off, its turn to slumber.

I miss you...

I blew out a breath, glancing out the window. “More Buttons dreams.”

“What happened?”

“The same as always. The lava and stuff.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “Only this time, he spoke to me. He said he knew I was watching him.”

Tae kept silent.

“Do you think there’s some sort of connection thing going on?”

Slowly, he nodded. “I wonder if we can break it.”

As much as I hated Buttons/James and everything he’d done, a part of me felt so bad for him being trapped in lava like that. I shouldn’t give him one ounce of sympathy, yet there it was.

“Feeling guilty over a guy who tried to kill me several times is icky,” I said.

“Don’t,” Tae replied, the word verbal ice. “He deserves to suffer.”

My insides twinged.

“Here.” Tae held out a pot of fairy cream.

I yawned again. “Look at us trusting Grindle still.”

“I’ve tried to reach him,” he said, his face stoic. “His number is disconnected.”

Grindle had been in my life for seven years, since I was seventeen. And now, just like that, he was gone, not the man I

thought he was. But then he was a fairy, and fairies weren't exactly straight arrows.

"Do you think he'll reach out at some point?" I took the pot of face cream from Tae.

"I hope so."

Banishing the demon queen would mean Grindle having to keep a low profile. There'd be many un-banished demons wanting his head. Thankfully, there wasn't a method of removing a banishment. Not to my knowledge anyway. If there was, the info was kept under lock and key. Good. It could bloody stay there.

Archie and Victoria were applying cream to their faces, too. Better to be safe than sorry.

"There is a carry case here for Fizz," Tae said. "If you need it."

"Thanks."

He lifted his hand to touch me but landed his hand on Fizz instead. Contact was still dangerous between us, the threat of sexy infernos super real.

Phew.

Fizz loved every second of Tae's attention, really pushing her head into his big hands. The same hands that should be slipping under my jumper right now on an expedition of my flesh.

Ahem.

"What's the plan?" I asked, applying the cream, aware of my nuclear cheeks.

“We stay on the plane until a helicopter arrives to take us to the island. My people are keeping watch around the air base, but we have to be careful. The ADU are on high alert globally. They may want to search this aircraft if they clock onto it.”

“Will they know it’s yours?”

“Not if my falsified paper trail holds up.”

“Whoa. Remember when I called you Batman? You’re still holding the crown.”

He smiled, his face radiant from it. “Cute.”

I blushed harder at the c-word, turning to face the window. What the hell was I blushing for?

Outside, it was daytime. South Korea was nine hours ahead of London. We left London around two, so it was just gone eleven in the morning here, and it looked super chilly outside.

“It’s winter here, right?” I asked, eyes on the gray sky heavy with clouds.

“Yes.”

“There’s central heating on that island, right?” I chuckled as I slowly turned to face him.

The crimson hues in his eyes sparkled. “Funny.” The corners of his mouth twitched. “So, so funny.”

His voice was a purr, one loaded with sexual promise.

I couldn’t wait to get him into the bedroom.

“I’m bloody starving,” Victoria declared. “When can we get out of here and eat?”

“Amen,” I agreed.

“Listen out for the helicopter,” Archie said with a shrug. “I thought we’d made that clear.”

She scowled at him. “Stop trying to be smart. Doesn’t suit you.”

Archie took her clapback in jest, firing her off his own. “You’re still hungry after eating five packets of peanuts? Impressive.”

“Five?” I added, not meaning to join in.

Victoria’s scowl took aim at me. “They were small packets.”

“But filling,” Archie said. “You only had the last two half an hour ago.”

The lawyer cracked her knuckles. “If it weren’t for my little baby cake Fizz over there, I’d be introducing you to my range of knuckle sandwiches.”

“What a thought.”

Being the idiot de jour I was, I joined in once again. “How many are in the range?”

Victoria grinned, then kissed her left knuckles. “One.” Kissed her right. “Two.”

“Oh.” That didn’t really make sense to me, but I still giggled.

“Don’t laugh at me, Christmas.”

I laughed more.

“What’s so bloody funny?” she asked through her own laughter.

“I don’t know. *You.*”

“I’m funny? Really?”

She only made me laugh harder, my face heating up, tears streaming down my face. It was a case of laughing at the littlest thing, when you opened the giggle floodgates, and you couldn’t stop the onslaught. Like those blooper reels from TV shows and movies where the actors lose their poop.

I set Victoria off too, the two of us trying not to look at each other, breaking down constantly while the other two watched on.

“Don’t get it, mate,” Archie said to Tae.

“Neither do I.”

It took until the sound of the approaching helicopter for us to calm down. By the end of it, my belly hurt, my jaw hurt, and my nose ran.

Sexy.

With the giggles passed, we made our way off the plane as the helicopter landed nearby. Tae took point with Archie, leading us through the bitter air.

“Gosh, it’s freezing,” I pointed out the obvious, holding Fizz close, forgoing the carry case.

Tae slowed to walk level with me, his arm around me protectively as the wind picked up from the *thrum, thrum, thrum* of the whirring helicopter blades.

“Duck slightly,” he said.

I swallowed, ducked down, knowing what he meant. The helicopter’s blades wouldn’t chop my head off, my height not quite there. But I felt better for ducking down, braced against the wind.

Tae directed me onboard the helicopter, even fastened my seatbelt for me.

“I could’ve done that, you know,” I countered his move, voice loud against the noise of the helicopter.

“Call it part of our courting.”

“What? Clicking the thing into the thing?”

He stared at me.

“You know, putting that metal bit into the other bit.”

“I love your wording, Clay.” Why did he sound so damn hot? And why was his hand on my thigh?

Warning! Warning! On the verge of jizzing in my jeans!

He removed his hand, giving Fizz another head rub, his eyes drilling into mine.

“Tae...” I whispered. Despite the helicopter, he would’ve heard me.

His eyes moved down my face, lingering on my chest, then back up.

“Tae...” I repeated, all sorts of flushed. “Gosh...”

“Let’s get this show on the road!” Victoria barked.

Our eye fucking ended, Tae swinging his body gracefully to sit beside me. Archie slammed the door, and then we were off with no drama, no chaos. Just the five of us flying away to hide in peace for a while.

Quentin was banished, knocked off the playing board.

Wow.

Resting my head against the window, I smiled as the helicopter flew over the twinkling lights of Seoul, heading

west toward the sea.

SIX

CLAY



The helicopter rattled violently as we flew over the Yellow Sea.

“Shit!” I yelled. “What’s happening?”

“No need to worry, Clay,” Tae answered.

I was about to hurl. “We’re going to crash.”

“No, we’re not. This is simply a security measure.”

“Huh? Turbulence is a security measure?” Oh, God. Any second now, I’d either be a spew machine or knocked out from fear.

“The island’s security systems are reading us,” he said smoothly. “They are determining whether to allow us to enter the island’s airspace or turn us away.”

My head hurt from the shaking and his words.

Now I knew how castanets really felt.

“There are several underwater and land systems performing a smoke and mirrors trick to hide the island from view. To any sailor or pilot, there would only be water here. If they come too close, they are directed around the island. But for us, access is granted after a simple test.”

The shaking stopped.

“Oh, God.”

Tae rubbed my bicep. “It’s okay. You’re safe.”

I bet I look green. “That... That sounds clever.”

“It is.”

“Expensively clever.”

“Extremely.”

“Can see why you want to hide here.”

He said nothing, leaning forward to look out the window beside me.

Appearing as if suddenly drawn to life, an island came into view. Tall cliff edges and a series of lush, green hills dotted with trees made up the landscape. At the top of the highest hill, and spreading down into the lower hills sat a huge, modern structure of glass, concrete, and chrome. It was all sharp edges and open-looking, erupting from the hills.

“Wow...” I said, totally gob-smacked. “It’s like a castle, only with no turrets and stuff and loads of glass. A modern castle.”

The main part of the building on the highest hill was a tall hexagon of glass, an immaculate front garden before it nestled between four small mounds.

From this point of view, I spotted a road leading away from the west side of the mansion, curling around the island, heading down to what appeared to be a harbor in a cove, two boats moored to a jetty.

I carried on gushing. “This is amazing.”

Archie and Victoria were also amazed by what they saw, glued to the windows.

“You’ve never been here before?” I asked.

“Never,” Archie said.

“I haven’t been here myself for a long time,” Tae added.

Victoria whistled. “I can’t wait to get down there.”

“The spring and summer months bring plenty of color.” Tae’s voice tickled the back of my neck. I tensed, holding onto my control. If the others weren’t here, I’d turn around and demand he rip my clothes off. Throw me down and do *so* many deliciously dirty things to me.

“I really want to see that,” I said instead. “Sounds pretty.”

“Maybe you will, Clay.”

“We’ll be here that long?”

“I’d never leave,” Victoria said. “Look at it. The water, privacy, a huge fucking house.”

The helicopter passed over the mansion, revealing a landscaped garden, a covered outdoor swimming pool, and an indoor swimming pool under a diamond-shaped glass dome, a fountain, even a maze, and a helipad.

“You have a maze?” I asked as the helicopter descended.

“It’s not a big one,” Tae said coolly.

“Stop trying to be modest,” Victoria retorted. “That maze is bigger than ten of my houses.”

We touched down and got off, Tae thanking the pilot. The sea air lashed at me, the sound of crashing waves a heavy, refreshing song compared to the traffic of London’s streets. The air was cold, crisp, and salty, incredible in the lungs.

Phew.

I followed Tae along a path past the maze and the two swimming pools toward the back of the mansion. Little solar lights embedded in the grass along the path waited for night to come.

Tae's demeanor was in fully frosty mode.

I upped my pace to walk beside him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He smiled weakly, angling his head my way.

Was he thinking about his wife and son? Did they spend some happy times here?

I went to reach for his hand but drew back. I kind of felt like I should leave him to his memories, to be in the moment he wanted to be in.

Unless he wanted comfort...

The temptation overwhelmed me. I went for it, casting everything else aside, brushing my fingers across his knuckles, then interlocking my fingers with his. He let me in, held my hand right back. He stopped, still smiling.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Looking forward to a bath, a shower—something with hot water and soap."

"Sounds good to me," Victoria said, grinning at our locked hands. "But food is still winning."

"This is an amazing place, mate," Archie proclaimed.

Tae nodded, released my hand, and pushed the glass doors open, leading us into a living area with eggshell walls, an enormous black leather corner sofa, and light wooden floors. Clean lines, much like Raven Tower. A huge TV faced the

sofa, a table with four chairs sat on the other side of the huge space.

“This is one of the living rooms,” Tae said.

“One of?” I questioned.

“Oh.”

“There is a second on the other side of the house.”

“Can we eat yet?” Victoria asked.

“Ever thought of not being a broken record?” Archie said with a groan.

She huffed, rolling her eyes. “Ever thought of not being a knob?”

He laughed and wandered off, eyeing up the simple décor.

“Help yourselves to any food,” Tae said. “We are well stocked. I will make us a proper dinner tomorrow. Traditional Christmas dinner.”

“Yay!” Victoria and I declared at the same time.

“I made sure everything would be here for our arrival.”

The lawyer and I high-fived, Fizz meowing.

“You will not have to want for anything while you are here, including you.” Tae directed that last part to Fizz.

She purred appreciatively.

“First, let me show you to your rooms. Victoria? The kitchen is through there,” he pointed to a door on my left, “if you can’t wait.”

“I’m helping you cook tomorrow,” she replied. “I’m amazing with a turkey. It’s defrosting, isn’t it?”

“Of course.”

“Good man. Pigs in blankets?”

“I will make them fresh.”

“Really good man.” She scuttled off to the kitchen, returning with a bag of crisps branded in Korean script. “Honey flavor,” she said. “Yum.” She crunched away.

Interesting. I’d have to try some in a bit.

“Follow me,” Tae said, taking my hand again.

First stop, the west of the house. A long corridor of glass connected both ends of the house. Four rooms with ensuite bathrooms sat at the bottom of a short concrete stairwell.

Tae opened every door, then stepped back. “Please take your pick. Feel free to explore the house after you settle in. There is a game room with a snooker table and various other activities.”

“Sounds cool,” Archie said.

Victoria disappeared into the room to my left. “This is fucking huge!”

I laughed.

Archie saluted Tae and took the one on my right.

I went to take the room next to Victoria’s.

He stopped me. “Not you.”

“Oh. Where—”

“Come with me.”

He led me back along the corridor to the main part of the house, taking me up a central stairwell to the top of the hexagon. Releasing my hand, he opened two huge doors, revealing a massive bedroom within.

I stepped forward, my heart in my mouth. “Look at the size of this.”

A plush gray carpet sprang under my feet, the walls painted a soft white to compliment it. A bed big enough for ten people sat as the centerpiece of the room, so inviting, ready to swallow up willing sleepers, decked out in gray and white bedding. There was a huge wardrobe, a sofa, a coffee table, a TV, a bathroom attached, and a magnificent view from the enormous window. It overlooked the sea, the sky a breathtaking vista of dramatic clouds. This was the top room of the house, the one with the money shot.

A vase of white roses sat over by the TV on a white marble plinth.

Roses for his wife and son—his wife’s favorites. They were an essential part of his life, a comfort to him. He had to do what he had to do to get through the days, which was really lovely and sad, and it hurt my heart.

“This is our room,” he said.

“Ours?”

“We’re dating, aren’t we?”

God, he knew how to bring the euphoria with only a few words. “I think I like courting best.”

He smirked. “Courting lovers, then. Unless you’d rather not share a space yet.”

“Erm, I so want to share a space.”

“Good.”

“You’ve been inside me, so—” I stopped myself from the rest of the outburst.

His laugh was a deep rumble. “I agree with the sentiment. Let me show you Fizz’s room.”

“She gets a room?”

“Yes.”

My baby girl’s room was next door, a much smaller room but still bigger than any room or hovel I’d lived in.

“Look at this,” I said to her, kissing her head and putting her down.

She immediately explored, sniffing the variety of scratching posts and climbing frames, even sniffing one of three litter boxes and her two big beds. She paused by the panoramic window, her ears and eyes alert, then moved on to inspect the bounty of toys scattered around the place.

“She really has her own room,” I said, shocked once again.

“With a cat flap,” Tae replied, indicating the flap in the door with his foot.

The sound drew Fizz over.

“Or we could leave the door open if she doesn’t like it.”

I launched into him, wrapping my arms around him, crushing him in the hardest hug I could muster.

With the side of my face pressed against his jumper-clad chest, I whispered, “You’re the best, do you know that?”

He smoothed my hair. “I just want you to be safe. Also, there are other cat flaps, all locked. I wanted you to decide on where she should be allowed access to.”

I looked up at him. We were close again, touching, the tension still burning in our veins, a sexy scratch in need of some serious itching.

I shivered in his embrace, cock straining to be free, ready for him, for this longing to be quelled.

He stroked the side of my face with the back of his hand. “Not yet. You should really eat something.”

I stared at his pale lips, hungry for *them*, nothing else.

“I’m...” I swallowed. “I’m a bit hungry. But I can sort myself out.”

“I want you to relax.” He planted a kiss on my forehead, keeping his lips there for long seconds.

“Tae...”

He pulled back, his hands moving to cup my face. “Later, my dear warlock.”

I laughed. “You called me dear.”

“You are very dear to me, dear.”

I blushed, lowering my head. “You crazy vamp.”

He kissed my forehead again. “If I don’t leave now, we won’t be eating for twenty-four hours.”

I looked up, face on fire. “You can go for twenty-four hours?”

“With you? Always.”

“Wow. I wish... I’m not sure my body could take it.”

His expression was loaded with mischief. “A pity.”

“I’ll give it a go, though.”

God, we had to stop this before I came on the spot.

“Until later,” he said, being the sensible one.

“Damn.”

“The expectation will be a wonderful wait. I’ll get you some food. Any requests?”

Your dick inside me? “Erm... Surprise me.”

With that, he left me in Fizz’s room with a raging hard-on and way too much desire.

I left Fizz to her exploring, telling her I’d be right next door. Back in, erm, my room, I left the door open and unlocked the cat flap.

I sat on the bed, sinking into it, bliss on my backside. Wow! This was luxurious and then some. I lay back, letting my spine get the treatment. The bed hugged me, told me it was a thing of great hugs and warmth and the best coziness in the world.

“I never want to get up,” I said as if in conversation with the bed.

I did sit up, though, as I really wanted to clean the day off me.

“Bathroom it is,” I told the bed like an idiot.

The bed didn’t give two flying craps.

Removing my trainers and socks to get a better feel for the carpet underfoot, I headed across the huge room to the equally huge bathroom.

Dark gray stone walls, tiled floors of the same shade, plus two white sinks met me first, along with a toilet and a bidet. The floor was warm from underground heating—super nice on my tootsies. There was a huge bath big enough for an orgy sunk into the floor, plus a shower cubicle also good for, erm, orgies.

Towels hung from rings fixed to the walls, and various glass bottles of shower gels and bubble bath sat on shelves outside and inside the cubicle, along with a colorful array of soaps.

I opted for a shower. I liked showers, especially the kind with rain heads on them. I stripped and opened the glass door, stepping inside.

I'm okay.

I survived again.

The positive vibes were starting to return.

Hello, sunshine.

The hot water sluiced down my body, a heavenly rain washing the drama away. I closed my eyes, letting it run down my face.

I might still be the number one target of the witches, but I was out of reach. Tucked away and safe with no Quentin problems to worry about. Bollocks to all the demons. They were facing issues of banishment and getting their arses kicked. Yes, I'd need to deal with Isobel at some point. She hadn't surfaced yet, but she would. Oh, she bloody would.

Until then, I let the heat of the water unknit my muscles, expel the tension, pinpoint the other heat between my legs. I reached down to my rock-hard shaft, shivering at my touch, its sensitivity magnified. I stroked the head gently, traced my fingers down the shaft, moving down to my balls.

I moaned, thinking of Tae. My touch wouldn't be enough. I needed more than my hand, more than my fantasies.

"Oh, Tae..." I whispered against the sounds of the shower.

"Keep doing that."

His voice startled me. My eyes shot open, heart racing.
“Shit!”

He stood outside the shower cubicle, a silhouette beyond the steamy glass.

“You made me jump,” I said.

“I can see that.”

My hand remained on my cock. “Can you see me clearly?”

“I can. Thank goodness for vampire sight.”

His voice, dripping in sex and rich chocolate, snatched a breath from me.

“Keep touching yourself,” he added.

My balls tingled. “I thought we were waiting.”

“This is waiting.”

“You were getting me food.”

“I can’t concentrate on getting food, Clay.”

I giggled. “Seriously?”

“Keep touching yourself.”

I licked my lips, the water beating my back as I stepped closer to the glass. “This isn’t part of the plan.”

“I don’t care,” he returned.

Keeping my eyes on his image, I did as he asked. I kept up with the gentle touching, scared of climaxing within seconds, teasing myself as much as him.

“Yes...” he purred.

With one hand on my cock, I caressed my stomach, sliding up to play with my nipples.

“Keep doing that,” he commanded.

I went further, turning my body to present my booty. I stroked it, teased it, watching him over my shoulder.

“Do you want it, vampire?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“How badly do you want it?”

“Desperately.”

His blood was a solar flare in my blood, taking over my senses. There was nothing but desire and him, a wonderful yet unbearable ache for his touch.

“Are you coming in?” I breathed.

“Not yet.”

“I’m on the verge...” I had to stop working my dick. “I’m really close already.”

“I know. I’m feeling it, too.”

“This is your blood’s fault.”

“It is.”

“Get in here and...” I started to hum the tune to Madonna’s *Justify My Love*.

“I like that song,” he replied.

Good that he knew my reference. “Appropriate.”

“Yes.”

“Fuck me, Tae.”

“Cum for me.”

“What?”

“Cum,” he said.

“But I don’t want to yet.”

“Do you honestly think this will be the only orgasm you’ll have today?”

That almost got my cock firing. “I…”

“Cum, Clay.”

I really, really wanted to cum. “Can’t you come in here?”

“Next. Cum for me first.”

Shit. My balls ached, my cock pulsing. I moved closer to the glass, inches away from being pressed against it. Focused on him, I got to work, moaning at the bolts of pleasure rushing through my body.

It took me less than a minute to ejaculate over the glass, my toes curling against the floor tiles. I braced myself with one hand on the glass as I decorated it, the explosion so intense I cried out like an overly enthusiastic porn star.

And this was only round one.

When the heady bliss began to fade, I found myself blushing at the mess I’d made.

“Sorry, I don’t know why I did that,” I said.

“Never be sorry for *that*, Clay.”

He began to undress, his silhouetted arms lifting to remove his jumper, bending to take off the lower garments.

I was still hard, still horny, and so ready for more.

Yeah, he’d been right—that was only the first cum of the day.

The shower door opened, my chest flaring with yummy heat. He stepped in, completely naked.

His long, dark hair spilled past his shoulders in masses of blue-black curls, the right side brushing the top of his black rose and thorns tattoo. His luminous skin glistened, his eyes fully crimson now.

Tae was built like a swimmer, but more muscular, a powerhouse, an amazing piece of eye candy with a big, hard cock ready for me.

I did that. I got him hard. I caused that fervent energy in his gaze.

All for me.

He wanted *me*.

He moved forward slowly, a panther stalking its prey. I stayed in place, the willing prey, ready to be devoured.

“You look so beautiful,” he said.

SEVEN

TAE



C lay's naked, slender frame was a feast for my eyes. I loved every inch of his fair, slightly beige-toned skin—from his toes to his forehead, to his wet brown hair.

I approached him, restraining myself from pouncing. He'd made that difficult by releasing himself against the glass, but I held back. Whatever was about to happen had to last for hours. I wanted to enjoy him fully, with no immediate threat of attack to spoil the moment.

We were safe here on the island.

With his blood inside me, my guilt over falling for this warlock waited in silence. It would return, of course, but for now, there was nothing but him and our mutual desire. As much as there was guilt, there was also determination to hold onto this beautiful creature.

I reached him, taking his face into my right hand, my left resting on his chest.

He nestled against my palm, his skin so soft.

I traced his face with my thumb, reaching his lips, and slipping one into his mouth. His eyes flickered with surprise as he welcomed me in. I slid my other hand down his chest,

taking my time over the planes of his stomach, fingers curling into his pubic hair.

He moaned against my finger, the water cascading down his body, adding to his beauty.

I never thought I'd be so taken with someone again, not after Tae Ae-Jung. She was the north star, the one and only, the lone diamond in a sea of other, lesser gems. My soul mate.

The warlock turned that thinking on its head, shook me to my core. I wanted him in body, mind, and soul. If he wasn't near me, I couldn't bear it. What did that say about me, about us? We were courting, yes, but was that a weak label for what this really was?

Was this a greater falling than I believed, edging me toward declaring my...

...not now.

Uttering *that* word was too strong, too raw, too loaded with power.

Not yet...

I took hold of his balls, going from gentle to rougher, giving them a squeeze.

He gasped, smirked mischievously.

“You like that, Clay?”

“Mmmm... Hmmm...” he moaned against my thumb.

I withdrew it, taking his cock with that hand. Massaged him, ran my thumb across his swollen head, leaning in to kiss him.

“Fuck...” he breathed.

I kissed him, sliding my tongue between his lips. His kisses were endlessly exquisite, sending my head spinning into the stars.

He moaned against me. I swallowed those moans, upping my force on his hardness and his balls.

“Wait...” he said. “Wait...”

“Are you cumming?” I asked, breaking away from his lips.

“I will if—”

I stopped, completely letting go.

He looked down at himself, panting. “Whoa... What was that?”

I wanted more than this shower thrill.

“Come back to the bedroom.” I left him in the shower, dried off, and headed to the bedroom.

Inside the wardrobe were some playthings. If we were going to expel our sexual energy, we had to do it right. Fucking him against the shower wall wouldn't do at all.

I wanted him to touch me.

EIGHT

CLAY



Breathless with aching balls, I dried off, stayed naked, and went after the vampire.

He stood by the side of the bed, bathed in the gray light of the afternoon, his eyes twin crimson flames.

“Hi,” I said. “What’s that?”

He was holding a pair of rose-gold chains. I mean, I knew what they were, and what he wanted to do with them. He liked to chain up his Feeders when he drank blood, and he liked to chain me up. It was his thing, and I was always game for it.

“These are for you,” he said.

“Where do you want me?” Call me the willing slave.

“They’re for you to tie me up.”

Say what now? “I, erm... Huh?”

“I want you to chain me up, Clay.”

“You’re joking, right?”

His perfect eyebrows pinched together. “You don’t want to?”

I stepped forward. “No. I mean, I’m really confused because we were taking baby steps back at Raven Tower for

me to touch you properly, and I thought we'd need to take them again and wait, and I so don't mind waiting and—"

"Breathe, Clay."

"Sorry, I'm just surprised you want me to do this."

He smiled. "I *really* want you to do this." He offered me the chains.

Screwing a lid on any further questions, I took the chains. They weren't too heavy, pretty light yet sturdy.

"Will these even hold you?" I asked.

"They're adequate. Now stop talking. This isn't a chit-chat session."

Hearing him say chit-chat made me giggle.

He climbed onto the bed, crawling up to the pillows on all fours. I watched that amazing backside, so pert and full you could dive in and get lost for hours in it.

"Treasure cave," I said out loud.

Whoops.

He paused, still on his hands and knees, looking at me over his shoulder. "Sorry?"

Gosh! Just look at how his hair swept to the side, how he presented himself for me.

Was he? Did he want me to...

Shit! Could I do *that*? For him, for that arse, I'm sure I could.

Yum.

I tried not to drool or jump to conclusions, nervous as well as horny.

Tae rolled onto his back, propped up on his elbows. “Come and chain me, Clay.”

I went to him, my turn to crawl, dragging the chains across the bedspread.

“You’re so hot,” I couldn’t help saying.

“Thank you.”

I crawled up him, my dick brushing against his leg.

“That tickles,” he said.

I laughed. “Good.”

Reaching him face to face, I took the time to kiss him. When we were done, my lips tingling, my anticipation palpable, he sat up, pushing me up with his chest. He put his arms above his head.

“Chain me to that.” He gestured to a hook in the ceiling.

Yeah, I’d not noticed that until now. What crap perception I sometimes had.

“Whoa.”

His expression radiated wicked delight. “I know.”

I got to work, binding his wrists together first, then fixing the chain to the hook. He wanted it taut enough so he could lay down but tight enough so it...

“Bites a little.” His words—his cock-swelling words.

Once he was secured, I straddled him. “What now?”

“You’re in charge,” he answered.

“Me?”

“You’re my master.”

“I am.”

“Yes, Clay.” He stared at me, his voice actually trembling.
“Touch me where you like.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll use our safe word if I want you to stop.”

Glitter...

“Now stop talking, Clay. Let me feel it.”

Mind. Officially. Blown. We’d taken a huge step forward.

Gosh, where to start with this amazing body? Suck on those swollen nipples first? Kiss his neck? What?

I shut myself up and drew in a deep breath. I’d let my body talk, go with the flow of my lust.

I loomed over him on all fours, my cock resting against his abs. I started with his neck, slowly kissing the skin there, lapping at it gently. He shivered beneath me, a delicious sensation I wanted more of. I nipped the skin, being the fake vamp to his real vamp.

He liked that.

I took my time on his neck, paying attention to both sides, slowly kissing my way down to his collarbone, sliding lower, skin against his skin.

He released a heavy sigh of pleasure, the vibrations humming against my dick.

“Hello, you two,” I greeted his nipples.

He chuckled. “Are you talking to my tits?”

“Don’t crack jokes, vampire. This is serious nipple business.”

I took one between thumb and forefinger, squeezing, rolling.

He released a soft moan.

I did the same to the other one, glancing down at his swollen shaft, then used my tongue to up the ante.

Tae squirmed a little, especially as I bit those lovely nubs.

He tasted of limes, kind of a soft hint of lime really. A nice flavor on my tongue, it spurred me to move lower.

I looked up, about to ask if he was okay before licking his abs. I stopped myself.

No *glitter* here.

With my tongue and lips, I moved down further, drawing circles with my tongue on his skin, tracing it across the firm ridges of his abs. Aiming for the sweetest place, pausing at the fine line of dark hair leading down *there*.

I only hesitated for a second, then kissed my way to his cock. Lifted my head, pausing again, the tip of his amazing dick inches from my lips.

Was I really about to do this? Were we really about to smash down this barrier between us?

Yes! Now shut the fuck up!

I kissed the tip first, a gentle peck to tease him. He strained against the chains. I glanced up to see him watching me. Waiting.

Using my tongue again, I flicked it across the head, then slowly swirled it around the top. More teasing, more enjoying his shuffling, the tensing of his leg muscles.

I opened my mouth, releasing a breath against it, then lowered my head. He filled me up, my mouth a wide pocket of heat just for him. I didn't stop until I got my fill, ending at the point of gagging.

Suppressing wild thoughts of puking on his cock, I closed my lips around his shaft, slowly sliding up and down, tasting more lime, feeling as if I weren't really there. An out-of-body experience or something.

Oh, you're really here!

Salty precum infused with lime met my tongue, my rhythm consistent, my lips wet and slick against his cock.

So fucking delicious.

Up and down, I worked his shaft, hands on his thighs. He spread them for me, giving me better access. I removed my left hand from a powerful thigh, dared a cup of his balls. He moaned again, his hips bucking slightly, cock thrusting to the back of my throat.

No gag, only an amazing feeling of him being inside me in a completely new way in our relationship.

I massaged his balls, removing my mouth from his cock for a break. Taking a moment to breathe, I stroked him in my closed fist, still playing with his balls, enjoying his eyes on me, the way he pulled on his restraints.

“Clay...” he whispered.

“You like that?” I said.

“Yes. You feel... You feel so good.”

It'd been a long time since anyone touched him like this. I wanted to make every moment count as much as my nerves twinged.

I went back to pleasuring him with my mouth, sucking him harder, keeping one hand on his balls, the other squeezing his thigh.

“Finger me,” he said.

I paused, releasing him from my mouth with a pop. “What?”

“Finger me.”

My chest tightened with the good kind of fear. “I thought I was in charge.”

“Please.”

Rather than talk about it, I went with it, going up to him for his saliva—vampire saliva acted as lube.

He sucked my finger, wet it, slicked it up with that wonder spit. Our eyes burned together, the energy between us an incredible electricity. I kissed him as my finger left his mouth.

“You’re amazing,” he whispered.

“So are you,” I returned and got back to work.

He lifted his hips, bringing his legs up. I bent down to look at his crevice, running my slicked finger around the edge, slowly pushing my way in. He shivered as I slid inside, deeper and deeper, adding a second finger. I watched his toes curl, his calf muscles tense, his red eyes blazing at me.

I wanted more lime.

I returned my mouth to his cock, working my fingers inside him as I sucked, diving for his G-spot, bobbing up and down on his shaft, my mouth a wet vise.

“Yes, Clay...” He began to thrust into me.

That spurred me on, taking him deeper, my throat yielding to his girth.

Salt and limes, his groans, the hotness of his arse, the jangling of the chains, the whole fucking package. It drew precum from me, pushed me to the edge of climax again.

Tae got there first with a deep, throaty growl, releasing hot jets inside me. I drank them down, the lime and salt sensation incredible, like a next-level cocktail. I didn't stop until I received every last drop.

I released him, slipped my fingers out of him, panting, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, glancing up at his sexy form.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Ride me.”

“What?”

“Ride me.”

“But you've just cum,” I said, confused.

“I want more. Ride me. Please. If you want to.”

Of course, I wanted to! “You're not too tired?”

“No questions, Clay. Only actions.”

I frowned at him. “This me being in charge thing is a bit sideways.”

He laughed lightly. “Just climb aboard and wear me out some more.”

I didn't need telling twice. First, though, I got myself more of his saliva, ready to give him the ride of his life. My desires were turned up to a hundred, taking me into stormy skies.

I'll be thunder and lightning on that fucking cock.

A dark voice like the one who wanted to kill demons—its twin, the voice of explosive sexuality.

No other man made me feel this way.

I straddled him, guiding him into me. His head fell back into the pillows, his fists closed around the chains.

Moving my hips, I worked him again, starting slowly, building up the friction between us. In control, giving it to him harder and harder, him finding the delectable button inside me over and over again.

“Oh, fuck...” I moaned, my arms above my head.

He set me on fire, my body a vessel for pleasure. I rode him to the edge, no need to touch myself, grinding down on him, moaning and moaning, dripping in sweat, so ready to explode as he slammed into my sweet spot.

“Yes...” he whispered.

The burn, the friction, the sounds of skin on skin, his groans, my groans, all of it whipped me into a frenzy, a hurricane against me.

“Oh, Tae. Oh, yes...”

Yes...

I came, shooting all over his abs and chest, calling his name in ecstasy. He thrust up into me, pounding his way to a second orgasm inside me, my spine arched back, hands buried in the bedspread.

When he was done, I sat up, then collapsed forward on top of him, planting my lips on his. We kissed deeply, languishing in the pleasure for long minutes, not wanting to break free.

I'd done it. I'd actually done something to Tae, and he'd loved it.

Would regret take over now, sending him running from the room?

"Unchain me," he said.

Oh, God. Here we go. I'd set him free, then he'd go all broody and walk off, and I'd sit here and wait for the next time he wanted me. It didn't matter what he'd told me about moving forward, about us dating. My self-esteem wouldn't compute, wouldn't allow me to enjoy the moment.

What happened to the return of my sunshine?

I released the chains. He gathered them up and threw them to the side. They landed on the carpet with a gentle thud.

Any moment now...

He pulled me to him, wrapping his big arms around me. I adjusted my legs, laying flush on top of him. His lips locked to mine once again, flesh melting into flesh.

He wasn't getting up?

Gently, our noses touched. "That was amazing, Clay. Thank you."

I swallowed. "Really?"

"Yes, really." He nudged my nose gently with his.

"You don't feel weird?"

"Only in a good way."

"Oh."

He ran his fingers through my hair. "What's wrong?"

I went for honesty, confessing my inner bullshit.

“Those days are gone,” he said after I finished. “There’s a lot for me to process. I won’t deny that. But I’m not dragging you back to that place of confused emotions, the hot and the cold dance. I don’t want that for you, for us, or me. I want this.” He kissed me. “I want you.”

I wanted to cry from the relief of those pretty words.

“I’m walking through a dream,” I said.

“One anchored in reality,” he replied.

We made out some more on the bed until my belly rumbled.

“You really need to eat,” Tae said.

“I’ve already eaten,” I answered, wriggling my eyebrows.

That got me a laugh, another kiss, and a spank on the butt.

“Ooo, Mr. Frost.”

He took handfuls of my arse cheeks. “Don’t make me go back in again.”

“You can if you like.” I kissed the tip of his nose. “I’ll leave that up to you.”

He went back in.

Doggystyle.



AFTER A FRIED EGG sandwich in bed, I curled up beside my vampire lover as the sun went down. Dark clouds smothered the stars, threatening rain.

Fizz was in her room, chilling by the window. We left the cat flap unlocked for her, but she seemed pretty content in her new digs.

The news played on mute on the TV. We were all over it, reporters telling viewers how we were the witches' most wanted fugitives, how I may be dangerous, waffling on about the history of Arcana, talking about Tae's business interests. With my initial horror fading, my attention drifted in and out now. Lifting my head to look in the direction of the screen took too much effort.

"How many people have been to this house?" I asked.

"Not many. You all, some of my staff, my wife and son. Winter Gold."

His sire. "Oh. Do you like it here?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"On my mood."

"I guess you haven't been in the mood for a while, then."

"I came here a year ago but didn't stay long."

"Oh, yeah. I remember you saying."

"I like it here with you," he said.

I listened to his heart beating under me as the rest of him fell silent.

"Thank you," I said, stroking his stomach. "For bringing me here. For everything."

"You never need to thank me, Clay."

"Can't help it. Sorry."

“You’re very welcome.”

I yawned. So comfy. “Can I train here?”

“I was going to suggest you do.”

“Cool.” Another yawn for good measure.

“Sleep if you want, Clay.”

I’d already had so much sleep on the plane. Apparently, not enough, according to my body.

With the thrumming of Tae’s heart, his warmth, and the sounds of the wind and sea transforming into a lullaby, I drifted away into a dreamless, peaceful sleep.

Turned out, I didn’t have twenty-four hours of banging in me after all.

Damn.

NINE

TAE



He slept soundly in my arms, snoring gently. I watched him, held him close for as long as I could before the kernel of pain in my chest made itself known.

Frustration unpeeled me from him, led me to get dressed.

At some point over the past couple of hours, Fizz came into the bedroom to sit by the window. She turned her head, emitting a soft meow, her eyes sleepily narrowed.

I stroked her after pulling on some clothes and trainers, then left the room.

The mansion was silent, aside from Archie and Victoria competing for the loudest snorer over in the west wing. If the tension within me wasn't so thick, I'd find it amusing.

I stepped outside into the cold sea air, breaking into a jog, heading down to the cliff edge. The waves thrashed themselves against the rocks below, the wind churning water. I ran along the edge, clinging to the wonderful sensations within me, the traces of Clay across my body. His vanilla scent enveloped me, trying its best to anchor me.

But my deep-rooted hurt dragged me down into the past, the kernel showing no signs of dying.

The more I ran to clear my head, the more it failed. I drifted into memory once again, of the last time my family and I had been at this house.

It was the year before Isaiah destroyed my world. My son, Tae Ji-Hoon, was five, the month was August, and we were in the outdoor pool together.

My son held a beach ball of red and white stripes. He called it his candy ball, popped his first one from biting it too much, his blunt little vampire fangs eventually breaking through. His reasoning was that if he tried hard enough, he was sure he'd find the real candy inside the candy ball.

After a brief period of bitter disappointment, he came around to the reality of the ball being plastic and lacking any sugary flavors.

“Too high, daddy!” Tae Ji-Hoon protested as I whacked the ball up and over.

“Whoops! Sorry, little man.”

I climbed out of the pool, fetching the ball for him. Tae Ae-Jung laughed from her lounge, as radiant as ever in a one-piece red swimsuit, sipping on her vodka tonic packed with ice.

“Not so high next time,” she said.

I cannonballed into the pool, splashing her. She shrieked with laughter.

“Tae!” she cried.

“Whoops again.”

Tae Ji-Hoon giggled. I threw him the ball. He punched it with his tiny fist, sending it back to me, and a long chain of back and forth commenced.

He won this round.

“Well done, son.”

He punched the air. “Oh, yeah!”

“But it’s not over yet,” I cut off his celebration.

“Let’s go, Daddy!”

Surfacing from the memory, I came to a stop at a boulder, resting my foot on it. My chest ached along with my heart.

The past pawed at me some more, taking me to the evening of that lovely summer day. I read to my son from *The Hobbit* until his eyes drooped, and he fell into dreams. I kissed him goodnight, his favorite teddy tucked under his arm.

My wife waited in the doorway, her hip resting on the frame. “He really loves that book.”

I thought I heard her voice on the wind in my present reality. I turned to its origin behind me, seeing only the dark grass of the island hills, the mansion a glowing crown.

“This is the tenth readthrough,” I answered my wife, putting my arms around her.

“He’s getting stronger,” she said. “Look at him today. I’m scared.”

“Scared of what?” I asked, kissing her cheek.

“Scared of him growing up.” She sighed. “Don’t take that the wrong way. I want him to grow up. I’m excited to see what he will become. It’s just that time moves so quickly. He’s five already. Why can’t the world slow down? I like him being our little boy.”

“He’ll always be our little boy.”

She gazed into my eyes, offering me her smile that shamed the stars. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.”

We kissed. We left our son to sleep. The next morning, we left for Europe, never to return to this island as a family again.

Tae Ji-Hoon. The son I’d never see grow up, time no longer his to experience. He’d be twenty-one now.

Enough...

Every one of my homes around the world whispered with their ghosts. Some more than others, inescapable wherever I went. But those whispers were thicker now, much more potent than before. Because of Clay. Because of his power, because of him making everything different.

As much as I was serious about him, about our future, I didn’t know what to do to make peace with my guilt. I wanted all his sunshine, his quirks, his soul.

Tae Ae-Jung was my soul mate.

Could I have two?

I removed my foot from the boulder, breaking into a run again.

I knew the answer loud and clear. The only way to stop this pain, to be able to move on, would be Isaiah’s death.

Somehow, I had to make it happen.

I ran for two hours around the cliff edge before I returned to Clay, no ideas on how to end that demon scum.

Yet.

It *would* happen.

I'd make sure of it.

TEN

CLAY



“He came to see me once,” Beryl Christmas told reporters outside her home in Luton, England. “Rude little *BEEP*.” Her slander got bleeped as she proceeded to hack her guts up, a cigarette between her fingers.

I glared at the TV as my grandmother talked about me, my spoon of cereal halfway to my mouth.

“She bloody changed her tune,” I said. “Thought she didn’t want to talk to the press.”

While I sat on the bed in a pair of boxers, Tae was fully dressed on the sofa, busy on his laptop. Well, had been until the old bag popped up to ruin breakfast.

The reporter asked her about my homelessness.

Beryl’s mean eyes drooped with fake sorrow. “I tried to reach out to him so many times, but he threw it in my face.” She coughed. “All I wanted was for my grandson to be okay, but he rejected me. You dunno what that feels like. You really don’t.”

The sanctimonious reporter offered her sympathies.

“Thanks.” Beryl sucked on her smoking stick.

I slammed the spoon into the bowl.

“What was it Clay wanted?” the reporter asked. “When he came to see you recently?”

“Didn’t want me to tell the press about him selling drugs and his body now that he was famous.”

“What the fuck?” I shimmied down the bed to get closer to the TV. “Is she for real?”

The reporter was shocked.

Beryl bowed her head. “It breaks my heart every time I think about it.”

“I never did any of that!” I protested.

“Maybe you should turn it off,” Tae suggested.

“Bollocks to that.”

“Clay has hurt me deeply,” Beryl went on to lie. “When he was here, he said terrible things about his dad and mum, about me, said him being on the streets was my fault. I suppose it is.”

Man, that really dragged some ‘poor yous’ from the woman interviewing her.

“Now this,” Beryl added. “I don’t know why or how he can use Arcana, but I... I hope he comes to his senses and turns himself in.”

Rather than smashing my fist through the screen, I got up, took Tae’s advice, and switched it off. My teeth ground together.

The vampire got up and came over to me. “Deep breaths, Clay.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“Come on.” He rubbed my back. “Breathe.”

Oh, I breathed—one sharp intake of air to fuel a rant. “What the fuck are they doing interviewing the miserable cow on Boxing Day? Don’t they have anything better to do?”

“We’re a major story.”

“I can see that!” I snapped back.

Ripples of itchiness. “I’ll go back there. I’ll go back there right now.” A dark veil descending. “I will...”

“Go back where, Clay?”

His voice was a fly to be squashed. He wanted to hide me away, to keep me from doing my job, to lock on training wheels.

I pushed away from him. “Back there. To her shit hole flat.”

“Why would you do that?”

I snarled at him, fingers gnarled into claws. “What the fuck do you think for?”

“Clay? What’s wrong?”

I bared my teeth, grunting at him.

“Clay?”

“Kill her. Make her scream. I want to hear her beg for her life.”

“Clay—”

I pointed at him, full of rage. “Don’t try to lecture me! She’s a vile fucking old hag, and I’ll kill her for her lies, for everything...” I staggered back, another itchy wave overcoming me. “I miss you. I miss you so much. Wake up... Wake up...”

“Clay...”

“I miss... I want it. Is it midnight?”

What are you doing?

I miss Arcana...

I spiraled, confused, a mess of emotions. As angry as I felt, killing Beryl wasn't what I wanted. She wasn't worth my time, and I wouldn't ever do that, no matter how much I loathed her.

Wouldn't I? Wouldn't it feel amazing to see her terrified, craggy face at her window, unable to escape the fire spreading through her home?

Yes...

Never mind the cigarettes. I'd smoke her to her grave.

Yes...

No...

I hunched over and puked on the carpet.

Tae was on me, rubbing my back, asking if I was okay. Nope. The cravings were rampant, this horrible darkness stirring inside me.

“I don't want to be this...” I wheezed. “I can't be this...”

Oh, gosh. Not me. Never me. I wasn't a dark creature. I wasn't a monster. I wasn't an addict of magic or a slave to Arcana. I was better than that.

Arcana shouldn't be here...

Throat on fire, I managed to rise. “I'm sorry.” Tears flowed, my nose a runny mess.

My vampire lover continued to soothe me. “Easy now.”

“I'm sorry I puked on the carpet.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s such a nice carpet.”

He handed me a tissue. “I’m more worried about you. I’ll get you some water.”

He grabbed the bottle from my bedside table. “Here.”

I gulped it back, a vicious pounding in my skull. “Need to sit.”

We parked our backsides on the bed together.

“What happened?” he asked.

I told him, drinking more water between words.

“I see,” he said.

“I’m really worried. I don’t know what to do. How am I supposed to balance this shit? These feelings suck. They’re not mine. They’re not fucking wanted.” I closed my eyes, blinking free more tears. “Sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry.”

“Maybe I need more training.”

He put his arm around me. “We’ll figure it out.”

“No offense, but we keep defaulting to that. It’s a crap answer.”

“I know it is,” he said.

“There’s got to be something to curb these cravings, or at least tone them down.” I dabbed at my eyes with the tissue. “One day, I’ll go too far and not be able to pull back. I’m getting worse.”

“I won’t let that happen, Clay.”

A pulse of pain rattled my skull harder. I winched, teeth clenching.

“Easy now,” Tae whispered against me.

It took me a few minutes to regain my composure. “Do you think witches and warlocks ever went dark like this back in the day? Arcana’s different now, right? It’s not supposed to be here, so it’s going to play up. And I’m of demonic blood, so that really doesn’t help, does it?” I released the biggest of sighs. “I just wish we knew why it’s back.”

A huge question left unanswered.

Wait. “Now the cat’s out of the bag, why don’t we contact my uncle Craig? Better yet, what about my aunt Emma? Maybe one of them knows something.”

Emma was my dad’s sister, Craig my mum’s brother. Maxine would always be my birth mother in my eyes, regardless of the queen being my real mum. I didn’t care how delusional that was.

Tae stared at the window.

“What are you thinking?” I asked, feeling like I had the worst kind of hangover.

“Grindle knows,” he said. “He knows a lot more than he’s let on. And I think he can help.”

“Do you think he will?”

Tae kept his eyes on the window. “He has a keen interest in your survival.”

Grindle’s homelands, the Fairy Wilds, had been the subject of an attempted demon takeover. It’d ended in disaster for the fairies, their lands damaged beyond repair, and the demons walked away with nothing.

Grindle, and I suppose other fairies, wanted demons to pay. Well, apart from his sister, seeing as she was married to Quentin Dawn.

Man, she'd be fuming I'd banished her hubby.

Kill her...

I want my spells...

I grabbed Tae's hand on instinct, steadying myself against the tide of darkness.

He held me, my rock, reassuring me with his gentle squeeze. "Let me get you some more water."

"Th-Thanks."

Tae left and returned quickly with three more bottles of water. I downed one, then drank half of another.

"I'm making you tea," he said.

"Oh. Thanks. I should try and walk this off or something, though."

He drew his thumb down the side of my cheek. "After tea."

"Is that an order?"

"I suppose it is." He kissed my forehead.

I closed my eyes against the warm press of his lips to my skin. "That's nice."

"We will fix this," he said.

"Through Grindle."

He kissed my forehead again. "I'll get your tea."



HALF AN HOUR LATER, I sat on the huge bed after two cups of chamomile tea, Fizz by my side, earphones in my ears, a Kylie Minogue tape playing on my Walkman. As hasty as the packing had been, I'd remembered one of my ultimate treasures, along with my shoebox of Kylie tapes.

Kylie's music got me through so many good and bad times, my yellow Walkman a steady, durable companion. I let the *Golden* album's country-tinged vibes wash over me, having myself a proper chill session.

I was terrified of what came next. The dark thoughts and the cravings were down to a distant rumble, but they left me a ruin in their wake. Empty, scared, waiting for them to return and kick my arse again.

What if I ended up hurting Tae with my magic? What if I hurt Fizz or Archie or Victoria or innocent people? It was bad enough having left so many humans like Roy from the shopping center to their doom in the demon realm. Prisoners of my family, lost through my inaction. I carried that with me, wishing I could've done something with my power to help, to be better than this walking disaster.

I want my spells...

I turned Kylie up, pulling my cat onto my chest. She purred under the Kylie beat, the music and my baby girl working their magic on me, sending me off to...

...not quite sleep.

Something else.

The lava and the suffering of my brother sat heavy against me, but it was his pain to endure, not mine.

He'd found a route out, breaking the surface of the lava to find some rocky place in the dark the lava didn't touch. A tunnel. Against the odds, he'd pulled himself out of the fire and into the solid, cold darkness.

Buttons was nothing more than a glowing skeleton. No flesh, the bones the final remnant of his living form. He rolled across the floor onto his spine, his jaw wide, his eyeless sockets gazing up at the ceiling.

I lingered beside him, kind of like a ghost along for the ride.

Behind me, the lava bubbled, revealing the ruin of rock from the blast that'd trapped him down here.

"You're resilient," I said, "I'll give you that."

Watching his rib cage move with labored breaths but with no lungs was definitely a freaky sight. Man, it looked like bad CGI.

"I always survive, brother." His voice was a smoker's rasp, barely clear.

A murderer, a crazy arsewipe, a dangerous creature with a fucked-up past. He'd been put through so much suffering, his real eyes taken, pumped full of demon blood, all sorts of nasty things ordered by Queen Imelda. Part of me even felt sorry for him, this murderer of innocent humans—families—spilling blood to please our mother.

There was clearly something wrong with me.

"Are you okay?" I asked the skeleton.

Firstly, how the hell could he be anything but not okay? Secondly, there went my misplaced caring again for my twin brother.

“I will be, Bright One,” he answered.

“Don’t call me that.”

His skull turned slowly to face me, the glow from the heat on his bones cooling off. I swallowed, the charcoal bone plucked straight from a nightmare.

“Not so bright now, Clay,” he added.

“Did you do this to me?” I asked.

“You did it to me,” he answered. “We did it to each other.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know, brother. I’m in too much pain to know.” He didn’t move, just laid there.

I looked into the dark, the lava’s blazing light revealing the tunnel beyond. “Do you think it will get you out?”

“I don’t know.”

“Am I... Am I really here?”

“Yes, brother. We’re connected.”

A consequence of our fight?

“I must return to her,” he added. “She will be devastated the power of the throne is lost.”

Should I tell him about mother dearest?

“Is it lost?” I asked.

“It’s not here.”

“There’s a problem with my magic. It’s changed. I can only cast a few spells now.” Erm, he didn’t need to know that.

“Maybe it’s because of our fight, Clay. We have ruined things.”

“*You* started it,” I clapped back.

“My jealousy again.”

“Exactly. Anyway, what about your Arcana?”

He had Arcana skills which allowed him not to be killed by me.

“I’ve told you I don’t know.”

“Fine.” When was I waking up?

Did I want to leave him yet?

“You escaped,” he said. “You got to leave with your vampire. I saw him there.”

“He saved me. Again.” I folded my arms. “I... I have something to tell you.”

He turned his skull away from me. “More bad news.”

“Yep.”

“Tell me, brother.”

“Queen Imelda has been banished.”

Buttons lay still, the ribcage unmoving.

“James?” I said.

“I heard you.”

“Oh.”

“Did you banish her?”

“No.”

“Who did?”

“I’m not telling you.” I kept Quentin’s banishment to myself. I’d already told him more than I should.

“I will kill the perpetrator,” he said breathlessly.

“What’s the point of that? It’s done. Her plans are over, at least those plans. Isobel might take up the torch without the wall-breaking power.”

I took the loss of that power with a pinch of salt, too wary from my life’s recent turmoil to trust anything completely.

Complacency made you its bitch if you weren’t careful.

“I will see Mother, I will heal in the healing baths, and I will be strong for her,” Buttons said. “I must. I must. I must.”

“Why?”

“Because she has given me so much.”

“She put you through hell, ruined your childhood. Some mum she is.”

“Don’t speak of—”

“Save it. Don’t want to hear your gooey shit over her. Just because I’m some weird ghost thingy right now doesn’t mean I won’t hurl.”

“A rude son.”

“A son by the misfortune of blood. Like our brotherly bond.”

Some of his bones rattled. God only knew which ones. “We are brothers, Clay. Whether we like it or not. We’re bonded by blood, by a hard past we’ve each had to endure. We ___”

“Save it. Seriously. I’m done. I hope you’re stuck down here as a skeleton forever. If you do somehow find your way to the surface, stay away from me. Try any shit again, and I’ll make it so you’ll be begging for a lava bath again.”

A pause, me trying to will myself back to the bedroom, Kylie, and Fizz.

“Why do you hate me, Clay?”

“Want a list?”

“I know the list.”

“Then why ask dumb questions?”

“I... I don’t want you to hate me.”

Seriously? “We’ll, you should’ve dialed down trying to kill me and being a murderer.”

“I only want...” he trailed off.

I could answer for him. “Yeah, you only wanted Mummy to love you, to be part of a family. Spare me the whining. We all want love, but we don’t all go about it by terrorizing a city.”

“You have killed demons.”

“Yeah. Good.”

“What about them and their families?”

“I don’t care.” My twisting guts told me otherwise.

“You do.”

“Fuck you.”

Damn conscience! Those demons were demons who killed, who did bad things in a world that wasn’t theirs.

Only, Jarod Woods had been innocent, a pawn, and I'd killed him.

Shit.

Phillipe wasn't part of the evil crews either. He'd helped Tae get to me and then out of the demon realm. He really didn't have to, seeing as he was Jarod's lover.

However, he still wanted a peaceful takeover of Earth.

Same goal, different method.

"Fuck..." I whispered.

"You see?" he said.

I straightened, not wanting Buttons to win. "No different to evil humans."

"You'd kill a human for being awful?"

Years of law ingrained in my brain resisted a yes to that question, plus the fact that killing in general felt weird and discomfoting—when Arcana wasn't filling me with bloodlust.

"Fuck off, James," I answered. "I'm not explaining myself to you."

"I see what you're saying, brother. The wicked are punished. I understand."

"Good. Then you know you deserve every arse-kicking."

"Yet you're no less of a killer than me."

I snapped, lunging forward to loom above him. My presence didn't affect this rocky dump, so trying to remove some bones and throw them into the lava wasn't in the cards. Fine. But I could mouth off at him.

“Don’t try and screw with my mind, arsewipe,” I said, pointing at his stupid, charred skull. “Say what you want. It changes nothing.”

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

That only stirred my pissed off pot more. “Why?”

“You’re my brother.”

I laughed from anger, from shock, from total confusion. He was supposed to be the button-eyed demon, a straight up bad guy. Not my brother, not pulling at my heartstrings with his grubby demon fingers.

“Now I’m your brother after you failed to kill me,” I said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Shut up.”

“I want a brother.”

“You’ve got one in Isaiah. Be his brother. He might enjoy breaking bread with a psycho when he gets his head back.”

A sigh from the skeleton. “It’s not the same. He isn’t like us.” No reaction to the other prince losing his head.

“I don’t care. Stop talking.”

He did, silence falling over everything.

Good.

Bollocks to him. My conscience, for all its silly noises, was pretty clear with the odd stain here and there. I made a mistake killing Jarod, sure. Hated it. Hated that I got manipulated to take out an innocent demon—*innocent* being a flimsy word. No one was really innocent, not even me. But there were those who floated in serious murk, causing

suffering because they were rotten. Harvesting human organs as Poppy Love had done being a good example.

Aside from the Hollywood star, I'd taken out the right demons. The bad ones, the ones who plagued my world, who chose their side and ended up facing me.

Fuck them. Fuck Buttons and his attempts at morality. I'd kill them again, over and over, driving home the point. A few good apples didn't reflect the rest of the rotten orchard.

What if the peaceful ones got their way? What would it lead to? Human history was rife with takeovers and invasions of countries, and this was on a whole different scale. Power would corrupt eventually, leading to more chaos we didn't need.

There could be no harmony between the demons and us.

Us? Man, I liked to forget about my demon blood.

"I will get out of here," Buttons added. "I promise you that."

I tensed up, already preparing for *that* moment. "Another threat?"

"No. I don't want to hurt you anymore."

"Until you do."

I broke away from him, returning to the bed, Kylie in my ears still, Fizz curled up on my chest. Laying there, I let things sink in, gave myself time to process what I'd heard and seen.

Buttons and I were linked. These weren't dreams but a reality.

And the reality hit hard.

Tae came into the room to check on me. I removed my earphones and immediately let him know what'd happened.

His stoic face showed no cracks.

“Crazy, right?” I said.

He sat with me. “Do you need anything?”

“A spaceship?”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“You know, to whisk us off to a more peaceful planet.”

He smiled, reaching out to touch my knee. “That sounds nice.”

“Doesn't it just?” I felt myself frown. “Knowing my luck, I'd get eaten by some alien beast.”

“No. You'd make friends with them.”

I chuckled. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

He got up, heading for the window. “Buttons.”

“I know. Not good. Do you think he can find us?”

“He won't find this island.”

“But he might come to South Korea,” I said.

He faced me. “If he ever gets out.”

“He'll get out. He's Buttons.” I blew out a long breath, my lungs heavy with a gritty ache. “Man, this is just bollocks.”

“The demon queen could still use him,” Tae added, “even with the wall-breaking power gone. He was bred to be her weapon.”

“Scary,” was all I could muster.

Tae nodded, facing the window again. “As much as I hate this connection between you, it may be a tool for you to spy on him.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I guess, yeah.”

“I’ll have my people watch out for him. I agree with you. I think he will surface. I think Queen Imelda will send him out, team him up with Isobel or something.”

I sighed. “He seemed really contrite. But then he’s been like that before, tried to play on my sympathies and look where that got me.”

“I wonder if his dose of Arcana has changed like yours.”

“Oh, God! What if he has spells now or something?”

“The ones you’ve lost.”

My stomach roiled. “If he has them...”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Can’t help it.”

He came back to the bed, sitting down, stroking my leg. “I wish I had words to soothe your fear.”

“There aren’t any. But thanks. This is just more bullshit we have to face, and also hope that last theory is way off.”

Tae nodded, pausing in his stroking. “I won’t let him hurt you.”

That meant so much, but it was a paper-thin sentiment. What if Buttons did come to South Korea and start wreaking havoc to try and draw us out? How many people had to suffer because of my hiding?

Gosh, my head struggled not to pound, so many drills in my skull ready to dive.

Tae leaned in and kissed me. “We’ll get through this.”

My fading sunshine struggled to agree with him.

ELEVEN

CLAY



Later that day, as Tae and Victoria got to work on the Boxing Day dinner, I went for a walk with Archie. Fizz walked with us, sniffing at the grass, wide eyes on the sea.

The blustery wind felt good, as if it were blowing cobwebs off me. Good stuff for clearing my head.

“Thanks for asking me along,” Archie said. “Felt like we were really in the way back there.”

“Same. I know my place in cooking hierarchy. Those two are masters.”

“Well, Tae’s a master. Not sure about Victoria. Think she likes to feel important outside her lawyer stuff.”

I laughed, looking down at the flour stains on his coat. “Did you tell her that?”

“I did. Got flour hands for my troubles.”

“Oh, dear. I mean, she’s confident about her gravy.”

“Yeah. She’s got a lot to live up to by bigging herself up like that.”

When I’d finally surfaced from bed to join the others, Victoria waxed lyrical about how amazing her gravy was, how

we'd never want instant granules again, or any other gravy for that matter.

The big guy stuffed his hands in his coat pockets. "How you holding up, mate?"

"I'm okay. Happy to be outside."

"Fresh air is always good. Gets me away from computer screens."

There was a live feed of The Rift set up by Tae's people via a ship anchored in the sea, plus cameras recording at both demon gates in London. The only demon gates in the world.

Impressive stuff.

Being part of the triangle of trust, Archie and I talked about everything, including this new Buttons/James development.

"I'm scared out of my mind," I said.

"Me too."

"You are?"

"Course, mate. Always. Don't let this tough guy shit fool you."

A big guy like him, scared? Didn't seem possible.

"Every day, I'm scared," he continued. "For Tae, for Victoria, for you. We've been living in dangerous times for so long, and working for Tae upped that danger fifteen years ago. Now it's upped again. I'm not complaining. I'd follow Tae into any fire, and Victoria would too. But we're human, and we get scared."

"I've made it even worse for you," I said.

"Don't do that," he countered. "That's stupid talk."

“Sorry. I get whiny sometimes.”

He patted me on the back. “You changed the game. You made it possible for Tae to get closer to the revenge he wants. But that shit’s never easy.”

“I’ll say.”

He slowed his pace. “In all the years I’ve worked for him, I’ve never seen him like this.”

“Like what?”

“Close to happy.”

I blushed. “Oh.”

“He’s not ever going to be bright and breezy, skipping down the road with the joys of spring under his feet. But he’s different, the ice melting. You’ve done that.”

“Oh.”

“Not trying to embarrass you, mate, but it’s true. I know he still wants what he wants, and he hurts how he hurts—that’ll never change. But things are different now.” He offered me a charming smile. “Never thought I’d see the bloke date someone in my life. Love it. Want the best for him and for you. Really do. Shame it’s come about under all this shite.”

Wow, my cheeks were nuclear. “That’s... That’s really sweet.”

“I’m a romantic at heart.”

Archie would be an amazing partner or husband to the right woman. But he didn’t want to go there, understanding the dangers of his job and accepting them.

Didn’t make it any less sad.

“Nothing wrong with that,” I said.

He stopped, bending down to stroke Fizz, her fur ruffling in the wind.

“We’ll fight with you until the end, mate,” he said. “Me and Victoria have your back.”

“Thanks. That’s really kind.”

“Not just because we’re on Tae’s payroll, but because we believe in this. In him and his cause, in whatever is coming next. We’re your team. We’re right here.”

Man, the pair of them should be running for the hills after getting dragged into the demon realm, tangled up in my family drama. They had no obligation to me, to tolerate my presence in their lives. But they did with open arms, getting behind their boss’s... What was I? What label did you slap on yourself when you were dating a guy? Boyfriend? Lover? Dater? *Datee?*

Hmmm...

“I’m grateful for you.” My turn to be sweet. “Both of you. Thank you.”

“Course, mate.” He stood, Fizz padding over to inspect a small gathering of rocks.

Gosh, what a nice guy. I should really get him and Victoria something. Well, I did actually get them both a Christmas present, but they were back at Raven Tower along with my awesome gold Kylie Minogue vinyls.

Bollocks!

I hugged him. He tensed for a moment, surprised, then hugged me back.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

“For being so cool. For being there for Tae all these years.”

He pushed back gently, taking me by the shoulders. “I love the guy like a brother. I’ll always be here.”

I nodded. “Sorry for the hug.”

“I like hugs.” He pulled me in for another. “Thank you for bringing light into his life.”

Wow. Just wow.

The second hug ended, Archie’s hands back in his pockets. “I’m freezing my nuts off. Mind if I head back in?”

“Is it safe?”

“I’ll avoid the kitchen. Thanks for letting me walk with you.”

“Thanks for joining us.” Fizz wove between his legs, then went to stare at the horizon.

“Must be so much to take in for her here,” Archie said, bending to stroke her again. She barely noticed this time.

“A feast for her senses,” I answered. “She loves watching the world.”

“Interesting place sometimes. Anyway, see you at dinner.”

“See you then.”

I watched him leave for a bit, then carried on with my walk.

“Come on, you,” I told my best girl.

She moved, then stopped by another rock.

I walked slowly to accommodate her curiosity, the sea air briny on my tongue.

“Nice here, right?” I asked her.

She meowed, jumping onto a boulder a few feet ahead to sniff the air. I rubbed her head as I passed.

“This must be the cleanest air we’ve ever breathed.”

In the snap of a finger, I returned to Buttons, still a skeleton on the ground.

“Fuck,” I proclaimed.

“Clay?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Why are you here?”

“It’s not by choice, believe me.”

I snapped back to the island, gasping at the sudden return.

“Whoa.”

Fizz meowed at me, rubbing up against my leg.

I picked her up, kissing the top of her head, watching the gray clouds rolling above us.

“Bloody hell, Fizz. Bloody hell.”



GOLD TABLECLOTH. Check.

Red and green crackers. Check.

Wine glasses and a fancy white dinner set? Check, check.

An amazing spread of food on the huge dining table in the equally huge dining room with fancy light fixtures.

Check all those points.

Gosh. This was a medieval banquet, not a dinner. So much food, leftovers aplenty to cover the next few days. The turkey made my mouth water, the vegetables sitting colorfully beside the roast potatoes. There was cauliflower cheese and Yorkshire puddings, pigs in blankets, and even some crusty bread to mop up the gravy with.

“This looks and smells amazing,” I declared, taking a seat.

“Thank you,” Tae responded, placing stuffing balls by my plate.

Victoria sat opposite me. “I can only take credit for the gravy. This man,” she jutted her thumb at Tae, “is a beast in the kitchen. Talk about being obsolete.”

“It was kind of you to make the gravy,” the vampire replied, opening a bottle of expensive red wine. I mean, the label on the bottle screamed top-tier vino, not the kind I used to buy when I’d made some coins on the streets.

“Would you like some?” he asked me. “Or would you prefer white?”

“Yes, please. To the red, I mean.”

How did he look so immaculate in his white shirt and black jeans, his hair tied back? You’d never know he’d been cooking for hours, that shirt fresh and stainless. If that were me, I’d be a right state, probably taking a nap after getting stressed over roast potatoes.

“Tuck in,” he said, touching my face briefly.

Archie sat next to me, Tae on the end seat. As a foursome, we clustered around one end, scooping food onto our plates. Well, apart from Tae. He kicked back and sipped his red wine.

“You having any?” I asked.

Vampires could eat if they wanted to, for fun, but blood was their only requirement in terms of nourishment.

“Not right now. I want to see you all enjoy it.”

I nodded, loading up roasted sweet potatoes, regular ones, vegetables, the lightest and fluffiest Yorkshire puddings ever, and added some Brussel sprouts. I liked those little green things. Then I went in for the turkey, already carved and ready for my belly.

“Don’t forget this,” Victoria said, offering me the gravy boat.

“Thanks.” I took it, let the brown, steaming goodness ooze over my food. “This smells amazing.”

“I know, sweet. I know.” She winked at me.

Archie groaned, taking the gravy boat from me.

“Problem?” the lawyer inquired.

“Only your self-trumpet-blowing,” he replied.

“There’s nothing wrong with taking pride in what you’re good at, dickhead.”

He laughed.

She smirked, picking up her wine glass. “Anyway, Merry Boxing Day. Didn’t think we’d get to do this, but here we are, and I’m so grateful. Let’s enjoy every last second.”

“Well said,” Archie responded.

“You agreed with me. Must be a fucking first.” They clinked glasses, then mine and Tae’s.

The vampire and I clinked last, our gazes lingering, the tension in my body melting like ice cream in a heatwave.

Tae was the best kind of heatwave.

“Wait,” Victoria said. “We need to do the crackers.”

“Why?” Archie asked.

“For the hats.” She offered him a cracker. “Pull it, bitch.”

He pulled it, winning. The two of them pulled another, Archie winning again.

“Two prizes!” he declared victoriously with a tiny pack of crayons and a bottle opener as his winnings.

“Just give me the damn hat,” Victoria growled.

He handed her a green hat, keeping the baby blue one for himself. “Manchester City colors,” he said. “The greatest football team in the world.”

Victoria groaned this time, slipping her hat on. “Think you’ll find that’s Arsenal.”

A spat kicked off between them over football. It lasted half a minute before Archie stuffed a slice of turkey into his mouth.

I put my purple paper hat on my head, then noticed the pink one on Tae.

“You’re wearing a hat?” I said, chuckling.

“It’s Boxing Day, Clay. Of course, I am.”

How I didn’t lose it to a giggle-fest, I didn’t know. Probably down to irritation over the fact he looked even more supermodel-amazing with a paper hat on his head.

Not fair.



AFTER DINNER, Tae and I went to the bedroom. Being far too bloated for shagging, I did my best impression of a gluttonous starfish, unable to move with the food baby in my belly.

“I’m never eating again,” I declared. “Until tomorrow.”

Tae laughed gently, lifting my T-shirt to expose my stomach. “Allow me.” He started rubbing. “How’s that?”

“That’s nice. Keep doing that.” I emitted a groan. “I blame you for this.”

“You do?”

“Those roast potatoes were my undoing.”

“You did have ten.”

Ugh. “Don’t remind me.”

“The pudding didn’t help. All that cream.”

The queasiness got too much. “You’re enjoying torturing me, aren’t you?”

His dark eyes sparkled with mischief. “As if I’d be that cruel, Clayby.”

Erm, what? “Say that again.”

“Clayby. It’s a new name I came up with. A hybrid of Clay and baby. Clayby.”

I laughed, taken aback. “Hold on a minute. That word sounds too cute coming from you.”

He cocked an eyebrow, pausing his belly rub. “How kind of you.”

“Sounded ruder than I wanted it to. Let me start again.”

“No, it’s fine. You hate it.” The corners of his mouth twitched, hinting at a smirk.

“I didn’t say that,” I tried.

He shrugged, pretending to sulk, being silly and playful.

“I’m not sitting up,” I declared through a bout of giggles.

“Okay, Clayby.” He smiled.

“Are you really calling me that?”

“Not if you don’t like it. I thought it was sweet. Like you.”

He tickled my stomach.

“Yep. You want to torture me.”

“The good kind of torture. With food and sex.”

God, he really made my heart dance. “I like it. Clayby. Call me Clayby.”

His smile died. “Maybe not all the time. It is quite sugary.”

I drifted in a strange reality where the frosty vamp made up cute nicknames for me, really failing in the broody department.

Rather than question it, I wrapped myself in the loveliness.

“I need to come up with one now,” I said.

“Don’t strain yourself.”

“What are you implying?”

“Nothing, Clayby.”

“You’re so weird, and I love it.”

He bent down and kissed my stomach. “It’s good to be weird sometimes.”

TWELVE

TAE



New Year's Eve morning, Clay and I trained in the mansion's gym.

Over the last few days, we'd fallen into a routine of physical training here, which included yoga and swimming to try and help center Clay more, to gain control over his cravings.

It seemed to help, but these were early days.

"Cat-Cow," I gave the yoga command.

He did it.

While we kept up with his fitness, Clay also trained outside, casting his spells to keep his magical skills active, worried those few spells he had left would leave him.

"Downward-Facing Dog," I ordered.

My people across the world were actively on the lookout for any sign of Buttons, Isobel, or other demonic activity. Things remained quiet, and Buttons remained a skeleton in the ruins of the throne chamber. At least in Clay's visions.

I'd called Grindle more times than I could count. My desperation for his counsel only grew, irritating me. I hated his power over me, how he held me on many leashes, dangling secrets like precious carrots.

There was no word or sign of him.

These training sessions with Clay, and all other physical activities we did together, helped keep me focused when my work threatened to overwhelm me. Hours and hours on my computer researching the movements of demons, watching The Rift and demon gate live feeds, studying Arcana history, trying to find the grain of a clue—all of it had to be balanced out to keep my mind healthy.

Being with Clay helped.

I have to be strong for him...

Isaiah's voice haunted me harder over the past couple of days.

I have to be strong...

THE WITCHES WERE STILL in full force, having raided many of my properties. Victoria remained in contact with the ADU, who questioned her on Brad Smith's disappearance.

Even with Quentin gone, Brad remained missing. The ADU didn't believe he was trapped in a demonic thrall.

Fools.

After more yoga moves, Clay collapsed, sweaty on his back. He released a long breath, beads of sweat in his brown hair glistening under the light. A beautiful sight.

"I think we're done for the day," I said. "Let's get cleaned up."

I offered him my hand. He took it. I helped him up, pulled him into a kiss.

If I couldn't hunt demons, if I had to remain on this island, I'd lose myself in physical activity.

I leaned in close, kissing his neck as I slid my hand into his shorts.

He quivered under my touch, hard in seconds.

“What's this for?” he breathed against my cheek as I lapped at his sensitive flesh.

“For you,” I answered against him.

I ran my thumb across the head of his swollen cock, nipping at his neck.

“Oh, Tae...”

Precum leaked against my fingers, sending waves of wonderful thrill to my balls.

“I'm going to fuck you, Clayby.”

He giggled. “Right here? I'm so sweaty...”

“Not here.”

Moments later, we were in the shower, me inside him, his hands pressed against the tiles. I held one of his legs up, pounding him hard and deep under the hot spray, my fangs out, scraping his flesh.

“Yes,” he said. “Oh, yes. Fuck me.”

I thrust harder, this moment about the language of flesh slapping against flesh, not tenderness. The incredible friction drove me deeper and deeper, my fangs piercing his skin. His blood oozed from the puncture wounds, twin crimson rivulets running down his beautiful skin.

I lapped up the blood, vanilla frosting on my tongue, reaching the point where my balls tightened.

I climaxed inside him, moaning against his neck. He followed suit, coming into my hand as I reached around to touch him.

“Wow...” he whispered. “That was great.” He angled his head to kiss me. “But...” he said between the lip wrestling. “We really shouldn’t bang in the shower. What a waste of water.”

I laughed against his lips, agreeing while also lamenting the loss of taking him against the tiles like this.

“Maybe as a treat,” he said.

“Good idea.”

A pleasant morning followed, of him and I reading together in our room. Wonderful peace, watching him enjoy a Stephen King novel, his favorite author, paying no attention to my Proust book. I’d rather read his features, watch his eyes react to moments on the pages before him. He gnawed on his bottom lip, his left hand resting behind his head. Wiggled his backside a lot, licked his lips every time he turned the pages.

My Clayby. Such a silly name, such a silly thing to do. He brought that side out of me, a side so lost and barren I never thought I’d feel it again.

Eventually, he caught me staring.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, immediately touching his left cheek. “Is there something on my face?”

“No. Only your lovely eyes.”

He quirked a smile at me. “Really?”

“Yes.”

He still rubbed at his cheek.

“There’s nothing there, Clay.”

“I know, I believe you. I’m just...”

“What?”

“Surprised to hear you say that, I guess. And I know that’s stupid as we’re dating or courting, and you were just inside me, but I do find it really hard to take compliments because I’m a—”

I moved, cutting him off with a kiss.

“You have lovely eyes, Clayby.”

He giggled, blushing.

Strange to see him embarrassed by words but not at being naked with me. Still, I understood it. Words held more power, broke down barriers.

Words I’d used before on my wife.

I flinched within, not without, yet Clay seemed to notice anyway.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

His hands were at my sides. “Do you need to talk?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“I’m here if you need me, Tae.”

“I know. Thank you.”

Talking was healthy, a chance to vent, to not allow things to fester. I wasn’t there. I wanted the fester, the rage, and the sorrow to linger on a steady simmer. It helped when it probably shouldn’t.

This really wasn’t conducive to a healthy relationship.

I called him silly nicknames, complimented him, enjoyed every moment, but my heart remained broken and pulled in too many directions.

I sat back, glossing over my outer self as much as I could. “I have something for you.”

“You do? What?”

I retrieved his gold Kylie Minogue vinyls from under the bed.

He sprang off the mattress, hopping from foot to foot. “How long have they been there?”

“Since yesterday. I sent for them.”

His hands opened and closed. “Oh, my God. Oh, my bloody God. They’re here? They’re really here?”

He was utterly adorable. “They’re here, and I think we should go and listen to them now in the recreation room.”

“I like the way you think.” He hugged me. “Thank you. Wait. Did anything else arrive?”

“Like what?”

“I got something for you and the others.”

“No. Sorry, I didn’t think.”

“Don’t worry.”

“I can send for them.”

“Is it a ball ache?”

“It is a covert operation with so many eyes on Raven Tower.”

He nodded. “Leave it for now. Come on, let’s give these a spin.”

We listened to the first record he chose, an album called *Aphrodite* before I left him and Fizz to it.

“You’re not staying?” he asked.

“I’ll be back shortly.”

“Okay.”

The recreation room sat at the back of the house next to one of the living rooms, facing the south side of the island. Smaller, cozier with several bean bags scattered around and a large brown sofa. Plenty of greenery and dramatic skies were on view, a perfect spot for relaxing.

I lingered outside the door before completely leaving him alone, listening to him changing the vinyl.

“Look at these, Fizz. They’re amazing. Sooooo gold.”

She meowed in response.

The music started again.

“Yes!” he cried.

I peered around the corner. He danced to the beat of ‘Spinning Around,’ lost in the music, filled with the joy of what he loved, his arms in the air, his eyes closed.

If only his happiness could be held like this forever.



LATER, I cooked for him and my friends. I made *Tteokguk* (a rice cake soup), which went down well, especially with Archie. He enjoyed julienned eggs.

The pleasantness continued after the meal. We were going to have some drinks and snacks, watch the festivities taking

place in Seoul on TV first, then London's celebrations later if they were still awake.

I couldn't see any of them being awake by then.

Maybe Victoria would be.

The relaxed atmosphere took a dark turn as news broke out of London. The four of us gathered around the living room TV after Victoria received a text about it.

"Oh, gosh," Clay said, perched on the edge of the large corner sofa beside me.

Prince Wilfred, eldest son of Witch Queen Margarite and Witch King Lawrence had been murdered at a New Year's Eve lunch in London. The attendees had been gathered in a ballroom near the palace when a gun fired, a bullet hitting him in the head.

He died instantly.

I took out my phone instantly, messaging various people, searching for the truth. So far, the news was full of shock, lacking details, lots of attacks on the presumed lack of security.

I doubted there was any lack of protection for the prince. Guarding the royal witch families of the world was serious, though not infallible, business.

"How does that even happen?" Clay said.

I received a message from one of my people in London. She informed me of her investigation, how there appeared to be a serious breach in security. Possibly an inside job. Details pending.

I told her to keep me informed and briefed the others.

“Shit,” Archie said, running a hand across his bald head.

Victoria typed on her phone. “ADU have reached out again, asking if we know anything.”

Her phone was highly encrypted and untraceable, allowing her to keep up with the ADU nonsense.

“I’m telling them not to be so stupid,” she added, “reiterating the demon possession point again.”

“Why don’t they get it?” Clay joined in. “They know what demons are like, what they want. Is possession so hard to believe?”

“When they have Arcana-tainted eyes, yes,” Victoria answered. “They’re so bent on getting to you, reason has fallen by the wayside.” She shook her head. “Bellends.”

Clay stood up, eyes on the TV. “This must have something to do with Quentin or Queen Imelda. They’re striking again.”

“But why?” Archie said. “They’re going for the big game witches now? It shouldn’t be that easy to take out a witch prince.”

“Demon control of witches must be spreading,” I said. “That’s the only answer. Which means Quentin is pulling the strings still from the demon realm.” I suppressed a growl. “Of course he is. We don’t know his plans, how he means to use The Rift as a weapon against us.” I closed my fist around my phone. “Banished or not, he’ll continue to play his games. It’s even possible Isobel has joined his team.”

What a horrible thought.

“You think that’d happen?” Clay said, moving closer to me. The brush of his thigh against mine acted as a balm to my anger.

“I need a moment.” I left the room, heading outside into the bitter night, not stopping until I reached the edge of a cliff.

I heard *him* follow, his footsteps on the grass, even the erratic beating of his heart.

“Tae.” Clay slowed down, coming to a stop beside me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, sighing deeply. “I’m sorry we’re here when this is happening. I feel so helpless right now.”

He linked his fingers with mine. “We can go back to London.”

“Not at the risk of you getting caught,” I countered. “I told you before, you’re my priority.”

“That’s bollocks. You want to stop Quentin and those other arsewipes.”

And kill your other brother...

I lifted his hand, kissing the back of it. “You are my focus.”

“I shouldn’t be.”

“Why?”

“I mean, I can be because we’re dating, and I’d never say no to being the focus of your attention because you’ve got the knicker-dropping powers of—” He stopped, frowning. “Damn. Rambling. Anyway, what I meant to say is that the bigger picture should be The Rift. If the world gets taken over or destroyed by The Rift, we won’t have each other, will we?”

He made a very good point. “The weight of the world shouldn’t be on your shoulders.”

“And it shouldn’t be on yours. But I was given Arcana, for whatever reason, so I have to do my bit. I don’t...” He shook

his head. "I don't want to be a problem."

"You're not," I said.

"I want to fight against this creeping darkness inside me. Reject the literal and figurative demon, make things as good as they can be, give us a chance at a life together where we don't have to hide on islands. Don't know how because of the witches, but I'm figuring it out."

His sunny outlook attracted me to him during our first meeting. Here was a man having faced so much, set up for a tragic end, yet he pulled himself through the darkness. A powerful resilience shone out of him, never failing to impress me. Buttons was right to call him Bright One.

Clay Christmas. The sparkle in the cold concrete of reality.

"I'm being too idealistic, right?" he asked when I didn't respond.

I cupped his face with my free hand. "Not at all. There is nothing wrong with hope."

His hazel eyes were pools to drown in, shimmering with the light of his inner sun. Sometimes, they were almost silver.

"Can't let these arsewipes get us down," he said. "We did the right thing at the right time. If the witches get me, we lose Arcana. I'm not sure I can win them over with a positive attitude and fire in my belly."

I laughed gently. "Then they're fools."

"Got that right." He looked out to sea. "I don't know how we go forward, but we have to get back to London at some point, or at least be closer." He put a finger to my lips. "And before you say it, I know the safety will be gone."

"There is no real safety," I said around his finger.

“Along with everything else, we’ll figure it out.”

Unable to resist his flesh against my lips, I slowly devoured his finger, sucking gently.

His lips parted as he watched me, his breathing hitched. “Oh...”

I ran my tongue around the tip of his finger, hungry for something far more filling. Sliding it free, I let my eyes roam down his body, enjoying the flush of his skin under my scrutiny.

His vanilla scent intensified, a heady grip on my senses. I had to have him again, right here in the elements, to taste every inch of him, starting with those beautiful lips.

I took his face in my hands again. He tiptoed to meet my approaching mouth. I smiled at the adorable move, landing another kiss against him. Deep and exploring, our tongues meeting as the wind lashed at our bodies.

I could kiss you forever...

I’d said those words before but to my wife.

I smelled it first, metallic and tinged with vanilla. It hit my lips second, breaking our kiss.

His blood ran from both nostrils, pouring over his lips. He touched his mouth, inspecting his fingers. “Oh.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I don’t...” His eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he listed to the side.

I grabbed him as we went down, his body limp. “Clay?” Crouched with him spread across my lap, I tapped his face. “Clay?”

He was breathing, his eyes closed, blood continuing to stream from his nose.

Arcana...

Scooping him up, I hurried back into the house, laying him on the living room sofa within less than a minute.

“Is that blood?” Victoria asked, jumping up. “What happened?”

He wasn’t waking up. I held tissues against the bleeding, contemplating giving him my blood again.

What if it made the problem worse?

I tried anyway. He woke up for a moment, his back arching as he drew in a huge breath.

“You’re okay,” I whispered, flooded with relief.

Why did I even doubt vampire blood not working?

“Tae...” He struggled before his eyes rolled back again, and he flopped down.

“I’m taking him to the mainland,” I said, scooping him up.

“You can’t,” my lawyer said.

“Look at him. My blood didn’t work. He needs real help.”

“We can send for someone. Let me make some calls.”

“I’m not waiting.”

Archie jumped up. “I’m coming with you.”

“Both of you stay here,” I countered.

“It’s too risky going anywhere near the mainland,” Archie protested. “Victoria’s right.”

“Talking about this is wasting time,” I said. “I’m going.”

With that, fueled by a desperate recklessness, I sped away, grabbed boat keys, and headed down to the harbor. A speedboat bobbed in the choppy water, moored to the jetty.

The conditions on the Yellow Sea weren't great, but I had no other choice. Clay had to get to a hospital, to—

“Tae?”

I looked down at the man in my arms, his eyelids drooped but open.

“Where are we?” he wondered. His voice sounded stronger, still weak. He was shivering.

“I'm taking you to the hospital.” I smelled my blood in him, the blood in me calling to it, my desire hot.

“I can stand,” he said.

I let him stand, wrapping myself around him. “Here. Let me warm you.” I adjusted my body temperature to a cozy warmth—a vampire trick.

He pressed the side of his face against my chest. “I feel so... weird.”

“Let's get you into the boat.”

“Like I'm burned out but full of energy. Did... Did you give me your blood?”

“I did,” I said. “Let's get you to the mainland. I have a doctor friend who can help.”

“Unless they're at a New Year's party,” Clay replied, a crack in his voice.

“Come on.”

His body resisted. “No. Please. Not the mainland.”

“But—”

He stopped me, gazing up at me with his tired eyes. “Please. Not the mainland. It’s not safe. I’m okay. I need rest... again. So fed up with conking out.”

“You have to see someone.”

His wide eyes implored me to listen.

“You’re not well,” I said, cupping his chin.

“The witches will get me.”

“I’ll protect you.”

He winced. The bleeding seemed to have stopped, but he tapped the side of his skull. “Headache.”

“Exactly why we’re going.”

“No. Remember when you said we have to think smarter?”

It felt like a lifetime ago, a principle lost in the madness. “Not taking you to the mainland is the epitome of not being smart.”

“You’re acting on emotion.”

“I’m not.”

“You are, Tae. And I love it. Makes me feel so special. But I’m not dying. I’m just feeling really wiped out.”

“My doctor friend deals with witches and warlocks. Let me take you to her.”

“No.”

“This isn’t a choice. I’m—”

“What about bringing her here?”

I paused, the kernel of pain in my chest releasing bursts of agonizing panic. “Here?”

Clay placed a hand on my chest, standing surprisingly strong considering his heavy fatigue. “Do you trust her enough?”

“Yes.”

“Then see if she can come here.”

“But—”

“Tae. No. If we leave the island now without a plan, running on emotions, we’re asking to get caught.”

I ran a hand through my loose hair, conflicted. “I don’t... I...” I stumbled over my words, rattled by this shift in course. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“And I love you for that.” His face immediately burned a bright scarlet.

That word...

“But I’m okay and don’t want to take risks and then not be okay because some witch decides I’m a pin cushion and sticks probes in me, slices me up with scalpels and—”

“I’ll call her,” I said, cutting off his embarrassed ramble.

“Thank you.”

He’d said *that* word...

“Do you want me to carry you back?” I asked, still conflicted from having yielded to his wants. Sometimes, the right course of action was to press ahead no matter what. Only, not in this case, despite my wanting to scoop him up and put him in the boat.

I glanced back at the harbor as we took the sea stairs back up the cliff—not too steep, fine for weakened warlocks to climb slowly. I made him lean against me for support. That was non-negotiable if he wouldn't let me carry him.

I made the call to the most important doctor in my life as we walked.

"This is a nice surprise. Happy New Year," Dr. Ryu answered in Korean.

"Are you available?" I heard the party in the background.

"I am. What's the matter?"

"Have you been drinking?"

"No."

"I'm at the island," I said. "It's Clay." I explained his symptoms.

"I'm coming over."

"I'll have transport sent to you now."

"I'm already moving. Have them pick me up at my office."

"Thank you."

"Of course."

We ended the call.

I pulled a shivering Clay closer to me. "She should be here within an hour or so."

"Okay."



DR. RYU ARRIVED by helicopter just over an hour later, immediately springing into action. Usually, whenever I encountered her, she wore a suit or a white coat, ready to go about her medical business. Tonight, she wore a short gold sequined party dress, her black hair tied up in an intricate design, face painted with soft golds and delicate oranges, fresh from a party.

“Sorry if I ruined your fun,” Clay said as she checked him over.

“It’s fine,” she replied. “When you’re a non-drinker in a room of drinkers, the fun doesn’t last long.”

“Don’t you drink?”

“Only now and again. It goes to my head far too quickly.”

Clay smiled at her.

I stood back, arms folded, leaning against the door. Fizz sat on the arm of the sofa beside her owner, watching the doctor work on him.

She checked his heart, his pulse, and examined him with a wand-like glass device I knew examined magical properties.

“You smell really nice,” Clay added.

“Thank you. My wife is a perfumer. This is her latest creation.”

“It’s good stuff.” Clay looked to me, fatigue ravaging his lovely features.

Dr. Ryu stood up. “Well, we can safely say Arcana is causing problems in your body. Because the magic is, for want of a better term, an alien property, I have no stronger diagnosis than that. However, it is still magic, and, therefore, can be controlled the same as any other magic.”

I have never been given a reason to distrust anyone on my payroll. Each of them from Archie and Victoria to those working exclusively in the shadows, they were all extremely loyal and closely vetted. Dr. Ryu was no different. She'd delivered Tae Ji-Hoon.

I'd rather Clay's magic remain a secret, but the entire world knew now, the truth unable to be stuffed back into the box.

"Let's try this first," the doctor told Clay, pulling a few pill bottles from her brown leather bag. "I have prescribed some medication I think will help you." She handed him one of the bottles. "They're used on overzealous witches or witches with mental health issues that may render them a threat should they lose control of their power. As hard as this must be to hear, you are firmly in that boat, Clay. Until there can be a better understanding of your magic, this is the best course of action. I'm not sure of this medication's efficacy against Arcana, so this will be a case of trial and error." She placed each bottle on the sofa. "I have three combinations here."

I noticed colored dots on each—one green, one red, one blue.

"Follow the order of red, green, blue," she said. "Take one of each daily and record your results with each medication and report those results to me every evening. We can then work with the results to develop your medication."

Clay picked up the bottle with the red dot. "Thank you," he said shakily. "I appreciate this."

"You're welcome, Clay." Her bedside manner was so gentle, so warm. "There is no shame in taking medication. You need help. This magic of yours is complex, but that doesn't mean we cannot get a grip on it."

Clay nodded, gnawing on his bottom lip.

“It was a pleasure to meet you,” she added.

“And you.”

She nodded and picked up her bag. “Do you have any questions for me?”

“N-no. Thanks. I’m good. Thanks so much for coming.”

“Anytime,” she replied. “Take care of yourself.”

“I’ll walk you out,” I said. The helicopter remained on the island, waiting for her.

“Do you need me to stay over?” she asked as we walked.

“I don’t think so.” I didn’t want anyone outside of this core group to linger here. “But thank you for the offer.”

The lights of the mansion sparkled in her dress. “Of course.”

“Will these pills really work?” I asked.

“Yes. I would have said otherwise.”

“I’m just being sure.”

“I understand, but I wouldn’t hide anything from you. We’ve known each other too long.”

I really had no reason to doubt her.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Understandable.” She stopped walking, turning her body to face me. “I’ve never felt power like it in all my years of magical readings. It is nothing short of extraordinary.”

She wasn't wrong. "I'm worried it's going to hurt him beyond repair."

"Understandable."

Her repeat of the word grated. I didn't know why.

"But he will be okay with the proper care," she added. "As long as you follow my advice."

That's all it was—advice, not concrete fact.

"I will," I said rather than throw paranoid words at her.

She cocked an eyebrow at me. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay to observe him?"

Should I? Wouldn't that be the smart thing to do?

"Stay," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes."

She smiled. "Okay."

"Thank you."

The exchange was so simple, so empty of feeling, until she touched my arm.

"You know I'm always here to support you, Tae."

"Thank you."

It'd been seven years since our last communication, yet here she stood, ready to act after one phone call on New Year's Eve.

"I really appreciate your help," I said. "Can I get you anything?"

"How are you?" she asked, ignoring my question.

“I’m fine. Would you like something to eat?”

She tilted her head to the side. “I admire you so much.”

I didn’t like this.

She continued. “For surviving all these years without them.”

I didn’t want this.

“I don’t mean to hurt you. I’m just saying I admire your strength.”

I buried any sign of emotion. We weren’t doing this. We weren’t having this conversation.

Only, my tongue had other ideas. “It has been a struggle. I miss them so much.”

“I’m so sorry. Tae Ae-Jung was my friend, an amazing woman. And your son...” She shook her head, adding nothing further.

I shut my tongue down, done with this. “Let me show you to your room.”

THIRTEEN

CLAY



The pills kicked in straight away, carrying me off on an easy wave of calm. I stretched out on the sofa with Fizz, comfy as hell, so warm and relaxed.

While I'd been kissing Tae outside, my ancient magic had woken up for its midnight-to-dawn run, swamping me in an assault of anguish and rage. My body struggled against it, generating a nosebleed and so much bloody tiredness.

The pills cooled me down to simmer, the cravings suppressed. Bliss. I'd take as many pills as required to keep me from losing my shit like the time in the demon realm when I'd wiped out a town square in Level 3. I danced along the rim of rage, scared shitless of falling in.

"I won't fall in," I told Fizz, rubbing her behind the ears.

She curled up next to me, my own little hot water bottle. Just me and her after the others left me to rest, the New Year's celebrations in Seoul playing on the TV.

I yawned, my eyes heavy, my mind emptying. Well, apart from one thing...

And I love you for that...

Man, why did I have to go and say *that*?

That word...

That word...

That word...

Wasn't it, erm, true?

"I'm not ready for this," I said aloud, sinking deeper into the sofa, ready for sleep until...

...I went off to visit my brother.

Bollocks.

"Hello, again," he greeted me, still in the dark place with the lava as his best friend.

Buttons, the skeleton rested his spine against the wall, his legs crossed.

"You're still down here," I said. "At least you're sitting up."

"I struggle, brother."

"No closer to walking, then?" I actually sat down opposite him, the ground solid beneath me but not really there for a weird ghost like me.

"I'll get there," he answered.

Why was I sitting with him? "How's the pain?"

"Awful. I really must get to a healing bath."

"How long do you think that'll be?"

"Who knows, brother?"

I sighed. "Didn't think I'd be seeing you again on the same day."

"I'm happy to see you."

Man, that irritated the shit out of me. “Why are you doing this?”

“I’m not. Our connection brings you here, not me.”

Damn this. “I don’t mean that. I mean this whole brotherly thing. Drop the act.”

The glow of the lava pulsed across his charcoal bones. “It’s not an act.”

I didn’t respond. I’d only mouth off again, get angry. Why retread old ground? I hated running in circles, especially with someone like him.

Buttons’s skull angled to the side as if the weight of holding it upright was too much for him.

“Here we are,” he said, “together in the dark.”

“Yep.”

“When I said I didn’t want to hurt you, I meant it. I truly did. I don’t expect you to believe me or to accept me, but... I don’t really know what I’m saying. I just want... I want... I’m trying to make things better.”

That ship had not only sailed but sank in the harbor.

I kept quiet, not really having the energy to do this with him. If I was being forced to hang out here, at least I could keep watch and see if he did actually get to his feet.

Then I’d start to worry.

“I want to get out of here, brother.”

“I know you do,” I answered.

His skull lifted, holding steady for a moment, then flopped to dangle on the other side. “Can I tell you something?”

“Okay.”

“I dream of things.”

“Most people dream.”

“Yes, but not me. Not since I was taken as a child. Dreaming stopped after the first cut was made.”

“Oh.”

“The last dream I remember is a colorful one of a rainbow river.”

“Really?”

“Picture it, brother. A river of rainbows, fish leaping from the water, fields of pink candy floss for me to run through, laughing, my fishing net ready to catch those shimmering creatures. A fantasy land built from my favorite things.”

“Candy floss and fish?”

“Candy floss and fishing, yes. I’ve always loved to fish, to explore the river near my old house. Find the leeches under the rocks, the tiny fishes, wander farther down to deeper waters to find the bigger fish.”

“Where did you live?” I asked. “Who took care of you?”

He lifted his skull again, unable to hold it up properly. “A children’s home at first, before I ran away and lived on the streets... So small, so scared. Eventually, I found a rotting country house surrounded by fields and woodland.” He paused for a few beats. “A forgotten place I shared with birds and insects and rats, free from the streets, free from people. Nameless and alone.”

“You didn’t know your name was James?”

“Yes, but they called me James Doe.”

“Like John Doe?”

“Yes. Apparently, I was found in a bundle of blankets with a letter asking to take care of James. No mention of you, a surname, nothing. I was sent to a children’s home, lived there until I was seven. Constantly rejected by the men and women seeking a child to adopt, reminded every day of my worthlessness. Bullied and terrorized, frightened of the next bout of punches or whatever waited for me next. I knew, even at that age, that if I didn’t run, I’d die.”

“Oh, gosh...” I didn’t mean to say it out loud. “You ran away at seven?” He’d shown me a vision of him being kidnapped while he played on a riverbank, taken to be... to be transformed.

“Yes. But I’ve drifted from what I wanted to really tell you.”

On the streets, scared... We were both cut from the same cloth, dragged through the shitty parts of life.

“How did you survive in that house?” I got in during his next pause.

“Sneaking to the town two miles away every night,” he said. “Rummaging through bins, taking whatever supplies I could. Each night brought variety—food, clothes, toiletries. I got by. I was happy. But the happiness had to end, to change. I know that. I know that to lose that life meant receiving a new one. A better one with power and strength and a mother.”

I actually wanted to cry. That sucked. He didn’t deserve my tears.

Did he?

I released a shaky breath, holding back some serious overload of emotion.

Not for him. He doesn't deserve emotion.

“What I really wanted to say was that I dream, brother. I dream of us. Best friends, brothers, living a nice life in the city. Meeting for lunch and dinner, being happy, talking of love and life and—”

“Please stop.”

“Okay.”

Just like that, he didn't speak anymore.

I did instead. “What's your plan when you get out of here?”

“To see Mother. To find you.”

Of course. “Please don't come find me.”

“But I want to.”

“There's no point,” I countered. “There's nothing for us, there's no relationship, and I don't want to fight. I will if I have to, though. Why don't you stay with the queen and...” I paused to mentally slap myself. Yeah, he'd stay with the queen and find a way to fight back, to try again to fulfill her quest to extend the demon realm.

He'd come for me. Mother would want me back. I was a demon prince, after all, a successful child she'd made from all those experiments. She'd left a trail of death and suffering behind her. So many dead kids, so many birth mothers being forced to carry children they'd never meet.

So many dead siblings.

God, I hated the queen so much.

My desire to kill twitched, calling me back to get up and fight. It soon fell away, leaving me to think.

Man, why was I thinking of him in that big empty house as a child, fighting to survive, scared and alone, all of my empathy being dragged over hot coals.

Because you care...

Damn it!

I'm sorry you went through that...

Silence fell between us again. Just two brothers sat together, waiting for the next stage in this crazy game.

FOURTEEN

TAE



I stood alone at the cliff edge, watching the night. The sea battered the craggy rocks below in a violent frenzy, the wind forceful and sharp. Dark clouds rolled across the sky, threatening rain.

Clay needed help more than ever. Arcana was hurting him, pushing him in directions he shouldn't go in. Finding Grindle was paramount.

Losing Arcana removed the possibility of closure, the possibility of finally avenging my family. And that shamed me deeply. It suggested Clay was a pawn in my game, as he was in the games of his mother and Quentin Dawn. How was I any better than them? How could I tell him I was falling for him, kiss him and hold him, and aim to protect him when I saw him as nothing more than a weapon against my sorrow?

I found myself stuck at a crossroads with too many options, too much room for terrible things to happen. Fight and be captured; fight and die; fight and achieve nothing; hide and let the world fall apart; leave Arcana to rip through him and snatch him out of my life.

"I don't know what to do," I told the wind.

My sire's presence alerted my nerves before she arrived by my side.

“Hello, Tae Hyun-Ki,” she greeted me by my real name, dressed in a long black coat.

Resplendent alabaster skin, eyes as black as midnight, features sharp enough to cut glass, my sire was an exquisite beauty who made my skin crawl.

Being my sire and an incredibly skillful vampire, Winter, real name Lee Min-Kyu, could bypass the island’s security systems, nothing standing in her way. I shrank slightly within her presence. A vampire’s sire always the alpha, always in charge.

I wanted her gone.

“How are you?” she asked me, her hands clasped together at her chest, showing off an onyx manicure.

“I’m fine,” I told her, my tone clipped.

“Do not lie to me, Tae Hyun-Ki. I know you better than you think.”

I hated her using my real name.

“You know the old me,” I said.

“Really? Is this the game you want to play with me?”

“I’m not playing games. I’m stating facts. The me of the past isn’t the same man as now.” We were once lovers, her the brightest star in my universe.

That star was now dead.

The wind rippled her loose, raven-black hair. “I can see that. But the core of you is untouched.”

“Please stop talking.”

She did, for three minutes while we watched the waves.

“You need release,” she broke the silence. “More than fucking your warlock lover and more than walking and running around this island.”

“Please—”

“Let me finish.”

“I don’t—”

“I am your sire, and you will accommodate me.”

Part of me yielded, having to obey her. Not with mind control, more with an annoying form of forced respect.

I let her speak.

“I feel it, Tae Hyun-Ki. I feel your suffering. I have done so for the past fifteen years.” Winter was privy to sensing my emotions—the good, the bad, the troubling. It also gave her an insight into the events of my life. “You’re hungry for vengeance. Too hungry.”

I growled. “Never too hungry.”

“Let me finish.”

“Fine.”

Her dark eyes moved up and down my body. “You need an outlet for this pent-up rage before you break. As much as telling yourself sex and exercise is enough, it will result in unhealthy consequences.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“But it has crossed your mind to charge recklessly into danger.”

“Yes.” I never bothered to lie to her.

“Are you understanding me, Tae Hyun-Ki?”

“I am.” She was right, as much as I didn’t want her to be. Eventually, this island would drive me to recklessness.

“Your unfinished business prevents that. You have to do more for your mental health, to change things.”

I sighed against the wind. “I feel so weak.”

“It isn’t weakness. It is a sign of your heart, of your soul. You’re not some unfeeling machine.”

Maybe I should be... I kept that to myself.

“You have to take care of yourself.” Winter turned her gaze to the sea again. “I can help you with that.”

“How? How can you all of creatures help me?”

“Your hatred of me hurts me.”

“Hate is an emotion.”

“Meaning what? You feel nothing for me?”

“Exactly,” I said.

She grabbed my wrist. “Look at me.” I looked, her eyes swirling shadows. “No matter what you think of me and the things I’ve done in the past, I would never deliberately hurt you.”

I stared at her, frustration bubbling. “I...” Words failed me. She’d helped me get the demon realm keys, pointing me in the direction of Jarod Woods when we all thought the dead demon/Hollywood superstar was a monster.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m sorry.” I lowered my head. “I know you wouldn’t.”

She released my wrist. “Say you’ll take my advice and my help.”

I looked up again. “I can’t leave this island.”

“What if I told you there are some immediate problems in need of fixing?”

“You’re more than capable of fixing your own problems.”

She arched an eyebrow—a rare move for her. “Don’t be so sure.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “What problems?”

“There are demons in Seoul snatching witches, and not only here, but across the world. It hasn’t made the news yet, but I know you know about this.”

“Witches being taken to be controlled by demons to control river monsters.”

“Yes.”

Quentin started this in the demon realm with his attack against the royal palace. The toxic river problem, along with the monsters that crawled out of them, wasn’t only a global problem but an issue for the demon realm with no solution in sight.

Maybe there wasn’t one.

“Tell me more of the incident with Quentin and the river monster,” Winter said.

I explained what’d happened, fitting the pieces she’d gleaned from our connection together.

“He’s building an army,” she said. “A global army. Quentin Dawn and his terrifying reach.” She growled. “This cannot stand.”

“I know it can’t. Do you know anything about Prince Wilfred?”

She took a moment to *not* answer my question. “I have told the witches we will help them fight in exchange for Clay.”

My body temperature plummeted to freezing.

“What did you just say?” I couldn’t have heard her correctly.

“I’m sorry, Tae, but this farce is over. I’m taking you and Clay to Seoul where the city’s ADU are waiting to take him back to London to face their Royal Majesties.”

No. She wasn’t saying this. As strained as our relationship was, we weren’t enemies. She’d helped us before, even gave her blessing of sorts for my relationship with Clay.

She said she’d never willingly hurt me.

“It is time to be free of this, Tae Hyun-Ki.”

My brain struggled to keep up with her words. “Free?”

“I can keep you safe. Remove this stain against your name. I’ve made a deal for you to get your life back.” Her face was a frozen tundra. “We can find a way to give you vengeance without Clay, without this web you’re tangled in.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I do not approve of this. Clay Christmas is too chaotic, too dangerous. He is not the way forward for your healing. Look at what you’ve gone through to get here, hiding on the sea. You have to be out there, to breathe, to live your life without these parameters. I can give that back to you. I can help you.” She still showed no emotion, her vocal delivery empty. “We can find a solution to kill your demon. I’ve explained everything I know to the witches, and they have offered to help as soon as they have Clay in hand. All you have to do in return is aid them in their fight. I will be right by

your side. Together we can pool our resources and battle this demonic tide. And in the correct hands, Clay can be a better weapon against the demons. Possibly. Did you ever think of that?

Her words were sinking in now. “You sold me out.”

“No, I’m giving you a chance at freedom. You can’t keep going in this direction.”

“Clay isn’t...” I stopped.

“A weapon? Have you tried telling yourself that? He is, and you’ve been using him as one, no matter how many kisses you offer.”

“Fuck you.”

“Maybe again, in the future.”

Never again will you know my touch...

...it is for one man only.

The sound of boat engines. I saw them cutting across the waves, their lights off.

My hands curled into fists. “What have you done?”

“As I’ve said, I have set you free and allowed my team into this secret haven of yours.”

She’d tinkered with my security systems.

I moved to run, but she grabbed me by the back of my neck, applying significant pressure.

“Be still, Tae Hyun-Ki. Don’t try to fight me.”

I did, spinning to shove her back, tearing into a run at the house. Reaching the inside, I hurried to a sleeping Clay, scooping him into my arms, Fizz coming up with him.

“Did you not listen to me?” Winter stood in the doorway.

“Get out of my way,” I growled.

“There’s no escape. The deal is done. Do you want to be locked up, your life in ruins? Because that’s the only alternative. You’ve committed treason by harboring this warlock, hiding the secret of Arcana’s return. But the witches understand. They really do.” She stepped forward. “Let it be done.”

“Get out of here,” I warned.

“I know it’s hard.”

“You’re a traitor, Winter. I’ll never forgive this.”

“You will. In time. This will give us a chance to rebuild our relationship. I want to make up for the past.”

This was madness. “Please don’t do this.”

“It is done.”

Commotion in the house, heavy boots and crashing, fists meeting bone, Archie and Victoria and Dr. Ryu crying out.

There were more vampires in my house—more of Winter’s sired followers. Two appeared behind her, dressed in black, two women glowing as we did, eyes drowning in scarlet.

“Come now,” Winter said, “or I’ll burn this house and your friends with it.”

Who was this creature? “Why are you doing this?”

“I’ve already explained. Weren’t you listening? I’m doing it for you. Because I love you.”

Love wasn’t here in this room, at least not between us.

A sire's demands must always be met. She hadn't made a full demand as of yet, the force of her will lingering around my edges. As soon as she did, resisting her would be a painful barrier to overcome.

I understood, somewhat, how the rebel demons felt when disobeying their queen.

"I want a peaceful transition," she said. "But the decision lies with you."

"Murdering my friends and torching my property isn't peaceful."

"It will be a lesson to you if you try to disobey me."

Her hold over me wasn't solid—it could be contested. Her threats, however, were always promises. As hard as I'd fight, she had the higher ground. She'd offered me a knife in the back I didn't see coming, with no way of digging it out.

So much for her love.

I'll kill you...

"And I will use vervain," she added. "If pushed to do so. I'll give you thirty seconds to decide."

As soon as they had Clay, the witches would whisk him out of my life. I wasn't about to allow that to happen, and I wasn't about to condemn my friends either.

"I'll never forgive you for this," I said.

"You will in time." Winter stepped aside along with her two vampires, gesturing for me to move.

With Clay and Fizz in my hands, I did as she commanded.

"The feline stays," Winter said.

"She won't leave his side."

“Yes, she will.” She grabbed Fizz by the scruff of the neck. The cat howled, thrown unceremoniously to the sofa.

“You—”

“Bitch!” Clay’s roar cut me off.

Immediately, the blazing pentagram of Arcana burned in the carpet, a sign he’d called his magic to activate. A heavy push of energy sent me flying one way, Winter and her vampires the other. I landed on the sofa, angling myself to avoid crushing Fizz. But she’d already jumped off the cushions, hissing beneath the sofa.

Winter jumped back onto her feet with liquid grace. “Stand down, Clay. You cannot win.”

“We’ll see,” the warlock countered.

FIFTEEN

CLAY



Who the fuck did she think she was throwing my baby like that?

Hell to the no.

“Touch her again, and I’ll burn your face off,” I said. The effects of the pills were gone, totally broken.

“You’re going to Seoul,” Winter retorted, a lot frostier than Tae could ever be. “The witches can deal with you. It is where you belong.”

“You’ve changed your tune.”

Her eyes were bloody rubies. “I have seen sense, at last. You’re bad for my Tae Hyun-Ki.”

Cue a snarl from me. “He stopped being yours a long time ago when you fucked his lover.”

“To show him the errors of that man.”

“Yeah, yeah. I call bullshit. Why not admit you wanted to bang him because you couldn’t stand someone else having what you want?” I took a step forward, anger a swirling darkness within.

Winter Gold growled, her serene beauty cracking with fury. “Do not threaten me.”

My push spells waited for more action. Okay, so maybe I couldn't burn her face off yet, but I'd definitely push the shit out of her, even send her off a cliff. Her and her vampire bitches.

Kill her...

"You can't win this," she said, her expression switched back to emptiness.

Kill her... I wasn't sure what was going on, only hearing parts of it as I woke up, her throwing Fizz catapulting me into action. I got the gist of it though—she'd betrayed us.

"Tae Hyun-Ki will be better without you," she added. "If you care about him, you will let him go and do your duty."

"My duty is to be a lab rat?"

She stared at me like a lion to a zebra. "To fulfill your true potential."

"Think I'll pass."

"They can help."

"Nope."

"Your destiny—"

"Spare me the destiny chat," I snapped.

"But it must be your destiny to be more than this scared man hiding on an island, pretending he is something he's not." Her manifesting smile freaked out. Didn't suit her. "You're not a vampire's lover. You're Arcana reborn. Get out there and be the ultimate soldier."

She sounded like Queen Imelda. "You're talking bollocks, and I'm bored." I smacked her down with my magic, giving the other vampires a massive dose too. The two women behind

her slammed into a wall, smashing through the brick. Winter tumbled after them, landing in a twisted heap.

This shit wasn't going down. She wasn't coming to this island and ruining my life and Tae's or those of my friends.

And no one touched my baby girl!

I stomped toward them, bristling with fury, senses heightened. A male vampire rushed at me from my left, reaching for me. Just in time, I became mist, and he passed through me. I hit him with magic, sending him face-first into a wall, then released my tougher push spell, a ring of force taking Winter, the two women, and another vamp down.

“Fuck you!” I bellowed, a ball of heat and rage. “Get the fuck out of here!”

I was losing myself to the shadows.

“Clay!” Archie ran into view down the corridor, holding a gun. “Where—” A vamp crashed into him, the two of them rolling out of view.

“Archie!” Victoria cried from around the corner.

Arcana read vampires everywhere—indoors and outside, surrounding us.

Tae whizzed past me, delivering a kick into a male vamp coming at me to my left. The guy flew up in an arc, smashing through a floor-to-ceiling window. The glass exploded, crashing in a thunderous waterfall of shards.

We'd take them out. We'd—

Gunfire. Pain. My turn to fly backward, spine meeting the wall painfully. I slid down, fire in my guts, confused by the new position.

As my backside hit the floor, I looked down to see the blood pouring from my stomach.

“Oh, fuck...” I wheezed, dizzy from the rising agony. “I... I’ve been shot.”

“Clay!” Tae roared, coming for me.

Winter grabbed him by the back of his jumper, spun him around, and punched him so hard in the face his head snapped around violently as if twisting off. He went down beside me, completely knocked out.

Blood pooled under his head.

“Tae...” I blinked at his body, holding a hand over my wound. Blood poured through my fingers. Wooziness gripped me, my vision blurring.

Winter held a gun in her left hand, approaching me. She was a blurry image, her colors running. She crouched to my level. “You will see I’m right in time.” She touched the side of my face, her touch pleasantly warm. “But first, let us get you into the correct hands.”

I slipped away as the pain spiked further, my body fighting to stay alive.



BUTTONS WALKED WITH CAREFUL STEPS, his hands using the wall for support. He stopped when I appeared beside him, his jaw clicking.

My heart pounded in my spectral chest. “I can’t be here!”

“What’s wrong?”

I hopped from foot to foot, loaded with anxiety. “I need to get back.”

“Then go.”

“I don’t know how. Why can’t you come and visit me instead?”

“Do you want me to? I don’t know how—”

“You know what I mean!” I barked.

“What’s wrong?”

“Shit’s going down. I need to get back and deal with it.” The crack of the gun echoed in my ears, the searing pain flaring in my guts. “I was shot.”

He turned his skull toward me. “Who shot you?”

“Doesn’t matter who. I just need to get back and fight.”

“While being wounded?”

“I...” Bollocks. “Stop trying to win.”

“Win what?”

I huffed, drenched in cold sweat without a single inch of my skin being wet. “I hate it here.”

“As do I, brother.”

He carried on walking, slowly putting one bony foot in front of the other, shuffling toward freedom.

“Does it hurt?” I asked, following him, seeing as I couldn’t leave.

“Every step is agony, brother.”

Nasty.

“I will not let pain stop me.”

A shame.

“I’m not sure how I see,” he said.

“What?” I so wasn’t in the mood for more of the Buttons Show.

“I can see as clearly as if my buttons were here, yet they’re gone, and I only have these burned sockets.”

I hadn’t actually thought of that. “Erm, whoa. How is that possible? But then you’re a walking skeleton.”

“I wonder if the same would’ve happened for you if you’d found yourself in the lava.”

Ah, here came the evil arsewipe routine. “Why? Do you want to find me and try?” I laughed, the sound loaded with anger. “Want to find me to get yourself some payback? I see your game.”

I’d be dead if I fell in lava, my weak blood not enough to save me.

“I wouldn’t wish this pain on you,” he said.

“Bullshit.”

“I’m not lying.”

“I don’t believe you,” I retorted. “For someone in so much pain, you seem really chilled out.”

That wasn’t a fair thing to say.

Oh, well. Fuck him. If I had an ounce of physical influence in this tunnel, I’d be breaking him down, tossing him bone by bone back into the lava.

Such a satisfying thought.

Was it?

I... I wasn't sure.

Damn!

Buttons walked on, clinging to the wall, ambling over rocks and debris. When he turned a third corner, the ground began to incline, a lava-filled crevice separating the flat ground from the slope.

“Can you get over that?” I asked.

“Yes.”

About three-feet wide, it was certainly clearable. However, my twin's footsteps weren't exactly long strides right now. He shuffled more than walked, the effort a struggle to watch.

Oh, God. He'd fall in and get his foot stuck and burn and burn and burn. I winced thinking about it, ears already tingling in anticipation of blood-curdling screams.

Yeah, turns out the thoughts of his suffering weren't so golden.

Damn.

Buttons shambled closer to the edge of the crack, his empty sockets not leaving the glowing hurdle.

My stomach lurched, attention held captive to a car crash waiting to happen.

He held the wall, staring at the lava, as still as the air in here, waiting, the cogs of his mind almost audible.

I clasped my hands together under my chin, the tunnel thick with tension.

Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.

His fingers scraped the rock, his feet inching closer, toe bones hanging over the edge of the crevice. His chest puffed

up. He held it there, lifting his right knee, slowly extending his leg, reaching out with his foot...

He wouldn't make it. He couldn't make it. He wasn't ready, and I should tell him to stop and wait until he got his strength up.

Reaching out, leaning forward, wobbly as hell, he took that final step. I gasped and...

...he did it. He lumbered forward on the other side, his right ankle twisting under him. He caught himself on the wall, bones scraping rock, sliding down to the ground intact, no part of him dipped in the lava crack.

He'd actually done it.

I clapped despite myself, even said, "I can't believe it."

Slowly, he turned his head toward me. "I did it..." His empty ribcage rose and fell, his exhaustion evident in his hunch and his floppiness—if you could call a skeleton floppy.

"Now for the climb," he said. "Soon."

I stood and waited, an eager and terrified spectator.

After the climb, he'd be coming for me. Unless, of course, I was about to die from a gunshot wound to the stomach.

SIXTEEN

CLAY



Blood pulled me away from Buttons. Hot and thick, it ran down my throat full of healing power, finding the damage to my stomach, fixing it. It traveled farther, reaching my other corners, radiant and incredible, flipping on all my sensual switches.

Vampire blood.

Not Tae's vampire blood.

My eyes shot open, my back arching, my dick throbbing as the euphoria got to work. I lay back down on a soft surface facing a white ceiling, my head resting on a pillow.

Full of renewed energy, I sat up, still dressed in the same clothes. There were holes in my jumper, a huge bloodstain there, some of it having reached my jeans.

Where the hell was I? Some white room with people inside it. Some white room with...

Witches...

Oh, shit.

Vampire...

Winter Gold stood at the foot of the hospital bed, licking her wrist to heal it, surrounded by witches. Eight of them,

armed to the teeth with Synth orbs and weapons, dressed in white, men and women from Seoul's ADU.

"Welcome back, Clay." Winter's eyes roamed my body to my aching crotch. "Nice to see you healthy once again and excited to see me." Her eyes were red, her horniness as rampant as mine.

"Yeah, right," I said, wiping sweat from my brow.

"Don't worry, I would never allow a warlock anywhere near me, no matter how special he is."

"Where's Tae?"

"Do you want him to come and scratch this itch for you? He won't. I won't allow him to touch you again. You and he are over now."

She really had some violence coming her way. "What have you done with him? Where are my cat and my friends? Where the hell are we?"

"Tae is none of your concern."

"That's not an answer."

"Your cat and friends are in the appropriate place."

"What does that mean?"

"It means none of them are your concern now. Your life as you knew it is over. Forget them. They are not a part of your destiny."

I groaned. "This shit again."

She stood as still as death. "Forget about Tae."

"No way. You can't stop our—"

“Stop what? Your sham of a relationship? There is no real heart here, only grief and lust. Tae doesn’t want you, not like he wanted Tae Ae-Jung. He will never love anyone as he loved her. Not even me. But he now has a chance to live his life free of you.”

“We’re—”

“You’re nothing. You have ruined his life, dragged him into the gutter press, turned him into a fugitive. That isn’t caring about someone. That’s called selfishness.” She took a step forward. “At least now he has the opportunity to rebuild his life.”

“With you, I take it?” I readied a spell.

“Absolutely. I am his future, his past, his savior. I couldn’t allow this to continue. He deserves better, and so do you.”

“You’re twisted.”

She ignored me, stepping back.

A witch holding a Synth orb came forward, the sphere full of cloudy red energy.

“Hello, Mr. Christmas,” she began in English, her accent super posh. “My name is Jane Taylor, the London ADU’s ambassador for South Korea. We are currently awaiting safe transport back to London.”

She didn’t say where we were exactly.

“I am here to oversee your journey home,” she added.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Jane was blonde, tall, smothered in too much fake tan, and her teeth blindingly white. “I’m afraid you are. There is no

need to worry. You're in safe hands. If you try to fight us, there will be consequences."

Fizz-related consequences?

"I..." I had nothing, sinking back into the bed like a heavy stone. "Please let me go." Yeah, that'd work.

"The ADU doesn't want to hurt you, Clay. We want your help, as do the Witch King and Queen of the United Kingdom. In light of the terrible tragedy they have suffered, they are keen to meet you, to see your power in action."

Oh, I'd show them it in action. I'd show everyone in this room right now.

"You have to let me go," I tried again, still on my back.

"Afraid not."

"You *will* hurt me."

"Why would we, Mr. Christmas? You're an important commodity to us."

"I'm a warlock." I sat up, hitching up a leg, resting my arm across my knee. Head bowed, defeat crushing my soul.

"That doesn't matter," Jane replied. "There is no prejudice in this room."

"If you say so." I looked up. "What happens to my cat and my friends?"

"As soon we arrive at the palace, they will be released. For the time being, they will remain here in South Korea."

"Are they on the island?"

"I cannot say right now."

Was this really it? The end of my life? Handed a hot guy, an amazing cat/companion, some new friends, only for it all to be taken away? This couldn't be it.

Only, what if Winter was right? What if I was only good for killing demons?

“May I offer you a shower and a change of clothes?” Jane asked.

Yes, please. “I’m good.”

“Are you sure?”

I didn't want anything from her.

“Refreshments?” the witch added.

Winter turned and left the room with deliberately languid footsteps, not giving me one single glance as she vanished.

“She betrayed us...” I muttered.

“Anything you need for your comfort will be provided,” Jane waffled on, adding more robotic crap to a list of lovely things she could shove up her arse.

I stopped her. “Won't all the witch monarchs want to get their hands on me?”

“Not when the demon realm gate is within the United Kingdom,” she answered.

Gates, actually, but then the Barking Park gate wasn't common knowledge like the more famous one in Richmond.

“A deal is already in place to secure the rights to you,” she added.

“I'm not a song!” I yelled.

“Sorry?”

Erm, not my best analogy. “You know, rights to a song.”

“I’m not sure I understand, Mr. Christmas.”

“Forget about it.” She’d already confirmed so much by talking about my ‘rights.’ The witches were like the demon queen, only caring about the weapon side of me and nothing else.

“Are you sure you don’t want a shower?” Jane asked again.

“Can I see Tae?”

“I’m afraid the vampire isn’t here. He is now with his sire.”

“I want to see him.”

Her smile told me she wanted to punch me. “It’s not possible.”

“Can you at least tell me where my cat is?”

“Not at the moment, Mr. Christmas. I would suggest you relax.”

“I don’t want to relax.”

“I understand. However, compliance is in your best interest. We have plenty of measures to quash any incidents.”

Basically, they had me by the bollocks.

Great.

Gosh, I was ready to break down into wild sobs. Not here, though, not before these witches.

Now for the big question: How to stop this runaway train?

SEVENTEEN

TAE



I watched the city of Seoul sparkle before me through the panoramic windows of a high-rise apartment block. It reminded me of Raven Tower, this space smaller and empty of furniture and any sort of décor.

Seoul Tower shone brightly nearby. We were in Jung District of Seoul (Jung-gu), the historic center, an area in which I'd once enjoyed a wonderful meal with my wife back in the early days of our courtship in a charming, family-run restaurant.

In the distance, the toxic rivers of the forbidden Dobong District pulsed brightly in the night. A demon tower stood close to this building, dark for the time being, more of them scattered throughout the city as anywhere else.

Demon towers were always a safety net, seen as the ultimate tool against demonic activity, keeping the world safe. Now I doubted their durability.

Seoul. The city of my birth. A place I didn't want to be right now.

I should've taken him somewhere else...

Winter's shoes echoed off the bare concrete floor, her floral perfume wafting at me.

“Renovating?” I asked, trying once again to break the heavy iron chains binding me to this chair. Layers and layers of them wrapped around my hands and legs, even my middle, holding me firmly in place.

Not my idea of a thrilling use of chains.

“I’m not sure if I want it now,” she replied, staying out of sight. “Another property to worry about.” A pause. “I do detest these new builds.”

Worry? She didn’t need to worry about anything. She had more money than me and no cares in the world apart from ruining my life.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

“We’ve been through the whys, Tae Hyun-Ki. Now is the time to move forward.”

“Chaining me to this chair isn’t moving forward.”

“I know.”

They wouldn’t hold me for long. She understood that and would have a plan to counteract my impending escape, which may involve having me beaten senseless. Again. My cheeks ached from the punches her vampire friends inflicted upon me when I woke up from her strike, my ribs and back hurting too. I took that pain and twisted it, used it as fuel for my resistance, for the coming fight.

I would escape, and I would stop the witches taking Clay back to London.

“Is he still in Seoul?” I asked. She’d told me he’d been healed after the shooting, that he was going home, but nothing more.

“He isn’t your problem.” She moved into view, eyes on her phone.

“You’re right. He isn’t a problem.”

She didn’t look up, her face lit by the light of the screen. “I didn’t say that.”

“I don’t care. You have to stop this.”

“Stop taking care of you? Never.”

I kept on testing the chains. “We haven’t dealt with one another for many years, now suddenly you’re back in my life?”

“I helped you.”

“I appreciate that, but this isn’t helping. This is madness. You’ve given Clay over to—”

“Don’t lecture me, Tae Hyun-Ki.”

“Someone has to,” I replied with a soft growl. “Let me go.”

“I made a deal,” she countered, still scrolling through her phone. “You will join the witches with me and fight against the demons. I have told them all I know—Clay and his lineage, Quentin, all of it.”

“They know he’s a prince...” I replied without air in my voice.

“They do.”

“How could you?”

“Because I love you so much. I want to start again, to rebuild.”

She was no less of a megalomaniac than Quentin or Queen Imelda and just as delusional.

“Our relationship ended a long time ago,” I said.

She remained glued to her phone. “It doesn’t have to be dead.”

“You killed it.”

“How sorry do I have to be? You forgave Clay’s lies about his demon blood, so why not my betrayal?”

The sooner I could get free, the sooner I didn’t have to tolerate her face. “I think you’ve answered your own question. Clay was trying to protect himself. You willingly betrayed me.”

“Too much time has passed.”

“It has. I’ve moved on, but that doesn’t mean I want to rebuild anything with you. My life is with Clay now.”

“Then why did you accept my help in Paris?”

“You summoned me.”

“Interesting,” she said.

“Is it?”

She finally looked my way. “You may want to see this.”

Before I could retort with a statement on the difficulties of reading her phone from my current position, she came over to show me the screen.

“Another attack on the witches,” she said. “This time in New York.”

“The princess?”

Princess Rachel, the only child of the king and queen of the USA, had been shot and killed as she was led to her car. No other information was being provided other than the suspects were demons.

“Social media says different,” Winter added. “Look.”

There were rumors of witches attacking witches, even river monsters being involved, which wasn't news to me.

“Why is this happening?” I asked.

“I have no idea.”

“Quentin supporters?” I wondered.

“We have to join the witches and fight with them. That is all I know.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her. “Since when did you want to be a friend to witches?”

“I'm a friend to many.”

“Only if it serves you.”

“Isn't that what friendship is?”

Once upon a time, I'd loved this woman so much. Would have died for her. “That's not my understanding of it.”

This was wasting time.

She put her phone away. “You're a man of your word, are you not?”

“Where is this going?”

“I hate being your enemy, and I'm not. I'm here to put your life back together, but I require reassurance.”

“How? Are you going to threaten me?”

“No. I'm going to have your word.”

“It’s not yours to have,” I countered.

“Promise me you will work with me, not fight me. I don’t want to fight anymore.”

She used a different lens to observe the world, completely disconnected from hard reality—at least when it came to me.

“Where are my friends?” I asked.

“On the island. Safe.”

“Until they’re not.”

“They do not interest me.”

“Then let them go.”

“I will beat you into submission.” Her usually cold, controlled voice came at me with a cracked bite. “I will use vervain on you if I have to. There are plenty of human servants around to inject you.”

This wasn’t her love but her obsession. “I’ll never love you like I did before.”

She rushed me, taking my face into her hands, resting her forehead against mine. She released warm, quivering breaths against my lips.

I growled in response.

“I will know your embrace again,” she whispered. “Your true embrace, nothing forced. You will open your eyes and your heart to me. We are made for one another, destined to be. I have always believed the heavens, or fate, led me to you the day we met. It was not by chance.”

I didn’t answer, resisting the urge to headbutt her.

“You are my finest creation, Tae Hyun-Ki.”

I had no idea how many vampires she'd sired over the centuries. Enough to build her own little army, I assumed. "I'm not yours anymore."

"You will always be mine." She moved her lips close to mine but didn't kiss me. "I will remove the stain of the warlock."

"Never."

She backed off, folding her arms. "What is it you see in him? He is nothing but street trash, a skinny mess of a man with too much damage. A demon prince, the enemy."

Heat fluttered in my chest. "He is none of those things. He is amazing."

"But he *is* a demon prince."

"I don't care."

"Doesn't that make you a hypocrite?" I heard her phone buzzing in her pocket. She ignored it. "He is from the same blood of the demon who murdered Tae Ae-Jung and Tae Ji-Hoon. Doesn't that sicken you? It sickens me."

I hate every inch of you. "He's nothing like his family."

"For now. But, as I keep having to remind you, your relationship with him is over."

"Not to me. He is wonderful."

She turned her back on me, retrieving her buzzing phone from her pocket. "Yes?" she answered it. "Thank you. We'll be there shortly." She hung up and waved her hand at some lackey. "How you carry yourself from this moment forth is up to you, Tae Hyun-Ki." A vampire appeared behind me, unlocking my chains as she leaned in close again. "I'm trusting you."

Your trust is misplaced.

I let the vampire free me, keeping a level head. Acting now would be foolish. Winter was always one step ahead of me and would have the appropriate traps and obstacles waiting for me if I tried to run.

Free of the chains, I stood up, stretching my limbs, ignoring my pains.

“Feed,” she said, waving over a human woman.

I did as she asked. The blood boost would help greatly and heal these hurts.

The woman greeted me with a *annyeonghaseyo* (hello), bowing her head. She was small, probably no more than five feet, her turquoise-dyed hair swept up into a sleek design on top of her head. Her lips glistened with gloss, her dress matching the color of her hair, slashed to the thigh, the top half showing ample cleavage. Beautiful, a woman I would have enjoyed feeding from before Clay—if enjoyment was the right word for it.

Now I just wanted my warlock, to pierce the skin of his neck, drain his vein just enough to take my fill of his amazing blood.

I have to save him...

The feeder exposed her neck, trembling as my hands slid to her forearms. I kept as much distance as I could, drinking from her quickly and efficiently. My cock swelled as it always did, and her pale skin flushed pink with expectation.

I walked away, turning my back on her. These desires would calm down, get stored away and saved for the man I...

...I'd fallen for.

And I love you for that... Clay's voice was a sweet echo in my mind.

"Are you ready?" Winter asked, the coldness against the warmth of Clay.

I nodded and followed her to the open door, two vampire males flanking it.

The loud crack of a fired gun, the breaking of glass. I spun as the object landed on the floor, a hole in the window from where it'd struck. It rolled, the shape of a grenade.

Stinking of vervain.

I immediately moved, dashing around Winter, cutting through her vampires. The grenade exploded, the force of it hurtling me sideways into a bare concrete wall. I hit it hard, tumbling forward onto my knees with a ringing in my ears, the taste of blood in my mouth.

Fuck.

"Tae Hyun-Ki!" Winter screamed from behind me, the stench of vervain potent and increasingly overwhelming. She coughed and gagged, calling my name no more.

A vervain grenade. Who had fired it?

I glanced back to see a white cloud rolling out of the ruined apartment doorway, the two vampires struggling to their feet, covered in blood. The floor and walls were cracked from the explosion, from my strike, dust choking the air.

"Come on..." one of the vampires said, taking the hand of the other.

Too late. The vampires failed to move in time, going down within seconds as the cloud overwhelmed them, their limbs turning to useless jelly. I got to my feet before I joined them,

the cloud moving quickly, and found the stairs. I hurried past more concrete, this entire building seemingly unfinished and raw, the ringing in my ears already subsiding.

Who fired that grenade? They could be in this stairwell or waiting outside. I stayed cautious, senses tuned into my environment for any incoming attacks.

I had no phone, no Archie, no Victoria, but there were people stationed in Seoul always awaiting my command. All I had to do was find a device, but not here in this vervain-compromised building.

Three female vampires were hurrying up the stairs. I slowed, ready to fight them. They slowed, not attacking.

“Mr. Frost?” one of them said, coming to a full stop. “What are you doing here? The penthouse was attacked.”

Wonderful. “I know it was, by a vervain grenade.”

“And you escaped?”

“Just in time.”

“You left them up there?” Her eyes narrowed in anger. “How could you do that? We’re under attack from demons.”

Wonderful. All the more reason for me to get back on the streets and find Clay.

In no mood to stand and chat, I swung myself over the banister, landing on the next set of stairs below. The vampires shouted for me to stop but opted to carry on upstairs and not pursue me.

“Make sure you fight down there!” one of them called after me.

More vampires passed me as I hurried down. Some burst out of doorways along the stairs to head down or up, trying to talk to me. There was plenty of commotion from below. Should I find a different route out? Getting involved in this fight took me away from my mission.

Clay was my only mission.

On the fifth floor, a vampire charged out of a door and lunged at me, hissing, his fangs bared.

“You’re going nowhere,” he declared. “You’re not a free man.”

I responded with a swift left hook to his chest, a right hook into his face, finished with a kick to his shins, cracking bone. He screamed as we went down, receiving a kick in his face for his troubles.

“Stay the fuck away from me,” I growled and took off again.

On the third floor, a female vampire leaned against the wall, clutching her side. Blood seeped through her fingers, a smeared red handprint on the wall where she tried to stay upright.

“Tae,” she breathed. “You have to get out of here.” She winced, in desperate need of a feeder. “Powerful demon... Get out a different way.”

I felt it before it struck—the Synth. It hit the female vampire first in a burst of blazing red before it bounced off her, striking me. Too powerful for my vampiric resistance, the magic fixed me to the stairs.

Fuck.

Brad Smith walked into view, slowly climbing the stairs, Princess Isobel behind him.

And so it begins.

While the witch, dressed in a grubby white suit, resembled a zombie, the demon grinned like a Cheshire cat, dressed in a long red coat and gold heels. The top half of the coat was open just enough to reveal a black bikini top beneath. Her white eyes were on full display, but not the full demonic side.

She held a golden ax in her hands, stained with blood—both red and black.

“Hello, Tae and bleeding friend,” the demon princess said. “Sorry, I’m late. We got delayed by Quentin’s dickhead servants and some vampires.” She rolled her eyes. That explained the blood on her weapon.

“How did you like the grenade? Smoking, right?” She laughed at her own pathetic joke.

“What are you doing here?” I responded, able to talk while the rest of me was frozen.

“Oh, babes, you’re not that clever to shake me properly. We followed you here when you took off from London, lost you, but knew you were around somewhere. Things have been complicated since.” She sighed. “So much drama everywhere all the time. Quentin’s demons are such dickheads.” Another sigh, followed by a bright smile. “Never mind, here you are now, showing off your sexy jawline.” She approached the female vampire. “You’ve got a lot to answer for, you and Clay.” She stroked the back of the vampire’s neck. “Where is my brother?”

“Witches took him.”

“I know they did,” she replied. “Where to?”

“You don’t know?”

“I wouldn’t be asking you if I did.”

“I thought you were smarter than me.”

She narrowed her eyes and raked her nails across the vampire’s neck. “Do you want me to take this bitch’s head off? I should after what you did, what you took from us.” She sniffed at the rising blood on the vampire’s neck, leaning in to lap at it with her tongue. “Gross.” She spat on the wall. “Where is he, Tae?”

“I wish I knew. I was about to go and look for him.”

Isobel regarded me for half a minute. “Someone told me the vampires made a deal with the witches, resulting in Clay being handed over to them. Is this true? Did you do this to my brother?”

“Not me. Why would I make a deal to put him in danger?”

Another pause, more staring. “I suppose that makes sense. You are a simpering little puppy around him. Was it Winter Gold?”

“Yes. She betrayed us.” There wasn’t any point in lying about that.

“I see. Well, let me go and talk to her. She’s upstairs, right? Fucked up by the vervain?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Shame you’re not, but Brad here is a good boy. He’s got some crazy skills.” She glowered at me. “To think I thought we could be friends. But you had to go and fuck everything up, didn’t you?”

“I thought Quentin and his followers were the ones who enjoyed possessing witches,” I said.

“We decided to get in on the fun but leave out the river monster part. That’s for insane, weirdo demons like him. Anyway, Brad? Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“Back up top for some Q & A and some executions.”

I growled, struggling uselessly against Brad’s magic. “I thought I was staying here.”

“Changed my mind.” She giggled. “What’s the matter, Tae? Scared?”

“No. Inconvenienced. I’m trying to find your brother.”

She pointed at the female vampire, trapped in the magic. “Brad? If you’d release her, pretty please.”

He did.

What was she using to control him? I didn’t notice anything obvious.

“Bye, vampy.” Isobel swung her ax, cutting the vampire’s head off cleanly at the neck. Her head bounced off a step, rolling out of sight. The rest of her collapsed and rolled after her head, blood spraying the walls.

I suppressed a growl, keeping my cool.

Isobel nodded and flicked some of the blood from her weapon. “Messier work than I expected.” She shrugged. “Carry on, Brad.”

The witch moved me up the stairs, my boots scraping the concrete as I floated.

“I think you should stay away from my brother, really,” Isobel said. “Especially after what you did to the other one. Well, the other two, I should say, seeing as you had a hand in Buttons being sent to the lava. Poor thing.”

We were already back on the fifth floor. “I thought you hated him.”

“Hate is a pretty strong word.”

This was wasting time. Clay could already be on a plane back to London right now.

“He bugged me,” she added, “but that didn’t mean I wanted to lose him.”

A telling statement. To her, he was still missing, trapped beneath the throne, not clambering for freedom.

“Probably for the best now,” she said.

Floor six, floor seven, and floor eight passed by in silence.

“I was talking about Isaiah,” she picked up the conversation again. “How you fucked him over.”

Rage sank talons into my reason. His name had the power to break down every wall, to send me spiraling into the crimson mists.

“Don’t say his name to me,” I retorted icily.

“Oooo, what a testy vampire.”

“You don’t know—”

“What I’m talking about? Oh, but I do, babes. I really do. He told us everything after he got his head back.” She winked. “Those healing baths of ours really are amazing.” Another wink.

“He told you...” I didn’t finish.

“What he did to your family? Yes. He’s a psycho, but there you go.”

“I’ll take his head again,” I said, desperate to be free.

He lived, he had his head again. He breathed the air my wife and son could not. He had to die. He had to face Clay’s might.

Clay.

Clay.

Clay.

“Actually, you won’t,” she responded. “You’re dying here today, as soon as I’m sure you’re not conspiring with that sire of yours upstairs and hiding Clay from me. Call it a blessing, a chance to see your family again. What’s the point in fighting? Why not go and be at peace once and for all?”

Because of Clay... I kept silent, done with her, synapses firing every second to figure out an escape.

“Because of Clay,” she said, mirroring my thoughts. “You can’t get him out of your head, can you?” The demon princess giggled. “See what I did there?”

I offered no response.

She rolled her eyes. “You know, a Kylie Minogue reference.” A long groan. “Are you really that clueless?”

“No, I understood it perfectly.”

“Then you don’t have a sense of humor.”

Isobel stayed silent on the journey up the stairwell until the twelfth floor—there were twenty in total. As we turned the corner, Brad showing no signs of dropping his magic, a male vampire came running down to meet us.

“Tae!” he cried. “What the—”

I expected Brad to hit him with magic. Instead, Isobel snapped her fingers. The vampire slamming into the wall. He slid down to his knees, his fangs bared, eyes flushing crimson.

He went to get up. Isobel clicked her fingers again, using that irritating demonic power. “Stay down.”

His kneecaps slammed into the concrete.

Footsteps from above.

“Don’t come down!” I called to the approaching vampires.

Why was I warning those who’d put me here in the first place?

They came anyway, charging into battle in sudden bursts of speed. Isobel brought down two before stumbling backward, forced to swing her ax. She missed, taking a punch to the face for her troubles. She went down in backward roll, her ax flying from her hands. It landed with an ear-splitting clang, her roars of rage following.

She didn’t manifest her true demon form but threw off her coat, revealing her black bikini.

Two vampires, a man and a woman, rushed her while the other two took down Brad, wrestling him to the ground. He stayed utterly silent, his magic breaking as a male vampire smacked his head against the wall to knock him out.

I was free.

“Stay the fuck down!” Isobel roared at the vampires, snapping her fingers. With every step closer they made, she sent them to their knees. Undeterred, they pushed on, sweat running down the demon’s face.

One of the two men who'd taken down Brad joined in, forcing Isobel to work harder, still managing to keep them at bay. Her white eyes briefly met mine as I watched on, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

"The vervain cloud's almost here," the only other vampire not fighting her said. "It's a smart cloud. We have to get out if we're gonna help Winter." He took off and joined the others against the demon.

Winter. Trapped up there, poisoned, weak, and vulnerable.

Let her stay there...

"Brad!" the princess cried. "Get up!"

Where were her guards? She was royalty, after all.

"Guards!"

Right, there it was.

The booming thunder of heavy boots ripped through the stairwell, the princess's army quick on the approach. One of the vampires got too close to her, landing a punch. Isobel shrieked, madly clicking her fingers, stinking of sweet panic.

I made my move, leaping over the vampires, too fast for the princess. My boot met her face, and her body propelled backward into the wall. She screamed as her spine cracked against concrete, releasing another cry as I grabbed her by the throat and tore it out. Her eyes widened with surprise as I tossed the gore away and threw her down the stairs.

The first demon arrived, freezing at the body of his wounded princess. Black blood oozed from her, her body convulsing.

A pity this wasn't death.

“You!” the demon dressed in black yelled. “What have you done?” More demons arrived, slowing to a stop behind him with their weapons and white eyes.

Demon ichor dripped from my fingers, an icy energy taking me in its hold. Something in me had switched off from the moment I attacked Isobel, vampiric coldness taking over, violence the one true path.

The golden ax glinted at my feet.

“Leave now,” I warned.

The front demon drew a grenade from his belt. I had the ax in his chest before he pulled the pin. I grabbed the explosive, the inner vervain stinging against my palms, and shoved it into the demon’s mouth. His teeth broke, his jaw unhinging with a sickening crack. I pushed it all the way into his throat, his screams vibrating around my wrist. His comrades backed away, the stairwell silent aside from the muffled cries of the demon, the wet sounds his body made.

I pulled the pin and withdrew my hand, kicking him away. I sped at the door onto the twelfth floor proper, feet pounding the concrete before the force of the explosion met my back. I staggered and kept on running past apartment doors, coming up to a window.

One useful vampiric skill is the ability to adapt one’s body to become light or heavy. Being light helps with climbing buildings. Being heavy allows for a leap to freedom such as this.

I pushed off the concrete as I came up to the window, arms protecting my eyes, and crashed through the glass. It exploded in an apocalyptic roar, glittering shards falling with me. I angled my body, twisting to land in a crouch on the ground,

then rolled forward, jumping up into a run across a large forecourt.

Blood, vampire corpses, and broken demon bodies caught my attention, not slowing me down. There were at least ten dead vampires massacred by the princess and a similar equivalent in seriously wounded demons.

Nothing moved around me.

There were three cars, two black and one silver, the latter waiting by the open gate in a huge metal fence enclosing this strange apartment block and its surrounding area. A place under construction, rather destitute and grim despite the clean, modern glass building. I glanced up at the smoke pouring out of the top of the dark tower, and the damage done to the twelfth floor. There were no alarms, no lights, no cries, only the wind. Eerily quiet, too quiet to stay in this place.

I considered taking a car but quickly decided against the idea. They might be boobytrapped. As paranoid as they sounded, I wasn't taking the risk. I'd find a car away from this place.

I ran through the gates into a quiet street lined with closed shops, the street curving around a second tall building dwarfed by the tower, gently sloping down to the main road. What a blight on the area this new building was, jutting above the other buildings as an unwelcome invader.

Sirens of the emergency services started up, the explosions from the tower having finally alerted them.

I aimed toward the main road, clinging to the shadows. The cold wind picked up, rattling signage, stirring the trees. I had to find a phone, a payphone would do, to try to reach

Archie. I had to be sure he and Victoria were okay, not trusting the word of my sire.

A black car pulled into the road before me, slowly coming to a stop.

Grindle sat in the driver's seat.

EIGHTEEN

CLAY



I dipped into darkness, hearing Buttons moving in the dark. Cracks in the wall oozed with lava, streams of it vanishing into the ground, casting light on my twin. He crawled on all fours, climbing the incline.

“How far have you crawled?” I asked.

“You’ll be proud of me, brother,” he said, not looking up. “I’ve come a long way.”

Proud? Man, what a delusional arsewipe.

I didn’t stay long enough to chat more, returning to myself, Jane patting my cheek.

“Don’t touch me,” I said, turning my head away.

The metallic tang of blood sat on my lips, my nostrils hot and wet.

“Are you all right?” she asked, backing off.

“No, I’m not.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be on the move soon. We’re awaiting confirmation.”

I sat up, my body itching with violent desires. Throw Jane and her fellow witches against the walls over and over again

until their bones broke and their heads popped. I could do it, paint the room with blood and brains, teach them a lesson.

I watched them, licked my lips at the thought of their deaths, their delicious screams. The panic, the shock, the sweet payback. After taking abuse from witches for years, to finally get the upper hand on them would make my day and night and all the birthdays and Christmases to come.

I chuckled.

“What’s the matter?” Jane asked.

“Nothing you need to know about,” I replied.

“I would strongly advise no resistance, Mr. Christmas.”

“Yeah, yeah. You don’t need to be a parrot. I got the fucking point the first time.”

She stared at me blankly, then spoke to a male witch over by the door.

Whispers.

Secrets.

Bullshit.

“Whispers and secrets,” I said aloud. I slowly sank into darkness again, wading into a lake of shadows. Half in, feeling the rage, my top half keeping me out of the depths.

Mostly.

“I’m sorry?” Jane asked, turning to face me.

The male witch glowered at me, less professional than her, more open about his hatred.

“You heard me,” I said, glowering myself. “But I couldn’t hear you and your secrets. What were you talking about?”

“Nothing you need to be concerned with,” Jane answered, offering up a smile.

I’ll smash the teeth from your head. “It all concerns me, witch. Everything about me concerns me. Funny how that works, right? How would you like to be kept in the dark about your own fate?”

She was still smiling like a complete freak. “Your fate is far greater than you can imagine.”

“Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Like what, Mr. Christmas?”

“I’m not interested in hearing this cryptic bullshit. Either you tell me what’s happening or keep your mouth shut.”

The male witch she’d whispered to stepped forward. “Watch your mouth, warlock.”

I laughed at him, feeling super brave. “You might want to watch yours, *witch*. Know who you’re talking to.”

Jane cut off his attempt to clap back. “Please be quiet. I won’t stand for this.”

I didn’t give a shit what she’d stand for. “Poor you,” I mock-whined at the guy as the other witches in the room kept quiet. “And all of you.” I looked at them all in turn. “Having to stand back and watch a warlock take the power you can never have and will never have again. Bet it hurts to see me be so fucking special.” Waves of itchiness ravaged my skin, my fingers curling into claws.

“Be quiet,” Jane warned me. “This is antagonistic.”

“And this is kidnap.”

“It is necessary. We need you.”

I licked my lips. “I know you do.”

“We’re taking you back to London.”

I rolled my eyes, swinging my legs off the bed. “Please don’t hold back on the breaking news.”

“Stay on the bed,” she said.

“I’m bored on the bed.”

“Mr. Christmas, don’t force our hands.”

I locked my gaze on her, barely blinking. “What happened to my comfort?”

“You know—”

“Stop talking. Stop your fucking bleating.” I gripped the side of the bed, squeezing the metal frame hard. “I’m tired of hearing your fakeness, of you regurgitating the same old crap. I know I’m caught between a rock and a hard place because you’re pathetic. You’re scared and weak, so you threaten me. Keep the muzzle on good and tight.” I laughed, scaring myself, sinking deeper into the darkness. “I’ll break that muzzle.” My turn to beam a grin at the arsewipes.

Jane’s left eye twitched, the male witch taking another step forward.

I waited for one of them to speak, for one of the other witches to indicate they were in the room. But silence followed instead, with lots of staring and tension pulled so tight it’d give at any moment.

As much as I bristled with this freaky darkness, they really did have power over me. They had me scared as witches always did, their feet crushing me into the dirt.

I swung my legs back onto the bed, crossing them and hunching forward, eyes on the sheets.

There were more whispers. I didn't look up, my anger morphing into a heavy, emotional tiredness.

I just wanted to get out of there and back to the island. Why couldn't they leave me alone?

"You're all stupid," I said, silencing the whispers. "So bloody stupid."

No one responded.

I carried on. "Quentin Dawn made this happen, gave you that footage of me. He's a demon, one of the worst. He wants to kill us all. You know that, though. You've been told that so many times, but you keep your heads buried in the sand. All you care about is Arcana and how you can use it."

"We care that you're a demon prince, too," a female witch said from my left.

I kept my head down. "Surprise."

"It was a surprise," Jane responded. "A terrible shock, but one their majesties are willing to forgive."

"Who says I want their forgiveness?"

"Wouldn't you want to be forgiven for being a demon? For being the brother to that awful button-eyed thing?"

"Part-demon, and no. I didn't ask for any of this. I didn't ask to be born."

"Of course not."

"So, what's your point?"

She didn't answer.

More silence followed for what felt like forever.

I wasn't getting out of this anytime soon. Was Tae coming?
Could he get away from Winter Gold?

"Mr. Christmas?" Jane said.

The door opened.

"Yeah?" I replied.

"Follow me. Our flight is ready."

Reluctantly, I followed her.

Damn.

NINETEEN

TAE



The fairy got out of the car, leaning on his silver cane as he stood.

“Grindle?”

“It’s me,” he said.

It was really him, the five-foot, stocky fairy dressed in his standard tweed suit. His curly blond hair seemed longer, framing the copper-skin of his face, his spectacles wonky. The green eyepatch still covered his right eye.

“Grindle?”

“How many times are you going to say my name?”

I growled at him. “Don’t tell me you’re here to reveal you’ve somehow betrayed me, too?”

My temples throbbed, the ever-present kernel of pain in my chest on the verge of taking me down.

“Come with me. There’s so much to do and to explain. First, we need to find our lad.”

“Do you know where Clay is?”

“Hopefully, he’s still in the city. He wasn’t at Seoul Air Base.”

“Then I’ll try Incheon Airport.”

“*We’ll* try. Get in the car, Tae.”

My distrust kept me on the road. “I tried to reach you many times.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Get in the car, and I’ll explain.”

“How can I trust you?”

“Because I’m on your side.”

“Not the demon queen’s?”

“We’ve been through this. Come on. We’re wasting time.”

“I need a phone,” I said, walking toward the car as the sirens grew closer.

“There’s one in the car.”

I quickened my pace for the sake of Clay, sat, and buckled up in the passenger seat before the fairy could move.

“That’s more like it,” he said, returning to the driver’s seat.

Grindle fired up the engine and sped away, turning left, heading in the direction of Seoul Tower before taking a right.

“Phone?” I asked.

“Face cream first. There are checkpoints here. Glovebox.”

I found cream and a phone. I quickly applied it to my face, then called Archie.

“It’s me,” I said when he answered.

“*Oh, thank God!*” he cried. “*Where are you?*”

“In a car with Grindle.”

“*What the fuck?*”

“We’re looking for Clay.”

“*Is that him?*” Victoria called in the background.

“It’s him,” Archie answered her.

“Give me the phone.”

“Wait a minute. Tae? You still there?”

“I’m here. Tell me what’s happening. Are you still on the island?”

“Yeah. We were being held up by vamps, but they’ve gone. Taken the boats back to the mainland. I’ve called for an airlift. Waiting for it now.”

“Okay. Good.” I explained what’d happened from the moment Clay had been shot to Winter and Princess Isobel.

“Shit. Explains why the vamps ran off. And you’re okay, mate?”

“I’m fine. I just have to find Clay.”

Archie sighed down the line. *“God, the poor bloke.”*

We were dealing with the very real possibility that Clay was already in the air, on his way back to London.

“Head to Seoul Air Base.” It would be safer to leave from there rather than Incheon International Airport.

“Okay. Want me to organize a jet?”

“No, I’ll do it now. Focus on getting there and staying safe.”

“Will do, mate. Victoria wants to talk.”

“Give me a moment while I order this jet.” I hung up and contacted the person I needed to make this happen. She quickly confirmed, informing me one would be ready within two hours, apologizing profusely for the wait.

Under normal circumstances, two hours meant nothing, especially when chartering a private jet so urgently. This would have to do.

I thanked her and called Archie back. The fairy focused on the road.

This call had to be quick.

"It's me," Victoria answered.

"Hello."

"Oh my God it's so good to hear your voice."

"Likewise," I replied. "I'm sorry, but I have to make this quick. There is much to do."

"I know. I just wanted a quick chat," she said. *"I've had witch lawyers on the phone again, confirming the deal struck between them and Winter. She told the fuckers you'd work for them."*

"I know."

"As a royal guard, working case-by-case. They're concerned about the attacks on the royals and wanted you to work protection duty tonight at Gyeongbokgung Palace."

"I see."

"Emailed me so much paperwork."

"I'm sorry for the mess."

"Don't be. They're wankers, and I know they're leaving out some vital info. I've not responded to a single thread yet. Waiting for you."

"I won't be working any bodyguard duty tonight unless it's for Clay."

“They’ve threatened a prison sentence if you don’t do what they ask.”

“I’m sure.”

“Tempted to tell them to go lick a hippo’s arse.”

“A disturbing prospect.”

She laughed gently. *“Less than they deserve. Anyway, just wanted to say that and hear you speak again.”* A heavy sigh. *“This is so fucked.”*

“I know.”

“Go get our warlock.”

“I will. Goodbye.”

“Bye, Tae.”

I hung up.

“Everything okay?” Grindle asked.

“Start talking.”

We reached the first checkpoint on our journey, the timing perfect to irritate me. The ADU witches asked for our documents, which Grindle already had at the ready. They scanned them, then waved us through.

“You planned this?” I said.

“I did. There are papers for Clay and your friends, too. Even the cat.”

There was plenty of traffic on the road, and the cold and the lateness not diminishing the business of the city.

“Thank you,” I said. “I appreciate the help, but I don’t appreciate being kept in the dark. You really need to start talking.”

“You’re not going to like what I say.”

“Speak.”

He stopped at traffic lights, tapping the steering wheel with his left thumb.

“What is it?”

“I’ve found out...” He shook his head. “I *believe* I’ve found out how Clay and James acquired Arcana.”

My body stilled, my ears primed for the truth. Here it was, the answer, the possible key to save Clay from the power threatening to undo him, to understand it at last.

The lights turned from red to green, Grindle driving on.

“The London witches ran an experimental program twenty-five years ago,” he said, “testing willing candidates in an attempt to bring Arcana back—or at least replicate it in a better, stronger form than Synth.” He made a left turn, heading for Seongsan Bridge. “Ten warlocks were chosen as test subjects, particularly those who were homeless or struggling financially. A huge payout was promised, as well as many other fake promises should the program prove to be successful—such as fame as the warlocks who’d helped restore Arcana.”

We hit another checkpoint, going through the motions quickly.

Moving again, the fairy continued. “I can show you the full report later so you can read the finer chemical details, but a concoction was created using harvested blood from the populace, Trace, and something else.”

Mandatory blood donations were required for everyone, including me, in order for Synth to be made in Synth labs—a magical process combing many blood types, putting that blood

through a deep cleansing, and adding other secret ingredients. A nefarious process that should be illegal and probably would be if the witches weren't in control of our laws.

The loss of Arcana had hit hard, prompting the desperation to make a powerful magic to fight demons and for the witches to seize control, leaving warlocks to use the far weaker Trace—a remnant of Arcana which lingered in the air, coming down in the form of snow once a month.

“What was the something else?” I asked.

He shook his head again, the streetlights outside bleeding across his face. “Fairy magic.”

I didn't think I could tense up any more than I already was. “What?”

Was he about to tell me he was involved?

I'd kill him if he did. I'd had enough of betrayal, of secrets and lies, of others pulling the strings against me.

“My sister. Gretchen. She provided her magic, fully immersed herself in the program. I've had my suspicions about her and the witches for a while, and they were correct. She's been playing both sides, just like me.”

“Does Quentin know?”

“Knowing my sister, no.”

“How did you get this information?” I asked.

“I went to see her, and she told me everything.”

“As easy as that?”

“Not exactly.” He turned right, then left. “I went to see her. She and Quentin have a house in Norway, and knowing he wasn't around due to his banishment, I took the opportunity to

visit her for the first time in a while. We don't have the best relationship."

I let him tell his tale, more anxious than ever to get to Clay.

"They live in a cottage in the middle of nowhere, facing the North Sea. With a powerful telescope, you can see The Rift from there. It's a charming place on a hill, small yet sturdy, away from everything. Peaceful, the kind of place I'd love to have for myself if it weren't for the snow." He groaned. "I didn't enjoy a single moment driving to that house through that white muck. Anyway, there was animosity from the moment I knocked on her yellow door. She screamed at me. I screamed at her. She let me in for tea, and we screamed some more about our differences. We've always been the same, always competitive and at each other's throats. She married Quentin. I helped the queen. She worked with the witches. I worked for you and have sold fairy things to witches."

Fairies were the worst, yet good to have on your side as long as they held off from betrayal. And they couldn't lie if you confronted them with the truth.

"I challenged her about the test program. I'd discovered a paper trail about the scheme, but a lot of it had been destroyed or redacted. She told me about it, divulged the information after she lost."

"Lost what?"

"The challenge was a game of cards. She lost and had to give me something I wanted. And she did."

"Because of cards?"

He nodded. "Fairies take these challenges very seriously. She even offered me files she had on each candidate. Including Adam Christmas."

“Clay’s dad?” I said.

“Yes. He was one of the two survivors. The other eight died horrible deaths, the magical concoction acting as a particularly extreme cancer, destroying their bodies within weeks. There was no cure. Adam and a woman by the name of Lin were sick for many weeks with a form of flu but did not develop the cancer. They recovered, showing no change in their magical skill, and were cast out, but not before their memories were wiped. Adam then went on to meet Queen Imelda later, getting himself tangled up in her mess, resulting in Clay and James. Lin killed herself two days after her recovery.”

This was awful, another case of those in power experimenting with innocent people. Just like the demon queen. “Adam was actually a successful candidate? They made it work?”

We arrived at another checkpoint, the man in charge extremely bored, slow in his reading of our paperwork.

“Got any cigarettes?” he asked following a huge yawn.

Grindle offered him a fresh pack of twenty, pulling them out of his breast pocket.

“Take them all,” Grindle said. “Trying to quit. In fact, take this.” He handed the man a lighter.

The ADU witch snatched them both, unwrapping the cellophane as if he were tearing into a Christmas gift. He waved us on, not offering a thank you.

Grindle cleared his throat as we moved on. “Adam wasn’t a success. He displayed no signs of change, simply went about his miserable life addicted to drugs, loving Maxine, and eventually crossing paths with Imelda.” He paused for a

breath. “Things took an interesting turn after he met the queen, and where I became aware of him seeing, as I’d been working with Imelda by this point.”

As immersed as I was in this tale, I wanted him to pick up the pace, to bring us closer to Clay. I opened the window a crack, desperate to catch his vanilla scent on the wind.

“After Imelda slept with him,” Grindle continued, “I kept tabs on Adam Christmas, intrigued by him. He would often leave his flat in south London, wander the streets until sunrise with a notebook, scribbling away, paying particular attention to the sky. Night after night, I followed him to parks, to anywhere he could sit and write and draw for hours on end. That struck me as strange as if he were seeing something the rest of us weren’t.”

We were almost at Seongsan Bridge now.

“Some would say he was displaying signs of poor mental health, that the drugs had ravaged his brain,” the fairy added. “I like to think his mind was open to secrets the rest of us are blind to.”

“And was it?” I asked, my sense of smell tuned to the wind.

He released a long, drawn-out breath. “He found something before he met the demon queen.”

“How do you know that?”

“I believe the experiments done to him, and possibly his drug addiction, opened his mind to see the truth. It makes sense now I know of the test program. It lines up. According to Adam’s notebook, he went somewhere in the north but didn’t want to tell anyone, as he says, Max or the sexy demon woman.”

“North of where?” I asked.

“I don’t know. A lot of the notebook is illegible, but I believe it was his diary, and a record of what he’d seen. He mentions Arcana a lot but doesn’t go into any detail. There’s even a map, but it doesn’t make a lot of sense. You’ll have to see the pages for yourself. Most of them are full of gibberish, but there are nuggets of interest. If we can figure out this map, we may get real answers into what actually happened.”

“Where is this notebook?” I asked.

“Safe in London. I didn’t scan it or take it out of its safe space through fear of discovery. I’ll take you to it when we get back to London.”

I opened the window wide as we approached the bridge.

London. Back to London, back to the heart of danger.

“So, you’re saying Adam found something relating to Arcana after he was experimented on and before he slept with the demon queen, passing Arcana on to his sons?”

“Yes. And I think it drove him to die from that overdose he took.”

“What about Maxine? She died the same way.”

“I think we can blame Imelda for that.”

And you knew all about the queen’s schemes...

He stopped at the checkpoint before the bridge. The two women witches checked us over and waved us through to cross the Han River.

“It’s hurting him,” I said. “Arcana is hurting Clay.”

“I’m sorry,” the fairy said. “I hate that.”

“I can’t let it carry on.”

But Isaiah still lived. Demons still worked to achieve their goals against this world. Clay remained the one and only power to stand against them, to set me free from the hold of Isaiah.

Selfish. We were all selfish to want to use him, especially me. I risked his life by training him, by giving him the goal of taking out Isaiah.

Isaiah has to die...

But at what cost? Not Clay, not my warlock, my friend, my lover. Not the man who'd shown me sunshine in the dark, who'd melted the ice around my soul. Not the one I was falling so desperately for.

And I love you for that... His voice sang in my mind.

Love....

I drank in the cold air. I didn't need to live but needed the sharp sting to keep me focused before I fell apart.

No. I never fall apart.

"We have to find this northern place," I said. "Figure this map out."

"Absolutely, but when the job is done."

My head snapped around to face him. "What?"

"Clay still has a job to do. Knowing the answers won't change that."

"What. No. You—"

"If we lose Clay now, we lose everything."

This fairy, this sneaky creature. "You've been withholding so much information, Grindle. This isn't becoming of trust."

“Because I had to. I’m telling you this now because you have to know. Because Clay has to know we might be able to save him. But first, he has to keep going. He has to kill Quentin, and the demon queen and her vile family. Cut the heads off the beasts and let the minions flounder in chaos.”

I’d cut *his* head off. “We can’t do that to Clay.”

“Have you forgotten your mission, your duty to your family?”

“Don’t you dare.”

“I’m sorry, Tae, but I can’t stand simpering nonsense. You want Isaiah dead. I want the queen and Quentin dead. They are the masters of our suffering.”

“And then a demon monarch will be appointed, a new Quentin Dawn will rise from the ashes of his beliefs. It won’t stop the cycle.”

“That is why we have to come up with a plan to break the demon realm’s hold on this one.”

“You’re as insane as Quentin.”

“I’m a realist.”

I really wanted to rip his tongue out, but he was also right. “How do you propose that happens?”

We were halfway across the bridge. I watched the skies, looking for planes, my brain throbbing with information to join the flaring kernel in my chest.

He glanced at me with his one, calculating eye. “I have been working on a plan. The final plan. It’s almost complete.”

I did not like the sound of that. “What plan is that? To use The Rift like Quentin?”

The fairy didn't answer, keeping his focus on the road.

“Grindle?”

“All in good time, Tae.”

“Don't try this with me.”

“You have to be patient. Let's get Clay first.”

“I'm serious, fairy. You need to start talking. Again. Why are you holding back now?”

“Because I want to. Because it's smart to feed you things piece by piece.”

Prick. “I'm not some trained seal you can command.”

He grinned, said nothing.

“If you hurt Clay, I'll—”

“I don't want to hurt Clay. I want to liberate Clay and the rest of existence from demons. I have a plan that might help, but first, we have to get out of here and head back to London. There I can show everything.”

“You bastard.”

“I'm sorry, Tae. This is how it has to be.”

“No, it doesn't.”

He kept quiet.

I tried to get him to speak again, contemplated taking control of this car, driving somewhere to torture the truth out of him. But the fairy was dangerous. Who knew what counterattacks hid up his sleeve? Who knew what other bombs he was ready to drop?

So, feeling completely useless, I left him to drive as I pondered this bizarre information.

But now what?

Save Clay.

After using him?

An impossible choice lay ahead. But shouldn't that be Clay's choice, not mine, not Grindle's?

TWENTY

CLAY



A black car with tinted windows took me to an airplane hangar in an airport that wasn't Seoul Air Base, a huge black plane stationed outside it. No branding, the windows as dark as the car's.

I shrank down in the back seat, desperate for an intervention to stop the boarding.

"Here we are," Jane said. "Finally, we are going home."

"How long have we been waiting for this plane?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter now. We're heading home."

Too long, then.

Jane got out of the front passenger seat as an ADU guy opened my door. Gone was my bravado, my anger on a low flame. Fear took over, my stomach a tangle of knots.

"I can't..." I breathed.

"Get out of the car," the guy said.

I realized it was the same guy who'd mouthed off at me back in the room. Arsewipe. He didn't turn up my rage, though. Being scared really was like the flu—hard to shake. I mean, fear did feed my survival instinct, but right now, fear just fed fear.

Do something!

I got marched across the tarmac, waiting for divine intervention, some sort of attack, something to get me off this hook.

I lost all hope when I took a window seat at the center of the plane, Jane plonking herself beside me.

Shit.

“Would you like anything to drink?” she asked me as other witches took their seats.

“No.” I watched the distant twinkle of city lights, Tae somewhere out there with his sire.

Gosh, this sucked. And what sucked more was the pure lack of sunshine from me. No positive spin, no cool ideas, no looking on the bright side. I’d run out of sparkly juice, trapped too deeply in the bullshit.

I’m screwed...

I’d never been one to resign to my fate because I never believed my fate was to be homeless and poor forever. But there’d been hope to cling to back then, unlike now.

Sunshine Clay was dying a slow, miserable death.

Oh, God. Listen to me. Just bloody listen to me.

Tears leaked of their own volition. I angled my head to hide my face so no witch could see.

Fizz, Tae, my future...

Fuck this.

Fuck this whining.

Come on! Get over it and get to fighting!

My inner pep talk worked like an ice cube thrown into a volcano.

I caught my tears with my sleeves, wiping my eyes as discreetly as possible. The least I could do was stop crying on this damn plane.

“It will be okay,” Jane said. “I promise you.”

She’d seen my waterworks.

“Leave me alone,” I countered.

“I can’t leave you unsupervised, I’m afraid.”

Whatever. Let her sit there. What did I care? What did I care about anything now the things I loved were taken away from me?

Love...

Love...

Love...

Love is a really good thing to fight for. Not everyone gets to have love, cut off from it for whatever reason. I had it, soaked it up, and I wanted more.

A spark ignited within my darkness, tiny but bright. Now I had to fight to keep it burning. Even with the plane moving to take off, I had to fight. Fighting is what I did, how I managed to survive so much nastiness for twenty-four years. I might be a bit of a mess, but I never quit. Ever.

The tears stopped, but the spark dimmed.

I can't fight anymore...

My rage cooled, my body feeling like it was going through a sugar crash. I yawned and went back to feeling sorry for myself.

I had to snap out of this.

Come on!

Gosh, I was like a dimmer switch, on and off, bright and dim, stuck between the two.

Fight.

Cry.

Ugh.

The plane's engines fired up with a mighty howl, my seat shaking. Jane reached over to check my seatbelt was fastened. I clenched my teeth at her proximity.

"It's done up," I snapped.

"I'm simply checking, Mr. Christmas."

The plane sped off down the runaway, angling upward into the sky.

Okay, so with this setback, I'd have to do something when we got to London. Fine. Plenty of time to come up with an awesome plan.

"This is a fourteen-hour flight," Jane said. "May I suggest you try and relax for the journey? We all want it to be a pleasant experience for you."

Her bullshit made me blackout.

Once again, I went to visit my brother.

Whoa. Things were different now.

"Oh," I said. "You're..."

"So much better," he replied.

Leaning back against the side wall of a healing bath, his head tilted back, Buttons/James wasn't a skeleton anymore.

Paler than me, his brown hair cut the same as mine, the same facial bone structure, and the same build, my twin was flesh again. Good as new. His white buttons gleamed over his eyes.

The pool room was the same one I'd healed up in when I'd arrived at the demonic palace. Red and gold mosaics with black borders decorated the place, complete with four pillars set around the bath. Fancy as hell.

"YOU'RE YOU AGAIN," I practically whispered.

Buttons pushed back his wet, brown hair.

"A new me," he said, his buttons focused on the ceiling.

"Those baths are great."

"That's not what I mean," he responded. "I'm talking about Arcana."

My scalp prickled. "What about it?"

"Our fight in the throne chamber changed things, brother. When Arcana and the demon power clashed, something changed."

I remembered the clash, the intensity of the powers fighting.

"Can't you feel it?" he asked.

"No."

"Go deep, brother. Feel it."

"I can't."

"You are the Bright One. *Feel it.*"

I closed my eyes, drew some deep breaths. Emptied my mind and tried to drift to a place of feeling to discover what

he'd found.

I don't like this.

Yeah, yeah. What was to like about any of this recent crap?

There. A fragment of change. Big change. It didn't reveal itself, only hinted at a new surprise waiting in the wings.

Great.

"Does the queen know any of this?"

"*Mother* doesn't know yet," he said. "There hasn't been time for us to talk. As soon as I surfaced, I was whisked off to this bath. I haven't seen mother or Isobel, only Isaiah."

"He's..." Fuck. Isaiah. His name turned my stomach.

"He's back to normal, having had himself a bath. He seems keen to see you and the vampire again."

"Too bad. He's banished."

"He wants you back here, brother."

"I'm sure," I said. "He can go hug a pylon."

"That sounds painful."

"The point."

He wafted his hands across the surface of the water, steam curling upward.

I walked to the edge of the bath, alarmed by the detail of his skin, the three tiny moles on his right shoulder exactly like mine.

That was me in the water with the button eyes.

"We have to reunite to understand," he said.

"Why do you think that?" I questioned.

“Makes sense to me. I think fate is telling us we need to work together.”

“We’re on opposite sides, James. We’re designed to fight. Just look at our history.”

“We don’t have to be enemies.”

“But we are.”

“Can we stop?” he said. “I want to be your brother.”

Man, he was still peddling this rubbish. “Impossible.”

“I can help you. We can help each other.”

“No. Just... no.” This was worse than the twerking clown at the trials. “And I know you’re a liar. You’d never betray the queen. She’s your mum and right up there on the highest pedestal.”

“She’s *our* mother. I don’t want to betray her. I want to unite us as a family.”

“By blood only.”

“I want to help you get your brightness back.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“By seeing you and talking through our problems, building from the ground up. There doesn’t need to be animosity between us. In fact, we can start right now.”

“What? How?”

He turned and climbed his naked arse out of the pool. I turned away, listening to him pad around the room. “One moment.”

He vanished into a side room—the dressing room—returning a minute later dressed in a red T-shirt, black leather

jacket, black jeans, and gold boots. The royal colors befitting a prince.

“How do I look?” he asked around a smile.

“Too much like me,” I admitted.

His fresh new buttons glinted under the lights of the pool room. “Not a bad thing.”

Was he seriously trying to compliment me?

Someone save me from this damn room. “What about the river monsters?” I asked. “How much damage did Quentin’s attack do here?”

His smile was gone. “Why are you asking that when I’ve told you I was taken here straight away?” He shrugged. “We can find out later. First, let’s try this.”

“Try what?”

“My new gift.”

His smile returned, malicious and knowing.

Creepy.

I came to on the plane, releasing a sharp gasp. “Shit...”

Jane twisted in her seat to face me. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You dozed off.”

“I know I did.” I sat back, flesh crawling with a low buzz of energy. Kind of like pins and needles without the floppy limbs.

I looked out the window at the night sky. We were high, coasting back to the UK.

“How long was I out for?” I asked.

“About twenty minutes or so. You’re certainly a snorer.” She chuckled.

I resisted a comeback, rubbing my arms as the buzzing intensified.

Watch him? What the hell did Buttons mean by that?

Jane stretched her arms above her head. “I love flying, don’t you?”

“Not really bothered.” I glued my eyes to the window. If I looked her way, I’d probably puke from all her fake smiles and reassurances.

“I love it. The best way to travel,” she added.

Who cares? “Right.”

“Would you like a hot drink? I fancy a tea. What about you?”

When would she stop trying to be my bestie? She reminded me of a less bubbly Isobel. Ha! What an interesting word for my sister. Bubbly. More like bitchy and a bit of a mean girl who also wanted to be bestie siblings, talking about boys and drinking champagne at pool parties.

No chance.

Jane called a witch over to fetch two teas without asking me again. Oh well. I wouldn’t say no to a cuppa, but I’d make sure to frown while I drank it.

“I’m glad you’ve calmed down,” Jane said. “I was concerned.”

“Oh.”

“Violence seems out of place for you.”

“You don’t know me.”

“True. But I know of you.”

“Not the same thing.”

“I’ve heard you’re a sweet guy.”

I glanced at her stupid face and her pathetic smile. “Let’s not do this, okay? I don’t want to sit and talk. It’s bad enough you’re dragging me away from those I care about against my will. This is kidnap.”

“It is a royal summons, really.”

“Bollocks. It’s kidnap wearing a pretty outfit.”

“Interesting analogy.”

I faced the window again. “It’s true.”

“Look, I’m sorry things have taken this turn, but you made this happen.”

The buzzing became a full-on vibration, my fingers shaking.

What the hell?

I clasped them together tightly, my temperature shooting up. Was it me or was it the plane?

Definitely me.

Jane didn’t seem to notice. “If you had come to us in the first place, none of this would have happened. You have a responsibility to declare this magic, to be with those who understand it.”

“You don’t understand it, though. Arcana left before we were born. This isn’t the same thing.”

“We understand better than any vampire.”

“Don’t speak about Tae...” I gasped as my body shivered in a series of violent tremors.

“Mr. Christmas?”

I grabbed the back of the seat in front, the whole thing shaking under my hold as my body succumbed to the tremors.

Oh. Shit.

“What’s.... happening...” I tried, my voice a comical wobble.

Only, having my brains rattling in my skull wasn’t actually funny.

I closed my eyes, willing myself to stop. It didn’t work, my stomach churning wildly.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Bollocks!

“Clay?” Jane’s voice drilled into my ears. Too loud, too shrill, too alien.

“Shut up...”

“Someone help!”

I screamed at the severity of her fucking tone, invisible energy shoving me backward, my head tilting sharply up. Orange-gold flames scored the cabin ceiling, drawing the pentagram—the Mark of Arcana.

I hadn’t summoned it.

I stopped shaking, drenched in sweat, breathing frantic. The witches moved around the plane, shouting. Jane stayed by my side, tried to take my clammy hand.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I warned breathlessly.

The itching intensified across my skin, my hands breaking out in a nasty red rash, the tremors still rocking my body.

“What the fuck is going on!” a male witch cried.

The pentagram blazed, rippled like the surface of water, rotating on the ceiling. As much as I shook, like I was trapped on some crazy fairground ride, I watched the pentagram.

Something was seriously wrong here.

Obviously!

Jane stayed by my side, barking orders at witches.

God, her voice was driving me nuts.

She turned to me. “The pilot is initiating an emergency landing, Mr. Christmas. Please hold on.”

Nice to see her so rattled along with the rest of the witches performing their best headless chicken impressions. A couple of them pointed their weapons at the pentagram, looking scared out of their minds.

Brilliant. Just what I wanted to see. Now they knew what it was like to be afraid and confused.

If only these damn tremors would stop.

A hand appeared in the pentagram. Witches yelled. Next came what looked to be a black tentacle slithering through the center of the five-pointed star.

Huh?

A second tentacle whipped outward, grabbing the nearest witch by the neck. He got dragged into the air then tossed across the cabin, flying past my seat. Jane yelped, jumped up with a gun drawn.

“We can’t fire weapons in here!” another woman bellowed.

Another arm appeared, then a third tentacle. The slithering black thing smacked a witch in the head as a fourth tentacle appeared. The chaos was sweet but scary. If I weren’t on the plane, I’d be all for it.

Would I?

He came through, dropping to the plane’s floor as if ejected from a gun. Buttons landed in a squat, his demonic form fully manifested. His black tentacles got to work, taking down witches. His famous spikes burst out of his hands, skewering a witch by the head and guts. He kicked the dead man off his pointy bits, his button eyes meeting mine.

His lips spread into a malicious smile.

What. The. Fuck.

“Isn’t this wonderful, brother?” he asked.

Jane went for him, trying for a high kick. A tentacle smacked her away. As she went down, he jumped over her and hurried to me, grabbing my hand.

I stopped shaking, sucking in a sharp breath as power flooded my veins.

So much power.

Arcana returned to me, the full roster of spells, a renewed sense of energy perking me up big time. I stood, hand still in his, letting the magic reach every corner. Knowledge downloaded into my brain, rich and incredible.

“My spells,” I said between gasps.

The knowledge kept on coming, casting light on this situation. Full Arcana was back with scary conditions. It required the presence of Buttons for me to use the spells now, and he'd been given an extra gift to make sure he kept by my side.

Teleportation.

Oh, gosh.

It is wrong...

Arcana should not be here...

I immediately cast the wall spell, a cylindrical turquoise shell protecting us. The intensity was amazing. Wow. Proper juiced up. The spells were all much more powerful than before.

Hello again, my awesome friend.

Yay!

Because of Buttons.

Erm, not say yay.

At least the witches couldn't get at us for the time being, the spell strong, showing no signs of diminishing. Gone were the days of me struggling to keep it up for fifteen seconds.

"You have teleportation?" I questioned my twin, relieved the shakes were gone.

"Yes." Black blood leaked from both of his nostrils. He licked at it as it spread over his mouth. "Though I may need an hour before I try it again." He blew out a breath. "An intense move. You must have felt *that*."

I'd like for him to not try it again. My body couldn't take another rattle and shake. I mean, I wasn't a cocktail shaker.

At least the rash was gone.

“You’re bleeding,” I said. “Am I?”

“A little,” he answered.

I touched my nose, fingers coming back red and wet.
“Shit.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re new creatures, Clay. We can take a bit of bleeding. But we have to be together for the magic to work. The most powerful creatures in existence. Embrace it, brother.”

I had a choice. Take this return to magical prominence, or let it die.

But I wasn’t *that* person. I was Clay, a simple warlock with big dreams, a cat as my best friend, and a massive infatuation with a sexy vampire who liked to kiss and hold me.

But...

But...

But...

The temptation overwhelmed me. For every argument to resist, counterarguments knocked them back. Case in point this plane, this kidnap. With my spells intact again, I had the means to get off this flight and get back to Tae and Fizz and my friends.

Changed magic. Demonic-infused Arcana? Could I really work with Buttons? In what twisted universe had this been allowed to happen?

This universe.

Damn.

I want it...

Man, this was hard. The cravings were at an all-time high, this new version of Arcana like the best chocolate cake in the world. The intensity of the spells was amazing, and who didn't want to be completely kick-arse?

Maybe I don't want to be.

Witches battled against the wall as I pondered stuff, the idiots making zero gains at breaking through it. Unlike before, the energy levels of this spell weren't starting to drain at all. They would, but not for a while.

I'd leveled up, big time.

"What do you say, brother?" Buttons asked.

The most powerful creatures in existence...

"I..."

The plane lowered its altitude.

"We can get out of here," my brother added, "find Tae and fight the good fight."

"What's your idea of the good fight?"

"Saving this world."

"For the queen to take over?"

"We can stop Quentin's followers from causing anymore hurt," he said.

"You caused hurt." My response didn't diminish my weird happiness.

The plane lowered further, the witches fighting on against my shield.

"Aren't we all redeemable?" he wondered.

"No."

“Says who?”

“Says your victims,” I countered.

He cocked his head to the side. “You’re wrong, and you’re being stupid. We can change things for the better. Just feel this power, brother. Feel all of it. Take it. We can be weapons against the dark.”

“You are the dark!” I cried. “You’ve done so much bad.”

He charged out of the shield, straight into a fight, tearing through witches with terrifying abandon. Threw them at the windows, snapped their necks with his tentacles, stabbed one in the eye with a spike. They were dropping like flies.

Oh, bollocks.

He is my battery...

How close did we have to be for him to power me?

I shuddered. He was already too close.

I walked a dangerous tightrope of light and dark, scaring myself on the daily with my aggressive turns. One wrong slip, and I’d lose myself.

I didn’t want to be like him.

Buttons broke through the cockpit door, his tentacles shooting inside. More screams followed, the plane lurching to the side. I staggered with it, clinging to a seat to keep upright.

Fuck.

“Make the choice, brother.” Buttons turned, his tentacles fanned out around him like a nasty interpretation of a peacock. “We’re going down.”

I bent to the window as the plane angled perilously to the side, dipping forward. Aiming right for a crash landing into

the sea.

“The crash won’t kill me,” he said, “but you won’t be so lucky.”

Being of weaker demon blood, death by plane crash was a real risk for me.

“I’ll stop the plane.” I ran at him.

He blocked me from entering the cockpit.

I snarled at him.

“I’ll fight you!” I roared in his face, calling upon a fire spell to burn him up a second time.

Alarms screamed from the cockpit, the plane rattling, dipping further.

Buttons’s tentacles stuck to the ceiling and the floor, holding him steady. I clung to a seat again, losing my footing.

“Come on, brother.”

“I can’t...” I said.

“Then crash and see what happens. We either leave together or we crash together.”

Two crappy choices.

“We’re almost there,” Buttons said. “Almost down. Choose, Clay. Choose your future.”

I closed my eyes as the plane screamed around me, as my soul fractured.

Crashing into the water would kill me, end everything. My returned power, even with the Buttons addition, would help me turn the tables back in my favor. Get me back to those I loved.

Kill those who wanted to hurt me.

Save the world.

“Make a choice,” my brother pressed.

Be powerful...

Be strong...

Show them all...

With a deep breath, I made my choice.

TWENTY-ONE

TAE



G rindle's phone sat in my lap, buzzing with a call as we approached Incheon Airport, parking at a quiet spot off Gonghangdong-ro, surrounded by trees. We were sneaking in with the help of some of my people.

I answered the call.

"It's me," Archie said. "We're getting a shit load of drama coming through."

"Talk to me."

"First up, there's demons, witches, and river monsters gathering outside the royal palace. Looks like an attack's about to go down on the royal family."

"Are the royals inside the palace?"

"I don't know yet."

I exited the car, immediately finding the plastic-wrapped package left behind an electricity box a few feet away from the road. A package containing three chaff grenades to temporarily take out the airport's tech systems. I'd arranged for the delivery fifteen minutes ago. My team was incredibly efficient.

"As for the other drama, there's talk of a plane running into trouble over the Yellow Sea. It was turning back to land at

Incheon, but it's about to crash."

I froze. "Do you know who's on this plane?"

"The ADU."

"With Clay."

"Shit, Tae. Shit."

I looked to the western skies, only seeing clouds and stars.

"I have to get out there. Now."

"Let me sort you out a boat."

Clay was about to die.

Trapped on a plane.

About to die.

Grindle approached me, head bowed to his phone. "I'm getting reports from the royal palace..."

I shot past him around to the driver's seat, tossing the phone on the passenger seat. Faster than he could react, I took off in his car, speeding in the direction of the coast.

Clay was not dying tonight.

My heart couldn't take it.

TWENTY-TWO

CLAY



Buttons ripped the door open with his tentacles. Man, did that look too easy.

He grabbed me with a tentacle, the slimy thing coiling around my waist, and jumped out of the plane with me trailing behind him. I cast the flight spell and took to the sky, his tenacle snapping taut.

“Hold on tight,” I said.

What the hell was I doing?

I went higher and higher, clearing the falling plane as much as I could. Flying was easier now, better. It was all so much better.

The plane crashed nose-first into the sea, the water exploding around it. A second explosion ripped out of the plane, a ball of fire burping up at the sky. The force rocked me but didn't hinder my flight back to the mainland.

“Lucky escape,” my brother said.

At least the plane didn't hit a town or something. I hadn't considered that before now, the guilt creeping in. It *should* have been on my mind.

This was the witches' fault. These things were always their fault. Witches and demons caused problems. I didn't ask to be

on that plane or dragged off to the demon realm to have my bloody power changed.

Fuck them all!

My demon wings burst from my back, my hands becoming claws, my skin erupting in patches of fleshy scales. My demon side out and ready.

A demon tower in the middle of the sea came to life, the red jewel a beacon against us. Its suppressing power came at Buttons in a shimmering wave. Not at me because I wasn't demon enough like my brother to get its attention.

Which one of us was born first? Something to find out later.

The tower's power bounced off him again and again. Demon towers never did much to stop him anyway. Talismans couldn't banish him, and no one had been able to stop him when he'd terrorized London.

He was forced to be a killer by the demon queen. As much as he craved her love, his affections were misplaced. I'd make him see the truth, rip that rosy veil from his buttons.

Huh? What was I saying?

"You look amazing, brother."

I looked down. "Thanks. I feel amazing."

"The Bright One."

"And you're not jealous?" I questioned. His jealousy always led to a scrap.

"Not now. Never again."

I trusted him as much as I trusted swimming with crocodiles.

My demon side rescinded, leaving my jumper in tatters, skin exposed to the cold.

“Bloody hell,” I moaned, casting my fire spell.

A ball of fire appeared beside me. I strengthened it against the elements around me, commanding the flames to remain locked in a smooth sphere.

Ah, sweet warmth.

The pops and booms of the plane still rang loud behind us.

“Do you need one of these?” I asked Buttons.

He shook his head. “I’ve had my fill of fire.”

We moved closer to land.

“What shall we do first?” he asked.

“Find Tae and Fizz. Do we have a searching spell?” I ran through them. “Ah, this one I’ve never tried before. Scrying. Says we need something of the person we’re trying to find.”

There were plenty of spells I hadn’t got around to yet. I mean, there were two huge grimoires downloaded into my brain, so it would take a while to work through them all. But at least I didn’t have to learn them, having evolved past that crap.

Yay.

Something of Tae’s...

“I have plenty of the vampire’s cum inside me if we do. Wonder if that counts.”

He gasped. “Brother! You’re outrageous!”

How could I say such a thing about Tae?

Because I fucking can!

I could’ve said blood.

Both were true.

I played with the spell, not needing to say or think the silly rhymes that were supposed to be used to cast an Arcana spell.

“Where are you?” I released a diamond-shaped pink light about the size of a kitten into the sky.

Man, did I miss my cat.

The light moved quickly, lowering toward the land. I followed it.

“We need to test how close to each other we need to be when we land,” I said.

“Wise idea.”

I was really doing this, really embracing this screwed up situation.

Not so wise, eh?

Fuck that. This feels great!

I kept up my speed in pursuit of the light. It grew brighter the closer it got to land, which I took as a good sign. We were on our way to my vampire lover.

He better not give me shit for this!

TWENTY-THREE

TAE



I heard the explosion out to sea as I braked in a screech along a coastal road. Fire lit up the darkness, trailing downward, crashing into the water.

Then I saw them, the two figures above it. Clay and Buttons, the latter in his full demon form dangling from a flying Clay using his flight spell.

“Clay...”

The warlock manifested his wings moments later. A demon tower blazed out to sea, having no effect on either of them.

I called Archie to tell him.

“You what?”

“I know.”

“You think they brought down the plane together?”

I stepped up onto the sea wall, the water thrashing against it directly below me. “Something is very wrong, Archie.”

“Mate, I’m so worried.”

A pink light came to life. Magical?

“Where’s Grindle?” Archie asked.

“I stole his car.”

“He won’t be happy.”

“I don’t care.” I held back on the bombshell regarding Adam Christmas for the time being. “Where are you?”

“Our ride’s coming in now. Dr. Ryu wants to go home.”

“She can go home.”

“Still want us at the air base?”

“Yes.”

The brothers followed the pink light, coming closer to land.

“I have to go,” I said. “They’re almost here.”

“Speak soon.”

I pocketed the phone, the pink light aiming straight for me. I got ready to dodge it as it increased its speed.

“I think he’s down there,” Buttons said.

The light came to a stop a few feet away, hovering over the water. It started to pulse.

“He is!” Clay cried.

TWENTY-FOUR

CLAY



Yes! There he was, standing on the sea wall.

Tae.

My Tae.

Gosh, I was so happy to see his whole body. I wanted to fly right at him now but hung back with Buttons, so I didn't crash land at the last minute because we were too far apart. It would not be fun to turn my face into a pancake against the sea wall.

I landed on the road behind the vampire, Buttons touching down next to me.

"Tae..."

The vampire jumped off the wall, didn't move. The wind ruffled his long hair. He was spattered with blood and dirt, and there were cuts to his face.

I walked toward him. "What happened?" I didn't stop, speeding up at the last moment to crash into him and crush him in a hug.

He tensed under me, his arms not doing their yummy wraparound thing.

I looked up into his dark eyes. "What's the matter?"

“You tell me.” His icy voice hit me like a ton of bricks.

Where were the hugs and kisses? What about giving me a smile and a happy reunion moment?

“I thought I’d lost you forever,” I said, licking my lips suggestively.

Man, he looked so fuckable right now. Actually, he always looked fuckable. Maybe a quickie before whatever came next. Buttons could piss off and leave us to it. Being bent over this sea wall might be fun.

Tae didn’t look like he’d play ball, though.

Why are you thinking like this?

I stood straighter, prouder. “Listen up.” I gave him the lowdown.

“I see,” he said after.

“Is that all you have to say?” Idiot. Why wasn’t his mind blown? Oh, wait. Not his style to give the ‘oos’ and the ‘aahhs.’

“Amazing, right?” I said.

He simply watched me.

“I know it’s a lot to take in and kind of twisted, but this is where we are right now. Got to roll with the punches. James? Run up the road.”

He did, my magic dropping when he was about twenty feet away.

“That explains that,” I said.

He came back, Arcana returning, test done.

Twenty feet wasn’t a lot.

“Now we know,” Buttons added pleasantly.

“Why are you talking like that?” Tae asked.

“Like what?”

He folded his arms. “Cocky.”

“Cocky? For real?” I snorted. “Sorry, you’d rather me be a starry-eyed wimp, yeah?”

“Not at all. I’d rather you talk like Clay.”

“I *am* Clay.”

“He’s his true self,” Buttons said. “The new and improved Bright One.”

“Clay?” Tae’s hands were on my shoulders.

Your touch is everything...

“Bollocks...” I whispered, making a sudden U-turn. “This is... Maybe we should shut this down, James.”

Buttons cocked his head in that chilling way he did. “You whine and dither too much.”

“What?”

“You need me.”

“That might be true, but maybe this is too dangerous. I feel too powerful.”

Dimmer switch activate!

“I thought you’d made a choice, brother. Or was that simply a selfish act to save your own life?”

“I... I had no choice.”

“You did. You made the right choice, thanks to me. Without me, you’d have gone down with that plane. I saved

you, and I saved the world from losing *us*.” He gesticulated, more animated than I was used to seeing from him. “We’re it, Clay. We’re the heroes.”

“Please don’t say that.”

“Why? Why can’t we be heroes?”

“You’re...” I sighed, shaking my head. Tae remained silent beside me. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Please leave.”

“Leave? You want to lose this power?”

“I... Please. Just go.”

This is what he wanted, to be special, to be...

...and so did I.

Right?

Shit. My damn head.

“You heard him,” Tae said.

Those button eyes fell onto the vampire. “You don’t understand.”

“I understand well enough.”

“I’m here to make him fight, to clear the rubbish blocking him.” He shook his head, becoming more and more human by the second. “That is my destiny.”

“I don’t think I want this,” I whispered, shaking.

You do. Oh, you do.

“But you do,” Buttons retorted as if he’d plucked the thoughts straight from my head. “You want to fight. You want to stand up to bullies and make things better. You hate being this weak, indecisive ball of sunshine.”

“Clay is not weak,” Tae interjected.

“He is right now.”

Tremors rocked my body again. I stumbled forward, falling to my knees. “Fuck.”

I slumped forward onto my hands and knees, pushing my weight into the ground in an all-fours position. Trying to curb the shakes, trying to make it stop.

A smack on the concrete, a groan. I managed to lift my head for a few seconds to see Buttons mirroring me. Shaking.

Arcana reacted, spiking, too much energy rushing through me—a balloon set to burst.

It passed. I collapsed, breathless, the side of my face pressed into the cold ground.

“Oh, brother,” Buttons said. “The power.”

Tae crouched beside me. “What happened?”

“Power,” my brother answered. “There is so much power between us.”

Tae helped me to my feet as Buttons got to his.

“Amazing,” my twin said. “I feel like we’re only just beginning.” He wobbled and stretched his arms above his head.

“Leave,” Tae told him. “Now.”

“No. I’m not leaving my brother. We’re going to—”

A loud crackle shut him up. I spun in the direction of the sound, a burst of red glittering in the sky.

Synth?

“What was that?” Buttons wondered. “Shall we investigate?”

“No,” Tae countered, stepping forward. “You’re leaving, and we’re heading back to the island.”

Buttons scoffed. “To hide again? What’s the point?”

“Clay being safe is the point.”

“He’s safer than he’s ever been. We don’t need to be scared of witches. We’ll fight every single one of them until they get it.”

I kind of liked what I was hearing, my doubts losing their grip again.

“And the real point is,” Button continued when no one responded, “that we’re not to be trifled with. There’s a new power in town. No, the world. The witches are nothing.”

“What about the demons?” Tae asked.

“The wrong kind will get the point, too.”

“The wrong kind?”

“The Quentin Dawn kind.” He snarled.

“So you’re still loyal to your mother?”

“Always.”

Before I could blink, Tae flung me over his shoulder and took off. My spells dropped like stones after we broke the twenty feet. Not even the three spells I’d had before could be accessed now. It was Buttons or nothing.

Oh, bollocks.

“No!” Buttons howled.

Tae climbed the first building, adjusted me to ride him piggyback. He dashed across the rooftops, the demon towers blazing as Buttons called my name. A second burst of red shot up into the sky.

Definitely Synth.

“Clay!” Buttons shrieked.

Tae kept on running, his increasing vampire speed blurring the city around me. I clung on tight and closed my eyes, burying my face into the crook of his neck. Drank in his lime scent.

He was safety and continuity and amazing.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered against his warm skin.

He leaped from roof to roof, jumped down to the streets. Didn’t answer me, just kept on putting space between us and my brother.

Part of me wanted to let go of him and run back to Buttons.

Eventually, Tae brought us to a quiet street full of dark, sleeping houses. He made a call, spoke for a few moments, then cupped my face in his hands.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

“We’re not going back to the island.”

“We’re not?”

“I’ll explain everything, but we’re going back to London.”

“Oh.”

He gazed down at me with his haunting, obsidian eyes. “I have so much to tell you. But we need to get out of this country first.”

What was I doing here? I’d decided to be a great new power with my brother as my battery. Hadn’t I?

“Climb back on,” Tae said.

I hesitated.

I don’t need this running away...

“Clay?”

But I need him...

I climbed back on.

Tae carried me through more of the city. I returned my face to the crook of his neck, wanting this damn night to be over, hating feeling so torn.

Did me being darker improve my existence? God, how awful. That wasn’t me. I didn’t operate on darkness. It might help others to get fire under their backsides, but it didn’t help me. Arcana-free, I ran on the fuel of light, of positivity.

Only, the Arcana-free days were over.

And darkness *had* helped. Buttons nailed the points home about the plane. Left to my own devices, I’d have gone down with the plane, no question. I’d dithered before he made me see the, erm, light.

My insides still trembled in the aftermath of having the spells back, of those tremors.

I want you gone...

No. You like me. You miss me. You crave me.

No.

Yes.

No.

Tae came to a stop at another street with closed shops. We started walking.

“Buttons will teleport,” I said after a long breath.

He threw an arm around me. “Buttons and teleporting are a terrifying mix.”

“You’re telling me.”

Let him come...

He kissed the top of my head. “Keep walking.”

Fairy...

“Have you got fairy cream on?”

“Yes. I don’t have any for you, I’m afraid.”

We walked into an alleyway between the buildings. Tae pulled out his phone.

“I’m with Clay,” he said. “Okay. We’ll get around it.”

“Was that Archie?” I asked.

“Yes. All flights are grounded due to an incident at the palace.” He told me about river monsters and demons and witches.

“Bloody hell! Should we go and check it out?”

“No. We’re staying out of it.”

“You think those Synth bursts had something to do with it?”

“I think so.”

We came to a street parallel to the one we'd left. "I don't get this attacking the royals thing. What does it mean?" I groaned. "Obviously, it means more fun bullshit to come."

He kissed the top of my head again. "You're too adorable, Clay."

I tiptoed to land one on his lips. "So are you." I breathed against him.

His hands slid to my hips, then slid off. "Now is not the time for this."

Phew! Talk about hot under the collar. "Sorry." I backed off. "And I'm sorry for my attitude."

"You don't have to be sorry for anything, Clay."

"But I do. I've been... slipping."

"It's Arcana."

"Is it?" Maybe it was the real me, finally accepting my true nature, spreading my wings.

His smile almost broke my heart. "I need to make a call."

This was avoiding the issue here.

"Hello," he said, talking about some flight stuff. Getting us out of Seoul, being the hero.

I should be the hero, not him. I had the power and the skills.

Hmmm.

Tae hung up the phone. "The plane may take longer than we'd like to be sorted, but we're getting out of here."

"Delayed flights are my jam tonight."

His eyes were sparkling onyx. "Running again."

I didn't know what to say.

He smoothed back my hair. "How did we find ourselves here?"

His touch set my pulse on fire. "No touching, Tae."

"Sorry?"

"We shouldn't be touching right now."

He traced a finger down my cheek, then cupped my chin. "Sensible."

"More than you're being right now."

"I apologize." Gosh, his words were a silky wind loaded with pheromones.

He released me. "It's taking every ounce of control not to throw you against that wall right now."

"Yum."

"Don't say that, Clay."

My eyes wandered down to his crotch. What I wouldn't give to unzip him, get on my knees, and take that amazing cock into my mouth. Work him so hard until he couldn't stop gushing down my throat.

I cleared my throat and ignored my aching boner, turning my attention to the sky. "Now what?"

"Now we carry on," he said. "Climb on my back."

Is that wise? I climbed on anyway, my erection pressing into his spine. Did he feel it? Of course, he bloody did.

He climbed more buildings, ran across rooftops. In and out of shadows, up and down, avoiding all the ADU checkpoints until we reached Seoul Air Base. We hid under thick trees, a

fence standing a few feet away, the dense leaves blocking out the lights of the air base.

When he finished another phone call, Tae said, “We really need to talk when we get in there.” He nodded toward the fence.

I inched closer still, reaching between my legs. Touching. Enticing him. “What did Archie say?” I bit my bottom lip, craving his dick.

“They’re here with Fizz.”

My horniness died, my spine straightening. “She’s in there?”

“Yes.”

“Can we go now?” God, I sounded like an excited child.

“Climb on.”

I leaped onto his back, and he took off up and over the fence, speeding across a runway until he reached a hangar. I winced internally at the recent memory of being taken to a different hangar, of the plane going down, the witches slaughtered.

As much as I hated them, did they deserve to die like that?

Why do you care?

Tae skirted around the hangar to a small building behind it—a gray box with a flat roof. He put me down outside the door and gestured for me to go inside.

I practically kicked the door down, scaring the crap out of Victoria.

She spun and dropped a glass of liquid on the threadbare green carpet.

“Fuck me sideways!” she yelled.

“Sorry,” I said, diving for the black leather sofa at the center of the room.

I landed beside Fizz, grabbing her into a hug. She meowed and purred, and I kissed her head, rubbed her fur against my cheek.

“I’m here, baby girl. I’m here.”

She licked my face.

I started to cry, so happy to have her with me again.

“I’m here.”

Victoria picked up her glass. “I didn’t want that gin and tonic.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, Fizz pushing her head against my chin.

Victoria came over and ruffled my hair. “I’m only joking, sweet. It’s lovely to see your face again.”

“Yours too.”

The lawyer went through an open door to my left.

“Really good to see you, mate,” Archie said, giving me a pat on the shoulder. He took a pew at a small desk, tapping on his phone.

Tae came to sit with me. “Can I get you anything?”

I shook my head. “Thanks, though”

He placed a hand on my thigh. “Of course.”

Fizz purred even louder in his presence.

He caught one of my tears with a finger, saying nothing. I looked at him, more relief washing over me. “I really thought I’d lost you.”

“I wouldn’t let it stand.” He squeezed my thigh. “I’ll get Winter for this.”

“What happened?”

Did I see sadness in his face? Was it there around the edges of his eyes?

He told me, including stuff about Isobel.

“Shit. She’s here?”

“She’ll need a bath,” he said.

I sighed. “Fuck. And what about Winter?”

“What about her?” Gosh, so cold. I didn’t blame him.

“Where do you think she is?”

“Suffering, I hope.”

I left it there.

“Grindle is also here in Seoul,” he added.

I sat up. “Where?”

“I don’t know. I stole his car.”

“You stole his car?”

“After he told me a story.”

Tae told me that same story about my dad, about the witch experiments, the notebook and map, every grim detail.

I sank back in my seat again, empty despite the revelation. Numb, I guess you’d call it.

“Clay?” the vampire said gently.

“I... I don’t know what to say.”

I’d been waiting for answers for so long.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he added. “I didn’t want to tell you now, not while we’re preparing to leave. But there is no perfect time to drop this on you.”

So numb, so cold. “It’s good we’re heading back to London.” I wanted to see this notebook ASAP.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“While also finding Grindle.”

“He wants us to see the notebook, so it won’t be difficult now.”

“Even though you stole his car?”

“He’ll have to get over it.”

I looked at him. “Do you think Arcana’s killing me?”

“I... I want to say no.”

“You’ve seen what’s been happening to me, the nosebleeds and now these shakes. With great power comes a great fuck up to the system.”

“I’m not sure the saying goes like that.” He offered a smile.

My shoulders sagged in response. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Maybe this map leads to a solution, a way of getting Arcana out of you.”

“By going somewhere north,” I said.

“Yes.” He sidled closer to me. “We will figure this out. I know I keep saying this to you, but I mean it wholeheartedly.”

“Unless...” I said.

“Unless what?”

He wouldn't like this. "Maybe this change in Arcana has, well, changed things beyond anything like that now."

"What do you mean?"

"That I'm supposed to be like this."

Tae took a moment to answer. "Grindle believes your job isn't done yet."

"He's right."

"Is he?"

"You know he is, Tae. You know what? The more I think about this, the more I think this was all meant to happen. Us coming together, Buttons, my dad, all of it falling into place to fulfill some sort of prophecy to end the demonic stronghold. As much as I hate to admit it, Winter was right to say this was my destiny."

Tae stayed so still I thought I'd somehow stopped time by blinking at him.

"Tae?" He didn't react or move. I waved my hands before his face. "What's happening?"

He spoke and made me jump.

Fizz meowed angrily at my jolt.

"Sorry, baby girl."

"Interesting theory," he said. "But you're not anyone's personal weapon."

"Not even yours?"

A brief pause. "No."

"I want to be. Isn't that how all this started? The opening scene to this crazy play?"

He didn't answer.

The story of Adam Christmas absorbed into my mind, playing over and over. What'd happened to him? Where had he gone? Was he scared? Did he love me and James? Did he ever get to read us a bedtime story?

Gosh, so many questions, so many attempts to look back. I'd love that, to see his life, no matter how sad. As a witness, not to turn back time because there wasn't a spell to do that. But there was a spell to look into past memories.

"Yes!" I squeaked.

"What's wrong?"

"I have this spell that might help." My excitement fizzled out. "I need something of my dad's to use it. And I'll need Buttons, of course."

Knowing the spells were there, feeling them, able to scroll through but not use them, was utter bollocks.

"We'll find another way," he said.

Running from Buttons now seemed ridiculous. Correction, it was ridiculous.

We have to find him... I held back my words.

What was I doing here? Trying to hold onto myself and my silly dreams? Like the one where I put my warlock powers to good use by means of entertainment in a massive show at an arena, delighting audiences for years.

Pathetic dream.

Being a powerful weapon, helping to stop Queen Imelda, Quentin Dawn, and killing Isaiah was something to reach for.

Screw everything else. Screw the old me. Times were changing, and so was I.

“I’m the world’s first real demon killer since the Arcana days,” I said. “A second chance.”

“Which includes Buttons,” he replied.

“Including him. That’s part of the change.”

The more I thought about it, the more I wanted him to be here. We could go and get this notebook and cast this spell and rock hard.

Rock hard?

“Buttons could turn up at any time,” I said. “And maybe he should.”

Archie made a sound, briefly glancing my way.

“I know I sound crazy,” I responded.

Tae kept quiet. Was he silently agreeing with me? I could give him the vengeance he wanted, even if it wouldn’t be him pulling the final trigger. He could watch, revel in my arrows striking Isaiah’s body. He’d done so much for me. I wanted to do that for him.

I’d give him a good show.

Destiny called me through a megaphone. I got that now. These things were my responsibility, what I’d been put here for. Whatever Dad had found, he’d brought about a blessing.

Really?

Victoria returned with a fresh gin, stopping the conversation dead in its tracks for the time being. “Want one of these, sweet?” she asked me.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

She nodded and took a sip. “So, Buttons is back and can teleport. Scary bastard.”

“He’s the only one who can make my magic work,” I said. “I’ve got no juice left.”

“Shit. What about the arrows?”

“Not sure. We’ll have to see.”

She took a bigger sip. “I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough.”

I nodded and kissed my baby girl.

“The plane will arrive soon,” Tae added.

“Back to London, eh?” Victoria replied. “You got anywhere in mind?”

“A house in the west,” the vampire answered, standing up. “I have already made arrangements.”

“Is it your house?” I asked.

“No. It’s owned by a trusted employee.”

“Oh. Cool.”

I wiggled in my seat, adjusting my position. “Buttons said it might be about an hour before he teleports again,” I said, my voice cracking. I cleared my throat. “Whether that’s true or not, I don’t know.”

Tae went to stand by a window. The blinds were drawn over each of the three windows of this shabby place. He opened them a crack to peer out.

“Anything?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

It smelled dusty in here like none of those windows had been cracked open in a long time. The green carpet was threadbare all over, the walls yellowish. But it was shelter, somewhere to take a moment before things kicked off again.

And they would kick off. I wasn't running and hiding and taking a back seat. Not anymore.

I sank deeper into the squishy sofa, stroking Fizz.

Fight back.

No more hiding.

Be a fucking hero.

"Victoria?" I said.

"Yes, my darling?"

"Could I have a little gin, please?"

"Course you can."

"No mixer."

She laughed. "Hardcore."

"Need the boost."

She went to that side room, a tiny kitchen, returning with the bottle and a glass.

"Here you go." She handed me the tumbler and poured until I said stop.

She patted my arm. "You're a good bloke, you know?"

I knocked back the gin in one go. "Ah. That's like petrol."

Victoria guffawed. "When was the last time you drank petrol?"

The heat burned down my throat, doing its job. “Hopefully never. Really hate the smell of petrol.”

“I wouldn’t put it behind my ears,” she said.

I chuckled, asking for one more.

She hesitated. “This is the last one. I’m not having you tanked up on my watch.”

“Just this one.”

“Good. Save getting pissed for another night.”

“Deal.”

“We’ve got a heavy session with our names on it.”

“Double deal.”

I knocked the second dose of gin back, enjoying the burn a lot more this time. It took me back to the days with my best friend, Lina, when I was in the care home, when we stole a bottle of gin from the manager’s office, drinking to fight the cold because the heat had been turned off in our room. That’d been Mr. Flint’s punishment for previously pinching bread from the pantry, dished after he’d beaten us with his belt first. The gin helped with those bruises as well as the cold and would prepare us for the next round of beatings when he found out we’d stolen it.

Mr. Flint always had a bottle of something locked up in his desk, his bloated, angry red face a sign of his reliance on drink over the years. God only knew how he got away with drinking on the job so much, but he did. He had money and friends in high places. Generally, an evil piece of shit with piece of shit buddies.

I heard the drink killed him in the end.

Good.

But that night, determined to resist our punishment, Lina and I drank the whole bottle, happy as cats rolling in cat nip. A nice memory.

I kissed Fizz again.

If I got up and left to look for Buttons right now, it would mean leaving her again.

Shit.

Fizz governed my choices. I lived by her comfort and safety. If I ran out that door, I'd be breaking my promise to her. I swore I'd always protect her, be by her side. She'd saved my life in so many ways, and I'd never forget that.

And Tae?

Tae was up there on his own special pedestal.

If it weren't for the risk of getting drunk, I'd be filling up my glass with more gin to chase these thoughts away.

I have to do something...

"Tae?" I said.

He turned and came over. I didn't expect him to.

"What's wrong?"

I hate it when you're quiet. "Can we trust Grindle?"

"I suppose we have no choice." He folded his arms. "Fucking fairies."

"Amen."

"He does care about you, it seems," he said. "A great deal."

I nodded, chest tingly. “He’s always looked out for me, making me those lollipops and stuff.”

Tae’s focus snapped to the door. “Something’s happening.” He ran to the window, peeling the blinds open.

Arcana confirmed it as a demon out there. I told the vamp this.

“I can’t see it,” he answered. “But I only hear one set of footsteps.”

Archie drew a gun, followed by Victoria.

“Let the wanker come,” the lawyer said. “I’ve been gagging to fire this baby.”

I stood up, putting Fizz down on the sofa. She stood, ears and eyes alert, watching the door.

“It’s okay, baby girl,” I whispered.

“Be ready,” Tae said.

Tae’s training helped boost my fighting skills. They weren’t great by any stretch, but they were all I had.

I made a quick dash to the drab kitchen and grabbed a huge bread knife. Good to have a sharp backup.

Where was Buttons?

“They’re hiding,” the vampire said. “Cautious approach. Still only one.”

“You think it’s my sister?” I whispered.

He didn’t answer.

Please don’t be Isobel.

I blacked out for a second, coming to on a chaotic Seoul street.

Holy shit! I backed off from a burning building, my incorporeal body passing through a dead body on the ground. Fire raged farther up the street, humans pulled out of houses by demons, dragged into the road, and slaughtered. Guttled like fish as witches watched on, river monsters by their sides. Some of those green arsewipes jumped through windows, killing more people.

I remembered my encounter with one before, how it'd tried to convince me death was the best choice I'd ever make in my whole life. That it would give me that death, hand me so much happiness by relenting.

I never wanted to face one again.

Unless I had my full powers.

The man to make that happen stood nearby, his hand around the throat of a demon. He pressed the male up against the wall of one of the few houses not on fire, the demon trying to hit him with pincer hands.

Demon towers were ruby fires in the night, bringing some of the demons to their knees. But not all of them.

Not a good sign.

“What are you doing?” I said to Buttons.

“Getting answers,” he retorted tersely.

“Let me go,” the demon choked. “Fucking prick.”

Buttons wasn't breaking a sweat. “This is one of Quentin's men, Clay. I caught him killing a child.”

“You've done the same,” the demon got out.

Terribly true.

“What are you doing here? Why are you hurting the city?” my twin demanded.

I glanced at the fires and bodies, winced at the screams here and farther away.

“This is spreading from the palace,” Buttons told me.

“Who the fuck are you talking to?” the demon asked, sounding very squeaky.

I faced the demon, who couldn’t see me. “What does he know?”

“He knows many things he is going to tell me,” Buttons replied.

“We have to help these people,” I said.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have run from me.”

“I—”

Buttons punched the demon in the stomach with his other hand. His fist swallowed into his belly. The demon screamed, pincers snapping wildly. They missed every time he attempted a strike.

My twin brother ripped out the demon’s black intestines, throwing them across the ground. “Tell me.”

I retched at the steaming entrails.

The demon screamed, drawing the attention of another demon. She came over to help with a massive lance in her hands. Buttons responded by unleashing his tentacles, grabbing her, and flinging her into a burning house.

Oh. My. God. He was so bloody scary.

“Speak,” he said calmly between the demon’s screams, pulling more insides out of him.

“Please!” the demon howled, his boots smacking the wall.
“Please! I’ll tell you.”

“Speak, and I’ll release you.”

“Q-Quentin!” he cried. “Quentin is trying to get free.”

Buttons cocked his head and dropped the demon. The guy crumbled to the ground, clawing at his insides, sobbing in agony.

My brother planted his boot on his shin, pressing down, drawing out more screams.

“I require details,” he said.

It was his eerie calm that brought goosebumps to my, erm, kind of ghostly flesh.

“I... I...”

“How is Quentin trying to get free?” Buttons asked.

“Break... Breaking the circle.”

Buttons applied more pressure. The demon howled, drawing the attention of a river monster and a demon.

“Oh shit!” I squeaked.

My brother got to work, savage in his attacks. He spun and ducked and leaped through the air as if he were in an action film. In fact, this whole place looked like the set of the grand finale to some big-budget Hollywood blockbuster. Fires and explosions in the distance, the ramifications of terrible destruction everywhere. Only, there wasn’t some superhero swooping in to put things right.

That had to be me.

I clenched my fists, watching the fighting. Buttons snapped the river monster’s neck, ripped the jaw off the

demon. He was brutal and amazing and completely bonkers.

We'll make a great team...

Covered in black blood, Buttons returned to the gutted demon trying to crawl away. He slammed his boot down on his leg, the bone snapping.

“Fuck!” the demon howled.

Buttons bent over, leaning on his thigh to bear down harder. “I’m done with your nonsense. Tell me what circle needs breaking.”

The demon coughed, spitting up black blood. “I... I... Please... I... I...”

“I’ll peel the skin from your face,” my brother added. “You have ten seconds.”

“Please...”

“Ten.”

“I’m begging you...”

“Nine...”

“Please...”

“Eight...”

“I...”

“Seven...”

“The circle...”

“Six...”

“The circle is... The circle is witches... Special witches who control...” He groaned, coughing again.

“Five...”

“Who control the magic of the talismans...”

“Is that so?” Buttons asked, pausing his countdown.

“There are six of them,” a female voice spoke behind us.
“All royals.”

I turned. Buttons glanced over his shoulder, his tentacles pulsing. She was a white-haired, white-eyed woman. Korean, covered in ash and blood.

“When all six fall, the circle is broken, and demonic banishment is lifted,” she said.

My stomach dropped.

“Interesting,” Buttons said. “Which royal?”

“Prince Park Seo-Jun.”

The one and only son of South Korea’s Witch King.

“Tonight is the night Quentin Dawn returns,” she said. “He is coming.”

Which meant Queen Imelda and a whole host of other banished demons would be free to walk in this realm again.

Including Isaiah.

“I supposed this is a secret you shouldn’t really know about.” My brother sounded like he was being deadpan, minus any trace of comedy.

“Yes. Quentin is a clever demon.”

“He’s an arsewipe,” I muttered, insides churning.

“There is no stopping this,” the woman said.

“We have to stop this,” I countered.

“We will, brother. We will.”

“Please leave him alone now,” the demon said. “I’ve given you what you wanted.”

I snapped back to the room, coming to on the sofa with Tae’s hands on my face. I met his eyes, shot forward, grabbed him by the shoulders.

“I was with Buttons,” I said, throat hoarse. “I know what’s happening.”

I explained.

“Oh, shite balls,” Victoria declared.

“You ever heard of this before?” I asked all three of them.

None of them knew.

Archie made calls, Victoria too. Tae went back to the window.

“The demon is still out there,” the vampire said.

“I *need* to be out there, Tae. I can stop this.”

“We have to get more information,” he said.

“Why delay? I can’t hide from my responsibilities, Tae.”

I saw his muscles tense.

“Yeah, well, you need to start talking,” Victoria barked into her phone. “We know because we know. Get your head out of your arse and speak.” Her face was a storm. “What? Fuck your plane. You tried to kidnap Mr. Christmas. Oh, get over yourself.”

“Tae?” I said, moving closer to him. “I have to get out there.”

“No, Clay.”

My hands were fists again. “You can’t stop me.”

No answer.

“I don’t want to fight with you, but I have to get to Buttons and fight back. He’s been fighting. You should’ve seen him. He was brilliant.”

Tae turned to face me, his dark eyes flaring crimson. “Brilliant? He’s brilliant now, is he?”

“I—”

“Listen to yourself, Clay. This isn’t you.”

My fists were so tight my knuckles throbbed. “What’s the matter? Worried I’m stronger than you?”

“Don’t be absurd.”

Why did I say that? “I have the power to make a difference right now. Me and my brother. Yes, he’s a scum bag, but he’s the key to making me work.” My entire body became a riot of tension. “I’m going, and you can’t stop me.”

No response.

“Say something.”

He didn’t.

Idiot. “So, you’re willing to sit back and let this happen?”

Still nothing.

“Talk to me, Tae.”

“You can’t join with him,” he said.

“I can’t? Is that an order?”

“You know what Arcana is doing to you.”

“We don’t know anything, actually. And it’s changed.”

“Because of him, because of the Throne of Vines.”

I moved closer to him, just shy of being at his side. “What are you trying to say here?”

“You’re dangerous, Clay.”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks, my chest tightening. “Oh.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? Now you’re sorry. Up until this moment, you wanted me to do your dirty work. I’ve been dangerous all along, but now you’re scared of me.” The back of my neck bristled with heat.

“That’s not true.” He faced the window again, our friends still working on their phones.

“Don’t turn your back on me,” I said, my hands opening and closing, my breathing almost painfully labored. “Talk to me.”

“Not when you’re like this,” he said.

“Strong, you mean. Better than you, better than anyone.” My heart pounded, blood pumping at a furious level. “You can’t stand my power. Admit it. You hate I can do the things you can’t.”

Whoa. I’d crossed a line, speaking without thinking. I reeled from my barbed outburst, stepping back.

“The demon is still out there,” he said.

“Tae, I... I didn’t mean that.”

No response.

“You’re just pissing me off,” I added.

He spun around, moving up close, towering above me. I should be scared, cowering before this intense force of nature.

His cold staring alone could wilt a field of flowers.

Not me. I faced him. I stood straighter, wracked with guilt and rage, my skin an inferno of irritation.

“Then go,” he said. “Go and be a hero. Go and do the things only you can do.”

“I didn’t mean to say that.” It implied he was a failure, that he’d never be able to get true vengeance for his family. But I really, really didn’t mean it like that.

“Yes, you did,” he responded.

“Not about what you think.”

“What did I think, Clay?” his voice was an Arctic purr.

“Your family...”

The ruby maelstrom in his eyes flared. “You’re losing yourself to this.”

I swallowed but held firm. “I’ve found myself.”

He stared, silent and terrifying. He could snap my neck before I could blink.

Why would he do that? He wasn’t my enemy? I shouldn’t be thinking such bloody rubbish about him.

“I said I’d help you right from the beginning, Tae. Even after everything, I’m sticking by that. I’ll get him, Tae. I’ll get him for you. But no banished demon can be free.”

No answer.

“Look at what I can do with a talisman,” I added. “I took out so many demons at once. I can do it again, maybe better now with the boost from Buttons.”

He growled. “Have you forgotten what your brother has done?”

“No. But things have changed.”

“Not to me.”

“Change isn’t easy.”

“Sweeping things under a rug is too easy.”

I closed my eyes, struggling not to lose my shit. “I’m not denying what he is. I’m taking advantage of a gift.”

Silence.

I opened my eyes, reached out to take his hand. To my surprise, he let me. I brought it to my lips, and I kissed the back of it. “Let’s not do this.” His skin was cold.

“Let’s go to London,” he said.

“And abandon your home city?”

“It’s too dangerous for you.”

“Why are you so set against helping others?” I dropped his hand. “It makes no sense. You want to stop demons, but then you want to hide me away. Me, the one person who can help turn the tide.”

Once again, silence.

“Things have never been more dangerous,” I added, getting cross again. “If this circle breaking succeeds, then we’re screwed.”

“I can’t risk your life.”

I snarled at him, anger snapping like peanut brittle. I even felt the crack within. “Can’t risk not having Isaiah killed and sod everyone else. Is that it?”

“Clay...”

“No. Fuck you. I’m not your weak little bitch.”

Oh, gosh. There went my mouth.

A growl rumbled in the space between us, but he didn’t speak.

“Hit the truth, didn’t I?”

He inched closer, leaning down as if to kiss me. “Where have you gone?”

I backed off. “I’m out of here.”

We faced off in a staring contest. Butterflies with talons danced in my guts, my resolve to stay strong as hurtful as it was resolute. One thing I always held onto was my determination to get to where I wanted to be. I relied on that strength to survive, and I drew from its well now.

It’d never hurt this much. But then I’d never been this nasty to a man I...

I...

I...

A huge tremor shot through me, sending me crashing into his arms. I grabbed him for support as a second quickly followed.

“Clay!”

I slid down him, my body shaking violently. He held me up, carried me over to the sofa. Fizz meowed with concern as he put me down.

“What’s wrong with him?” Victoria asked.

I shook and shook and shook, the Mark of Arcana blazing
to life on the ceiling.

He's here...

TWENTY-FIVE

TAE



Clay shook in my arms as his twin came through the pentagram above. He landed behind the sofa, my friends springing into action.

“Stop!” I ordered them.

They froze.

Buttons smiled at me, covered in demon blood and ash. “Wise choice, vampire.”

I couldn’t risk them being hurt in an attack

Clay stopped shaking, sitting upright. “I’m okay, Tae.”

He stood, completely healthy, some beads of sweat on his brow, but no damage done.

I stood with him, Fizz springing at me. I caught her, holding her to my chest.

Clay stretched his limbs above his head. “That’s so much better.” He flexed his fingers, offering me sorrowful hazel eyes. “I’m so sorry, Tae. I’m not doing this to hurt you. I didn’t mean to say what I said.”

“We have to go now before it closes,” Buttons said.

The Mark remained on the ceiling.

“I’m already getting better at this,” he added. “I love the new me.”

Fizz meowed at her owner. Clay’s eyes glistened at her continuing soft pleas. They asked him not to leave her.

His wings burst out of his already tattered clothes that revealed glimpses of his beautiful skin.

Beautiful skin for a beautiful soul who’d flung angry words at me. I knew he didn’t mean them, that he was changed and frustrated, that he was losing himself to his magic.

I had to save him from this.

But he’d touched on the raw facts. I did, like Grindle, see him as a means to an end. And I had to wrestle with that.

“I have to go, baby girl,” he said as his hands turned to claws. They lasted seconds, his human state returning. “I’ll be back, though.” He looked to me.

After how the world had treated him, he still wanted to help it. He was a better man than me.

This is why I was falling for him.

More than falling...

“I’m coming with you,” I said.

“Not through there,” Buttons pointed at the Mark. “For brother’s only.”

“Please take care of her,” Clay said. “I’ll be back. I promise.” He connected his lips to mine in a swift, surprising move.

As he pulled away, I said, “I’m joining you in the city.”

“Come, brother.”

Could I let him go with this creature?

Clay smiled at me, then went to his twin.

“I’m following,” I reiterated, handing Fizz to Archie.
“You’re not doing this alone.”

“Thank you,” he said.

Buttons offered his hand. Clay took it, the image disturbing and wrong.

“Let us fly,” Buttons said.

Clay cast a spell, and they flew upward into the pentagram, my warlock lover waving at me as he vanished into the orange-gold blaze.

Fizz meowed as the pentagram closed, a lament for him.

What had I done to let him slip away like that?

“Look after Fizz, get out of the country,” I told my friends, running for the door.

“But—”

I yanked the door open as Archie spoke, coming face to face with a demon with an injured witch on his back.

“Phillipe?”

TWENTY-SIX

CLAY



I braced myself to arrive in the thick of the action—the burning buildings, the chaos. But that didn't happen.

Instead, we landed in the bitter wind and rain before the demon gate in Barking Park, East London.

“What the hell?”

Buttons fell to his knees beside me. “Give me a moment, brother.” He released a heavy sigh. “That really is intense.”

I backed away from the tree that was the demon gate. “What have you done?”

“I brought us here to kill the root of the problem.”

“No. Take us back. We have to go back.” Oh, gosh. I was about to pass out. “Take us back now.”

“No, brother. The real fight is here.” He got to his feet, his demon side hidden. “Time to kill Quentin Dawn once and for all.”

“But the prince...”

“The prince can die,” he said. “The prince has to die for mother.”

Oh no. Oh, hell no. The realization sank in like a sickness. “You... You want her un-banished.”

“Of course, Clay. I always want what is best for Mother. She is our queen.”

And there it was, the biggest fuck up of all time. I never should've listened to myself, believed in this bullshit destiny idea.

Buttons approached the tree. “Quentin will not know this realm again. He won't hurt it. He won't take it away from her.”

“She'll hurt it, James,” I tried.

“Never. She wouldn't.” He extended his arms, face pointed at the sky. “She wants the best for us all, to give us a new world where there doesn't have to be war and suffering anymore.”

He really was on another planet. “She told you that, did she?”

He retained his position. “I know that's how she feels. I see it in her heart.”

“You see things differently than me.”

He dropped his arms. “I see things others do not. Because of my special eyes, because of love.”

“Love?”

“Love and understanding of the queen who made us. I know you loathe her now, but you won't. You weren't given the chance to sit with her properly. But we can repair that damage, and we can be the princes we were born to be.” He slowly turned around, lifting his arms again. “We can be a family.”

Back here again, back to this delusion. Our powers might have changed, but he still spouted this same junk.

I didn't have the energy to fight him on it or even the desire to. Selfishly, I wanted to hold onto these spells. Which said a lot about me, didn't it?

Like brother like brother.

Damn.

I couldn't move without him. Flying back to Seoul would take too long, a colossal waste of time. If Tae was getting out into the streets to join me, maybe he could help the prince. Unless the prince was already out of the country.

Oh, God. What a mess.

I tempered my anger toward Buttons further. Playing this smartly. When life gives you lemons, make that lemonade. This didn't have to be a bad thing. In fact, there were some great endgames to be had.

The death of Quentin.

The death of Isaiah.

The queen.

"Hold on a second," I said.

"What?"

"What's the time?"

"I don't know."

"It's before midnight here, right?"

South Korea was ahead, already in the new year. But the UK wasn't quite there yet. So how were my spells working? Was there a time zone rule? I had no idea. But here they were, ready for action.

Button cottoned on to my thinking. “We may have changed the rules.”

“Whoa.”

“Yes, brother. Whoa.”

That didn’t sound right coming from him. “Can you teleport us inside?” I asked.

“No. I tried. Demon realm rules hold firm.” He chuckled.

Not funny. “Oh.”

“You always need a key for *that* realm.”

“Oh,” I said again.

“This teleportation only works by me moving to you from somewhere else,” he added. “I can keep the portal open temporarily after reaching you, then choose us somewhere to go. Like here. But once I’m by your side, and the portal is closed, there’s nothing I can do.”

“Annoying rule.”

“A rule all tied up in you, brother.”

Uh-huh. “Do you have demon keys?”

“Yes.” He reached into his pocket, revealing a gold key with a black and red head. “Royal key. It will take us anywhere in the demon realm.”

I inched closer to him, boots squelching on the wet grass. “Where did you get it?”

“Mother gave it to me some time ago, to protect myself when the ADU hunted me for my...” He didn’t finish.

For his crimes.

“Do we have to walk all the way to Level 3 to get the train?”

He shook his head. “There is a royal tunnel joining Level 1 to Level 3. Come, I’ll show you.” He slid the key into the tree.

The bottom part of the tree opened inward into the shape of a door. Moments later, a figure stepped out dressed in black leathers, two swords in her hands. She grinned, her eyes white fires, stepping aside to allow more demons to file out of the tree. All in black, all bearing weapons, none of them showing off their demonic sides just yet.

We stepped back, staying close together as they kept on coming.

The demon towers at Barking Park remained dark.

“Here you both are,” the lead woman said. “Brothers in arms.”

“Get out of our way,” Buttons returned. “We have important work to do.”

“We know. We’ve been waiting.”

There were at least twenty of them now, gathered around the base of the tree.

“Quentin is no fool,” she carried on. “He’s been expecting an attack of some kind from you.”

“We know of his plans,” Buttons said. “He will not see them come to fruition.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Her Majesty will win this war.”

The demons snarled collectively, a mass of battle-ready power.

“She’s losing her grip,” the woman said, a cut opening on her forehead for her treasonous words. Black blood ran down the bridge of her nose, dripping off the end of it. “We’ll make sure she loses it completely.”

She clicked her tongue, and the demons sprang into action.

I cast the wall spell immediately, weapons clashing against the turquoise energy. The shield rippled with each strike, useless against my protection. The magic held with ferocious intensity, its energy stores mega high, keeping those arsewipes at bay.

“What shall we do?” I asked.

“You’re the Bright One, brother. Hit them with spells.”

Right.

I unleashed my push spell first, sending them sprawling.

“Good, brother. Good.”

I cast a wind spell, forming a vortex around the tree. The brutal ring of wind ripped them upward, spinning and spinning. I dragged it higher, halfway up the tree, mindful of tearing it out of the ground.

This was fun.

I turned the wind into water, added ice, the bodies slowing as white patterns bloomed across the rippling circle. Ice patterns, freezing the liquid to a crawl, then to a stop.

“Interesting,” James said.

The ice ring held the demons in thick layers. I applied more of it, making sure there were no cracks, no means of escape. Nice and cold.

“There will be more, brother. There are always more.”

Yes, thank you for that, oh wise oracle.

I dropped the shield for the time being. Making pretty ice sculptures wasn't my goal. Death was. I smashed the ice open, my killing arrows coming to life. The demons hit the ground, confused, shivering. My arrows flew at their heads and chests. Within seconds, they were all dead, crumbling to black ash.

“Excellent work,” Buttons said.

“What is this, a running commentary?” I asked as hot liquid ran across my lips.

Bollocks. Bleeding again.

He tilted his head to the side. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. Let's get moving.”

A second wave of demons charged through the gate, firing arrows, lunging with swords and spears. I cast the wall spell again, unleashing my death arrows upon them. They dropped, and more came, wave after wave of Quentin followers trying to take me out. Idiots. They were no match for me, not with my awesome battery super-charging my moves.

At the same time, this was one big delay. The sooner we got into the demon realm, the sooner the hunt for Quentin could begin. We were against the clock with this breaking the circle thing.

What about the demon queen?

I'd cross that bridge when I came to it. Or, more appropriately, burn that bridge to nothing.

No matter Button's dreams and sickening love for her, she wasn't seeing this realm again either. She'd bring hate and terror, not peace. She was a cruel manipulator, a murderer of her own children. Made them, cast them aside when they

failed to meet her expectations. Used me, used James, did this to my magic, changed me, infected my life.

She was no mother of mine. Nothing more than a monster to be eradicated.

“Brother?”

I’d turn her to ash.

“Brother? What are you doing?”

Floating. Up and up and up.

“Clay?”

His voice. That voice. The button-eyed killer saying my name, another infection, something else to cut out of existence.

“I’ll kill you all,” I said.

“Brother!” he bellowed.

I blinked, looking down. I was in the air about ten feet, floating above him as demons attacked my shield.

“What?” I questioned him, blood running across my lips.

He was shivering, his trembling hands reaching for me. “Please... Please come down.”

I sent arrows to the demons, killing them. There was so much ash around the demon gate.

“Please c-come d-down.” My brother’s voice shook as he did.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“I... I... I...”

“What?”

“I... I... I...”

They hit me, the violent tremors. My head snapped back, my magic breaking. I landed hard on my feet, pain shooting through my bones. I slipped, tumbling to the side and into Buttons. We went down together, sliding across the wet grass.

He trembled by my side, his hand next to mine.

“What... W-hat’s ha-happening?” he asked in a juddery voice.

I dug my fingers into the grass as the tremors worsened. My body bucked and flailed, my head pounding all over, a nasty ringing assaulting my ears.

I thought this was an effect of Buttons teleporting. Clearly, I’d been wrong.

Wrong...

So wrong...

Arcana is wrong...

I entered the place in my mind I thought was lost—the clearing in the forest with the campfire that represented my magic, where I’d learned some things about Arcana.

It’d changed again, now a dead forest, a storm raging in heavy dark clouds rolling above. The trees were scorched, the ground black ash whipped up by an unfelt wind.

“What’s happening?”

An apocalyptic landscape of dead things and demonic ash.

Dead and lost and wrong and changed and...

“Arcana shouldn’t be here,” I said as violent forks of lightning ripped across the sky.

“There they are!” voices cried.

“Kill them!”

I woke up, thrashing so violently the back of my head smacked into the ground repeatedly. My stomach churned, every corner of me screaming with pain.

“J-James...” I tried.

A surge of unbelievable energy slammed into me.

My spine arched to the point of breaking. I lifted off the ground as weapons came at me. The wall spell burst to life at the last second, deflecting them.

“Kill him!” demons cried.

An inferno consumed me, tearing up my insides. Too lost in the pain to scream, to move, to do anything but be the conduit for this power. Arcana power. Wild power. So much, too much, building and building, the energy rising and rising and rising and hurting and hurting and hurting...

Oh, God. What was happening? Was I dying? Was this it? Was this the end?

I'm sorry, Fizz.

I'm sorry, Tae.

I'm sorry for everything.

As the Arcana reached its summit, I found my scream. It ripped out of me as the magic did, explosive beams of bright orange-gold light tearing at the earth and sky, me a riot of tremors and fire.

I screamed so hard my lungs threatened to disintegrate, my vision blinded by the magical light, desperate for it to stop, helpless as it exploded in a relentless torrent of rage.

Stop...

Please stop...

TWENTY-SEVEN

TAE



Phillipe put the male witch down, allowing the royal man to lean against him. He'd hurt his left leg, unable to bear weight on it.

The witch was South Korean, in his twenties, dressed in silver and purple, his short black hair surprisingly immaculate, his pale skin flushed. He blinked his dark eyes at me.

"Prince Park Seo-Jun," I said.

"Yes."

"Get inside." I scanned the night, watching for more surprises. There were violent sounds coming from the city, but nothing here. Yet.

I closed the door. "What are you doing here?"

After helping with our escape from the demon realm, Phillipe had vanished. I'd presumed he was either in hiding in the demon realm or on Earth, seeing as he'd betrayed his Queen. His boyish, fair features were marred by cuts and bruises, his red hair greasy.

"I got wind of Quentin's plans after he was banished," Phillipe said. "I came to find you, following Princess Isobel. Got tangled up in the attacks at the palace, found His Highness here alone, and helped him. We *must* help him, Tae."

Phillipe helped the prince to the sofa.

I have to go... “And what is your plan now?”

“I was hoping you could help us escape,” the demon answered.

Clay is out there... “Where are his royal guards?”

“They are with a decoy,” the prince answered in English. “I ran from the palace with two guards who were killed by a demon. The plan was to get me to a ship and sail east, but that failed when the demon attacked. I was injured in the brawl, almost killed. Phillipe found me and helped me run, told me you could help us.”

I have to help Clay... “How did this secret about your circle get out?”

“I don’t know. A spy? The knowledge is kept under strict secrecy, told to few. This shouldn’t be happening.” His eyes were dark and imploring. “If the circle dies tonight, then the war with demons is lost.”

“What about a new circle?”

“Only when each of the six bloodlines produces an heir can a new circle be formed. I have no children yet, so my successor isn’t here. It is an important part of the spell, keeping the bloodlines to six and maintaining secrecy.” He winced in pain. “And now we’ve lost that, too. But if at least one of us stays alive, the circle remains.”

“Really?” Victoria questioned.

His Highness nodded. “It will be fragile protection, but protection nonetheless.”

“Nice loophole.”

This prince may be our last hope if other royals around the world died tonight.

As much as I angled toward the door to join Clay in his fight, I had to make sure this prince got out of here safely.

This entire time spent with Clay made me resistant to dealing with anything other than the task at hand—killing Isaiah, keeping the warlock safe. But change cut through everything.

I was beginning to loathe that word.

Change...

“There is a flight arranged to leave here imminently,” I said. “Board it when it arrives.”

The prince sighed with relief. “Thank you so much. I’ve lost contact with my guards, my family... I... I can’t...”

“The flight is heading for London,” I added. “You’ll be safe, Your Highness.”

“Thank you,” he said again.

I nodded, glancing at the door.

“Where’s Clay?” Phillippe asked.

“He’s...” I hesitated, torn over my next move. “He’s out in the city, fighting.”

Phillippe’s demon eyes widened with shock. “Alone?”

“Not for long. I have to go to him.”

“We can’t lose him, Tae.”

I ignored him.

“I hear James is free,” he added.

“He is.” I debated calling Grindle, surprised he hadn’t arrived here yet. I tried him, his phone off.

“He has to be stopped,” the demon said.

“It’s complicated,” my lawyer jumped in. “So leave off.”

“I’m only saying.”

“Don’t say. We know what a shit storm is.”

“How did he get free?”

“How did you get your info?” She pursed her lips, arching an eyebrow. “You did more than follow Isobel.”

Phillipe looked down at scabbed knuckles. “I hurt demons.”

“Tortured them, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Glad you did,” Victoria said.

He didn’t say anything, head bowed as the prince touched his arm.

“I’m grateful for your help,” he told the demon. “Unexpected, yet perfectly timed. Fate has smiled down on me.”

“Let’s hope he keeps flashing you his gnashers,” Victoria responded.

I went over to my friends. Fizz meowed in Archie’s arms, Victoria’s narrowed, angry eyes on the new arrivals.

“This is fucking crazy,” she said.

“What do you want to do?” Archie asked.

I stroked Fizz’s head. “Take them to London. I’ll meet you there.”

Archie nodded. “Anything you want, mate.”

“You can trust us,” Victoria contributed.

“I hate putting this responsibility on your shoulders,” I said.

“It’s fine,” Archie said. “It’s what we’re here for. But I’ll be coming with you.”

“No.”

“Yes, Tae,” Victoria said, taking me by surprise. “I’d be joining in too if it weren’t for Fizz. Someone needs to look after her.”

“No, Archie.”

“Yes, Tae. I always respect your decisions, always follow where you lead. But I’m not letting you go out there alone. You need back up.”

“It’s too dangerous for you.”

“You saying he’s weak?” Victoria questioned.

They were ganging up on me. “I’ll be out of here before you can follow. I move faster alone.”

My lawyer rolled her eyes. “Stop with this lone warrior shite. You’re not alone, and we’ll never let you be.” Her smile crinkled the corners of her eyes. “Let us do what we can to help. I’ll get these two and little miss cutie to London. You two go get our lad. Well, lads, if you *have* to bring the other one along.”

“Guess we’re stuck with Buttons while he does that teleport thing,” Archie added.

We kept our conversation low, away from the prince and the demon’s ears.

“Let’s not waste time arguing,” Victoria said. “We’re better than this.”

I wanted to argue, of course, but enough time had passed since Clay left. The longer I lingered here, the greater the risk of losing him.

Archie slapped me on the back. “Anyway, you need my mad skills to cover your arse.”

“Mad is right,” Victoria countered.

Archie snorted, handed Fizz to her, and picked up a gym bag from under the table. He unzipped it and handed me some ear comms. “Grabbed these from the mansion. Here.”

He handed me and my lawyer a tiny device each, slipping his into his ear. They were perfect for communicating when on missions such as these.

“Get on the frequency,” he said.

“What’s going on?” Phillipe asked.

We got on the frequency.

“Your flight will be here soon,” I said. “Stay here with Victoria. She will explain every detail. Your Highness?”

“Yes, Mr. Frost?” the prince responded.

“You will be kept safe.”

He sat forward, sucking air between his perfect teeth. “You are going to the Arcana warlock.”

“Yes.”

“I have followed this story with great interest.”

I’m sure he had.

“I would like to meet him.”

A prince in need of saving or not, he was still a witch, and Clay was still Clay. A fascinating specimen to a man like him, a prize to be won and studied.

The two could not meet—a problem to be solved later.

“You are in good hands here,” I said.

“Thank you.” He leaned back, clearly in so much pain.

“I’ll get you some painkillers,” Victoria said, heading for the kitchen.

“Thank you. My healing spells aren’t having much of an effect right now.” He winced again.

Him being injured would not help his escape. Should something go wrong, he’d need to run. I elongated the fingernail on my right index finger, slicing open a vein at my wrist. Blood pooled to the surface.

I offered it to him. “Drink, Your Highness. My blood will heal you.”

And give you a terrible erection...

He frowned. “I cannot drink vampire blood.”

“I’d prefer it if you did,” Victoria replied. “I want you fighting fit for when that flight arrives.”

He looked at me, then Phillippe, anguish on his face.

“Drink,” the demon said.

“It won’t hurt me?” the prince asked me.

“No. But you will be aroused.”

“Sorry?”

Victoria waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry about it. Time’s a’ ticking.”

A' ticking?

The prince licked his lips, glanced between the demon and me, then agreed. I pressed my wrist to his mouth. He held my arm and drank. Timid at first, then developing a taste for it. He tightened his grip, sucking noisily, moaning.

My cock swelled as my sexual energy stirred. I ignored it as I ignored the heat between Clay and I on the way here. All I'd wanted was to ravish him, fuck him against a tree or a wall, feel our bodies joined once more after so much nightmare.

All in good time.

I peeled the prince off me, immediately licking my wound closed. He slid down the sofa, panting.

"My goodness," he whispered. "My leg... It's healed. My..." He looked down at his groin, a bulge straining against his purple pants. He covered it, eyes on me.

"You might want to pop into the loo to relieve yourself," Archie said. "Trust me."

An amusing thing to say to a prince.

The prince's mouth opened and closed. "Where is it?"

"Through the kitchen." Archie pointed at the door.

Prince Park Seo-Jun jumped up and dashed to the kitchen, a door slamming closed seconds later.

"Was going to tell him to shut the door," Victoria said.

Phillipe went to wait by the kitchen door.

"We're leaving, Archie," I said. "Let's go."

"Thank you, Tae," Phillipe said. "I appreciate this."

"It's fine. Stay safe."

“We will.”

“*You* stay safe,” my lawyer said loudly to me. “I mean it. Don’t get hurt, or I’ll kill you both.”

Archie laughed. “You worried about me?”

She shrugged. “Got used to having you around after fifteen years.”

“Soppy.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

If we were friends who partook in group hugs, now would be the moment. I considered it, resisting the strange urge.

I petted Fizz one more time, and we were outside.

“Get on my back.”

“Your what?” Archie responded.

“Just climb on.”

“But I thought I’d drive and meet you somewhere.”

“If you insist on coming with me, we stick together at all times.”

He tapped at his back and sides, drawing my attention to the sword and two guns he’d armed himself with. “Too much extra weight, mate.”

“You know that doesn’t matter.”

Archie’s bulk on my back was a comical thought and a necessity. I wanted him close, not trailing me in a car and getting into trouble. I wasn’t having it, and his size and weight meant nothing to me.

“Climb on.”

He pulled a bemused face, then climbed on. “This isn’t awkward at all.”

“Get over it, Archie.”

I took off, zipping across the airfield, leaping over the fence and tearing through the trees. Headed back toward the city, trying to find Clay’s vanilla scent on the air amidst the burning and the death.

I heard a plane approaching.

I slowed down, looking up.

“It’s here,” Archie said against my ear.

“Good.”

We continued on.

Across the Han River, the city burned, fire spreading through the streets. The palace flared the brightest in the distance, a vibrant star in the middle of the inferno. Sirens wailed, people screamed, and Synth spat into the air in red fountains.

My hometown burned.

“*The plane’s just landed,*” Victoria said via the ear comm.

“Excellent,” I said.

The turnover would be quick. My people were fast and brilliant at these things.

I sniffed the air again, trying to find Clay. Nothing. I took off again, needing to be closer with all the smoke and repugnant stench.

As we approached the city at the end of the bridge, the acrid smell of burning flesh assaulted my sense of my smell. I rifled through it, searching for one hint of vanilla.

It wasn't there.

I ran through dark streets that fed into burning streets littered with bodies, took to the rooftops.

He wasn't there.

A demon forced me to stop, a man with a huge scorpion tail at his back. He spotted me, his eyesight clearly annoyingly astute, and spat a sizzling liquid in my direction. I avoided it in time. The phlegmy goo smoked on the ground, eating into the asphalt.

I put Archie down and rushed the demon. He moved as fast as me, ducking my punches, avoiding my kicks. His tail snapped like a whip, constantly going for the kill. I spun and dodged it, the sharp end taking chunks out of the ground with every strike.

A deafening crack, the demon thrown back as the bullet exploded his skull. Blood and brain matter sprayed my face, the demon twitching at my feet. His left eye was gone, his right eye locked onto me, full of rage. Unless he got himself to a healing bath, he'd be stuck like this for a long time.

I stamped on his tail for good measure, breaking through bone and muscle, reminding me of the wet crunch of breaking open a lobster.

“Good shot, Archie,” I said as he stomped over.

“I was waiting for you to stop dancing.”

“Hilarious.” I glanced around. We were on a side street away from the main road to our left, a series of small streets branching off to the right. Untouched by fire and bodies for the time being.

“I can’t find him,” I said. “I can’t smell him.” I tried repeatedly, the other scents too cloying.

He’s not here.

Of course he was here. He was here helping, being the man he wanted to be.

I growled in frustration, angered by the unnerving lack of vanilla. Regardless of everything else, I should be able to find him, even a tiny trace of him.

He wasn’t anywhere.

“Let’s move closer to the palace,” I said, losing hope.

I should have never let him go.

If I lost him, I couldn’t stand it. Not him, not the one who’d made everything so different.

I... I needed him.

I...

I...

I *would* find him. He had to be here.

Archie jumped onto my back, a lot more eager this time. “We’ll find him, mate. We will.”

His reassurance slid off me as water on glass.

It all came at once.

First, the cries of Victoria.

“Tae! Archie! They’re attacking the airport!”

And then a woman in a tweed suit with wild blonde hair and copper skin sprang from the shadows of a house.

A fairy.

She smashed an orange glass flower at my feet, orange beams forming around us, creating an orange bubble that swallowed us. I tried to move, my limbs cutting through heavy mass, trapped like I'd been trapped when Grindle had protected me at the shopping center with the same thing.

Only this time, I doubted this was for protection.

“What the fuck?” Archie roared. “Fucking fairy!”

The fairy stood before me, holding a pair of secateurs over her left little finger. She smiled and cut her finger off, baring her teeth from the pain. Blood sprayed, and we were sucked out of Seoul as Grindle called my name from somewhere behind me.



TRAPPED with Archie in the orange bubble, teleported to a clearing in a dark forest, stars twinkling in the circle of night sky above.

The fairy stood before us, applying a bandage to her wound.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Gretchen. Grindle’s sister. Thank goodness I reacted before he did.” She chuckled.

I bared my teeth. “Release us. Now.”

She chuffed, shaking her head. “Don’t be ridiculous. I lost my finger getting you here, so I’m not about to send you back. Wastefulness is a bad trait, vampire.”

“The Fairy Wilds,” I said.

“Absolutely.” She finished bandaging her wound. “Anyway, better go. Things to do. Don’t worry, I’m not planning on killing you. You’re a good warrior to have around. Possibly. I may change my mind. Let’s see.”

“Why are we here?”

She wriggled her other fingers in a wave and walked away toward the trees.

“Answer me!”

But she left, vanishing into the dark.

“What now?” Archie said, struggling against the jelly. “Victoria... Fuck!”

Helplessness wrapped in hopelessness cloistered itself around everything.

The plane...

The prince was dead.

Victoria was dead.

Fizz...

No. This wasn’t happening.

This couldn’t be happening.

TWENTY-EIGHT

CLAY



I barely managed to sit up, body humming inside and out. A sickly sensation roiled in my stomach, my temples throbbing.

Every spell was burned out, leaving me weak and clammy.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

“Oh... Oh, gosh.”

Smoke curled up from the churned-up ground, patches of the wet grass burning despite the rain. Arcana flames crackled along the edges of gouges across the park, stretching away into the night. Trees burned in orange-gold flames, spreading outward and away from me.

There was so much damage everywhere, so many trenches ripped into the ground as if there'd been an earthquake. So much Arcana fire.

“Shit...”

Buttons lay flat on his back beside me, his head angled to face me. “You... You were magnificent.”

“What happened?” I winced as my voice hurt my head.

Man, did I need ten gallons of water to drink. My throat was sand and thorns.

“You ripped through everything, brother.” He smiled. “I have never felt such power, such chaos.”

I did this damage. “But why?”

“Because... Because you burn bright.”

Unable to keep sitting up, I returned to my back, so exhausted.

“I did this,” I said. “I did this.”

“Rest for a moment, brother.”

“I did this.”

Consumed by the magic, losing my mind like I’d done in the demon realm. Only, this was worse. The fire was spreading through the park. How much damage had I caused?

“I did this,” I said again.

Who had I killed? What had I destroyed?

“Bright One,” Buttons whispered.

We did this, the brothers of Arcana. Dangerous twins playing with a power that shouldn’t be here. It sank in as heavy as iron, crushing my spirit.

I was nothing more than a mistake, a walking bomb. Those tremors were a warning, telling me to stop, to keep away from James. But I’d ignored them, clinging onto some crap about destiny.

“I did this...”

“Stop, brother. Stop.”

He was right, even if he didn’t mean it as I took it.

We had to stop. What if this happened in the center of a city? How would that help the world? How was that anything

other than chaos and death?

Control it...

“I don’t know what to do.”

Control it...

Footsteps, someone approaching.

Demon... Arcana informed me from my depths.

“I have a suggestion.” Quentin loomed into view, standing above me with a sword in his hands.

“No!” Buttons cried, breaking into a coughing fit.

Quentin Dawn lifted the sword above his head. “Death would be my suggestion. You’re much too dangerous to live.”

He brought the sword down.

He’d won.

He’d bloody won.

That circle of witches was broken.

It was over.

Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes. I tried to fight back, to call up my magic. It sat as useful as a wet match.

The sword shot out of Quentin’s hand before it skewered me. He went next, whipped out of view.

“Kindly leave my son alone.”

Queen Imelda’s voice set my blood to ice.

“Mother...” Buttons said.

Oh. Bollocks.

NIGHT TREASURES

MIDNIGHT MAGIC BOOK 5



ONE

CLAY



Too weak to lift my head, I listened to the demon queen spar with Quentin Dawn after she'd just stopped him from skewering me with his sword.

Phew! What a close one.

“Your Majesty,” Quentin said.

“Spare your groveling, I’m in no mood for the words of a traitor,” she returned.

“With all due respect, why have you come to join us out here?” he asked.

“Because you seem to be under the notion that it is acceptable to be touching things which belong to me.”

Belong to her? Me? Oh, hell no. Mum or not, I didn’t belong to her one bit.

“He is nothing but a problem to be eradicated, Your Majesty,” Quentin said about me.

Arsewipe.

Movement, the arrival of more bodies.

“Much like you and your team,” the queen countered.
“You are all extremely problematic.”

“Thanks to *them*.” Meaning me, again, and my button-eyed twin.

The new footsteps kept coming—marching boots—growing by the second.

“Stand down, Quentin,” the queen added.

“I can’t do that, Your Majesty.”

“But you must.”

They were both out of my line of sight, seeing as I was flat on my back in the wet grass of Barking Park, the demon gate feet away. I watched Arcana fire spread across the park from my point-of-view, devouring trees, fires started by me losing my shit big time. Again.

The rain failed to touch the magical fires, despite falling harder within the past few minutes. It battered my face, soaked me through to the bone. I shivered as the bitter air got to work on my wet body, unable to move from my soggy spot on the grass.

Floored by my magic, the tremors that’d rocked my body. Powered by Buttons, my new super Arcana battery, I’d wreaked more havoc with my magic.

Nothing but walking danger nowadays.

Damn.

Buttons and I had changed the nature of the Arcana after our spat at the Throne of Vines, tossed the rulebook to the wind. Now we depended on each other, a powerful duo when we were within twenty feet of each other. Without him, I couldn’t use my magic. Without him, I might not have caused this shit show.

How much damage had I actually done?

I was a menace to this world, not a savior like I thought I could be. I had to be stopped, this ancient magic within me needing to go.

Or die...

No. Never that. There was too much life to live, to get back to. Too much love.

Only...

Shit.

Was there a life still there for me to live? I mean, I'd lost myself to a crazy burst of power before, but this was different. The intensity of being powered by Buttons, the damage greater here than that town square from what I'd seen so far, the tremors, the nosebleeds, too much magic coursing through me. This was bad, having the potential to drag me toward a seriously grim ending.

Only if you let things go that way...

"I don't want to stand here arguing with you, Your Majesty," Quentin added, pulling me back into their conversation.

"Then don't. Yield and stop this madness," she said.

"This madness set you free."

Arcana called to me on some distant sea, told me it would be back, to be patient.

All well and good when you're in the thick of a demonic back and forth and had been so close to resembling a chicken kebab.

God, what was going to happen now?

You're getting out of here...

I loved my inner voice and his determination to smack me into shape. Well, at least try to.

I'm coming back, Arcana soothed.

Did I want it back?

Yes...

No...

I tried to turn my head to face my brother. Nope. Not yet. His hand brushed mine, though, his cold skin against my cold skin, and I heard his slow breaths. I tried to speak, unable to find the energy to make a soft noise let alone a whole word.

Damn.

“Listen to me, Quentin,” the queen responded to his last comment. “I’m willing to forgive your treason, to wipe the slate clean if you submit yourself to me now. This is the only chance I will give you.”

Quentin took a moment to answer. “And lose everything I have worked for?”

“All you have is chaos.”

“It is this chaos that will set us free. You will see, Your Majesty. You will come to understand your plans for expansion on Earth will only bring suffering to demons as it always has. I can end it. I can finally move us forward.”

“Expansion is moving forward,” my mother replied.

Great, I was stuck in some crappy version of a parliamentary debate. Just how I wanted to spend my New Year’s Eve—my second of the night after seeing in the new year in Seoul hours ago.

A jolt of energy struck me, filling me up. Enough to allow me to turn my head. My eyes landed on my twin, also lying on his back, his white button eyes fixed to the sky. The fires burned beyond him, around the edges of so many nasty trenches sliced into the ground from the beams that'd burst out of me and, well, it was all me.

I'd done this.

The fire consumed the trees, spreading across the wet grass. Those flames seemed to stay away from us for the time being.

Where else did they burn?

Quentin took his next turn. "We can work together. I miss being your servant. I would be happy to hand you the reins of my mission and follow you to the end."

"Even after you attacked me?" she said. "You set a giant river monster loose in Level 500, caused a terrible amount of destruction."

"You took me down, did you not?" Quentin replied. "I barely escaped. Your strength is unparalleled."

"But still, you slipped through the net to rebel against me."

"I am eternally sorry for doing so, Your Majesty."

Demons who went against the queen suffered emotional and physical pain, Quentin's face covered in scars and fresh cuts, one of his demonic white eyes black with blindness, some of his bottom front teeth missing.

"I know you are," the queen replied. "I can see it. But it doesn't change anything. You have betrayed me, attacked me, and you stand against me in all things. I know you want to

send me to the lake to become king.” A brief pause. “I must hurt your insides terribly.”

“You do, Your Majesty.”

To overthrow a demon monarch, seeing as demons only died by being hit with an Arcana arrow from yours truly, a demon had to take the king or queen to a frozen lake in Level 666 of the demon realm. Apparently, loads of former monarchs slept there, powerless and usurped. I didn’t know how it worked and didn’t want to find out.

“Where is Tasmin Vacquier?” my mum asked.

He kept quiet.

The queen snarled. “As a coward. Another traitor.”

“I am sorry, Your Majesty.”

They carried on in circles, him expressing regret, her laying on the guilt trip thick. How much longer did I have to suffer through this? They weren’t here to chat. They were here to fight, drawing this out like a cat fight. You know, when two cats face off for ages, howling at each other, ears back, tails puffed up, pupils dilated.

Fizz hadn’t really got into fights with other cats she came across on the streets. At least in the time we’d been together. Only once with some battle-worn tomcat who dared to hiss at her. No standoff for her. She’d jumped straight in to show the cheeky kitty who was boss.

Gosh, I missed her so damn much. Her and Tae and my friends.

Please be okay...

I wasn’t supposed to be in London but in Seoul, fighting the good fight, trying to stop Quentin’s followers from killing

the Prince Park Seo-Jun. Buttons had other ideas, dragging us here with his new teleporting power to visit the mother he loved so much.

What misplaced love that was.

With Queen Imelda and Quentin being here, it meant Prince Park Seo-Jun was dead, along with the rest of the circle of six royal witches who controlled the magic of the talismans. Demonic banishment was now lifted for all demons.

Shit, shit, all the shit. The realest shit ever.

The world was screwed.

I wanted to get back to Seoul, to my people, to wrap my arms around Tae and hold Fizz close. Run away, hide, and let the world spin out of control without me.

No.

I was better than that. This didn't have to be messy. I didn't have to be a walking timebomb in fear of going off in some city, killing loads of people. No. Sod that. Sod this recent blip. I wasn't put on this Earth to hurt it, given this amazing power to be weak and afraid and lay here like some dead log.

I was *so* much better than that.

This is more than a blip...

Another burst of energy hit me, small yet slightly stronger than before. Enough for me to try and push myself up properly as the talking went on between queen and rebel.

In a minute.

I licked the raindrops from my lips, blinked them free. The relentless water was cold and refreshing but getting on my

nerves. There was only so much rain I'd tolerate taking to the face.

More talking, more bursts of energy. Arcana sailed closer, reaching for me across imaginary waves.

I'm almost there...

At least *that* facet of the magic stuck around. After the town square incident, Arcana came back quickly, much to my happy surprise. Being a beefed-up version, its return this time was much improved. And I didn't have to wait until midnight to use it, because it wasn't midnight yet here in London.

Yep, rulebook be damned! Midnight magic was no more.

"He has to die," Quentin said. "They both do. They are dangerous to us, and now working together, it seems."

What an arsewipe.

"They are brothers," the queen replied. "They should be working together."

I sat up with an almighty push. I sagged forward, my legs stretched out before me, strong enough to stay upright.

Now I had myself the full view of the demons.

Queen Imelda stood before the non-burning tree/demon gate, twenty or so guards around her, ready to fight for their monarch. Long black hair tied into an elegant ponytail, her pale skin shimmering and flawless, my mum was full-on regal. Picture perfect. A monster wrapped in a super model casing.

The light of the Arcana fires reflected off her golden pantsuit that looked like it might be made of armor. Rubies sparkled around the edges of her collar, her onyx rings glinting with deadly intent as if they were really knuckledusters.

In her left hand, she held a silver, curved wand-like thing. Kind of looked like a tree branch with a black glass flower at its tip. Tae had mentioned it when he'd seen her with it in the demon realm when Quentin had attacked the royal level with that giant river monster.

Grindle had made it for when he'd been working for her but really conspiring against her.

By contrast, Quentin withered in the queen's spotlight, his bronze skin so marred by betrayal there couldn't be any inch of him without some sort of scar now. Scruffy in jeans and a long black coat. He still held onto his sword, alone in his cause. His peeps were gone—I'd taken them before losing it.

A silver lining, I guess. A really faint one.

“Look who's decided to join us,” he said, spotting me sitting up.

Fuck off! I pushed my shoulder blades back, trying for a stretch. Nope. Not quite yet.

The Arcana fires were brighter, a wall around us, swallowing up the trees and the surrounding park. Much worse than I thought.

So much worse.

Buttons sat up on my left, mirroring me.

“My sons,” the queen said, opening her arms. “I have missed you terribly.”

Buttons released a long, deep breath. “We have missed you, Mother.”

Erm, don't speak for me! I kept my mouth shut, watching her, my hate a separate entity within me. A special kind of hate just for her, for everything she'd done.

More energy returning, more reassurance from Arcana. Soon the tables would turn in my favor against whatever bullshit these two demons were planning.

I had this. I could be better, sort out these teething problems. I was right to think this power served a purpose other than starting fires and messing things up. I just had to buck up and get a grip on it. This world wasn't built for those who gave up, but for those who smashed hurdles, not just jumped them. Arcana was mine, and I'd make them all see just how mine it was.

Kill them all...

“We're done here,” the queen said.

There were ADU sirens in the air. Also a concern.

Her eyes landed on me. “My complicated child.”

Fuck. You.

She smiled at me as ten more demons filed out of the demon gate, fanning around her.

“Arrest him,” the queen's voice came as a loud bell.

I braced myself, not quite ready to fight back. But she didn't mean me.

Quentin backed off, dropping his sword and pulling a pistol from his coat. “Stay away from me.” His eyes narrowed, his lips drawn back in a snarl. He was terrified, and I loved it.

Alone and scared and so done.

Yeah, maybe I wouldn't make that assumption just yet. This was Quentin Dawn, after all. Who knew what nasties lived up his sleeves?

Arcana inched closer, fingertips brushing my soul.

“I can feel it, brother,” Buttons said in a soft rasp.

Queen Imelda glanced at him but said nothing.

The demon guards pounced on Quentin, overwhelming him. The arsewipe tried to point his gun at me, getting off a shot as a demon snapped his arm upward.

It went wide.

“Unhand me!” the creep cried. “You can’t do this to me!”

“But it *is* done,” the queen countered. “Get him through the gate.” Her eyes swept across the fires. “We have wasted too much time.”

Quentin roared for help, desperate. “You have no idea what you’re doing! The Rift will save us! The river monsters are the key.”

Huh? I wanted to know more, but Her Majesty didn’t give a crap. She let him be dragged through the gate, no help coming for him. Where were his followers? There were more of them than those I’d killed around the gate. And where was Tasmin Vacquier? Shouldn’t she be here to help him? Had I killed her along with those other demons?

No. I would’ve known.

Right now, he was alone.

Ha. Ha. Ha.

The queen approached me, striding across the grass as if she were gracing a catwalk. “I want you to come home.”

“Yes, mother,” Buttons responded.

She crouched before me, ignoring the brother who adored her. “Here we are again with your destruction.”

“Leave me alone.” My voice was a whisper, as weak as a dead flower.

“You won’t ever be alone, my son.” She reached out and stroked my cheek. I flinched, pulling back. She gripped me by the chin. Hard. “I have missed you so much.”

I’ll kill you...

Darkness swirled to life inside me, resilient and terrifying, ready to end her the first chance I got.

I met her intimidating gaze, not blinking even when she ran her thumbnail across my skin.

“Be careful, Mother,” Buttons said. “We’re not the same. We’re changed and dangerous. Keep him twenty feet away from me, and he won’t be bright.”

She faced him now. “What are you saying?”

He explained the change in the power, how we had to be together.

“Interesting,” she said, eyes back to me. “A new and improved Clay. Possibly. You’re a work in progress, a weapon in need of tuning. I can help with that.” She stood up. “I thought all hope was lost after my banishment and the loss of the Throne of Vines, but here we are with freedom and with you again.” She laughed lightly, barely making a noise. “I have to thank Quentin for this stroke of genius. I had no idea the witches had a weakness in their banishing power.” She snapped her fingers, and my body lifted off the ground of its own volition, her demonic power a smothering blanket around me.

Damn.

“Can you walk?” she asked Buttons.

“Not yet, Mother,” he replied.

She waved over two demons. “Help him through the gate after me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the two women replied in unison.

“Make sure there is always plenty of distance between my sons.” She started walking, me floating behind her toward the tree.

Not again. Not the bloody demon realm.

“Come along, Clay,” she said.

Being helpless and too far away from my twin, I got dragged back into, well, Hell. She maneuvered me through the gate, floating me down the stairs, arriving in the park that was Level 1. A park the size of a football pitch, black walls around it, tall lanterns with gloomy light, a playground at the center of the grass. I blinked up at the strange blue stars, trying to figure out how to overcome this new predicament.

Why did Buttons have to bring us here, for fuck’s sake?

Ugh.

Quentin was on his knees near the playground, demons in a circle around him with a wide gap for the queen to stand in. I floated beside her as she stopped within the space, her wand held in both hands. The perma-cold air of the realm licked at my face, creeping down my neck into the ruined tatters of my clothes.

What I wouldn’t give for a jumper, some thermals, and a puffy-as-fuck coat.

“Before we continue,” she said, “there is something I must take care of.” She pointed her wand at Quentin.

Black demon blood poured from his lips, his face covered in fresh gouges from his rebelling.

“Then do it,” he said. “Have your son kill me. You’ll fail. You’ll regret not listening to me.” A cut appeared on his neck.

She took a moment to answer. “I don’t want you to die, Quentin. You have a brilliant mind. Honestly, I do wonder about The Rift, if it can change things. The river monsters are the key, you say?”

He sucked in air between gritted teeth, clearly in pain. “Yes, Your Majesty. The human’s war with the witches resulted in The Rift, the toxic rivers a residual magic we demons also must deal with.”

“And?” she asked softly.

He sighed. “The river monsters bring a usable magical energy with them when they leave the water. We have been using it to control witches, who then draw back upon that magic to then control the monsters as well as increase their own magical potency. After much testing, I believe we have enough magic to take control of The Rift and harness its power to unleash destruction upon Earth. End that realm for good, release ourselves from its grip.”

Wow. What a crazy plan that fell in line with what he’d been doing.

“That is pure insanity,” the queen responded, agreeing with my thinking. Anyone not hell-bent on, well, the apocalypse would agree. “It would benefit nothing but your own delusions.”

“That’s not true, Your Majesty.”

“Of course it is. How does it solve our river problems here? Will it help with that? How does this plan not harm us?”

“It is a first step.”

“A terrible first step, yet I admire your creativity. As I said, I don’t want you dead.” The glass flower at the tip of her wand started to glow with an ominous black light. “But lessons have to be learned, consequences have to be met.”

His guards doubled up on holding him tight, pulling his arms out to his sides, keeping him on his knees.

“Your Majesty, I beg you to reconsider,” the demon pleaded pathetically. “This is a plan I believe in, have spent many hours on. It will work.”

She moved closer, taking her time, me floating with her, the wand buzzing with an electronic hum.

Quentin’s good white eye was wide. He licked his lips repeatedly, focused on that wand.

“You attacked me,” Queen Imelda said. “You hurt your own kind with that river monster, caused damage on the royal level, hurt me beyond words with your plot to take me to the frozen lake. To remove me from power, to betray me, and you even considered using my Arcana son against me. To kill me.” She sighed dramatically. “And you are married to a fairy. You are supposed to use those creatures for their benefits, not love them.” She stopped before him. “Though it seems fairies really are nothing but tricksters. Just look at the relationship between your wife’s brother and me. More betrayal. How I am weary of it.” She smiled down at him. “Quentin Dawn, once a demon of such high regard, a trusted friend, a constant presence I now mourn. Will you ever come back to my table, to my bed?”

Huh?

The queen touched the side of his face with her free hand, me floating beside her still.

“You were my favorite lover,” she said.

Really? They’d been a thing?

“Your Majesty...” Quentin looked up with his one eye, his skin drowning in a sheen of sweat.

“Never again, Quentin. Once burned...”

She removed her hand and pressed the end of the wand against his white eye.

Two

CLAY



His flesh sizzled, a thick stream of black smoke curling upward from his eye. He screamed so loud and high my stomach roiled, bile rising in my throat. I gagged, swallowing it back down, trying not to watch.

But a part of me enjoyed this. The arsewipe was getting his comeuppance. Or at least the first dose of it. A smile crept to my lips. I quickly shut it down.

With serene coolness, Queen Imelda removed the wand from his eye. Black demon blood oozed down his face from the charred socket, the guards holding him up as he tried to collapse forward.

Whoa.

“Greater pain,” the queen said.

Using the wand again, she pressed it to his left shoulder. He screamed again, threw his head back, his mouth wide to expose his broken teeth and the sores inside his mouth.

Shit.

The queen cut downward with the buzzing wand, burning through his clothes, then his flesh in a sickening hiss and pop. Cut through the bone and muscle until his left arm dropped to the grass.

How I wasn't puking my guts up was a testament to an iron stomach I didn't know I possessed.

I smiled again, wider, starting to enjoy myself when I shouldn't.

Fuck him. Let him feel it, the piece of shit. If he had his way, he'd have his sword buried in my heart by now, sending me off to the afterlife away from Fizz and Tae.

"Yes..." I whispered.

No one heard me.

My mum got to work on his right arm next, then his legs, cutting them off above the knee. By the end of it, he was sobbing and smoking, writhing on the ground in a pool of his own black blood.

Oh, God...

Oh, yes. He deserves worse than this.

I wanted to puke.

I wanted to crack open the champagne. No, sod that. Crack open the gasoline and matches, light up Level 1 to go along with his pain.

Closing my eyes, I drew a deep breath, scared of myself, proud of myself, craving my magic. A heady rush spun my head, the familiar itchiness crawling across my skin like an army of bugs.

Blood ran across my lips from my nose.

"Let me have my spells," I said.

Again, no one heard me.

"Take him away," Queen Imelda commanded.

The guards picked Quentin up, carrying him toward the other side of the park—to the wall opposite to the spot where the Level 2 doorway sat. One of the four guards around Quentin that were not holding him withdrew a gold key with a black and red head key—a royal key—and slid it into the wall. A soft line of gold light drew the shape of a door into the stone, opening inward silently. The demon guards took Quentin through the secret royal entrance linking Level 1 and Level 3.

Level 3 with its fucked-up town square and train to Level 500.

The stench of his burned flesh really played havoc on my stomach, even if I was kind of satisfied with the outcome.

“And now for you,” the queen said, turning to face me.

“Me?”

“Yes, Clay. You. Do you remember when I told you I’d been too soft, offered too much comfort?”

“Condition your weapons to be deadly, sharper, destructive...” was part of what she’d said to me before the trials.

“I... I do.” Oh, gosh. Here came my lesson, and goodbye went my limbs.

Stop that!

My mother released me from her power. I fell to my knees before her, the buzzing wand inches from my face.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I lifted my head, trying not to look at the fairy nastiness, swallowing as I met her eyes. She slammed the other end of

the wand into the ground so fast she made me jump. It stuck into the dirt at an angle, the glow fading from the tip.

Thank God for that.

“You’ve been bad sons,” she said. “Both of you. Running from me like that, ruining the trials. Thank goodness for Quentin and his genius with the circle of witches. If not for him, we wouldn’t have this new opportunity to strike freely.” She looked to Buttons. “At least you had the decency to come back here. Back to me. I’m assuming this wasn’t your choice?” She aimed the latter at me, her eyes on me again.

I went for honesty. “No. We were supposed to be fighting Quentin’s followers in Seoul.”

“I see.”

“Where are they?” I added.

“His followers?” she responded. “All over the place.” She shook her head. “I really did give you too much freedom the first time you were here, didn’t I?”

“I—”

She slapped me across the face so hard I literally saw stars as my head snapped to the side, exploding with pain. A colorful firmament swirled across my vision, my craving for Arcana calling out desperately.

I miss you...

Buttons remained silent, kept away from me by another set of guards. Watching.

“I will teach you obedience,” the queen said, grabbing my face. Her nails dug into my cheeks as she forced my head into place.

I tried to look away.

“Don’t you dare struggle,” she ordered.

I obeyed.

“You will be a good son, a stronger son.”

“He is so much stronger, Mother,” Buttons chimed in.

She didn’t take her cruel white eyes off me. “Speak again, and I’ll take your tongue.”

He kept his lips zipped.

“He may be stronger, but he is still dangerous. He doesn’t love me as you do, and he never will.”

Even though I couldn’t see him, I knew Buttons would be struggling not to speak.

“Am I wrong, James?” the queen added. “You may answer.”

“That’s why we’re here, Mother. He needs to spend time with you, to understand your love. He didn’t get the chance before.”

She released my face, smoothed my skin with the back of her hand. “An interesting idea, James. I admire your enthusiasm. But it is misplaced. Clay isn’t made the same as you. He is too human. My mistake, I suppose. An error I can fix.”

“Do you want to make him like me?” Buttons asked.

Oh, bollocks. No, no, no. No button eyes for me, no forcing demon blood into my system to make me full-blooded.

“Please...” Damn. Didn’t mean to say that out loud. No begging her, no letting her see me weak.

Too late.

“No, James,” she answered my twin. “There is only one *you*. I don’t think it will work with all this Arcana inside him anyway. I will not waste time on experiments.” She stroked my hair. I flinched, trying to pull away. She grabbed a handful of it, tugging my head back. “There are other ways to make him one of us. Maybe not a loving brother or son, but a loyal soldier nonetheless.”

“Fuck you...” I just couldn’t help myself, so done with her and her threats. So done with being treated like this all my life.

My cursing got me another slap and a kick in the ribs. I fell to my side, curled up into a ball on the grass. Man, she knew how to kick. I wasn’t sure if she’d broken something.

Blood dripped from my nostrils, my skin a relentless itch stoking my rage. But I had no magic to back it up with.

“Brother...” I heard Buttons whisper.

“Don’t feel sad for him, James,” Queen Imelda said. “He is on a journey of improvements now. Possibly. We’ll see.”

Protective fairy charms in short supply? Noted. Fingers crossed they were all gone, leaving the way clear for some royal demon slaying.

“Thank you for the information you have provided, James,” she said, eyes on me. “For now, you will both be kept apart, Arcana muted.”

He didn’t protest. In his mind, she was the messiah, the one true goddess, him her trusty little acolyte.

“What are you going to do to me?” I asked.

“Back to the palace,” she said. Okay, no answer from the wicked queen.

I tried to will Buttons to move closer to me, imploring him with my eyes. But his white buttons revealed nothing, simply watched me back, the rest of his face as cold as the air.

What happened to us being brothers against the world?

It's complete bollocks, that's what!

“The Arcana fires,” I said, realization crashing into me now.

Shit. They had to be stopped.

“Let me put the fires out,” I added. “Please.”

“And risk you attacking me?” the queen returned. “I don't think so.”

She retrieved her wand. My stomach dropped. When would I meet the nasty end of her weapon?

“But—”

“But what, Clay? The fires will burn the world I want to take? Don't be silly. Anyway, it will be good for the witches to have a new distraction.” Her hand returned to my hair. “I'm sorry Quentin did what he did to you and the vampire. He crossed a line in exposing you.” She ordered the guards with Buttons to take him away. My twin went with them willingly.

“We will leave soon,” she said to me.

“Tae will come for me,” I replied weakly.

“No, Son. He won't. I have changed the locks.”

THREE

TAE



The fairy magic held Archie and I trapped within a bubble of orange jelly, our movements sluggish and inconsequential.

Victoria.

Fizz.

Prince Park Seo-Jun and Phillipe.

We'd left them to fly back to London on a secure flight while we set off to find Clay and Buttons, to join the brothers on the streets of Seoul. Only, they hadn't been in the city. And the flight hadn't been secure. Attacked. Victoria shouting down our ear comms before Gretchen the fairy used her magic to take us to this forest clearing in the Fairy Wilds, trap us in this unbreaking bubble.

"Fuck this," Archie said. "Fucking fuck this. Victoria!"

Helpless.

So helpless.

"We're getting out of here," I tried, refusing this helplessness.

"Fuck."

What good was my vampiric magical resistance if I couldn't break this bubble? Granted, it was only a slight

resistance to magic, nothing to rely on. But still, there had to be something I could do to set us free.

I tried to find a weakness. Searched for some crack, anything to manipulate or push against this prison.

Nothing.

Yet.

“Sorry, Tae,” Archie said.

“Why?”

“Didn’t see Gretchen coming.”

“Neither did I.”

He released a long, deep sigh. “Said I’d have your back, and I fucked up.”

I watched him through the prism of the orange jelly. His formidable bulk, the scars cutting across his dark brown complexion, and the booming depth to his voice usually added up to create an intimidating figure. Now he seemed so fragile.

“I fucked up, Archie. I’m the vampire. I’m the one with the powerful senses. I should have picked up on a fairy nearby.”

“You were trying to find Clay.”

“We *both* were. Can we not do the self-blame thing?”

“Sorry, mate.”

“Let’s focus on getting out of here.”

“Okay.”

A doubt-ridden *okay* I would change. I would set us free without Grindle coming to the rescue—if he ever would. I had no idea what his plans were now, if he and his sister were now

working together. After all, he'd been to see her recently about her involvement in witches experimenting on warlocks—on Clay's father, Adam Christmas. Revealed details of Adam's notebook, which may be the key to finding out where this new Arcana had come from. Maybe save Clay from it.

Clay...

Would the fairy come? He'd called my name when his sister took us away, hurting herself to do so. What kind of magic was fairy magic for it to work by maiming? Grindle had lost his eye to take me to the subsiding house by the lake.

A question for later. I wasn't relying on Grindle or on miracles. I was relying on me.

My magical resistance worked of its own volition most of the time, sometimes telling me with a little buzz that a particular magic wouldn't affect me. It offered nothing now.

"I'm not giving up, Archie."

He didn't answer.

There had to be something inside me. There just had to be.

I closed my eyes again, emptying my mind of my troubles. Thousands of images came at me in a storm of remembrance, of a grizzly future concocted by my imagination, images to hurt me, to panic me, to throw me off. I was at once my own enemy and a fighter, the mind a terrifying place when it wanted to be.

But I pushed through that storm, letting images of my wife and son rush past me, my fears for Clay, my guilt over falling for him after losing the woman meant to be my soul mate. The pain was not welcome right now, a distraction I didn't need.

After twenty minutes passed with me resisting, the pain overwhelmed me. My eyes shot open, winded from the mental assault on myself.

But I tried again and again, fighting on, failing each time.

Okay, I was doing this wrong. Maybe I didn't have to be empty. Maybe my mind wasn't working against me but trying to give me something to cling to. A weapon rather than a hindrance.

“Are you okay?” Archie asked me.

“I'm fine. I just need some silence.”

“No worries, mate.”

Lightning forked across the sky, darker clouds moving in. The air became thick with the metallic scent of rain, the flowery and muddy scents of the forest on the wind.

I closed my eyes again, drifted into my thoughts, rejoined the storm. I searched through the images, swam into sadness and joy, ignored the fake future, found the birth of my son, found my wedding day. They burned me. As happy as they made me, they were vicious, raw, and too much. They always would be.

Terrible times followed, the aftermath of my wife and son's murder, the one and only time I broke down. Lost myself to sorrow. Drunk on the blood of feeders, alcohol, naked on the floor of a room in a feeder club, covered in cum and lipstick. Naked men and women around me, their blood in my veins, their touches burning on my skin. I'd let them touch me, kiss my skin, put their cocks in my mouth, their breasts to my lips. I'd enjoyed every moment until I didn't, drinking expensive champagne and brandy, tying those feeders up, fucking my hurt into shallow oblivion until I finally broke.

Until the alcohol and the grief became one rotten blend, sending me to the floor, tearing wild sobs from me. There was no such thing as removing the sorrow through sex and drink. I'd only made it worse, exposing my wounds to these humans.

I left them, ran into the night naked, jumped into my car, unable to see through the haze of my tears. Sped off through the streets of Paris, drove for miles until I reached the coast, slamming my foot down on the accelerator, hurtling off the edge of a cliff, hoping to be decapitated—the only way to kill me.

My head smashed into the windscreen as the car landed front first into the water, my body passing through the glass, getting stuck halfway. Water filled my lungs, consumed me, and I let it take me, the car dragging me down into the dark where I'd stay forever alive, away from the world, from the hurt.

Lost.

Love changed my mind.

To live like that wasn't love, wasn't honoring the memory of my family. It dishonored them, told them I was too weak to fight for them, to get the demon who'd stolen their lives. And so, when the car hit the seabed, I pulled myself out of the glass, broke free of the vehicle, and swam back to the surface.

I howled my grief at the moon and returned to shore, naked and broken and ashamed.

But determined.

From that moment, I closed thick walls around my heart. Buried it, hid it from any form of light. When it came to pleasure, I vowed to never let another touch me, to give it, not receive it.

I became a vessel for vengeance.

Clay changed that. His light found the cracks in my walls.
Found my heart.

The warlock appeared within the storm of images, clear and bright. I replayed our first meeting when he'd killed his first demon. Then his joining me at Raven Tower, his love for Kylie Minogue and his cat. Dancing to the music, as radiant as the sun, eating the food I cooked him, being so sweet and kind, summoning the Mark of Arcana...

...his lips on mine. Our first time together, his skin on mine, his eyes so beautiful, his vanilla scent, his caring nature, his positivity, the darkness taking hold of him piece by piece, the first time I saw his demonic side...

...everything. Every part of this man who'd... who'd saved me from the wilderness. Who'd called to my soul, awoken it, found his way into my heart. A brave, resilient, incredible man I wanted to be with more than anything. My wife and son were gone, but Clay wasn't. As much of a cold blade that was to my heart, Clay was there to melt it.

He'd changed me.

He'd given me back my capacity to... to love.

Love.

Love.

Love.

Falling...

Falling in...

Falling in love.

Love.

As clichéd it was to say, love was a force like no other. Amazing yet painful beyond measure. I suffered from its sting, but also relished in it.

I was in love with Clay. Not only falling for him, as I kept telling myself, but in love.

I love him.

I'd had this feeling once before with Tae Ae-Jung. And my son, Tae Ji-Hoon, my amazing son. Two forms of love, two forms of extreme hurt. I never wanted to call my feelings for Clay love because I struggled to reconcile my family with him. But they were gone, forever in my heart. I could never have them back, and I would never let them go. Ever.

I couldn't lose Clay. I had to see him, to tell him this, to hold him again. He was my future. Being with him, loving him, didn't mean betraying Tae Ae-Jung. I would always love her but closing myself off to this new love hurt just as much.

I loved Clay. I had to tell him.

My eyes watered, leaking hot tracks of tears down my face. As they touched the orange jelly, they pushed it back away from my cheeks, plucked at my resistance. Emboldened me to get this magic off me.

Inch by inch, the bubble receded, setting my limbs free. I kept pushing at it, holding onto my epiphany, tears streaming down my face.

"I haven't cried for so long," I whispered.

"Mate, you're doing it!" Archie cried.

My resistance was my resilience, my determination. Clay always blazed with determination, and I took inspiration from

that. Maybe it wouldn't protect me from all magic, but I would always have that hope and strength now.

He'd saved me once again.

The bubble thinned and collapsed, dropping us onto the ground. The remains of the fairy magic became a pool of brown liquid at our feet, absorbing into the grass.

Gone.

Archie slapped me on the back. "You did it. Wait. You're crying. How long have you been crying for?" He slipped his arm across my shoulders.

Not one for hugging my friend of fifteen years, I grabbed him, pulled him into a bear hug, and held him close. Buried my face into his shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably as thunder ripped the sky.

"It's okay, mate."

He stroked my back, held me, didn't tense up, didn't resist me.

My friend. My loyal friend.

Grief and happiness flowed, a powerful stream to match the sudden downpour coming down around us. The truth hurt in a good way, in a world-spinning way.

"I love him," I whispered, soaked within seconds by the water. "I have to find him."

Archie ended the hugging, taking me by the forearms. Rainwater streamed down his bald head, dripped off his face. "Then let's find him."

FOUR

CLAY



Back on the demon train, sat in the last carriage with shackles at my wrists with guards occupying the front seats, me alone in the rear. No Queen Imelda. No Buttons.

The outside blurring past the windows was way too familiar and seriously annoying. I didn't want to be back here again.

The doors to the adjoining carriage slid open, my other brother walking through.

Isaiah. At least I thought so. We hadn't actually met yet.

I tensed up just about everywhere, anger bubbling. "No. Not you."

He smirked, ignoring me, dressed in a red shirt, black trousers, and gold brogues. He was clean-shaven, his hair long and slicked back, super handsome and prime meat for flaying if I got the chance.

The guards all stood to bow as he swept past them.

Yep. Definitely *him*.

He sat in the seat opposite mine, the gangway between us and so not wide enough. There were plenty of other seats in the carriage. Why did he have to sit there?

Because he's a piece of shit.

“Hello, Clay,” he said, his voice crisp and rich. “We haven’t had the chance to meet properly, have we?”

“I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Too late. I’m Isaiah.

“I don’t care. Leave me alone.”

“I’ve heard a lot about your insolence.”

“I’m not insolent, just selective when it comes to chatting to arsewipes.”

He laughed. “You’re a riot, aren’t you?”

Ugh. Why were his teeth so damn perfect?

“Get me a bottle of whisky!” he barked.

Immediately, a guard sprang up and left the carriage.

This was just like being with Isobel on the train, him now trying to be my best friend with drink and chat.

Never.

“Well, it is nice to meet my long-lost brother at last,” he said. “Even if you don’t agree.”

“You killed—”

“The vampire’s family, yes, yes.” He waved a dismissive hand. “Let’s not retread old ground.”

“It’s not old to me.”

“And I would go as far as to say it’s none of your business.”

His smugness got a reaction out of me. “How’s your head?”

Ha! That wiped the grin off his face.

I cocked an eyebrow at him, giving him the ‘what’s up?’ vibes.

“You’re brave considering your current position.”

“Not brave,” I said, “bored out of mind. How many train rides are you lot going to take me on?”

He smiled again as a waiter demon came with a bottle of whisky on a gold tray and two glasses. Man, what a pretty bottle.

Isaiah’s smile dropped. “Why are there two glasses?”

The waiter’s light brown skin paled to a sickly gray. “I... I...”

“Speak clearly.”

“I... I thought—”

“You thought what?”

“I thought you would want—”

“Did I ask for two glasses? Did I even ask for one?”

“N-No, Your Highness.”

“That’s right, I didn’t. I asked for a bottle.” God, his voice was loaded with barbs. “You were given a clear order, yet you made assumptions that I not only wanted a glass but two to share this fine drink with my brother. You were wrong. Terribly wrong.” He plucked the bottle from the tray, placing it in the seat beside him.

“I apologize, Your Highness.” The poor waiter. He looked ready to pass out.

Isaiah stared at him with the purest malice I'd ever seen, his white eyes orbs of poison in his handsome face. "You are not here to think. You are here to serve me and my desires. You didn't do that. I wanted a bottle of whisky."

The tray trembled in the waiter's hands.

"I'm disgusted by your assumptions," Isaiah added and jumped to his feet.

The prince swiped a glass from the tray and slammed into the waiter's face bottom-first, the poor guy's nose exploding with a sickening crunch.

Holy shit!

The waiter staggered back, dropping the tray as black blood poured down his chin. Isaiah picked up the other glass and threw it into the guy's chest. The waiter grunted, trying to apologize and beg for mercy.

Isaiah wasn't hearing it, wasn't done with his assault. He picked up the tray and swung it into the waiter's face, sending him tumbling onto his back. The waiter screamed as Isaiah landed on him, bringing the tray down onto his face over and over again. Clangs and blood and screams tore through the train until the demon twitched and made no other sound.

Isaiah had beaten him to a pulp, part of his hair free from its slick sweep.

The demon prince sighed, tilting his head back, his face spattered with inky blood. "Get me a hot towel."

A guard went off to get some other waiter. In less than a minute, a new guy came with a hot towel only. Not additions, nothing other than what the arsewipe asked for.

Isaiah snatched it, wiping the blood off his face, tossing it back to the waiter. He looked down at himself and tutted.

God, I hated him so much.

“New clothes,” he demanded. “Exactly like these.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” The waiter bowed and ran off to do the prince’s bidding.

Isaiah stood up, removing his shirt to reveal his abs and super toned arms and chest. And he didn’t stop there, taking it all off, including his underwear, not giving a shit. He tossed his clothes onto the beaten waiter’s body and returned to his seat.

I fumed, fingers twitching.

He noticed, crossing his legs as he cracked open his whisky. “Want to fight me, Clay?”

Oh, yes, please! “Why did you do that?”

“Because my staff needs to learn their place.” He glugged from the bottle.

“Seems like they already know their place.”

Two guards dragged the body away. The guy wasn’t dead, but would he be given a healing bath or left to suffer?

My vote was on the latter.

“You saw for yourself that’s not true.” *Glug, glug.*

“You’re pathetic.”

He released a satisfied ‘ah!’ after his third round of necking the brown liquid. “Is that your best shot? I liked the head insult better.”

The new waiter returned with fresh clothes, then scurried away after Isaiah waved him off. He dressed and took a fourth glug.

“You hurt Mother, do you know that?” he said.

“Am I supposed to care?” I retorted.

“As her son? Yes, you are. As much as you like to resist her, she’s your family. I’m your family. We all want to be here for you.”

That sounded as believable as me making small talk with a scholarly pineapple. Well, I suppose it could happen with the right spell or drugs.

Seriously?

“Your apparent found family aren’t your family,” he added. “The vampire isn’t—

“He wants you dead,” I cut him off.

“Through you, not himself. He can’t do it, no matter how hard he pulls my head from my body.” A menacing smirk. “How weak.”

“Fuck you.”

“It’s true.”

“I want you dead as well, so...” I shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter who pulls the trigger, does it? The stain of you will be gone.”

“Will?”

“It’ll happen.”

He chuckled. “What a promise.”

“You got that right.”

He sniffed, drinking some more. “That’s not very brotherly.”

“About as much brother as I can muster.”

“I suppose I have to take what I can get for now.”

“That’s all you’ll ever get. You killed Tae’s wife and son.”

“And here you are trying to do his dirty work for him again.”

“Stop trying to win,” I returned.

“But I have won, Clay. You’re in shackles. I’m drinking this amazing whisky. You’re powerless, I’m brimming with it. I’m back to walk the Earth again, to do whatever the fuck I want. Make up for lost time, get myself some new trophies.”

I went to lunge at him, but the shackles were locked to the floor by a chain.

He roared with laughter as the chain snapped taut, downing the rest of the whisky in triumph.

The smugness was pure in this one. And he must have some amazing constitution to not be floored by the booze right now.

Gosh, I’d be in a coma after all that whisky.

“Little warlock bitch wants to be brave and tough,” he said, followed by more laughter. “I should let you out of those shackles for a traditional melee. It’s been a while since I’ve traded real punches with a real opponent.” He looked me up and down. “Though you’re hardly worth it.”

Fucking piece of shit. “I’ll get out of this.”

“Will you now?”

“You can drag me on as many train journeys as you like. Doesn’t matter. It’ll only end in tears. Your tears and Arcana arrows in your rotten heart.”

“Is that so? Whisky!” He tossed the empty bottle on the floor.

“I’m your worst nightmare.”

A new bottle of whisky arrived. Isaiah glowered at me as he opened it, taking his first glug. “If you say so.”

“I *do* say so.”

“So brave without your powers.”

“I can still kick your arse.”

Glug, glug. He put the bottle down. “Shall we see how well you do fist to fist?”

“Let’s do it.”

“Really?”

“Come on. Show me what you’ve got.” This was stupid, but he’d pissed me off beyond the point of no return. Sitting down drove me crazy. I had to expel my anger.

His was the perfect face for my rage.

He glugged one more, erm, glug, and jumped up. “Someone release my brother.”

A female guard came over. “Your Highness?”

“You heard what I said.”

She didn’t question him again, unlocking my shackles. I rubbed at my wrists, flexed my hands, and cracked my knuckles. Got to my feet, stretched it out.

“Where are we doing this?” I asked.

“There’s a better carriage three carriages down,” he said. “It’s actually a gym for demons to stretch their legs on long journeys.”

“Oh.”

“After you.” He swept out his hand.

I stepped out in front of him, the guards watching me. I started walking, hands opening and closing, anxious to hurt this arsewipe.

He hurt me first, punching me in the back of the head. I lurched forward, spun to meet him, putting Tae’s training into action.

As much as my head hurt from his sneaky strike, I managed to duck his next swing, and land a punch into his stomach. He released a satisfying groan and staggered back.

“Sneaky,” I said. “So that’s how it is, is it?”

He grinned, his body erupting in black demon scales, his approximately six-foot frame increasing until his head almost met the ceiling. “Yes, Clay, that’s exactly how it’s going to be.”

His clothes fell off in tatters, leaving behind a terrifying beast.

Oh, shit.

FIVE

TAE



We sheltered at the edge of the forest under the trees, the rain relentless in its pounding. The thick gathering of leaves and branches in the dark canopy above only let through a small percentage of downpour. They were practically umbrellas.

Now to decide on a direction to head in. My vampire sight saw nothing but trees, the forest dense on all sides of the clearing.

“I’m thinking the layout of this forest might be the same as Seoul,” I said, a lid firmly on my emotions.

“What do you mean?” Archie asked.

“According to Grindle, this world lays against ours. There’s no city here, but I’m thinking more in terms of Seoul’s landscape.”

“So you think we can follow a loose map? This might roughly be the position of the street we were taken from?” He scratched his face, shivering from the cold.

“It’s the only idea I have. I’m not sure what direction to aim for, though. Key locations of the city? There may be routes back into our realm at these places, if any at all.”

“Could be.”

“I’m creating an extremely loose plan here.”

He nodded. “Reckon it’s as g-good as anything else, mate. Rather follow y-your map and plan than wander about t-this place without anything to go on.”

“We need to get you warm,” I said.

I threw my arm around Archie’s bulky frame, pressing the side of my body to his. Adjusting the temperature of my body to a steady heat, I did my best to take the chill off him.

“T-Thanks, mate.”

“You’re welcome. As soon as we find a better spot, we can light a fire.”

“This is fine,” he said. “Warm enough.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I mean, you’re not my ideal person to snuggle with, no offense. But I’m glad you’re here with your hotness.”

I smiled. “Promise me you’re warm enough.”

“I promise.”

Archie was a man of his word.

Honestly, I was glad he said it. I’d monitor Archie closely, be careful. I wasn’t about to put his life in danger to these harsh elements. As much as I wanted to get to Clay, my friend deserved to live, to be warm and safe. He was human, not built like me. I’d protect him every step of the way.

The wind picked up as we walked through the trees, rustling the leaves and bending the branches. Thunder boomed, lightning flashed, and more rain got through. This storm was picking up, an ominous sign in a dying realm.

After my emotional outpouring, I felt lighter. Freer even. I'd carried so much pain with me for fifteen years. I didn't know how to live with this newness. The grief remained, but not in the same way. A sense of joy hammered it to some dark corner away from the rest of me. Even the eternal kernel of pain that'd taken up residence in my chest was nothing more than a weak attempt at a pinch.

For Clay.

There is room for Clay now.

We came to a stop at the edge of a basin flooded with water, the trees thinner here. Logs and leaves floated on the violently rippling surface. This was where a residential street would be in Seoul, passing a small convenience store selling my son's favorite strawberry-flavored, star-shaped gummies. I could almost see it there with the white sign, the paint peeling around its blue letters.

"This way," I said, following the basin anticlockwise.

"Where are we in Seoul?" Archie asked, his shivering lessened.

I told him about the store.

"It's still there?" he asked.

"Unless it's gone now from the..." I didn't finish. Was my hometown still standing? How much of it had those demons, enslaved witches, and river monsters destroyed? And was Clay there somewhere? There all along, out of range from my senses?

Where are you?

"Dunno what I'll do if she's not okay," Archie said softly.

"Neither do I."

Victoria was as much of a rock to me as he was, my closest employees, my friends, the two I trusted implicitly. They came as a pair, a unit. I needed them as much as I needed Clay.

“She has to be okay,” he added. “She can’t be dead.”

“I know.”

“If she’s dead then... Then I don’t know. Fuck.”

“I can’t stand the thought of her being gone,” I said.

“Do you remember when we first met her?”

“Of course.”

She’d come into my life at Auto Frost HQ—my global luxury car manufacturing business—in the financial district of London. I’d been trying to build a team I could trust, closely vetting candidates to be another of my right-hand people. There were others I’d found, stationed across the world, but none to be let inside my closest circle. Really, I didn’t want anyone to be that close to me, but a smooth operation was key when it came to demon hunting. And I needed a good lawyer, a real force of nature.

I’d certainly acquired *that* in her.

Before her, on a rainy October night fifteen years ago, I met Archie Daniels on a demon hunting job. He became my first second in command—so to speak.

I’d been down at the Limehouse docks, having tracked a demon for a week who kept moving between London and Paris weekly. Every Friday, he would leave one of the cities for the other, spend a week there, then go back. Seeing as my wife and son were murdered in my Paris home, this demon seemed a good target to start with in the hunt for their killer.

Archie had been watching him, too, for different reasons.

Archie was ex-ADU, part of the ADU's field team made up of non-magical humans with muscle, good in combat. From there, he'd moved into the intelligence team after showing aptitude in detective work. After five years spent gathering intel on dangerous demons, helping to get many banished, he stepped back due to some ridiculous in-house politics. Jobless, he drifted, not really knowing how to implement his skills into anything else. Until someone hired him for a job to hunt the Paris/London demon who'd robbed their London mansion.

The demon was a professional thief, robbing various properties around England and France, assuming different identities, trading his stolen goods in London and Paris. Always managed to keep below the radar until Archie's client put him on the case.

Archie found him the same night as me, watching from one shadowy corner beside the Thames, me another. We'd locked eyes, taken down the demon together with no new information for me. Archie's client took the demon away somewhere, never to be seen again. From the moment the demon had been handed over, bound and gagged, Archie found his new job.

Victoria Jenkins made an impression straight away. I'd been alerted to her presence by my secretary, Archie with me in the office as I'd wanted him to meet the interviewees straight away if they were going to be working closely together.

I heard the music after that. A Tina Turner song. Rather than have her sent in, I followed the sound. It wasn't just Tina Turner's vocals I heard, but someone terribly off-key and terribly loud.

Dressed in a black pinstripe suit, tall and muscular with rich, dark brown skin and short black hair, she immediately presented herself as a real powerhouse. And she was so strong she almost took my hand off when we shook in greeting.

“Sorry about the tune,” she’d said, “but this song gets me so pumped.”

‘Steamy Windows’ before a job interview? Interesting.

From that moment, the two of them assimilated into my life, proving their loyalty, again and again, working so hard to keep my ship of vengeance afloat.

She had to be alive. I wouldn’t stand for our bonds to be broken.

On the other side of the basin, the trees thickened again. The ground sloped downward to the point of being too steep. I stopped before we slipped.

“Shit,” Archie said.

At the bottom of the slope, a thick, cloying darkness stretching from left to right and ahead of us as far as I could see churned like liquid tar. The rain didn’t touch it.

Strange.

“We go around,” I said.

“What do you think it is?” Archie asked.

“The Fairy Wilds are dying,” I replied. “This must be part of it.”

“Don’t get too close!” a shrill voice called over the rain.

Thunder cracked as I turned, spotting the hunched figure at the top of the slope. A woman, dressed in soaked gray rags,

her fair skin a sore-looking red. Her hair was shorn and white, and she leaned on a gnarled wooden cane.

“Get away from it!” she hissed. “Get away!” She beckoned us with a long finger.

“Who are you?”

“Fayette,” she answered. “Not here to hurt, only to help.”

“You’re a fairy.”

“Yes, yes. Please come up here. I can’t bear it.”

“What can’t you bear?”

“The pull. It will pull you in. It’s safe up here.”

I glanced back at the darkness, its density. This realm was strange and dangerous. On my last visit, I’d encountered a giant, hungry worm. I trusted nothing, feared everything, but this fairy may be our only chance of escape.

“Come on,” I told Archie, helping him back up toward the woman.

My reflexes were on high alert, braced for an attack. It didn’t come. Fayette sighed heavily with relief, nodding at us both.

“You’re safe now,” she said. “Never get too close to the dark. It pulls every hour, and the hour is almost here.”

“Pulls?”

From inside her rags, she removed what looked like a pink banana spotted with mold. She tossed it down the slope to about where we’d been standing.

“Watch,” she said.

The minutes ticked by.

“Watch,” she said again. “It comes.”

The darkness rippled, shifting, swelling. It lifted by inches, consuming the grass, the rain receding from it. More inches, rising until it ended at the banana, drowning the pink thing in treacly shadow.

“Blimey,” Archie said.

“What just happened?”

“The darkness is swallowing the Fairy Wilds. It won’t stop until there is nothing left. We’re the dying star, that oblivion down there, a black hole. That piece of fruit is never coming back, and neither will you if you so much as touch the dark. Never touch the dark.”

Wonderful. “Why are you here?” I asked. “Shouldn’t you be on Earth?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like Earth.”

“But it must be safer than here.”

“Depends. Come and have some shelter.”

“We have to get back to Earth,” I said. “We can’t stay here.”

“I can help you, but it won’t be easy. I’ve lost my magic.”

“How?”

Rainwater ran over her buzz cut. “Come with me. I’ll tell you and show you. But this rain is too much. Come and shelter and let it pass.”

Seeing as she’d just saved our lives, we agreed to follow her into the trees.

SIX

CLAY



My demon prince brother loomed over me, sculpted from bulging, veiny muscles. His scales seemed to slither across his skin, his fingers curling into pointed talons. Kind of like two rows of mini scythes.

Spikes popped out of his shoulders and his knees. He immediately clicked his fingers at me, forcing me back to the ground. I landed on my backside, teeth rattling.

“Amusing,” he said.

Once again, I tried to call up my killing arrows. No luck. I really was completely dependent on my twin now. That sucked and didn’t speak of brilliant evolution to me. I needed to speak to some higher power about sorting out this glitch.

Isaiah kept me stuck to the floor with his demonic magic, walking closer, his enlarged tongue running across his lips. “If it was up to me, I’d kill you slowly. Take my time from your feet to your face, pick you apart inch by inch after what you did to the sacred Throne of Vines.”

The booze made him sway ever so slightly, his speech not quite slurred but not fully sober.

“I—”

He snapped his talons, slamming my mouth shut.

“But you’re worth more than that, according to Mother. You’re a tool to be used against the witches.”

My mouth loosened, allowing me to speak. “How is this fair?”

“What?”

“This fight. You manifesting your demon side and using your powers shows what a coward you are.”

His white eyes blinked. “Coward?”

“That’s what I said.”

“I’m not the one who hid on an island.”

This arsewipe wouldn’t get the better of me. “Man, now that was luxury.” I snorted. “Royal palace? Ha! What a joke. And don’t even get me started on the beds. I’ve seen less lumps in a bowl of porridge.”

Hmmm. Not my best insult, but the first thing to fall out of my mouth. Any insult directed at him and this shit hole was good enough for me.

He smiled, shrinking back to his more princely form. Naked again.

“Clothes!” he barked.

He kept me on the floor, staring at me until the clothes appeared, and he was dressed again.

“If you had your magic right now, you’d be using it against me, wouldn’t you?” he asked.

“Damn right.”

“So, what makes you special?”

“Arcana.”

He released me. I clambered to my feet. “You throwing down the gauntlet?”

Isaiah ordered another bottle of whisky. “Give me a moment.”

Should I jump straight into a scrap?

The booze arrived. He glugged, then put the bottle on his seat. “Let’s reset, Clay. You wanted a fight. Let’s have one. No tricks, just us as we are now.”

“Agreed.”

He laughed. “This takes me back to my childhood, the fights with Isobel.”

“This isn’t some sibling crap.” Only, it was. “I’ll let you swing the first punch.”

“Excellent. Guards?” They all stood to attention. “Don’t intervene. Enjoy the show.” That got him a few laughs.

Arsewipe.

I brought up my fists, ready to beat down. I’d practiced boxing with Tae, Isaiah a suitable punching bag to help hone my skills further.

He wasn’t coming at me.

“Let’s go,” I said, hopping from foot to foot.

He laughed. “You look absurd.”

“And you’re a knob. Come at me!”

He shrugged, completely nonchalant. “Boring. You make the first move.”

“I’m not giving you what you want.”

“I’m not giving *you* what *you* want.”

“Really? We’re going for childish?” I said.

“We’ll go wherever I say we go.”

I almost charged at him. “Are you just going to stand there?”

“Maybe.”

“Idiot.”

“Maybe.”

“Fuck off.”

“Maybe.”

“You’ll maybe fuck off? Good. I’d love you to leave.”

Silence, a staring contest as the train rolled on.

“You’re no match for me without your magic,” he said after about ten minutes.

“If you say so.”

“I know so.”

“How’s your stomach?” I taunted.

A shit-eating grin. “Was that what you call a punch?”

“You grunted.”

“I did.”

“So, yeah, I call it a punch. One of many.”

He picked up his whisky bottle, drinking without any cares in the world. Winding me up, but not enough to make me move first. That’s what he really wanted, those calculating eyes devising some scheme where I got something broken.

Not happening.

Why did I have to challenge him to a fight? I mean, really? Why couldn't I sit and scheme rather than engage with another sibling. I was sick of my family. They were all arsewipes.

"You've bitten off more than you can chew," he said. "I love that saying."

"I don't care."

"You should."

I groaned. "Is this your technique? Boring me to death?"

"I want you to know something." He swayed a little. Drinking whisky on that scale would do that.

I want you to know my fist. "What?"

He came at me, delivering a knee into my groin. Fuck! The pain flared between my legs. I tried not to fall but ended up on my knees.

Man, a hit to the balls worked every time.

"Pain," my brother said. "Lots and lots of pain." He drank, he laughed, and he offered me a full dose of arrogance.

Fuck this.

Pushing through the nasty ache in my nuts, I returned the favor, cracking him in the family jewels with a right hook. He went backward, dropping his whisky bottle with a satisfying thud. The brown liquid poured onto the floor, the glass fractured. He roared, kicking at my face. He missed and went in a drunken lurch to the side.

Ah, now the booze was hitting him harder.

Goodie.

I picked the bottle up, smacking him over the head with it. He slumped into a seat, his legs in the air like a beetle stuck on

its back. The idiot tried to kick me again, missed. I hit both his shins with the bottle, then his head again. He grabbed it, wrestled it from my hand.

“I’ll fucking beat your face off!” He lunged forward, barely missing my face.

My fist slammed into his jaw. He hit my shoulder with the bottle, losing his hold. I grabbed it back, slammed the bottom of it into his face like he’d done to the waiter. Struck his teeth, cracked the top row. Went for a second strike, knocking two pearly whites out.

Saw red. So much red, descending into a hateful rage. Arcana begged for its battery as I pleaded it to find another way to come back to me.

I drove the bottle into Isaiah’s face again.

“Some scary demon you are,” I said, drowning in red mist. Lifted the bottle, brought it down on him. “You’re nothing compared to me.” Lift and hit, lift and hit. He raised his arms to protect himself. “You don’t scare me. You sicken me.” My skin spiked with angry heat, demon blood splattering my face as I beat him. Sometimes I got his face, other times his hands as he tried to protect himself or grab the bottle. Too intoxicated now, too arrogant. Failing to click his way out of this.

“Stop!” he cried.

I brought the bottle down harder, the glass finally smashing across his head. He screamed as the shards burst around him. I stabbed him in the center of his face with the jagged end of the bottle, slicing through his hands as he tried to protect himself, pushed all my weight into him as he squirmed beneath me, grinding the glass into his skull.

He roared, finally managing to snap his fingers.

I flew across the carriage from the force of his click, howling with laughter as I slammed into the window. He clicked again, pushing me harder into the window, the glass cracking under my weight.

I kept laughing.

He was back on his feet, a ring of messy rips on his face. Bleeding profusely, making me laugh harder.

The idiot clicked again and shut me up. I coughed behind my sealed lips, snorting out of my nose, the burn making my eyes water.

Didn't stop me laughing at this ridiculous creature. I mean, he held all the advantage against me. His demon side, his clicky powers, everything. But I'd kicked the crap out of him, fucked up his face. Sure, he was pickled with whisky, giving me some of the upper hand, but that was his mistake.

I'm Arcana-made.

Bow. Down.

Whoa...

He came at me with the bottle, pressing the jagged glass edges to my neck.

“Funny is it?” His smelly whisky breath washed over me. “What if I cut the artery in your neck? You'd bleed to death and die, wouldn't you? Weak little mortal cunt.” He spat bloodied saliva in my face, opening his mouth to show me his damaged teeth.

Was he about to bite my face off?

Nope, he closed his gob, stepping back. “But what fun would that be?”

A click so hard I broke through the window, falling back into the roaring wind, the train speeding onward.

Oh, shit.

His demon magic bent me backward across the broken window, glass cutting into my back, body doing its best impression of a *U*. I yelled in pain against my closed mouth, the demon realm whipping past me, the train’s wheels a menacing shriek below me.

“Not so funny now, is it?” Isaiah called over the deafening noise.

I was going to piss myself.

My legs began to rise, my body slipping down the outside of the carriage. Closer to those wheels and the tracks.

“All we need is a tunnel to take your head off!” he cried, laughing his head off. “Fuck with me and get fucked up.”

Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God. He was right. This wasn’t funny.

I slid back inside. Well, more like I was dragged back inside, glass slicing down my back, unceremoniously dumped on the floor, held there on all fours by demon magic.

“Welcome back,” Isaiah said. “Now, how’s *your* head?”

I noticed the window immediately repair itself, a fresh layer of glass slotting into place.

Wow. Handy.

Isaiah kicked me in the ribs, slammed his foot down on my spine. My back was wet with blood, hurting to merry hell

already. The left side of my face hit the floor, rattling my brains. He pressed his foot harder into my spine, dropped the broken bottle beside my head. Those pointy bits were so close to my face.

Fucker.

“Well, look who’s been taught his very first lesson.”

He released my mouth from his magic, but I kept quiet.

The prince burped. “Why didn’t you help me?”

Who was he talking to?

“Well?” he snapped. “Speak! You’re supposed to be my guards.”

Oh. Right.

“You told them not to!” I responded, not on the side of the guards, but on the side of calling out bullshit behavior.

I got stamped on for my contribution.

“Your Highness,” a man tried, “we’re deeply sorry. We were only following your orders.”

“I see. You’re making excuses.”

The prince’s staff couldn’t win any argument.

“I’m disappointed.” He clicked his fingers again, moving me like a puppet on strings to sit upright in the nearest seat.

God, I hurt everywhere. Balls, back, face. However, I still felt proud of myself for what I’d done to his face. Really proud. The start of a beautiful relationship between me and his suffering.

And then his death.

I’ll get you. I’ll get you so hard.

“With respect, Your Highness,” a man said, stepping forward. A brave man. “We were charged by the queen to watch the Arcana prince.”

Isaiah looked at me, scratched his chin. “Is that his title now? Arcana Prince? Did she tell you that?” He swayed on his feet, blood pouring down his face, his clothes soaked black.

“Her Majesty called him that.” I watched the demon’s throat bob.

“I see.”

“You need medical attention.” Wow, the demon guard really was super brave to still be talking.

“Do I?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Give me your sword?”

The demon paled. “My sword?”

“Yes. Give it to me.”

He blinked, obeying the command. “Your Highness, please allow us to help you with your wounds.”

Isaiah took the broadsword, examining the polished white blade and the bejeweled handle—rubies, gold, onyx.

Oh, gosh. What now?

“You want to help me,” the prince said. “*Now* you want to help me after you watched me get attacked and mutilated.”

And I thought I could be whiny. Wow. What a prat.

“Your—”

“Please don’t speak, Grunt. When I’m talking, you listen. Actually, you kneel and listen. I’d like that better.”

The guard immediately went to one knee.

Isaiah lifted the sword. “I’m tired of people thinking they know what’s best for me, ignoring me, making me feel small.” He looked at me. “As much as I love Mother, she treats me like a child. When I was banished, she scolded me and confined me to my room for days. Such a naughty boy, grounded for being so foolish. And it didn’t stop there. She wouldn’t look at me or talk to me unless she needed something from my network of spies, made me wear that hood so my face wouldn’t offend her. I had to listen to the whispers of lesser demons talking of their disappointment, their shock at a prince being banished. The careless son, the complete opposite to his wonderful sister Isobel. I missed pool parties. I missed so much, left out in the cold. At least Isobel tried to make things better, but her hands were tied.” He drew a long breath. “But when Mother was banished, I consoled her. She came to me, desperate and afraid. And I held her, professed my love as the dutiful son, discovered Quentin’s plans through my spies here and on Earth, came with her to the demon gate, and found you.” He smiled at me. “Unexpected.”

I let him ramble on.

“We were following Quentin, waiting to see if his plan to remove banishment would succeed. We would take him and his followers and get back to work on our takeover plans. But there you were, once again, changing things up.” He chuckled. “One thing I will say, Clay, is that you’re not boring.”

“I’d rather be boring.”

“You would?”

“Right now, I would.”

“You’re in pain,” he said.

“And? So are you.”

Was that a black tear rolling out of his right eye?

Yep.

“I hate to let Mother down,” he said. “It hurts so much.” More tears. Drunken tears. “It hurts that... It hurts to be the outcast of the family.”

Erm, okay then.

“All you siblings are special.” He sniffled, opening those white peepers. “You, Isobel, James... How is it fair? You’re not even of full demon blood, and you get all the attention. What about me?”

I groaned. “Not you, too.”

He sniffled again, in need of a tissue and stitches. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “What are you saying?”

“I’ve already been down the jealousy road with Buttons.”

“I’m not jealous of you.”

“I think you are. I’m the Bright One, after all. The Arcana Prince. So cool.”

What the hell was wrong with me goading him like this? I couldn’t help it. He brought out my cocky side, my resistance. I wanted him to whine, to be jealous, to feel like the turd he was.

“Watch your mouth, Clay.”

“Trust me, your hate for me is like diet cola. Mine for you is the real sugary deal.”

He chuffed, narrowing his eyes. “I should cut your lips off and make you eat them.”

“But what would Mother say?”

That really annoyed him. “You’re so confident, aren’t you? But you have no idea what’s to come.”

My stomach twisted into knots. “But I do. It’s the same shit. She wants to teach me a lesson, train me into being some compliant son who’ll fight for her, dead behind the eyes, nothing but a weapon, blah, blah, blah. She’ll threaten me and those I love, and she’ll probably torture me, keep me away from Buttons because she’s too chicken shit to let me run wild.” I smirked at him, using his smugness against him. “And I *will* run wild. Oh, man. Just you wait. Just you bloody wait.”

He stared at me for long seconds, the corner of his lips twitching.

“Scared?” I said.

He snarled and swung the sword, taking off the demon guard’s head. He roared with white-hot fury, stomping forward to run through another guard. The sword burst out of the woman’s back. He yanked it free, losing his balance, listing to the side with a grunt.

The other guards gathered by the carriage doors, confused, clearly unsure of how to proceed. It wasn’t like they could draw their weapons and fight their prince—as fun as that’d be to watch.

Isaiah swayed, blinking rapidly with the blood-stained sword in one hand. He rubbed at his eyes, his wounds still bleeding.

He pointed at the guards. “You’re all traitors. You let him hurt me.” God, he was sobbing again. “I’m in so much pain.”

What a crybaby. He even stomped his feet, screamed.

“You let him hurt me!” he shrieked. “You let him hurt me!”

He manifested his demon side again and surged forward. Used his knee spikes in the guts of a woman, took the head off a man next. His moves were sluggish, drunken. And the guards took it, zero retaliation, standing around, waiting to be maimed. Loyal to their prince until the end. Well, not the actual end.

Limbs and heads were strewn around the carriage, the walls painted in demon blood. What a gruesome spectacle.

I kind of liked it.

Isaiah turned to me, using the sword as a walking stick.

“Someone needs an espresso and a bottle of water,” I said.

He sniffed deeply, gathering up some phlegm. He spat in my direction, hitting a chair instead of me.

“I’m not drunk.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” As pickled as he was, his hold on me remained strong.

Damn.

“Stop... Stop talking to me with such disrespect. I’m sick of it... I’m not a... I’m not a...” He collapsed, the sword falling over with a loud clang. “I’m not... I’m not...” He started to snore.

His magic dropped. I was free. In agony but free, facing another train escape. I could do it, no problem. Now, where was the emergency brake?

The doors opened, Queen Imelda stepping through. Her eyes roamed the carnage, lingering on Isaiah.

“What have you done now?”

SEVEN

TAE



Fayetta took us deep into the forest toward a glowing jar and a raggedy tent. Dirty material, much like tarpaulin, fixed to the trees with ropes, lifted off the ground with sticks serving as poles. It provided shelter from the rain for the three of us.

We huddled together around the jar. A buzzing came from it, three fireflies inside. At least, I assumed they were fireflies. Did the fireflies of Earth emit that level of heat?

“They’re safe,” Fayetta said. “Glow beetles don’t hurt, only warm your bones. Enjoy it. You look particularly frozen.” She directed the last part to Archie.

He nodded, holding his hands over the jar. The heat was so effective our sodden clothes began to dry quickly.

Fayetta sighed with a smile, exposing crooked yellow teeth. She wasn’t old, yet not young, as if she were stuck somewhere between the age lines on her face and clinging youth, the two of them battling it out for dominance.

“I’m glad I came across you,” she said. “That was a close one.”

“Thanks again for saving us,” I replied. “I wasn’t expecting to come across anyone.”

“There are still some of us left here. Those who hold on with stubborn hope, those who cannot leave. Hopefully, you won’t encounter a worm again.”

“Again? You know I’ve been here before?”

“Whispers in The Wilds told me. The last creatures here gossip as they starve. Like me. I have been looking for a way to free you, no skill of my own to free you from that bitch’s bubble.” She sniffed. “But you did it. How did you get out?”

“A combination of determination and vampiric resistance.”

And the power of love.

Fayette scratched at her collarbone. She was incredibly skinny.

The rain picked up, pelting the ground. The grass squashed under its attack.

“Why won’t you go to Earth?” I asked. “This realm is a lost cause.”

I couldn’t tell if her green eyes glistened with tears or if it was an effect of the light from the glow beetles.

“I don’t have the magic to move me now. And I cannot make the river crossing.”

“Rivers?”

“Toxic rivers. They make the crossing perilous now.”

The same problem across three realms—those wretched rivers.

“Fuck it,” Archie said. “They’re a poxy plague.”

The fairy sighed. “They pour in from the weakness between our realms, creating a hazardous crossing for those of

us unable to magically leave. I can take you there, but that's all I can do."

"Thank you," I said. "We appreciate it."

I wanted to leave for this crossing right now.

"What about the monsters?" Archie asked.

"I've seen one. It fell into the darkness."

"That's good news," he said.

"Absolutely."

"Tell us more about fairy magic," I added. Seeing as we weren't going anywhere with this downpour, it made sense to hear her tale rather than sit and stew on my frustrations.

I am coming, Clay. I promise.

But did he need me this time? Wherever he was, whatever was happening, his evolved power...

No. Arcana was wrong. It shouldn't be here. I kept reminding myself of it, of the danger. His nosebleeds, cravings, and rages weren't healthy. No matter how powerful he became, Arcana's wrongness would never leave, always be there to tell Clay and the rest of us to stop the madness.

Could it be stopped with whatever secrets Adam Christmas's notebook held?

"Tae? Mate?"

I came out of my bubbling stew. "Sorry. Please, tell us more."

Fayette rubbed her dry hands together, her cracked skin in desperate need of hand cream. "Gretchen brought you here."

"She did," I said. "Do you know her well?"

“Yes. She’s a horrible fairy. One of the nastiest I ever knew, and I’ve known some nasty fairy folk.”

“We had no idea this place existed until recently,” Archie said.

“You wouldn’t. We swore to keep it hidden. Grindle changed that, and he had to. He likes to help. You’re lucky to be his friend.”

“He may like to help,” I responded, “but he does it sneakily.”

“What do you expect from a fairy?” She said it as if we should be as used to it as the moon.

“He does himself no favors,” I said.

She shrugged. “At least he’s not like his sister. She’s the sneakiest of all, a real traitor to her kind marrying that demon.”

Did she know Grindle helped Queen Imelda?

“Grindle did what he did for the good of us,” she added, answering my question. “To get behind enemy lines. We all want revenge for what the demons did, led by the queen’s grandfather, King Isaac. This realm dies because of them. They have to be exterminated no matter what. Grindle wants it. His sister doesn’t. She wants her husband to win, sees herself as a demon-inherent. Wants herself a palace over there, to be a queen she could never be here. But I also know she wanted Arcana, to use your warlock to make herself a queen to be feared more than any other. Not now. She sees him as a danger.”

Her words were punctuated by a crack of thunder.

“Did you have a king or queen here?” I asked.

“President,” she answered. “Elected president. Her name was Winifred Snowling, one of the first to be killed in the demon attack.” There went the glister in her eyes again. “A great woman, put herself in the firing line when she didn’t have to. When the damage was done, there was nothing left to care for, to elect a new leader to lead. What’s the point of leading a dead thing?”

“I’m sorry,” I offered.

“Me too.”

She didn’t speak for a few minutes, letting the elements make all the noise.

“Where were you going?” she broke her silence. “Did you have a direction? You looked lost to me, because you were. Why wouldn’t you be?”

I explained my theory to her.

“This realm doesn’t work like that, though you should exit somewhere in South Korea when you cross—back to the last place you were, yet not the exact spot. Then it will close, await the next crossing. But I like your idea. Very interesting.” She gazed at the glowing jar with a wistful expression. “I used to be a cartographer. Celebrated throughout the Fairy Wilds, respected by my peers. Gretchen brought me down before the demon attack. I suppose I deserved it, but not to lose my power. A fairy without magic is no fairy at all, as you can see.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I cheated on my husband,” she replied. “Because he was a bastard. Not an excuse, I know, but Finley really was a bastard. Mentally cruel, neglectful, and a cheat himself. But he had powerful friends to look after him—including Gretchen.

She's a cheat, too. A demon fucker and a fairy fucker. But she knew the right fairies, the ones with political and social clout, and adultery is a crime here. Unless you can bury it like them." She smacked her lips together, ran her tongue over her teeth. "They shamed me, stripped my magic with nasty brown charms. I tried to defend myself, but Gretchen really made sure she ruined me, shot made up holes through my story." More lip smacking. "At least Finley got killed, most of that crowd of sluts did." She spat at the jar, a soft hissing from the glass as the saliva landed. "I'm not stuck here. I can leave. But I don't have the energy to get out. I'll die when the end finally takes everything."

How sad. "Is there no way of restoring your magic?"

She shook her head. "That ship has sailed."

"Why?"

"It's been too long now. Too many long years."

"But there is a possibility you can be—"

She grunted, cutting me off. "Are you suggesting you'll return the favor of me helping you? Do you want to be my hero?"

"No. I'm simply saying..."

"What? You can help?"

She saw through me. The thought crossed my mind to lend a hand, then the rebuttal ended it. Helping her delayed getting out of here, even if she had saved our lives.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be. I'm not. I've lived a long life. I've experienced the good and bad parts of it. I'm tired now, waiting out my

days.” She took a pause. “I won’t end things myself. I’ll let the story play out as it’s supposed to.”

A flash of lightning bathed the tent in a harsh glow, accentuating the strange lines and youth of her face.

“I have a question,” I broke her pause.

“Ask me anything in the rain.”

That sounded like the beginning of a song or poem. “Can you explain why Grindle lost an eye taking me to that house? Why Gretchen cut off her finger to get us here?”

She nodded slowly, spitting into the fire. “There are three strands to fairy magic. Firstly, you have the will of the fairy. That will is used to be infused into an object or substance, making it magical.”

Such as the fairy cream.

“Sometimes it is a good thing or a curse,” she continued. “Secondly, there are the fairy charms. I’m sure you’ve seen those glass flowers being thrown around. If you haven’t, how?”

“I’ve seen them, don’t worry. The orange one has been used on me twice.”

“The charms come in various colors with different effects,” she said. “They either have to be broken or held. That orange one is a trap and requires breaking to work.” She spat at the jar again, her spit sizzling. “Your demonic enemies use pink charms to protect themselves from Arcana. I’ve seen Gretchen making them, heard the whispered tales from Earth.” She offered us both a morose smile. “The third thread of fairy magic is about sacrifice. A new thread to our magic—there only used to be the other two before the demon invasion. The Fairy Wilds changed in their dying, refusing the bringing of

outsiders without paying a price. No outsider can cross into this realm without the help of a fairy. Grindle lost his eye for you, Gretchen her little finger to keep you out of her way.” She grinned. “She didn’t count on me, though. Stupid bitch. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you get out of here.” She spat on the jar again. “And you can. Leaving costs nothing.”

“Thank God,” Archie said.

She chuckled at that. “Listen, if you want to help me out, you can kill her. Make sure you make her suffer, maybe get Clay Christmas to blow her up.”

“Trust me, she’ll get what’s coming to her,” Archie replied.

“Good. Demon fucker. And she has the nerve to look down on me when she opens her legs for the enemy like that?” She hissed and spat on the ground this time. “I’ve never loathed a fairy as much as her.”

With that, we sat in silence as the rain continued, the wind picking up to shake the tent.

“It’ll hold,” Fayette said. “It’s been holding for years. Had to build it strong after they took my house from me.” She laughed. “Finley died in that house, hiding from demons. Dirty little coward. I found him there hiding under the bed in his boxer shorts after I stabbed a female demon prowling the perimeter in the face. Left her screaming there while I searched for my husband. I don’t know why I went to him, maybe because of love. But there he was, crying and scared, begging me to help him. Reaching out for me from under the bed as the house shook. The realm was rejecting the demons, breaking apart, infected by their presence. The floor split open, the walls, everywhere. He screamed, and I told him to die slowly. If there had been love, he killed the last tiny piece. I ran outside as the house collapsed, sucked down into the dark,

the demon I'd stabbed rolling with it." She laughed again. "She'll still be down there, trapped inside it forever. I can hear her screams whenever I walk those parts."

I looked into the darkness of the forest, willing the rain to stop.

"You miss him," the fairy said.

"Desperately," I answered.

"The rain will stop."

"What about Gretchen?" Archie added.

"She'll be busy trying to find her husband and kill Clay." She snarled. "She really wants your warlock dead and her husband free."

"You know so much," Archie said.

"I have nothing to do but listen, to feel," she responded.

"Where does she live?" I asked.

"She's got a shack on the edge of this forest, not far from where she dumped you. Probably thought you'd be stuck in her bubble, waiting for her to finish her business. Thank goodness you did whatever you did because useless me would never have got you free. And thank goodness you didn't attack me. I wasn't sure at first, especially with how you've been treated by my kind—all the sneaking and things. But then I had to reveal myself when you approached the darkness. I'm glad I did, glad I listened to my instincts. You're good men. You can save your world."

This was never supposed to happen. Saving the world wasn't ever the goal, only finding and killing Isaiah with Clay's power. The reveal of Quentin Dawn's ambitions

changed that, the events unfolding to shift a life of demon hunting into this chaos.

“I wish I could meet the warlock,” she said.

I didn't answer her. She'd never get that chance unless a fairy dragged him here, and I wouldn't allow that to happen.

You can't control everything...

Once again, we sat under the tent listening to the rain.

An hour later, it stopped.

“Are you ready?” the fairy asked.

I'd been ready every second of being here.

EIGHT

CLAY



I mmediately on the defense, I almost fired back some insult at the queen for trying to pin the blame on me.

She wasn't talking to me.

"You're a fool," she said down to Isaiah. "Why do you keep on with this disappointment?"

I stood there like a lemon, twiddling my thumbs.

Eyes to me. "What did he do?"

I told her.

She nodded slowly, focus locked on me. "He hurt you."

I just told you! "Yeah. I'm not shocked, though."

"You're not?"

"Why would I be shocked someone like him would hurt me? Doesn't it come as part of the package deal?"

"Are you trying to be humorous?"

"You're not the first person to say that."

"Demon," she said. "I am a demon. I am not keen on the term person."

"Oh."

She sighed. “It appears I have to be teaching all of my children lessons.”

“Including Isobel?” I asked. “Where is she?”

“On her way home after her ordeal.”

“Oh.”

“Another disappointment. I seem to be surrounded by it.” She sighed again, so dramatic. “Such is the curse of being your mother.”

God, she was so boring. The darkness within me thrummed, longing for her death.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Now you get back in your seat and be patient.”

Easier said than done. Now the adrenaline eased off, my pain came rushing back. I grabbed the back of a seat, leaning into it.

“Don’t try to play games with me,” the queen said.

“I’m not playing any games.”

“Yes, you are. You’re trying to appeal to my sympathy.”

“Didn’t realize you had any.” Whoops.

“If that’s what you think, then you can forget about any pain relief or healing baths until I say so.”

I rolled my eyes, lost in my cockiness. “As if you’d offer them to me anyway. You want to harden me, remember? Make me into your good little bitch.”

I actually thought she’d snapped my neck, the force of her slap that hard. I spun like a ballerina, crashing to the floor onto

my front. My face slammed into the floor, cracking a tooth, bringing more hurt.

Me and my big mouth.

Ah, fuck it. As much as I hurt, mouthing off was fun.

“So worth it,” I said aloud.

“What did you say?” She clicked her fingers, bringing me to my feet. She turned me to face her. “Well?”

“Just telling myself how fun it is to speak to you like the piece of shit you are.”

Oh, dear. I’d crossed a line, delved too deep into my darkness. Her anger reached me as a cold wind, then a punch to my chest so hard she cracked ribs.

Goshfuckgosh!

Because of her hold, I stayed upright, unable to curl up into a ball or anything. And that made my mouth worse.

“See what I mean?” I wheezed, really wanting to cry in agony but not giving her the satisfaction of my tears and pain. “What an arsewipe queen. Thinking you’re so amazing, so powerful and, worst of all, right. But you’re not right. You’re a monster through and through and so delusional. You could never take over Earth and rule peacefully. We’d rise up against you, no matter how hard you try to crush us. You know why? Because we’re Earthlings. We’re resilient and terrible and amazing. We’ve seen so much shit, caused so much shit, and also fought for what’s right. We’re a complicated mess and we won’t stand for the likes of you sitting on a throne.”

She folded her arms. “Two things, dear child of mine. Firstly, you already allow those on thrones to suppress you. The witches have ruled you for a long time.”

Okay, so my speech was basically lace, but whatever. I believed in the sentiment, I guess.

“Secondly, you’re of demon blood, no matter how hard you try to deny or how little of it there is inside you. As I see it, you are part of the so-called demon problems of Earth. In fact, I would say you are worse. Look at the damage you have caused in one night.”

“The... Fuck you!”

She held a phone up to my face, playing a recording of a smoking wasteland of burned trees and deep trenches. The Arcana fires were gone and had completely taken out Barking Park. The camera panned around to show me, the demon gate tree also gone.

“What...” I breathed.

“No more Barking Park gate,” the queen said. “Thanks for that inconvenience.”

“I... I did this.”

“Not to worry, we can still use the Richmond Gate despite its irritating complications.”

“I did this,” I said again.

“There’s more.”

The video jumped to the next scene, walking through the ruins of burned streets, nothing there but rubble and ashes, thick smoke rising from destroyed homes, choking the night. It’d stopped raining in the video.

“I... I did... this.”

“You destroyed the park and six streets nearby,” Queen Imelda jumped in. “I had someone film the aftermath for me.

A terrible situation. So many deaths, people trapped in their houses, no official death toll announced yet.” She tutted. “Such a terrible thing, and no one could put the fires out. They went out by themselves. Thank goodness.”

My chest flared with a new agony, my stomach a storm of acid. “I... I’m going to... I did...”

“You did this, Clay. You are the real monster here, the deadliest creature in existence.” She laughed. “I’m happy for you to have the title and so proud.”

Nausea assaulted me. I’d... I’d done this.

Oh, God.

Oh, God.

“You really are hated by your supposed own kind now,” the queen added. “You are all over the news once again.”

“I... I...”

“But don’t worry, Clay. I still want you around. I’m not blind to your usefulness, though you do frighten me.”

“I... I...” My mouth and brain were disconnected, both drowning in the horrific realization of what I’d done.

“Oh, Clay. I know the truth is hard.”

I blinked at her, my body numbing.

“But it will be okay, you will see. Everything is going to be glorious. We’re going to be a royal family for the ages, the ones who changed the world—both worlds. So much greatness awaits us.”

Oh, God. Please let me... let me out of this. I battled tears, still refusing her my anguish.

“Let it out, Clay. Let Mother hear it.” She came closer, her arms open. “Let’s start again. Allow me to be your mother, to be someone you’ve never had. I can love you. I can show you what family is.” Closer, closer. “I can change your life, wash away your sins that don’t have to be sins. You humans carry too much guilt, too much pain. Allow me to set you free.” She touched my face with her elegant hand, her palm warm against me. “I believe in you as much as I fear you. Fate gave you to me. There are so many layers to you. I just have to peel them back to find the raw *clay* and shape you into my desired son.” She chuckled. “I used to enjoy pottery as a child.”

“I’m chaos,” I responded. “Walking chaos with the power... with the power to kill you.” My hatred overcame my distress temporarily. “Get your fucking hand off me.”

She dropped her hand. “Of course, the shaping of *Clay* will take work.”

“Shape yourself. Stay away from me.”

“That will never happen.” She punched me in the mouth, breaking more teeth.

Holy shit. Blood and broken bone filled my mouth.

She wasn’t done. Taking hold of my left wrist, she snapped it with as much effort as breaking a dried-up twig. Next, she broke my right wrist, proceeding to work her way up both arms, snapping bones until she ended with a double collar bone break.

Oh. My. God. The pain was white flowers across my vision, my heart racing me toward unconsciousness.

When she broke my legs next, I did black out, the pain too much to handle. Not before I mentally told her I’d get her.

Hard.

Man, had she made it to the top of my hit list.

I loved lists.

I loved killing demons like her.

You're dead, Mother. You're so dead.

NINE

CLAY



I woke up groggy to bright lights and the sounds of gentle water.

Huh?

I groaned, eyelids heavy. “Where... Where am I?”

No one answered, even though there was someone there. A woman, blurry yet familiar. A woman who called to my hate.

Queen Imelda. Mother.

“What... What’s going on?” I couldn’t feel anything.

We were at the healing bath, the same one I’d healed in before, where Buttons had got his skin and organs back after his bout with the lava. The one with the red and gold mosaics covering every inch of the room, with black borders to make those colors pop. There were also four pillars around the bath to give it a Roman-like aura.

“You broke my bones,” I said, only able to move my head around.

She stood to my right, her arms folded. I realized I was sat in a wheelchair, engulfed by a gold body cast, attached to drip.

“You are being treated for your afflictions,” she said.

I yawned, so bloody hazy and tired. “Ones you... you caused.”

“To teach you a lesson. A demon who speaks to me in such a manner must suffer, especially my child.”

“I’m... I’m not your child.”

“Of course, you are, Clay. Don’t be silly. I’m offering you the healing bath so we can move on to the next stage.”

“What stage is that?” Man, I’d rather hurt than be this numb. “You got someone I love to threaten me with?”

She shook her head. “You will see.”

Great. Sounded super fun.

The door opened, a man walking in. It took me a moment to realize it was Isaiah. Ugh. Wrong brother.

Wearing a red dressing gown, he came and knelt before the queen. She offered him her hand. He kissed it.

He was still injured, his face cut to pieces from our fight.

I resisted laughing at the state of him, especially in my current predicament.

“Your Majesty,” he said. “Mother.”

“Hello, my son. You may stand.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” He stood, head bowed.

“How are you after your period of reflection?”

“Full of regret. I’m so sorry for what I did on the train.”

“I am glad to hear it. But there is much healing to do, and it begins here.” She swept her hands over us. “My sons must learn to unite, to get along. From this moment on, you will

spend your days and hours together until I am confident you have moved past your differences.”

This was the next stage?

“He killed—” I tried.

“Enough of this repetition,” the queen snapped. “It is in the past. Now is the time for the future and how we build upon these foundations you will make together.”

No bloody chance. “Is this your idea of toughening me up?”

She smiled, said nothing. “I will leave you to bathe.”

“Kind of tricky for me.”

“You’re right,” she said and shoved my wheelchair into the water.

I was thrown forward into the hot water, the heavy plaster immediately dragging me to the bottom. The healing power of the water got to work on my body instantly, wrapping me in a warm hug I would’ve enjoyed more if it weren’t for the burning in my lungs.

Unlike my dickhead brother still on dry tiles, I could drown. The water wasn’t deep but deep didn’t lessen the deadliness for a mortal like me.

As my strength returned, my bones knitting back together, I managed to break through the wet plaster, freeing my arms first, then my legs. I broke the surface of the water, naked, greedily sucking down deep breaths.

“What the hell?” I gasped, covering my private parts.

The queen laughed, her back turned. “I’ll give you boys some privacy.” She left.

Isaiah watched me for a moment before disrobing. I looked away, sinking into the water, moving to the far side of the large pool.

He sunk below the surface for a good thirty seconds, resurfaced, his skin flushed with a fresh pink glow. No more injuries. As good as new.

Isaiah pushed his hair back, dipping down so only his head stuck out of the water. “Hello, again.” He sounded tired and defeated, no smirk or snarls on his face.

“Don’t talk to me,” I said.

“But she wants us to, Clay. She wants us to be the best of friends.” He shook his head. “Trust me, I hate you as much as you do me.”

I looked to the window, blue stars twinkling in a clear night sky of dark purple. “I’m not going any more rounds with you.”

“You won’t get the chance to.”

I looked at him. “Why? What’s the plan for us?”

“You heard her.”

“To get along.”

“Exactly.”

“Not happening.”

“We’ll both have to try. As will Isobel.”

As if timed to his words, the door opened, the naked princess arriving, aided by a demon guard. Her neck was wrapped in a brace and layers of black bandages. She really didn’t look well, sickly pale and shuffling along with the woman who helped her.

I ducked my head to give her some dignity, listened to her enter the water.

The door closed, and I looked back up to see her mimicking her brother, only her head above the water. She lifted an arm out, holding the soggy bandages and brace, tossing them onto the tiles.

Isobel and Isaiah looked alike, though her hair was cropped and bronze. Their facial structures were similar. Sharp with some soft edges, much like the queen.

The princess released a long sigh of relief. “That’s so much better.” Her white eyes moved between us. “Hello, brothers. Where’s the other one?”

“James can’t be here,” Isaiah said.

“Why not?”

“You don’t know?”

“No. Tell me.”

He told her.

She looked at me, eyes narrowed. “Remind me again why we keep you alive?”

“Why don’t you pop away and become a fish for an hour?” I retorted.

Her annoying giggle followed. “Oh, Clay. You kill me.”

One day soon...

“So, we’re here to bond, are we?” She snorted. “We’ll never get along. It’s impossible.” She nodded at me. “Because of you.”

I didn’t answer.

“Obviously, Isaiah and I have a good relationship, and we tolerate James even if he is annoying. At least he cares about us, wants to build a family. But not you, Clay.”

“You ruin this family,” Isaiah added. “You are Mother’s deadly obsession. Or at least your magic is. One day she will see through it and toss you into some pit. I only hope I get a front-row seat.”

Isobel nodded. “You’ve ruined our lives. A burden, not a gift.”

“You didn’t mind my magic the first time we met,” I said to Isobel.

“I was wrong.”

“Yeah, you *are* wrong—the lot of you.”

“There he goes again, thinking he’s clever,” Isaiah said. “All you are, Clay, is a dead man walking. Either your power will kill you, or Mother will. Deep down, I think she’s erring on the side of slaughter.”

“Yep,” Isobel chimed in. “She’s one smart cookie, and her eyes are being opened to the risks of you. If you don’t lose your head, we’ll lose our lives. It’s only a matter of time. I agree with her when it comes to having a weapon to use against the witches. We need to have an edge. But you’re not it. Not after what I’ve seen.”

“Mother will be thinking about Barking Park,” Isaiah said. “A lot.”

I tried not to. The gnawing horror had other ideas, though. Chew, chew, reminding me of the destruction with every bite. I didn’t mean to destroy the park or those homes or kill those people. They were caught in the crossfire of this rising power. There were always sacrifices along the path to progress.

I swallowed, scared of myself as I crawled out of my darkness.

What have I done? What am I becoming to think like this?

A couple of tears escaped my eyes, followed by another, then another, until they streamed silently down my face.

How many were dead? Were there kids burned alive by the Arcana fires? How many families wiped out? How much suffering and screams and terror?

“Oh, gosh...” I sniffled, wiping at my eyes with wet hands.

My siblings watched on in silence, probably enjoying every moment of this. Fuck it. Let them have these tears. Let them revel in my misery. I didn't care. I deserved... nothing. I deserved to be snuffed out if all I'd ever do was bring misery.

That's it, whine.

I'm done.

You're never done. This power is yours. Be amazing.

I closed my eyes, tears still leaking, the water hot and soothing as much as irritating. Sharing a bath with them, being here, being helpless and reliant on that button-eyed arsewipe, it all stirred my rage.

I wanted out.

I wanted to...

Kill them. Never let them win.

Kill them all.

Once again, my guilt took a back seat. My eyes opened, my anger taking the steering wheel.

“How about coming at things from a different angle?” I said.

“What angle?” they responded at the same time.

I smiled, amused by the double reply. “Maybe the queen keeps me alive because, as you said, she’s a smart cookie. She understands the magnitude of my power, how it’s like nothing else ever made.”

Yes...

“You’re a megalomaniac,” Isobel said.

“I’m being realistic.”

“You’ve actually snapped,” she added. “When I first met you, I thought you were really sweet. Sure, you destroyed Level 3’s town square, but back then, it was impressive. Exciting. Now you’re a crazy bastard with a nosebleed.”

I felt it then, hot rivulets across my lips. Drops of crimson hit the water, dissolving in a second.

“I’m the best shot she’ll ever have at taking over Earth,” I added, letting the blood flow.

Blood was better than tears.

“A megalomaniac and delusional,” Isaiah said. “What a dangerous combination.”

“I’m the dangerous one?” I countered. “Well, yes. I am. But what about your behavior on the train? Oh, poor you not being protected by your guards when you told them not to because you’re an arrogant piss head. Oh, poor you for not getting what you want from your wait staff, throwing toys out of the pram and stomping your feet and, well, you know the rest.”

He growled at me, didn't say anything.

"Spoiled, psychotic trash," I said. "I can't wait to see you as a pile of ashes."

"You—"

Isobel lunged through the water and grabbed her brother before he could act. "Don't. He wants a fight. Mother doesn't. You'll make things worse for yourself."

After a few long breaths, Isaiah moved backward. "You're right. Let her see for herself."

I laughed. "I love that you both think I'm the unhinged one after everything you've done. But then I'm not surprised." I stood up, not giving a crap that my cock dangled free for all to see. Water sluiced down my body, my hands curled into fists at my sides. "This won't go the way you want it to."

"What does that mean?" Isaiah questioned.

"It means what it means," I said. "Your days are numbered. I'm death walking, not a dead man walking."

The door opened. Queen Imelda entered the room. "Is that so?"

"That is, you nosy monarch."

She sneered. "I've listened to this, to the nerve of you two," she addressed the dickheads on her side of the pool. "Thinking you know, that you understand my thoughts. I'm surprised *your* noses aren't bleeding too for such fallacy."

They both apologized about three times each.

"Sheep," I said. "Bbbbaaaaaahhhh!"

"Enough!" the queen roared.

I chuckled, climbing out of the bath.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the queen demanded.

“To dry off, learn tap dancing.”

“What?”

“Leave me alone.”

Once again, I walked on eggshells over a pit of fire, freaking myself out with my mouth but also not giving a shit. These demons bored me.

I told them that. “And you’re delaying the inevitable. Bring Buttons in here and face your fate. Come on, die like a, erm, demon.” I shrugged. “Demons all die the same, eh? Arrows and ashes.”

The queen moved fast, having a painful handful of my hair within seconds, dragging me out of the bathroom. She tossed me into a golden cage on wheels waiting outside the door, four guards standing around it. I banged my head on the metal as I landed in an awkward heap. I scrambled to my knees as a robe of red, gold, and black stripes hit me in the face, the cage door slamming shut behind me.

“Now your real test begins,” Queen Imelda said, her tone loaded with bite. “I’m a fool to think you can assimilate into this family.”

“Agreed. Fancy putting me in a bath with those idiots.” I shook my head, pursed my lips. “What were you thinking? Silly mummy.”

“I softened with you again.”

“You softened? Gross.”

She stared at me. “You really are an insolent fool.”

“Aw, go easy on me.”

“Never. Not again. I gave you this chance to try and—”

“Save it,” I jumped in. “Just spare me the bullshit. You don’t know how to soften. You’re playing mind games with me and those two in there. You’re a nasty, vile demon who will get her just desserts one day soon.”

She leaned closer to the cage. “What happened to you? Where did the sweet Clay go?”

“Did you ever meet him?”

“I did briefly. But Arcana has changed you, hasn’t it? Poisoned your tongue and your mind, set its roots deep. I should kill you.”

“Another failed child.”

“Indeed.”

I grabbed the bars, gripping them so hard the metal almost sliced open my skin. “Then do it. Come on. It’s the only way to save yourself.”

What the hell was wrong with me?

She didn’t flinch from me pressing my face to the bars. “One more test first, Clay.”

“More fool you.”

The guards wheeled the cage through the corridor.

“Don’t suppose you can give me a clue as to where we’re going?” I called to the queen.

No response from her.

“Does it have a phone?” I added. “I’d love to make some calls.”

I howled with laughter, banging on the bars, spiraling into fury and shadows. My sunshine smothered by so much shadow.

“Kill you all!” I roared, my skin flaring with unbearable itching. “I’ll fucking kill you all!”

TEN

TAE



Another clearing, sheer cliffs of reddish-brown rock jutting out of the ground. They stretched from east to west, a wall against us. A waterfall of green cascaded into a splash pool, a toxic river flowing like a snake into the woods.

The forest formed a half moon behind us, lining the top of the cliffs. I scrutinized the tree lines, the river, searching for any sign of monsters.

“This is the crossing,” Fayettea said. “The main part is behind the waterfall, which is easy to get to without coming to harm.”

Being touched by the green liquid melted flesh from bone.

“Can you see?” she asked, pointing at the waterfall.

There was a gap to the left of the water, sufficiently clear of the downpour.

“I see it,” I said.

“Get through there, and you will find the crossing.”

“Are you coming?”

“No.”

“I can help you across.”

“You haven’t seen it yet,” she said. “It’s not what you think.”

“I’m strong. I can carry you.”

She shook her head, smacked her lips together. “My time’s over. I’ll wait for the end here. I don’t want to start a new life in a new world.”

I went to argue with her further, not wanting to leave her behind when she’d helped get us here. But I also understood her mentality. Starting over wasn’t for everyone.

“Then thank you,” I said. “For everything.”

She extended her hand. I shook it.

“Try to get Gretchen for me, if you can.” She turned her head and spat.

I nodded, she nodded, and then she hobbled away into the trees. Out of our lives for good, facing the end of her existence alone.

“Come on,” I said to Archie, aiming for the craggy gap.

We were lucky to have made it here without Gretchen returning to do whatever it was she had planned for us. Kept alive to be useful, as she’d said, or maybe killed when she changed her mind.

More fool her for leaving us alone.

The grass gave way to a rocky terrain as we approached the waterfall. We were at a safe enough distance to avoid any spray.

The ground to my right was soaked with an iridescent green, ending at a sharp drop into the splash pool inches away from my boots. One false move and we’d be melted into soup.

I let Archie take point, ready to grab him if he fell. His bulk moved gracefully across the rocky path, steady and balanced, until he reached the gap, one hand planted on the side of it.

“Can you feel that?” he asked.

Hot, sticky air blew from the gap.

“Unfortunately,” I answered.

I took the lead, pushing my body sideways through the slit in the rocks. It hummed with foreboding vibrations, an intense warmth emitting from the walls.

“Can you manage?” I asked my friend after a few feet.

“Yes, mate,” he grunted, slowly moving after me.

I kept close to him, not barreling ahead. It was dark within the gap, green light in the distance. Jagged pieces of rock snagged my clothes, bit into my skin. I checked on Archie after each step, smelled his blood. He was okay but cut by the stone.

Finally, the gap spat me out on the other side into an enormous chamber about the size of a sports arena. A toxic lake filled it, a scattering of boulders jutting out of the shimmering green water. I stood on an outcropping at the top, moss hanging in long trails from the ceiling. What looked like a mudslide in the far left corner sloped down to the lake like a huge dirty tongue. A strip of white light blinked at the top of it.

The way home.

Streams of toxic water poured down the almost sheer walls, feeding the lake, making it impossible to climb them.

The boulders it would have to be.

I helped Archie out of the last part of the gap, taking his hand. He popped out, staggering forward. I steadied him.

“All good?” I asked.

He brushed dirt from his ruined clothes. Both of his cheeks were cut, but not deeply.

“Shall I lick you?” I said.

He frowned. “No. I’m fine with no licks.”

“My saliva will seal the—”

“No, mate. Keep that stuff away from me. The last time we got close with the vampire shit, I got a stiffy like never before. I can’t be having one here.”

“My spit won’t do that.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m keeping my dick soft.” He laughed. “Not a thing I enjoy saying.”

“Are you sure? I promise you a lick will not turn you on.”

“Call them my war wounds.”

“Fine. But if they give you trouble, I *will* feed you my blood to heal you. And then...”

He huffed, slamming his hands into his pockets. “Bloody lick me then.”

I took his head in my hands. “This will only take a second.”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like this is the sexiest thing in the world.”

I smiled, then got to licking. Each cut sealed, his tangy blood tinged with dirt hot on my tongue.

“There, all better,” I said.

His brows were so pinched together they were one.
“Thanks, mate.”

“See? No erection.”

“Just how I like it.” His frown unfurled. “But not really.”

I patted his shoulder. “You’re an amusing human.”

“Eh... thanks?”

I turned to face the hell before us again, a second and third examination to see if there was another path other than the boulders. The moss would be too weak to swing from, and climbing up to the ceiling wouldn’t be possible with the water on the walls.

A second, smaller mudslide joined to this outcropping sloped down to a dirt beach below. The boulders were laid out like a steppingstone course, the closest one too far away from the shore for any jump Archie could make. An unfair course, then, but one I could traverse easily with him on my back.

“It’s like *Tomb Raider*,” Archie said.

“Sorry?”

“You know, *Lara Croft*.”

“The video game?”

“That’s right. You never played it?”

“No.”

“Oh, you should. It’s awesome and like this. She has to navigate deadly crossings all the time. When things calm down, we’ll have a game.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t sound too excited.”

“Difficult at present.”

“Set it as a goal,” he said.

I nodded, moving to the edge of the outcropping. “We have to go down there.” I leaned over the edge, testing the mudslide with my fist. Cold, compact, dry.

A good sign.

After another test with more weight, I was satisfied. No sinking, no sludgy patches.

“Get on my back,” I told him.

He climbed on without complaint, and I carefully moved down the dry mudslide, adjusting my weight to keep us vertical down the steepness.

We made it to the bottom, green waves licking at the mud beach. I tested again, the mud too soft to walk on. As far as I was concerned, a soft, muddy beach was a red flag.

I checked the area for other dangers, then made the leap to the first boulder, clearing the distance between shore and rock easily.

“All good?” I asked my companion.

“I’ll puke after.”

Another leap, another, the lake eerily silent beneath us, not one ripple across its surface.

Within two minutes, I made it to the other side, landing on a path of dry mud at the edge of the mudslide. Keeping Archie firmly on my back, I tested the mudslide, eyes on the blinking prize above.

As dry as the first.

We were going home.

A splash, a heavy landing behind us, followed by a second. I spun, putting Archie down as a river monster attacked.

Green, metallic-looking skin, humanoid and sexless with no mouth, it rushed me with furious speed, eating up the remaining distance with a leap through the air.

It crashed into me. I closed my eyes and mind to it, blocking out its death stare. My vampiric resistance flared against it, as it'd done before, protecting me from the deadly temptation.

These monsters were strong, brutal. It grabbed me by the throat, attempting to crush my windpipe, pinning me to the mud. I brought my knee up, hitting it between the legs. Though sexless, it still felt pain there.

It lost its grip. I headbutted it, then drove my fist into its temple, a metallic ding with each strike. The monster rolled off me as the second ran for Archie.

A sweeping kick brought down my monster as it jumped to its feet. I twirled and slammed a fist into its chest where the heart should be, cracking its exoskeleton.

It tried to get back up.

I grabbed hold of its bald head, twisting it off. Green liquid oozed from its neck, narrowly missing my hands. I threw the head into the lake and hurried to Archie.

No. He was on his back, the monster looming over him, convincing him death was a wonderful, peaceful step to take.

I leaped, landed behind it, grabbed it, and threw it into a wall.

Rock broke away, a trickle of river leaking out through the cracks.

The monster charged at me, limbs spiraling in a whirlwind attack. It flipped and danced through the air, around me, trying to confuse me.

I shot forward, took hold of its arm. Broke it, slamming the prick into the mud, denting the ground from the force of it.

Done with the creature, I repeated the head removal, threw it away.

“Archie...”

I went to him, crouched beside his still body. Took his hand, searched for a pulse. Faint but there, his breathing weak. Lifted his eyelids, only the whites of his eyes exposed.

“No... Archie...”

I bit my left wrist, opened his mouth and held my bleeding wound to his lips. My blood poured in but had no effect. He didn't move, didn't so much as twitch in response to the healing crimson.

“Come on, Archie...”

More blood, no results.

“Archie...”

Not him. Not him or Victoria or Fizz or Clay. Don't let them all leave my life. Not now, not when there was a path to a beautiful future within the gray.

“Not now...” I breathed.

A monster behind me. I met it, delivering a high kick into its chest. It flew backward in a violent spin, back into the lake.

Two more jumped out of the water, another following seconds later.

Scooping up my friend, I charged up the mudslide, putting everything into my speed. Pushing, pushing, desperate to save my friend, to be free of these lands.

The strip of light grew by the millisecond, closer, closer.

The monsters closer, closer.

The light grew, expanding into a brilliant, blinding glare.

Hold on, my friend...

The light swallowed us.

ELEVEN

CLAY



The guards wheeled the cage up an endless spiraling slope, the kind you found in multistory car parks. This one seemed to go on forever and a day, no windows, only the monotonous black walls.

Eventually, we reached a blue glass elevator in a small chamber. No windows, so there was no view, only three light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. The whole place was pretty drab.

“Suppose you won’t give me a hint as to where we’re going?” I asked one of the guards.

A woman grunted in answer.

“Oh, go on, let’s play a guessing game,” I said.

“You’re really confident, considering how fucked you are,” she retorted.

“I’m enjoying this new confidence.”

Her brows pinched, and she slammed her sword against the cage.

“Was that supposed to make me jump?” I asked and shrugged. “Erm, I’m so scared.”

Stop being like this!

Fuck that.

These demons would never get anything other than this shitty attitude, no matter how risky this talk was.

The elevator doors, big enough to accommodate a cage with a warlock inside, opened with a hiss. The guards wheeled me inside. A tight fit for sure, but enough.

“Now what?” I asked.

The doors closed, and down I went into the dark.

The bloody boring dark.



AFTER, well, too long, the elevator broke out of the dark and into the light. My lids slammed shut against the glare, an arm up to help block out the sudden transition.

And, man, was it cold.

The demon realm might be cold everywhere, but this place froze my bones on another level. The shivers started, icy winds whistling around the edges of the elevator.

Bollocks.

The cage moved. I slowly unpeeled my eyelids, easing myself to adjust to the new light. This new level of this damn realm.

Two guards pulled the cage along with rope. I rubbed my eyes, stunned by the new location.

An endless icy tundra spread out before me as far as the eye could see, broken up by gorges and bridges. The sky was a deep blue-black reminding me of the tones in Tae’s hair,

strange pink smears daubed across it. A full moon beamed down on the ice, the blue stars were brighter here, the wind almost a song, the whistle of a milkman.

There used to be a guy who delivered milk to the shopping center now and again—a few times every other week when he could manage to pilfer some pints for us. He'd always whistle songs by *The Rolling Stones*, one of the cheeriest men on the planet.

Good old John and his kindness.

The wind of this frozen place didn't offer a rendition of 'Jumpin' Jack Flash' or anything, but it reminded me of him, of those days in my hole in the wall at the shopping center.

"Welcome to Level 666," a male guard announced.

There were around twenty demons lined up along the edge of the first, closest gorge, a dark maw shrouded in mist. A massive bridge arched over it, linking this side to an island of ice.

Two Victorian-like street lamps stood either side of the bridge, the same on the other side.

The two demon guards wheeled me across the bridge to the island, the misty dark still below us, clinging to the edges. Another bridge connected to a second island, then a third to another. We moved across each ice island, each bridge, a network zigzagging across the dark void below. Man, it took an eternity to get to the other side, to the meat of the icy tundra.

A frozen lake. *The frozen lake.*

Oh, shit.

A pulley and winch system fixed to a tall beam stood beside what looked to be the shore.

Great. I was getting hung from that, right? I mean, there was a handy hook for a cage like mine to be dangled from.

“For you,” the guard on my left said, snorting with laughter. He tossed a brown envelope into the cage.

The guards, both male, got to work hooking the cage to the beam and winch. Once locked in, they turned a huge crank together, hoisting me up until I was a scary amount of feet in the air, dangling in the cold wind.

Shit.

Done, the pair of them trotted off back toward the bridges and islands, laughing, thinking they were so clever.

Alone. Scared. Angry. Ready for my magic, ready to kill and blow this realm to merry pieces.

Voices...

Voices in the deep. Calling to me from the frozen dark.

“*Prince,*” they said, icy whispers licking at the back of my neck. “*Prince of the brightness, the abomination.*”

I saw them down there, the old kings and queens kicked off their thrones by their kids and other demons over the centuries. Never allowed to die, forever thinking about what went wrong, plotting their escape. They told me so, whispering away, laying it all out there.

They never let go of hope. They wanted out. They believed they would be free one day soon.

Soon seemed a bit too ideological to me.

“*Revenge,*” a king said.

“Freedom,” a queen added.

“Imelda...” another king said. Was that the queen’s dad?
My grandfather?

*“She stole from me. She forced me here. Your mother is as
dirty as you are.”*

Yep. That answered that.

I shivered under the onslaught of the ghostly whispers.
They called my name, insulted me. Threw stuff at me like
abomination, dirty prince, walking dead.

Whatever. Bollocks to them all.

“At least I’m up here, not down there,” I said, not really
wanting to engage.

After a while, they dulled down the vitriol, easy to ignore.
Those monarchs were over, irrelevant, and as good as dead.

So, fuck you.

Needing a distraction from the cold, I broke the wax seal
on the envelope, finding the queen’s elegant scrawl on
perfumed paper.

Ugh.

Dearest Clay,

I hope this letter finds you well.

**This is your next test. Testing your will to survive, the
power of your body and mind. Can you overcome the
elements of this level? Can you free yourself from the cage
and find your way back to me?**

**If you do, I’ll let you live. If not, you die a lonely death. My
assumption is on the latter, for without James, you are**

nothing. My hopes are for your end. But I will let fate dictate it.

A dead Clay means you were not meant to be. A Clay who survives proves to me you were. Then we will plan our next steps.

Do not hope for the Peace Order to intervene. They are ended. Do not hope for your vampire. He will not get inside this realm.

Do not hope for Grindle.

Do not hope for your twin.

No one is coming for you. This is your trial to overcome.

With love,

Mother

Man, she certainly enjoyed inflicting trials on people.

I screwed up the letter and tossed it into the snow. Pulling the robe around my shivering body, I regretted being such a mouthy arsewipe, even if it'd felt so damn good at the time.

The cold soon sank deep into me. I huddled against the biting air, making myself small, hunched up, the robe too thin to make much of a difference.

Yeah, I was definitely freezing to death without a little twin brotherly intervention.

I'd spent many cold nights on the streets. Gosh, some of the winters had been brutal before I'd found the shopping center. They were worse without Fizz, so lonely under the flyovers, in shop doorways, trying to keep warm at the barrel fires people would sometimes share with me. Waking up to witch attacks, running for fear of black eyes and broken bones,

just wanting to sleep because I'd finally nodded off after shivering for hours. But my witch attackers never cared how tired and cold I was, how my stomach hurt from hunger. All they wanted was a drunken thrill, to chase and beat up a warlock.

Sick fucks.

Man, those days were rough. But I survived. I fought my way through them. The cold never got to me. No witch broke my spirit. And then along came my little Fizz Pop, galvanizing me into harder action. I had another mouth to feed, a buddy to curl up with at night. Gosh, she was a walking radiator—not so fun to sleep with on hot summer nights.

“I c-could d-do with you r-right now,” I said, teeth chattering, hurting when I took a breath.

I tried the bars, pulling and pushing on them.

Useless. Oh well. Worth a go, right?

I closed my eyes, focusing my strength. Like the cold of the past, this wouldn't beat me. I'd find a way out of this mess. I just had to dig deep, find my way to Buttons.

He was the key. He'd set me free.

I chuckled at the rhyme, repeated it several times out loud, in my head, until I slipped away, arriving next to my twin talking to the queen.

Yay! It worked, opened up our connection. Maybe. Coincidence or not, I ran with it.

His white buttons shimmered in the light of a huge hearth in a room of shadows somewhere in the palace. Too small to be a bedroom. He angled his head to acknowledge me but didn't speak as he listened to the bitch sat in an ornate chair

facing the fire, reiterating her disappointments in her children as he stood and took it.

When would she change the damn record?

TWELVE

TAE



I burst through the light into the daytime of Seoul.

A burning Seoul, smoke choking the sky, a plateau of smoldering ruin before me, new green rivers cutting through the city. The death and smoke hit the back of my throat, an overwhelming morosity attacking my senses.

I stood with a still unconscious Archie in my arms in a disused picnic area on Nam Mountain, Seoul Tower still standing above me, reaching for the heavens.

My city. My hometown.

Burning.

No time to think on it now. I bit open my left wrist, fed Archie my blood to heal him. Archie required medical attention, his affliction beyond my healing—some sort of mental disruption.

I had to get to a phone or a hospital.

Before I set off, the river monsters appeared behind me, having followed me through the light.

Wonderful.

I went to run, stopped by a blast of Synth rushing past me. It struck the first monster, sending it back through the light as

the others dodged out of the way of more beams of red.

Five ADU agents, their white uniforms gray and covered in dirt, ran at them, firing off aggressive magic, casting a series of spells.

The white light vanished, and the crossing closed.

I moved past the fighting, darting down the hill, expecting to be stopped by more witches.

That didn't happen.

I shot across roads, wound through streets, jumped over dead bodies and toxic rivers, avoiding crowds and the ADU. Blocked out the carnage around me. Focused.

Arriving at a pay phone, I made some calls. Dr. Ryu couldn't be reached, but I managed to get through to one of my people based here in the city.

Ari.

She spoke in Korean. *"Mr. Frost? Where are you?"*

I told her the street.

"I can't send transport," she added. *"The roads are either closed or too dangerous to navigate. Can you make it to Seoul Air Base?"*

"Yes. Is it still standing?"

"Enough to fly out of the country. We can take you to Fukuoka, Japan. The flight will take an hour and twenty minutes. Victoria is at a medical center in the city, hidden."

I had to get Archie there before I went after Clay. I would save the deep dive into what'd happened there for when I saw Victoria.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

“She is, sir. Doing well.”

The relief almost flooded me. She was alive. Victoria was alive.

The phone shook in my hand, the wire it was attached to flapping. I steadied myself.

“What about the cat? Fizz?” I asked, my tone controlled.

“She’s fine. Scared, quiet, unhurt.”

More ripples of relief.

I told her about Archie.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Frost.”

“Will the flight be ready when I get there?” I asked.

“It’s ready for you now. We’ve kept a plane waiting.”

Amazing. “Thank you, Ari. I appreciate it. And it’s good to hear your voice.”

“Yours too, sir.”

Our conversation ended, and I took off through the streets once again, speeding toward Seoul Air Base.



ARI MET me on the tarmac beside a small private jet.

“Poor Archie,” she said.

Dressed in black from head to toe, her trademark lucky battered black cap pulled down over her hair, it was like seven years hadn’t passed since the last time I’d seen her.

There were signs of fighting around me, damage around the runway. A ruined, charred plane sat on its side, crushing

fallen trees. It was broken in half, so much of its body a burned ruin. The plane meant to take Victoria and the others to London.

“We managed to put out the fire,” Ari said.

“I’m sorry this mission failed.”

She nodded.

The runway was clear for the jet to take off. Within minutes, we were on the plane, Archie laid out on a row of seats, me crouched beside him.

“You will wake up, friend,” I said. “I promise.”

His complexion was losing its dark brown to a pallid gray. His chest still moved in delicate breaths, his heart trying its best to keep him alive.

That wasn’t good enough.

I had to hear his voice.



THE WHOLE OPERATION RAN SMOOTHLY, the plane taking off and landing in Fukuoka. We were driven through the city to Chūō-ku—one of the seven wards of Fukuoka—aiming for the medical center a few streets back from Ohori Park.

Archie’s head rested in my lap, my prayers flowing from me to him, willing him to get back up again.

What had the river monster done to him? Was he trapped in some sort of purgatory?

The car pulled up to the anonymous beige building about six stories high, with tinted windows, a simple green cross

above the entrance.

Ari gave the go-ahead from the front passenger seat for me to move, the driver another woman I hadn't seen in years.

Ari came with me through the automatic doors of the center.

A female doctor and two male nurses met me in the lobby, directing me to a waiting stretcher. I put my friend down on it, following the medical staff to an examination bay just off the lobby.

"This way, sir," one of the nurses said to me in Japanese, stopping me. "Your friend is this way."

I hesitated, receiving reassurances from the doctor that Archie would be taken care of, and I'd be kept informed the whole time.

Some of the people working here were on my payroll, humans I'd never met before. Discreet, efficient, able to keep my friends and me hidden. No press or witches would show up here.

I thanked the doctor and followed the nurse up a set of stairs to a corridor of private rooms.

Victoria was in the third room along. In bed, attached to drips and a heart monitor, the left side of her face bandaged, her right arm in plaster, her head facing the window. A paperback novel sat next to her, Fizz curled up in her lap.

The cat looked up and meowed. She leaped off the bed and into my arms as I approached. A ball of purrs, rubbing her head against me, licking my hands, beside herself with happiness to see me.

I kissed her, stroked her.

Victoria turned to face me. Her bottom lip quivered, tears rolling from her one exposed eye.

“Oh, Tae. Oh my God.” She lifted her good arm.

I took her hand, bent to kiss it.

She broke down into sobs.

“I’m here,” I said, squeezing her hand. “I’m here, Victoria.”

She drew in shuddering breaths. “I... I... Give me a minute.”

I let her calm down, taking the seat beside her bed, Fizz in my lap.

After a few minutes, she called the nurse and asked for a cup of tea. The woman happily went off to get her one.

A few more breaths, dabbing at her eyes and nose with a tissue she already had in her hand, she was ready to talk.

“How are you?” she asked.

“How am I?” I shook my head. “How are *you*?”

“Getting there.”

“What happened to you? The plane?”

“What about Clay?”

“He’s missing.”

“He was in London.”

I sat up straighter. “What?”

“He’s vanished again, but Clay turned up in London. He destroyed Barking Park, some of the streets around it.”

“What... What are you saying?”

“Take that phone over there,” she said, gesturing with her good hand to the bedside table. “It’s all over the news.”

I took the phone, bringing up a news site, found the video of Clay and the destruction, the Arcana fires.

No fire burned like the vibrant, distinctive orange-gold of Arcana fire.

“No...”

“Now he’s really public enemy number one,” she said.

My heart throbbed with a terrible, knotted pain. “And he’s disappeared?”

“No sign of him anywhere.”

This was further evidence of the importance of Adam’s notebook, of finding a solution to taking Arcana away.

“This will have devastated him,” I said.

Unless he’s succumbed to his rising darkness.

No. Not him. Not the sunshine warlock.

“Are you okay?” she asked me.

“I’m fine.”

“Get back out there. You don’t have to stay here with me. You have to find him.”

“I will.”

“Then go, Tae. I’m not worth the time.”

I growled. “Don’t ever say that to me again.”

She blinked, stunned for once. “I’m... I’m sorry.”

“I want to find Clay, but I have to be careful. I’ll leave for London shortly. In fact... Excuse me a moment.” I left the

room.

Clay...

My Clay...

Ari waited outside in the corridor, standing watch with a man. They both stood to attention as if I were their army general.

“Can you make arrangements for me to leave for London, please?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. When would you like to leave?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Right away.” She saluted me.

“There is no need to salute me.”

“Sorry, sir.”

I returned to Victoria. “I’m leaving for London soon. Now tell me the rest of the story.”

My Clay...

My Clayby...

So much destruction...

“It all happened so fast. Things were going well, we got on the plane, and then I saw them flood the airfield. Witches and demons barreling across the fucking place like coked-out zombies—the witches, at least. They started firing off Synth at the plane. Blew out the cockpit windows first, then the turbines.”

At that moment, the nurse returned with the tea. My lawyer thanked her, and the nurse left us to it.

“Fuck...” she whispered.

“Take your time.”

“Where’s Archie?” she asked. “Oh, fuck. Where is he?”

I’d been hoping to delay telling her, scared to upset her even more.

“What a bitch I am not to ask straight away. God... Selfish.”

“You’re not selfish,” I countered. I told her, adding the details of our journey through The Fairy Wilds.

I let her cry again, for our friend.

She wiped her nose, the white of her eye red. “What if he doesn’t wake up?”

“He will wake up.”

“Oh, God.”

“We have to keep faith in him. This is Archie we’re talking about.” I took her hand again. “You’re my friends, my support. I... I love you both so much.”

Telling her those three words was a pressure lifted, a truth revealed.

“You... You do?”

Amazingly, I experienced no awkwardness, only a sliver of joy. “I do. You’ve both been with me every step of the way these past fifteen years. I couldn’t have done anything without you both by my side.”

Fizz meowed gently.

Victoria started crying again.

I squeezed her hand.

“This is all your fault,” she said.

“Sorry?”

“Look at the state of me. You shouldn’t be making me sob like this.”

“I’m sorry to upset you.”

“I love you too, you big sexy fool. Come here.”

Putting Fizz down for a moment, I leaned in and hugged my friend carefully.

She kissed my cheek. “You’re a beautiful man.”

“So are you.”

“A man?”

“Beautiful woman.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” She snorted, a brief slice of her fun side coming through.

It soon died.

“Archie’s a fighter,” she said. “He won’t let this beat him—whatever it is.”

“Yes.” Fizz returned to my lap, gazing up at me.

“You’ll see Clay soon,” I told her.

She meowed in response.

Victoria continued with her story. “My face got burned as I escaped the fire on the plane. Managed to get me and Fizz off, Phillippe and the prince right behind me. But then the explosion...” She bowed her head. “Oh, God.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Broke my arm falling over.” A heavy sigh. “Then I saw them. Saw the prince and Phillippe. They’d got out of the plane, crawling across the tarmac. Looked like they’d been thrown

off the plane. They got to their feet, both hurt but able to stand. Started toward me and then... then a demon came out of nowhere and stabbed the prince ten times in the chest, the face, the neck. More than ten times..." She blinked away fresh tears. "Phillipe tried to help, but he got dragged away. Probably in the demon realm being tortured as we speak." Her shaky hand lifted her cup.

"Do you need help with that?" I asked.

"No, I'm fine. Thanks." She managed what looked like a blissful sip. "I got rescued before the wankers killed me. *We* got rescued." She smiled weakly at Fizz. "I thought that was it, that I'd be stabbed, too, or taken away. But your people got here before that happened, before the ADU. Took me away, flew me here because... because Seoul is... You've seen it, right?"

"I've seen it."

"Sucks."

"It really does."

"The staff here fixed me up, took care of me. They're so good here."

"I'm glad."

"But I didn't know where you were, what'd happened to Clay and Buttons, nothing. Then the news reports came through. First, the rest of the royal witch deaths to break the circle, then the Clay in London thing, then... nothing. I thought you were both... gone." A heavy, shaky sigh. "I won't cry again. I won't."

"You can cry all you like."

“That’s sweet, but I’m so worn out from all the crying. I just want to go home.”

“You will. Soon.”

“Unless the world goes to shit,” she countered. “Fucking demons, fucking witches. Fucking Winter Gold.”

I kept my rage firmly bottled. “Fizz will have to stay here with you.”

“I know she will.”

“It’ll be too dangerous for me to take her with me.”

“Her favorite babysitters are here anyway.”

I smiled. “That’s right.”

A reunion with his cat would do wonders for Clay, yet I wasn’t risking the adorable feline’s safety. Danger waited in London. Serious danger.

I felt *her* presence, her arrival on the roof. Cold and terrifying. I winced at it, eyes snapping to the window.

“What’s wrong?” Victoria asked.

I placed Fizz on the bed. “Excuse me again.”

Standing in the shadows of an emergency stairwell, I found Winter Gold, her vampires lurking behind her.

“Hello, Tae Hyun-Ki,” she said.

THIRTEEN

TAE



My bottled rage threatened to pop. “What are you doing here?”

“To see you, of course.”

“Leave. Right now.”

“Please, Tae Hyun-Ki. Do not run from me again.”

“Get away from me. I never want to see your face again.”

“But you will, my love. I will never give up on us.” Her cold veneer was shattered, exposing a raw emotion, a pathetic aura I never associated with her.

“There is no us. When will you get that into your head?”

Anger flashed in her midnight eyes. “You left me in that tower, riddled with vervain, vulnerable to demons. I could have died. Many of my people did.”

“Am I supposed to care?”

I couldn’t tell if she was hurt or enraged—probably a cocktail of both. “The Tae Hyun-Ki of the past would have cared. He would have helped me, held me, kissed me. You are an ungrateful fledgling, a—”

“Let me save you some time, Winter,” I said, not using her real name as she liked to use mine. “I’ve reached my limit on

taking shit. Your shit, demon shit, witch shit. I'm done. It's in your best interest to walk away right now, leave me be for good. There is no future. There is no love here. Nothing you do will ever change that. I hate you. You took me away from Clay. Walk away now before I end your life."

Her obsidian eyes were dark fury, her lips twitching as she stepped closer.

I braced myself for a fight. She was much stronger than me, with an army behind her waiting in the corridors, as well as having the witches on her side.

"You disgust me with your threats," she growled, her words vibrating the air. "I should take your head right now for such betrayal against your sire."

I straightened my spine, steel against her. "Take my head. It won't ever change my hate."

She leaned in closer, reaching biting distance. "You will never escape me."

"I already have."

"Never, Tae Hyun-Ki," she whispered, coming even closer toward my lips. "I am in your blood, your heart, your mind. There is no you without me. There are no steps you take without me in your bones. There is no turn of the world when we are not joined together. We are forever. The same cannot be said for you and Clay. He is the path of chaos and death. No future, only more sorrow. I can free you from that."

I pulled away from her. "The only freedom I want is from your shadow."

"Impossible, as I said."

Unless I kill you right now...

The only way forward was her death. She'd never leave me alone, never allow me to love anyone but her. Not again, not after Tae Ae-Jung.

My muscles tensed, my insides a maelstrom of ice. "Why are you doing this again?"

"Because I love you. And I forgive you for abandoning me."

"You can have anyone you want. Why me?"

"Because you are my special one, the man who stole my heart."

Her voice drained me of everything but hatred. "Then I'm sorry for you. It must be hard loving someone who doesn't offer it back."

She held me in her gaze. "You are weak. You always were."

"If you say so."

"You were always a slave to your emotions. That hasn't changed over the centuries."

That was probably true. "What of it?"

"I want to be yours again."

"Those days are gone."

"But—"

"How many times do we have to do this? Until one of us is dead? Is that what you want?"

"Why would I want you dead?" she questioned coolly.

"If you can't have me, no one will."

“But others have had you. Your wife. Clay. They have all enjoyed you, fallen for you as I have.”

“And?”

“And I want to have my turn again. I want to save you from Clay. He is dangerous. I gather you have seen what happened at Barking Park?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you still stand by him after that?”

“Because he needs me.”

“He needs to die.”

“I love him.”

Her dark eyes widened, filling with crimson anger. She charged forward, grabbing me by the hair, yanking my head back.

“What did you say?” she hissed.

“I love him.”

I felt so powerful, so free.

Now I only had to tell him.

“You do not love him. You love to fuck him. There is a difference.” She bared her fangs.

“You don’t know anything about us.”

“Oh, but I do know. I know you are on a path of self-destruction, clouded by endless grief. You will always make these mistakes while you hold onto bitter sadness. I can help you move on. I can help you forget.”

“I will never forget my family.”

“You will. One day you will only see me, never look back on them or the warlock again.”

My bottle popped, fury bursting forth. Taking her by surprise, I twisted and slammed her through a window, the glass smashing in an almighty boom.

She was on me again before I hit the ground, throwing punches that I barely ducked.

We danced across the small courtyard beyond the window, trying to land blows on each other, our fangs bared, our eyes red storms burning through the gray daylight.

“I command you to stop!” she roared.

The order rumbled through me, but I resisted. I’d never yield to her again, never let her betray me again, be nothing to her but a memory.

“I love you!” she cried and landed a punch on my jaw.

I took it, boots sliding across the concrete ground as I stayed upright.

I rushed her, dropping at the last moment to punch her in the shins. She buckled, falling to one knee.

Her vampires lingered in the stairwell, watching, waiting for the order to intervene.

Winter jumped up, twirling above me, a spinning kick cracking me in the side of the head. This time I went down, tumbling across the concrete to land in the shards of glass littering the ground.

As she came at me again, I scooped up a large shard and leaped up and over her, landing at her back, grabbing her arms, and shoving her forward into the wall.

She hissed, kicked at me. I slammed harder and bent her arms, snapping the bones. Pinned her against the wall with all my might, pushed against her, the side of her face grinding into the brick.

I had her. I'd actually overwhelmed my sire.

"Let me go, Lee Min-Kyu," I said. "There's nothing between us now."

"Never..."

I brought the glass up to her neck. "Then I'll end it for you. I'll take away the pain."

She didn't struggle as the tip of the glass bit into her flesh. "Then do it. End me now because there is no future without you."

I couldn't help but sigh against her. "This is madness. Why are you doing this? You've seen my love for Clay. I haven't felt like this in a long time. And I don't want to lose it."

"But you're happy to lose me."

"Honestly? Yes."

She sagged, her solid form softening beneath me. "Then kill me."

I backed off, leaving a decent amount of distance between us. My body on her body revolted me.

"I won't kill my sire if I don't have to."

She turned, her eyes cold and obsidian. "Why?"

"I will if you force my hand."

"Then you must because I will never leave you alone, never stop meddling in your life until you end me or give in to me."

“And that’s love, is it?”

Human security turned up—my people. With hand signals, I kept them at bay, waiting with Winter’s vampires.

No more fighting. No more of this time wasting.

“I am surrounded by so many lovers, yet so lonely,” she said, wiping blood and dirt from her cheek. “There is only one of you, and you hate me.”

“Look at what you’ve done. How can I feel anything else?”

“I did it for love.”

I shook my head. “We’re done here.”

“You won’t kill me?”

I should kill her. She deserved to die after her attack on my island.

“If you want to die, do it yourself.” I walked away, boots crunching on the glass.

“I... I’m sorry.” Her words hit me hard.

“What?” I faced her other my shoulder.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry now?”

“Am I not allowed a change of heart?”

“As quickly as that?”

She sat down on the ground, crossing her legs. “Have you ever taken a course of action you know is wrong, yet refuse to stop?”

I stared at her, too surprised to answer. I’d been prepared for a second attack, the real possibility of having to kill her.

“I’m the terrible ex-lover, the cliché, unable to move on from a past relationship *I* destroyed.” She stood up, brushing down her clothes. “This is no trick. I truly am sorry.” Tears rolled down her cheeks.

I struggled, both sad and angry. I felt her genuine grief through our frayed connection, but that didn’t mean anything.

“I never want to see you again,” I said.

“I know,” she answered.

“You’ve made a mess of things with the witches,” I added. “Made promises of me working for them.”

“I will break those promises.”

“How?”

“By walking away.”

“They’ll want payback.”

“Let them come.”

You’re insane... “I’m finding it hard to believe you’ll just move on after everything.”

“I won’t move on. I will never forget you. I will simply close myself off to you.”

“Is that possible? A sire’s bond to their fledgling is eternal.”

“It is, but it can be silent. I will make it silent.”

As much as I tried to deny it, sorrow fluttered through my chest.

“This is the end?” I asked.

“The end.”

I closed my eyes, muscles tight. “After today, if I ever see your face again, I *will* kill you.”

“I know.”

“You’re not tricking me?” I asked.

“No. Time will show you that.”

I opened my eyes to meet hers again.

Forgiveness was hard, nothing but flimsy, rotten wood unable to hold up against my hate. Not now, not for a long time. If ever. I wouldn’t hold onto it and let it fester, though. It wasn’t like that for me, more a case of not giving her what she wanted.

Because she didn’t deserve it.

“Goodbye, Tae Hyun-Ki.”

“Goodbye.”

She held my gaze for one long minute before turning and walking out of my life forever.

My lonely, complicated sire. The first person to ever steal my heart.

Gone for good.

Another weight had been lifted.

Now for London.

FOURTEEN

CLAY



Queen Imelda's posture put me to shame. My shoulders would never go back that far, and I could never sit as straight-backed in a chair like that. I was more of a sloucher, and that gold chair of hers looked super uncomfortable. Very slouchable.

I looked around at the darkness ringing the light of the fire. Couldn't make out much other than the stone floor and curtains drawn across a window. There were demon guards hiding in those shadows, though. I mean, of course, there were.

"Are you mine, James?" the queen said, her dulcet tones cutting through the room.

"I'm yours, Mother. Always."

"But you ran from me to be with Clay. I hurt from that, James."

"Let me make it up to you," he begged. "I can. I will. I'll do anything you want."

"You're dangerous."

"I'm sorry."

"You failed in the trials."

“But we became better,” he said.

“Better? Chaotic, you mean.” She shook her head. “The moment you step close enough to him, you grant him the power to kill me, to bring down this palace, possibly this entire realm.”

“No. He won’t—”

She held up a silencing hand. “No, James. He *will*. He hates me so much. You should have heard the things he said to me. He’s shown his disregard for our family repeatedly.”

“I can talk to him, make him see—”

“Talk to him? And be close to him? Never. It is far too dangerous.”

“Not close to him physically, but here. Right now.”

She stared at him for a couple of beats. “Here?”

“He’s here, Mother.” My twin pointed at me. “Like I told you before, the ghost Clay.”

Her white eyes moved to me, saw nothing there but still managed to send a chill to my soul.

“Is that so?” she said. “Are you really there, Clay?”

“I’m really here,” I responded.

“He said he really is,” Buttons said, playing mediator. “Shall I talk to him with you here, Mother? Shall we finally try to move on?”

I kicked things off before she wagged her tongue. “She’s locked me in a cage, James. At the frozen lake where they put the old demon kings and queens. I can hear them crying down there, wanting their power back. Her dad’s there. He’s really pissed off.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Exactly what I said. She’s locked me in a cage at the frozen lake. And it’s bloody freezing. Calls it a trial, but really she wants to kill me.” I quoted her letter to him.

“I thought he was in the building across the river,” Buttons said to the queen.

She stared at him, silent.

“Mother? You said Clay was being held in that other building for safe keeping until he sorted his mind out.”

“Not my brain that needs sorting out,” I muttered.

He took a step forward. “Did you lie, Mother?”

“She did,” I added.

His head snapped to me. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Fine.” I kept quiet.

Queen Imelda returned her gaze to the fire. “He really is there.”

“I told you he was,” Buttons replied. “Now, please answer me.”

“I am the queen, James. I do not answer to anyone.”

“Please answer *me*, Mother. Is it true what Clay says? You’ve locked him in Level 666? You mean to freeze him to death?”

She took ages to answer. “He requires more tests, more conditioning.”

“And the letter?”

She slowly got to her feet. “Is your loyalty now slipping?”

“No... But I thought we were going to try and ease him into this family. Not hurt him, not kill him. He is the Bright One, my brother. I care about him. I want him to be safe and strong, so we can fight our enemies. For you, for the future.”

I wanted to puke, my stomach set to a painful broil. Kind of. As broiling as a stomach can be for a guy stuck between an ice lowly and a ghost.

“When will you see her for what she is?” I said. “She killed so many of her kids because they weren’t what she wanted from her experiments, and she beat the shit out of me on the train. Broke my bones, fucked me up badly.” I told him every single detail, ran through all of her faults. “And look at what she did to you. Hurt you, transformed you, and didn’t bother to meet you until recently but expected you to murder in her name. How is she a mum worthy of loving? She’s filled your head with bullshit, and you need to let her know that.”

He looked at me. “You shouldn’t say those things.”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

“She... She did that to you?”

“Not just me, James. You, too. To those who came before us. So much blood has been spilled in the name of what? Experimentation? Greed? Power? She’s a monster. You know she is. You know what she’s done, what she made you do. She turned you into a killer.”

He turned his buttons to her. “Clay is telling me things, terrible things.”

“Because he hates me,” she replied. “He wants you on his team.”

“What team?” I countered. Man, if only she could hear me for a verbal spat.

Buttons's shoulders hunched forward. "Please tell me this isn't true."

The queen kept her back to him, her eyes on the fire. "Are you begging for an easy swallow?"

He stepped forward again. "Are you saying—"

"If you come any closer, I'll have your head mounted on my wall."

Buttons stepped back, his hands up defensively. "I'm sorry, Mother. I mean no offense. I just... I just don't understand why you would lie to me. Why would you want to kill Clay?"

"Because he wants to kill *me*," she answered. "It is as simple as that. There is nothing left for me to work with. He is a lost cause."

"But you haven't killed him yet."

What was this? Still trying for hope?

"Give up," I said. "There's no love in this room."

He faced me. "What about us?"

"I..." I opened and closed my mouth, my throat dry.

"Mother..." He turned away. "Please. I can't lose Clay after everything we've been through together, after this change. It would be such a waste. And I can't lose you and this family. It's all I've ever wanted."

The queen remained silent.

"Please, Mother. Let me try and fix these things. I know you can be mother and son. I know Clay can be—"

"Never," I interjected. "She's the enemy, and you fucked me over by taking me to London."

Again, he looked at me. “I’m sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

From serial killer to this, messing with my emotions.

Damn.

Still, the queen kept her mouth shut.

Buttons shook his head. “I want us to be happy. I don’t want to be alone again.”

Gosh, my hurt heart. “Listen to me, James. She’s not about making you happy, only using you to get what she wants. Nothing else. You showed me that little boy by the river, so alone, in need of love, and she had you taken away. Not to take care of you or hold you and tell you bedtime stories, but to put you through hell. She’s not a mother you need in your life.”

He looked between us. “I...”

“Why didn’t she take you in when we were kids? She knew our situations. She knew the pain we were going through. But she stood back and watched, tested us. She’s always testing us, putting us through her trials. When will it stop? When can we just kick back and relax?” Here I went, offloading. “I miss my cat. I miss Tae and my friends. I want some peace, James. I want to enjoy my new relationship, explore it, have a life, be still for a bit. Not this drama, not this fucking pain. Layers and layers of bullshit and suffering and crying and being scared, and now I have to deal with being a mass human killer. I burned down the park and those houses and killed...” Shit. The guilt... “Maybe I don’t deserve to be happy, but I can make a difference. I can make it up to those dead people, make this worth it. Stop Quentin’s plan being

implemented, stop the queen from messing up my world. No matter how much you think she'll love you, she won't."

He didn't answer.

"Remember what you said to me about being better?"

He nodded slowly.

"I know this is hard," I continued, "but you have to see things clearer. Use those button eyes to see more, break through her crap. Come and get me, and we'll get out of here."

Who would've thought I'd be here begging the button-eyed demon like this?

All this time, Queen Imelda watched Buttons, her hands folded before her. A silent sentinel, deadly with hidden claws ready to slice and dice.

"How can I trust you not to hurt her?" he asked.

You can't. "James..."

"Promise me you'll leave her alone."

My eyes flicked to her. "I... She has to stay out of my way."

Such a promise was impossible. With my spells back, I might lose my shit again in her presence.

Here's hoping...

The queen shot forward, backhanding Buttons. His head snapped to the side, and he listed into the shadows. He managed to keep himself vertical and stumbled back to face her, clutching his face.

"Mother..." he breathed, his face flushing red.

"Get out of there," I said. "Now."

“On your knees, demon,” the queen commanded.

“Mother...”

“I said on your knees!” Her voice was an explosion.

The guards moved forward a step. She ordered them to keep back.

Buttons went down to his knees, his hands up. “Please, Mother. I’m sorry.”

“Bow your head. I cannot stand the sight of those buttons.”

“Mother...”

“Is this what you want, James? The destruction of your family? You found us, only to lose us to this thing.” She waved in the general direction of me. “He has poisoned your mind against me, been more trouble than he is worth. I believed Arcana within a demonic body, even one of diluted blood, would be a boon for us. It has not turned out that way. In fact, I think I have come to a decision.” She snapped her fingers, not to use her power but to call a guard over. “Deliver the order to have Clay killed immediately. Bring me his body.”

“What—” Buttons tried, receiving another smack to the face.

“Do not speak again. You were conspiring with him, weren’t you?”

“Mother...”

A third smack, sending him to all fours.

“I told you not to speak!”

“But you asked him a question,” I said.

Buttons spat black blood on the floor, pushing himself up to his knees. He looked up at her.

“You were conspiring to go and rescue him, betraying me,” she said, calmer now. “Of course, he would hurt me. So have you.” She turned her back to him. “Take him back to the lava. I want him to burn while he thinks on what he has done to his queen.”

My God. No.

“No!” Buttons roared. “I won’t let you do this!”

Black tentacles burst from his body, lashing out at the guards. He knocked them to the ground, threw them across the room within seconds. His spikes burst from his hands. He jumped forward, stabbing the queen through the stomach. It happened so quickly that no one, including me, had a chance to process his switch from pleading to hardcore.

Wow.

Buttons removed his spike from the queen. It was her turn to fall to her knees, clutching her wound as black blood seeped through her fingers.

“What... What have you done?” she wheezed.

“Forgive me, Mother.” He crouched, feeling down her sides, finding a key hidden inside a discreet pocket. Two keys—a royal key and a black exit key.

“James...” she breathed, listing to the side.

He helped her lay down. “Things have to calm down before I can put them back together.”

“Get out of there,” I told him.

He smoothed Mother’s hair back from her forehead. “You’ll be in a healing bath before you know it.”

The Mark of Arcana came to life on the floor, a fiery orange-gold pentagram ready for him to come and see me.

I snapped back into my body in the cold cage, the Mark appearing in the snow. First, a wave of itchiness on my skin, then the violent tremors in my body, my limbs thrashing against the cage.

Ouch.

Blood streamed down my lips, my head spinning.

Yes...

Yes...

Yes...

Buttons came through the pentagram, hurrying over to the cage. The tremors shut down as the spells came to life. A power surge, an amazing rush of pure, deadly magic.

“Yes...” I said as my body erupted in demon scales, wings bursting from my back, hands becoming claws. “I’m back.” My demon side retreated, my robe torn at the back from the wings.

“You were telling the truth,” Buttons said, wrapping his tentacles around the bars. He pulled them apart, offering me a tentacle.

I took it, let him help me down onto the ice, the pentagram portal closing. Good job, he stole an exit key from the queen, then.

As soon as my feet landed on the cold, he grabbed me in a hug. Held me tight.

“I’m sorry, brother. I didn’t mean for this to happen. I thought... I thought...”

Oh, God. Too close to me. Too close. Too close.

He should always be close...

He broke away from me, his button eyes scanning our surroundings. He listened to the distant groans, the whispers of the demon kings and queens, cast his gaze at the ground.

“They’re really down there, aren’t they?” he said.

“Best place for them.”

I cast a fire spell, shaping a floating ball of fire beside me to keep me warm. Cast my flight spell next to levitate my frozen feet off the ice.

“That’s better.” I stretched my limbs, wiped the blood from my nose and mouth with my robe. “Passed her trial.”

“I hurt her,” Buttons said. “I hurt her, Clay.”

“She’ll be fine...” *Unfortunately...* “Come on, let’s get out of here.” I spotted the guards in the distance, running across the bridges.

“You really want her dead, don’t you?” he said.

“James, please...”

“I know you do, and I understand why. But we can make this work.”

“We can’t.”

“We can.”

Never would I try, never would I be a son or brother to those bastards.

My hands began to shake, the tremors rising.

“I’ll blow this realm apart,” I said, drawing on him. “I’ll set us free from—”

He handed me the black exit key, twisting the head. He jumped back as I was sucked away in a blur of sickening speed, rushing through cold air and smeared colors, landing on my feet in the morning sun

“Oh, gosh...”

No spells again. Dumped in the middle of a field, facing the heavily guarded and magically sealed Richmond Gate, a cone of shimmering red Synth covering the tree.

Up until now, the Richmond Gate was the famous one, what we all believed to be the only gate into the demon realm. Sealed off against entry, demons occasionally used it to cross over here. Only, they weren't really using it because most demons were using the secret gate at Barking Park. Which meant those demons who did slip out of the Richmond gate were cannon fodder to distract from that now lost gate.

I GUESS this really *was* the only demon realm gate now.

“It's him!” someone roared.

Exit keys weren't good for sneaky, erm, exits. Especially when they dropped you off here.

There were witches everywhere.

Oh, bollocks.

FIFTEEN

TAE



As the plane flew over India, I received word of Clay.

A member of my staff on the ground in London reported him turning up in Richmond Park.

Shaky, live footage streamed through the phone in my hands.

It was him, surrounded by witches. And I was stuck in the air, watching on uselessly.

Clay...

SIXTEEN

CLAY



Buttons had screwed me over again.

Damn it.

I went to run in my bare feet and shredded robe, aiming for a gap in the closing sea of white-uniformed witches. Weapons were pointed at me, an alarm shrieked.

Fuck. From a prisoner in the demon realm to one here. Unless they killed me.

Guilt bit at my soul again.

My darkness killed it.

From all my time running and dodging witches, I was quick on my feet. Synth wouldn't touch me now because Arcana smacked it back, regardless of being switched off.

Yay to some passive power!

I just had to be really bloody quick.

Tremors hit me, sending me onto my backside. The Mark flared beside me, drawing more blood from my nose. Buttons jumped out of the pentagram, demon side hidden, grabbing my hand.

He went to pull me into the pentagram. His teleportation worked by him teleporting to me. He could then temporarily

keep the pentagram/portal open and choose somewhere to take us—other than into the demon realm because of its stupid key rules.

Before he got us into the blazing circle, he shoved me to the side, a stream of Synth fizzing overhead, dangerously close to his head.

The pentagram flickered and dropped. He'd panicked. Anyone would panic.

It was now up to me to save us.

No problem.

With my magic back online, I cast the flight spell and took off into London's skies, away from the alarms and the commotion in the park.

"You're here," I said, scrolling through my spells to find something to help us on our flight.

God, this would really drive home my evil storyline in the media.

"I wouldn't leave you alone," he answered. "I used the exit key to stop you from destroying the demon realm, losing yourself again. I'm sorry. I couldn't let you do that."

"You were prepared."

"It's good to be prepared, brother."

As much as I wanted to rain death down on that realm, I was glad he stopped me.

"I have to get back to Seoul," I said.

"There is no time for that. You have to hide here."

I mean, Tae and the gang were supposed to be coming back to London anyway. But still.

“In plain sight,” he added.

“But where? Raven Tower’s out. Anywhere related to Tae, Archie, or Victoria is for the time being.”

We flew over west London, spotting the ugly gray ADU HQ building in the distance, toxic rivers bright green veins nearby.

Gosh. What now?

Then it hit me.

“I’ve got an idea,” I said.



FIRST STOP, a supermarket.

Running with my new life as a fugitive, I cast a fog spell. White mist engulfed the outside and inside of the shop, setting off the fire alarms. I moved quickly when everyone cleared out, able to see through my own magic. Grabbed a couple of shopping bags and filled one with food and drink, then headed to the small clothing department at the back. Found some underwear, a jumper, a coat, jeans, and some trainers. Took two of everything, the carrier bag bulging.

Buttons found several tubs of blue and pink candy floss. He loved that stuff, as well as fishing.

Next, I took a couple of mobile phones from a kiosk near the clothing department. Two burner phones and two sim cards.

I had to try and reach Tae.

Quickly, we hurried out of the fire exit, taking to the skies again. I flew us northwest out of the city, then looped back,

landing in quiet streets, taking off again and again until we reached central London without being spotted.

Man, I needed the cola and crisps calling to me from the bag.

We took refuge at the top of London's tallest demon tower. The last place the witches would look for us.

Once called the *Post Office Tower* a long time ago before its change in use, the tower loomed over the district of Fitzrovia, a place free of rivers, quite posh. I'd performed my warlock tricks here before for money, back in those simpler days.

The huge red Synth jewel stood above us, sitting on a ring of elevated black concrete. We leaned against the ring, taking in the amazing view through the grated guard rail circling us.

I tried Tae's number ten times, unable to get through. Should I go to Auto Frost HQ? Could someone help me there?

No. Wasn't risking it.

I tried Archie, Victoria, having their numbers memorized.

Nothing.

Damn.

"London looks so different from up here," James said, drinking candy-floss-flavored soda.

Yuck.

Now dressed in a black jumper, navy jeans, black trainers, and a black puffer coat, I tore into my second packet of ready salted crisps and my third can of sugary cola.

"It really is," I agreed.

The sun was out, the sky a radiant blue speckled with clouds. Crisp, chilly air filled my lungs with every breath, so fresh and welcome. Nice for clearing the head.

Buttons opened a bottle of cream soda. “I imagine the view is incredible from Raven Tower.”

I nodded, missing Tae’s London penthouse. “We’re going there tonight after we pop up in Berlin.”

He cocked his head. Man, he looked so creepy when did that. “Berlin?”

“Yep. We’re going on a flying trip across Europe.” I wet my whistle with more cola. “Decoys. I’ve found another spell to use.”

There were so many Arcana spells. I held the knowledge of the grimoires inside me, but I still hadn’t used every spell, and I still had to scroll through that knowledge for hidden treasures.

I saw the spell in my head, written on a dusty page.

DECOY

A DECOY OF THE CASTER AND ANYTHING THEY WISH TO CREATE CAN BE SHAPED AND USED HOWEVER THE CASTER WISHES BY USING THE FOLLOWING TWO METHODS:

- 1. USE OF THE CORRECT WORDS—WITHIN OR WITHOUT.**
- 2. MAKING A DECOY WITH THE INGREDIENTS LISTED OVERLEAF. BE SURE TO FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY.**

THIS METHOD MAY START FIRES.

A DECOY ENDS WHEN THE SPELL IS ENDED BY COMMAND OF THE CASTER OR THE EXPIRATION OF THE MAGIC.

“A wonderful idea,” Buttons replied glibly after I filled him in.

Should I offer kind words? Pat him on the shoulder and tell him it would be okay? Even hug him like he’d hugged me?

Oh, gosh. No way. As much as he really managed to get under my skin, rouse my sympathies, we weren’t ever going to be hugging brothers. We just couldn’t be, regardless of what we’d been through together.

He was still the button-eyed demon.

Only, he wasn’t. He was my twin with multitudes, more than a scary serial killer.

I guess we had slaughtering humans in common now, didn’t we? Something to bond over.

I bit down on my bottom lip, trying to push *that* away to deal with later.

Clearing my throat, I said, “While the witches hunt us across Europe, we’ll hide out in Raven Tower. We have to be careful, obviously, but if we’re staying in the city, it’s the best we’ve got until Tae links up with us.”

I tried his number again.

Where are you?

Tried my friends.

Nothing. They’d clearly lost their phones. Which meant I had to try to find someone in Tae’s global team.

No easy feat.

Damn.

I pulled my knees up, hugging them, missing Tae and Fizz so much.

“Are you okay?” Buttons asked.

I cast the decoy spell, not wanting to talk. Wisps of clay-red energy swirled in my fingers, waiting for instruction. For a few seconds, I stared at it, a strange combination of wet clay and fog, completely lacking any sensation against my skin.

Weird.

Buttons leaned in, captivated.

I told the spell what I wanted. A decoy of me and a decoy Buttons, off on a European chase, possibly global. Whatever worked. I gave us clothes different from the ones we had on—bright and totally conspicuous. I wanted the witches to see us, chase us, stir up the drama while we hid.

The clay stuff slid off my fingers, landing in a pool on the ground. It split in two like an organism under a microscope, both pools spinning. Yep, just like clay on a pottery wheel.

My twin and I watched as the pools dragged upward into the air, rotating cones, growing arms and legs and faces, taking less than a minute to stand before us as him and me.

Whoa.

I stood up to meet myself.

“Man, my outfit is so much better than mine,” I said, admiring the pink jeans. “Not fair.”

“Extraordinary,” Buttons said, eyeing up his replica.

They were silent, unbreathing, didn’t even blink. I wouldn’t want one in the house, that’s for sure.

Once in the air, they’d blink and breathe and do all those things we did. Even manifest our demonic sides. Sell the bullshit and all that good stuff.

Resisting the urge to quote the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, I told the decoys to hop to it. Off they went, whizzing off eastward.

“Let’s give it until the sun goes down,” I said, sitting back down.

SEVENTEEN

TAE



C lay and Buttons escaped Richmond Park, disappearing again.

The plane was a prison, a hindrance keeping me from him.

Silence, no sightings, the media whipped into a frenzy by Clay Christmas working with the button-eyed killer. So many rumors, so many theories, no other news able to get through the tangle.

Hours away still, trapped on this plane.

I drank a shot of vodka, eyes on the screen, the screaming headlines, the...

... the breaking news.

They appeared again, flying across London, heading east.

EIGHTEEN

CLAY



When the sun went down, we moved through the streets. I flew when I had to, preferring to keep to the shadows on the ground.

There was another spell in my repertoire called *Bending the Light*. Apparently, it tricked the eye of those the caster wanted to, erm, trick by bending the light. Perfect for hiding a face. My warlock shimmer trick kind of worked the same way, only this was better. Not perfect, the spell was delicate and could easily break, even with beefed-up force behind it. And some might see through the manipulated light.

That didn't happen. We made it to the roof of Raven Tower with zero drama.

For now.

"This is so tall," Buttons declared, peering over the edge of the massive glass building on the North Bank of the River Thames between Blackfriar's Bridge and Millennium Bridge.

A locked trapdoor sat in the middle of the roof. I cast an unlocking spell on the locks, another hidden treasure. The lock popped open with a soft click.

We took the ladder down, then a spiral staircase to two locked gates and a heavy glass door. Got through them both

easily.

“Now, keep low and quiet,” I said, casting more bendy light spell on us and on the cameras. To blur them up a bit. Tae’s people might be watching, and that would be awesome. But I still didn’t want to take any risks.

We crept through corridors, going down a few floors, eventually finding a sealed entrance to the emergency stairs leading up to the penthouse and down to Tae’s private carpark.

I paused at the door, taking a breath, close to sobbing my guts up at being back here again.

Hold it together...

I punched in the security code on the panel fixed to the door. Scanned my hand, my eyes, the penthouse’s system linked to me as well as Tae.

It would’ve been much nicer to enter through the front door, but we didn’t have that luxury.

Up we went, through another door, stepping into the open-plan apartment of gray walls and black stone-tiled floors. There was the white and chrome kitchen, the breakfast bar, the dining table, the chess set, the stairs leading to the second floor, the piano. All of it.

I took it all in, breathed in the faint trace of Tae’s lime scent, the perfume of the white roses in their vases, falling to my knees. I almost kissed the floor, wanted to rub my body against it, on every corner of this place, to let it sink back into my soul.

“Gosh, I’ve missed this...” I whispered.

The Christmas tree still stood there, the lights off, everything so cold without my lover here.

I miss you so much...

Buttons walked past me, studying it.

I stood up, weirded out by him here in our place. Call me a presumptuous shit, but so much had gone down here, the first place the vampire brought me after plucking me off the streets. It felt like home—my first real home.

I tried Tae's number again.

Buttons stopped by the panoramic windows, his arms folded. "What of the fairy? You haven't tried the fairy?"

"Huh?"

"Grindle. He might be able to help."

Damn! The tweed-loving guy had slipped my mind completely!

Idiot! "You're right." I dialed his number, hung up before it connected.

"What's wrong?" my twin asked without turning around.

I mean, that view of London over there was super mesmerizing.

"Is it stupid to call him?" I said. "He's... He's..."

"Despite his faults, he wants the best for you," he responded.

How bloody insightful. "Oh."

"He cares, even if he works in fairy ways. But that's fairies for you. Amazing."

"What?"

"The view. Call him. He will help."

"What about if I try the lobby downstairs?" I said.

“Why?”

“See if someone from Tae’s team is down there.”

“Call the fairy.”

I swallowed, faced with no other choice. Sitting here and waiting for things to happen wouldn’t help. Anyway, Grindle might get me to Tae, and he had my dad’s notebook. That was the goal, after all—figure those pages out.

Our dad, I thought as I watched Buttons watch the city.

I dialed again.

“Yes?”

Whoa. I’d expected, well, no answer.

“Grindle? It’s me.”

“*Clay?*” his gruff tone brightened. “*Is that really you?*”

“It’s me.”

“*It’s not windy.*”

“Huh?”

“If you’re flying across the north of Spain avoiding ADU fighter jets, it should be windy, shouldn’t it? I’m watching you on the news.”

I swallowed, gnawing greedily on my bottom lip.

“*Clay?*”

“I’m not, erm, up there.”

“*Where are you?*”

Should I say it over the phone, burner phone or not?

“Erm...”

“*I’m going to take a guess.*”

“Oh?”

“Wait there, and we will see.”

He hung up.

Buttons turned from the window, canted his head. “Well?”

“He’s coming here... I think. We’ll see. Listen, if things take a crappy turn, we’re out of here. I’ll blow through those windows, and we’re gone, okay?”

He smiled. “Of course, Bright One.”

“Don’t call me that.”

I went to sit on the black corner sofa, feet tapping on the gray rug. Maybe a glug of that expensive vodka Tae kept here would steady the nerves?

My stomach rolled too much for me to get up.

Waiting was a real bastard on the nerves. My thumbs wrestled, my bottom lip threatened to gush blood, and I was sweating. It looked like it might start snowing again out there, the sky taking on that weird orangey-gray vibe that meant snowflake time.

Half an hour passed.

The penthouse elevator moved.

I jumped up, almost tripping over myself. “Oh, fuck.”

Buttons was at my side. “Be ready, brother.”

We waited, watched, listened. My heart strained to beat its way out of my chest, the back of my head dripping with moisture.

“Oh, gosh...”

Buttons took my clammy hand. “I’m here.”

I don't know why I didn't pull my hand away. I just didn't. I... I wanted it in his.

The elevator doors opened, and there he was in his tweed suit, his blond curls wild, carrying a leather briefcase, his body framed by the backdrop of...

“Oh my God!” I cried, my hands shooting up to cover my mouth. Heat pricked my eyes, tears leaking down my cheeks.

Tae was standing right there.

NINETEEN

CLAY



I broke into a run as Tae did, crashing into his beautiful body so hard we could split atoms.

Taking handfuls of his grimy jumper, I held on tight, scared he was a dream, never wanting to let him go.

This was him. This was really him.

I sobbed against him, face buried into his chest. Wracked with relief that hurt just about everywhere.

“You’re here,” I said. “You’re really here.”

Fingers in my hair, hands sliding down to cup my face. I met his incredible onyx eyes, feasted my peepers on his delicious lips, his chiseled face, glass-cutting cheekbones, the lock of dark hair falling across his face.

He bent, bringing his lips to mine in another powerful crash. Skin on skin, melding, moving, bristling with sparks and the promise of wonder. I cried into him, the tears hot and fast, falling into his kiss.

He broke it, still holding my face. “Clay...”

“Tae...”

He wiped away tears with the pad of his thumb. God, I loved it when he did that.

“Clayby,” he whispered.

I laughed softly, tiptoeing to kiss him again. A soft quickie.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I slowly shook my head and broke down in his arms. For the destruction I’d caused, over losing him, over everything.

Eventually, I managed to peel myself off him, take some breaths.

“We can’t stay here,” I said, sniffing.

He offered me a tissue.

“Where did you get that from?” I asked.

“Vampire magic.”

“You didn’t move.”

“I told you, vampire magic.”

“But you didn’t move.” I wiped my nose. Gosh, what a snotty mess.

He kissed my forehead. “It was in my pocket.”

I laughed again, rolling my eyes at him. “You idiot.”

“Why can’t we stay here?” he asked, stroking my hair.

“It’s not safe.”

“It’s the safest place right now. Isn’t that why you’re here? To hide in plain sight while the other you distracts the witches?”

“Erm... yeah.” I sniffed deeply. “What happened to you?”

My eyes were hot and wet again after his story—the Fairy Wilds, the bullshit with Winter Gold.

“I’m so glad you’re safe.”

He stroked the left side of my face. “My people saw you break into the roof, watched you play around with the cameras. A spell?”

I nodded.

“They’re keeping watch for us,” he said.

“That’s good.” I fell against him again, wanting his arms around me once more.

He obliged. “You can take a breather, Clay.”

“Oh, gosh... I miss my Fizz.”

“She’s safe there.”

My baby in Japan? Whoa. Just whoa.

“I miss her so much,” I added.

“I know, Clay. I’m sorry.” He kissed the top of my head again.

“Poor Victoria. Poor Archie. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“There’s too much sorry here.”

Fuck Winter Gold. Let her go and crawl into some dark corner of the world and feel crap about it forever.

Okay, so maybe I did sympathize a bit. I shouldn’t, but I did. Deep down, I got her pain, if not her actions. And I understood regret, losing yourself to some dark path.

I really, really understood it.

There was no such thing as true safety right now but taking a breather here with Tae was the best slice of heaven.

“You smell,” I said.

He chuckled, the laughter vibrating against my face. “I know I do. I’m in desperate need of a shower.”

“First, we talk.” Grindle’s voice burst through my bubble. “And we move when we have to move. Don’t get too comfortable.”

Tae pressed his forehead to mine, his hands on my hips. “He’s right.”

“I don’t want him to be.”

“Me neither.”

With one more kiss, he removed his body from mine, the mood shifting. I watched the vampire stare at the button-eyed demon in his apartment. A strange, messed up twist in the tale.

“Would anyone like a drink?” Tae asked, not taking his eyes off my twin.

Buttons shook his head.

Grindle refused.

I went for a quick shot of vodka with my vampire lover, really needing to settle my nerves, my bubbling guilt. I didn’t deserve any of this, zero affection.

So many dead...

I should be put down.

Fucking rabid dog...

No... Powerful entity.

Entity?

We sat together on the sofa, me pressed against Tae, Grindle on the corner. Buttons wouldn’t sit, preferring to stand.

We so needed to have a chat about my twin.

But first, I had to tell them about Quentin's arrest, his plans for The Rift, the drama in the demon realm (again!), and all the other stuff.

I gasped at the end of my speech, desperate for air.

Grindle took the figurative talking stick. "It's good to see you again, Clay."

"You, erm, too." Bit of a surprise, him opening with that.

"I know I haven't been the most forthcoming friend, sneaking around a lot, withholding things."

"Yeah..."

"But I have my reasons, the top one being you."

"What does that even mean?"

"It means I want to help you, keep you safe. Make you win."

"Win what? The war against the demons?"

"Against those who matter, yes," he answered. "The queen, her family, Quentin Dawn—though him being locked up and dismembered helps a great deal."

"No one can get into the demon realm now," I said. "The locks have been changed."

"Then my sister can't save her husband."

"Doesn't mean she won't try."

"We are the queen's family," Buttons interjected. "We are her sons."

"Are you, James?" the fairy questioned. "Or are you her tools?"

My twin didn't answer, a practically unmoving statue standing beside the fairy.

"Stopping these players ends their schemes," Grindle added.

I sighed heavily. "But it doesn't, does it? The dream of a demon takeover doesn't die. Quentin's dream might fall apart, but not the queen's. There are loads of demons who want to take this realm—peacefully or not."

"I believe it can be crushed," Grindle said. "The true death of a demon monarch, not her simply going off to the frozen lake, will count for something."

I looked to my brother, his button eyes on me.

"Think of the ripple effect, the fear it will instill," he added.

"And what about Arcana? Weren't we supposed to be finding a way to get it out of me?"

I won't leave you...

Buttons tilted his head. "You want rid of this, brother?"

"It's hurting him," Tae jumped in, speaking for me.

Nope. *I* spoke for me. "Honestly? I don't know. I should be saying yes after everything I've done, the bodies I've left in my wake. You were right, James. I can't say anything about what you've done in the past with all this blood on my hands. But I love this power." I shuffled forward to the edge of the sofa. "It's incredible. It feels so alive, so indestructible. I can do anything. I can fight whatever and whoever. Together, we're unstoppable." I nodded at Buttons, a heavy orb of lead in my guts. "On the flip side, I don't want to be this person I'm becoming. Slipping into darkness, a cocky arsewipe,

craving power, hurting..." God, a biting sensation in my chest. "I've hurt so many people. I... I want to be me again. But I know I can't be. Too much has happened."

My nose itched, blood running from my left nostril. I caught it with my finger, Tae handing me a tissue.

"Are you okay?" he asked, rubbing my back.

I'll never be okay again... "Can I have another shot, please?"

"Of course." He went to get me some vodka, coming back with the bottle.

I'd love nothing more than to drink my weight in booze and pass out, sink into some erotic dream about Tae and me fucking on a magic carpet flying across the world. Think *Aladdin* but with a content warning slapped over it. And super gay.

Man, the things I'd do to him on that flying rug...

But it was just a dream. The more I thought about the future, the more I saw a tragic ending. I wasn't a hero. I wasn't some great new power. I was a mistake.

And I had to know why before the lights went out.

Goodbye sunshine...

"Where's the notebook?" I asked. That would tell me once and for all where this magic came from, what I really was.

"Notebook?" Buttons questioned, suddenly moving to sit in the wide space between Grindle and me.

Here we go... "I have something to tell you."

He waited.

“Our dad, Adam, he was part of an experiment conducted by the witches to try to get real Arcana back.” I filled him in on the details, on Gretchen’s involvement, the deaths of most of the warlock volunteers as a direct consequence—apart from Dad and another woman. Those came after.

Then Grindle took over, telling him about Adam’s notebook, how illegible it was, how it spoke of a northern place he wanted to get back to.

By the end of the information overload, Buttons sank into the sofa, slouched. “Dad...”

“Do you need a moment?” I asked, fingers twitching, wanting to take him by the hand.

Slowly, he shook his head.

“You sure?” I added.

“I’m sure.”

“It’s a lot to take in.”

“I said I’m sure, Clay.”

Grindle fished the notebook from his briefcase. Baby blue cover, doodles all over it, the edges as dog-eared as the yellowed pages.

My left leg bounced, my nervousness cranked up to a hundred. My breath hitched, focus locked onto the notebook. A thing that’d belonged to my dad, my actual dad.

Adam Christmas.

“Oh, gosh...” I stood up, hit by a hot flush.

Tae stood with me. “What’s wrong?”

“I just...” I flapped my hands to shake off the nervous energy. “I... It’s just got real. I’ve been waiting for this, and

now it's... real.”

“Whenever you’re ready, use the memory spell,” Grindle said, putting the notebook on the coffee table. “I’ll leave you to flick through it. By all means, take your time, but not too much.”

“I’ll be with Grindle over there,” Tae said, pointing at the kitchen.

“What? No. Stay and look.”

“Later. I think you both need a moment together with this.”

Buttons slid across to me. “Thank you, vampire.”

Tae left us to it without a response.

I picked up the notebook, both light and heavy at the same time. My fingers seemed to tingle against it.

“This was Dad’s,” I said.

Buttons touched it, running a finger down the spine. “Dad’s...”

“Can you believe it?” I asked.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about this before.”

“Sorry.” I looked into his button eyes. They never showed anything other than gleaming white. No sadness, no fear, no anger. He was unreadable.

“I understand, brother. A lot was going on.”

“I should’ve said something.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re here with it now. Open it.”

Taking a long, deep breath, craving more vodka, I cracked it open. Buttons leaned in close to read with me.

Grindle was right, most of it was waffle. Ha! I saw where I got my rambling from. The odd part was legible, like him talking about the sexy demon woman—Queen Imelda. Like going back to the north place.

**It's up there. See it. See it. See it. Want it. Can find truth.
They made me see it. Secret. Somewhere... time... time...
north... broken... broken...**

FFFFFFFFUUUUUCCCCCKKKKKK!!!!!!!!!!!!

See it again up there.

Ask it again like before.

Go north. Can't find the north. Can't remember.

Where is it?

FUCK!

He'd found something. He'd really found something but couldn't remember where.

The rest of it went on with words put together that didn't make sense, talked about Maxine, our birth mother but not really going into any details, passages on how sad he was. How he wanted the best for his...

“Oh, shit...” I gasped as I turned the next page.

“Oh...” Buttons sounded like me, leaning even closer until he almost rested his head on my shoulder.

I want the best for my boys. I love my boys.

Not the best dad for my boys.

My Clay. My James.

I love you, sons. I love you so much.

I'm sorry I can't be strong.

Tears pricked my eyes, set free again. How did I have any left?

“Do you... Do you see that?” I asked my twin.

Droplets splattered across the paper. My tears, black splashes of ink too. Buttons’ tears. I looked at him, black rivulets running from behind his button eyes, splashing on the pages.

I put the notebook down.

“He mentioned us,” Buttons said. “He... He was our dad. Our dad, Clay. Our dad is in these pages, and he loved us and wanted us and... I...” He broke down. Buttons, the creepy, cold demon who’d stalked this city in the name of the demon queen, snapped into frantic sobbing.

Inky demon tears flowed wild. He wailed, his hands tightly bunched into fists. Shaking, so devastated.

I was in another reality, not really seeing him so human, so sad that it tugged hard at every heartstring I had. He was my brother, my twin, calling to my soul, needing me, needing comfort as his world turned upside down.

My body reacted on some strange instinct. I took him into my arms, let him bury his face into my chest, let him wrap his arms around me. Allowed him to cry it out into me. And I wanted him to. I wanted to be his rock as this pain hit him.

We were bonded through this notebook, mourning a childhood we never got to have.

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s okay.”

It wasn’t. None of this was okay. Not one bit. We should’ve had our chance at a life with Adam and Maxine Christmas. To be little boys who knew each other, brothers

playing and fighting, eating dinner with our mum and dad at the table. Breakfasts, lunches, birthdays, Christmases, holidays at the seaside, bedtime stories, a whole lot of love. Drugs and desperation stole our future away.

I saw Tae and Grindle watching this spectacle.

Queen Imelda stole it, too.

The witches also.

Witches.

Witches.

Witches.

Meddling witches, putting Dad's body through hell.

Demon queen using Maxine Christmas as an incubator.

Demons.

Demons.

Demons.

I shook as the magic storm rumbled within me.

"I'll kill them all..." I said.

The tremors increased, magic taking hold. Ready to burn again, to cleanse the scum out of my life.

"No, brother." Buttons shoved me hard. I rolled off the sofa. He ran away to the other side of the large apartment.

The magic died in an instant as he left our range, knocking the wind out of me.

"Shit..." I whispered, flat on my back.

Tae was there above me, helping me up. "Are you okay?"

I let him get me back onto the sofa. Blood streamed from my nose. I held two tissues there, looking for Buttons.

He stood panting by the elevator, face smeared with inky streaks. “Not again, brother. Not here.”

He did the right thing. If I’d gone bonkers in Raven Tower...

I didn’t want to think about it

Tae held me close with one arm, silent.

“What about the memory spell?” the fairy said. “You have to cast it.”

“I have to calm down first,” I replied and picked up the notebook, handing it to Tae.

He read, eyes dancing left to right.

“I’m sorry, Clay. James,” Grindle said. “I should have warned you of the contents.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“Is there anything else?” Tae asked him.

Fairies couldn’t lie. “There is nothing else.”

“See how angry I get?” I added. “See why we need to do something about Arcana?”

Never...

The new power needs to thrive...

No...

Yes...

“I see it,” Grindle answered.

Yeah, but it didn't mean he'd changed his mind about using me to kill those demons. After all, I started out my Arcana journey as a demon-killing machine.

"I'll make you all some tea," Tae said.

I kissed him. "Thanks."

"Thank you, vampire," Buttons offered from his spot.

I turned around in my seat to face him. "How long should we wait, do you think?"

"Until you're ready for spells."

"After tea?"

"After tea, brother."

"Not fair you having to stand over there, though."

"I'd rather it for now," he said.

"Oh."

He bowed his head, retreating into himself.

I wanted to hug him again.

Tae made a pot of tea, pouring for Buttons first, handing it to him without a word exchanged between them. He came over to us next, Grindle having rejoined the action on the sofa. Put down a bowl of sugar cubes and a small jug of milk on the coffee table. Poured me a cup, then Grindle. Not for himself. Vampires didn't need tea, even though they could enjoy it.

Man, vamps missed out. Tea was the elixir to cure all ills, in my opinion.

Grindle added sugar to his tea and too much milk. Stirred. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I want to sleep for a decade," I said.

That was the thing about the magic shutting down. It left me exhausted.

Tae took my hand off his thigh, kissed the back of it, put it back.

“I tried to stop Gretchen,” the fairy took up the talking stick again. “But I was too late. After Tae stole my car, I got caught up in the madness in Seoul. Everything started to go wrong so quickly. I tried looking for him,” he nodded at Tae, “in the Fairy Wilds, but there was no sign of him. So I made the choice to come back to the city after you’d been spotted, to reevaluate. Then London happened.”

A bullet to my chest.

“After that, a member of Tae’s team contacted me to say he was back, then I made contact when he landed here in London.”

“Then I made contact,” I said.

“Exactly.”

I drank my tea, worn out by all the catching up.

Tae clicked the news on.

We were all over it—Buttons and I. Footage of us in Italy now, flying over The Colosseum in Rome, landing on the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica at The Vatican for a few seconds before taking off again.

Wow. Those decoys were really putting on a show.

Apparently, we were now heading across the Mediterranean toward Egypt.

Not only did my decoy have better clothes, but it also got to do things on my bucket list. Like see the Pyramids of Egypt.

So not fair.

“At least the attention’s still on them,” I said.

Tae nodded, pouring me more tea.

Rolling across the bottom of the screen were the headlines, tidbits of news.

A ‘Breaking News’ bar flashed up on the screen.

“We have some breaking news for you,” the newsreader said, looking down at her screen. “Beryl Christmas, the grandmother of Clay Christmas has died from a heart attack. According to reports, she was in the middle of giving a new interview for this channel when she slumped over in her chair. The emergency services were called, but she was declared dead fifteen minutes later. We’ll bring you more on this story shortly.”

A picture of my grandmother came up on the screen. She was actually smiling in it, not the haggard, nasty piece of work I’d met. The liar who’d sold false stories about me to the press. Made herself out to be some hard-done-by saintly grandma.

Tae went to turn it off.

“No, don’t,” I said. “Leave it on. It’s fine.”

I glanced back at Buttons, who watched from his spot, sipping his tea. He had nothing to add about the news.

He’d dodged a bullet not meeting her.

The news rolled on talking about us, about Beryl and the heartbreak she’d suffered by having me as a grandson.

Clay bad. Clay a monster.

Yeah, maybe they were right.

After ten more minutes, I reached a calmer place. More focused, more ready.

I had to move this forward.

“I’m ready when you are,” I said to Buttons.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“I’m sure.”

“I will pull away if you start to—”

“I’ll be fine. Really. Let’s get this done.”

He nodded and walked forward, my magic springing back to life. I shivered in the heady rush, rolling my neck, stretching my limbs.

“Are you really sure?” Tae asked softly.

“Yes. I’m really sure.” I picked up the notebook.

The memory spell worked by walking through the past of a person, by holding something that was part of that person. In this case, Dad’s notebook.

I closed my eyes, building up the rhythm of the words, a mantra as silly as all Arcana spells were—simple words that rhymed.

A magical seeing is cast,

To explore the past.

As simple as that, but actually tricky to get the words to fit. Well, back before I’d sucked up the grimoires. Now everything came really easy, just a matter of waiting for the magic to kick in.

Drifting, drifting, traveling through the past, winding through lanes, through secret streets, light throbbing around

me, voices, noises, wind, rain, sunshine, snow. Spring, summer, autumn, winter. Years, months, weeks, days, hours, seconds. Where did I want to go? How far? There were twenty-four years of Adam Christmas's life to walk through. Deep dive into his childhood, explore him from birth to death? Really get to know him? He'd seen the war twenty-five years ago that left the rivers and The Rift in its wake. Survived it. One of the lucky ones.

I ended up at his twenty-third year, joining him on a train. Traveling across the country. East. Toward the sea.

The carriage came into view, slotting together from the throbbing light. It was nighttime, summer, the train hot and sticky, rocking as it made its way along the tracks.

Adam sat in a four-seater alone, facing the direction of travel. God, he was so thin. Skinnier than me, emaciated, cheeks sunken, his brown hair slicked back and greasy, the warlock mark (a white, incomplete circle with a tiny star at the center) glowing on his forehead.

He wore a blue polo shirt and beige three-quarter length shorts, a pair of worn white trainers on his feet. Man, did he look tired.

He sat back, his eyes on the window. In the dark beyond, we passed some threads of toxic river covered in protective glass.

My heart raced as I studied him closer. The spots along his chin, his chapped lips, the track marks on his arms.

“Oh, Dad,” I said, my voice an ineffective breeze.

I sat with him, wishing we could speak, if only for a few minutes. Ask him things, easy icebreakers like what his favorite food was, what kind of music he enjoyed. Did he like

Kylie Minogue? That would've been cool if he did, something to really bond over.

"It'll never happen," I said and moved the scene on.

Dad alighted the train at Great Yarmouth, a town on the east coast of England. He grabbed a taxi and headed for a Great Yarmouth Harbour. Most of it had been hit badly by toxic rivers, leaving behind a small part of the large area free and in use for fishing in the North Sea.

He met a man at the docks he'd contacted a week ago, handing him some cash. The man in the fisherman's cap, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, thanked Dad and took him to a small, moored boat bobbing in the water. He went through sailing procedures with Dad, but Dad knew what he was doing. He'd been in boats before, loved them. Wanted to be a proper sailor, a captain, sailing a freight ship or even huge ADU vessels, patrolling the waters for trouble.

He'd fucked up his life, but he could certainly drive this poxy little boat.

No problem.

A piece of piss.

The fisherman believed Dad was heading to the Netherlands, some bullshit story about being on the run. Guys like this fisherman loved stuff like that, loved to take money from fleeing convicts when the fish weren't biting. A lucrative business. What happened to the escapee after the deal wasn't his problem.

Dad wasn't on the run. He was following a calling, a magical song in his head. Those witches might have failed to bring Arcana back, but they'd opened up his brain. They'd

done something to him, the experiments working with all those drugs to elevate his thinking.

There was something in the north.

No map. Only the song, which wasn't really a song. More like a compulsion.

The map would come later when he tried to get back.

"Got a spare ciggie?" Dad asked the fisherman.

"Yeah." The man grunted and offered one, along with a box of matches.

Adam sparked up, and the man left him to it.

Puffing away on his cigarette, Dad sat on the wooden dock, legs dangling over the side. Watched the water, thinking, smoking.

Smoked.

Watched.

Thought about Maxine, how much he loved her. All he wanted was for his mum to stop being so cruel to the woman he loved. Beryl hated his girl, didn't make any secret of it. She even slapped her once over Sunday dinner.

Maxine burned the Yorkshire puddings, set off the fire alarm in Beryl's flat. Adam laughed. Maxine apologized, saying she'd make some more. Beryl's face turned purple. Her hand flew through the air and clapped poor Maxine right across the cheek.

"Junkie slut!" the old bag cried. "Dirty, junkie whore!" Spittle flew from her mouth. "Get the fuck out of my house!"

Adam blew smoke into the air, sad as fuck. Yeah, him and Max had some problems with crack, heroin. They wanted off

it, desperate to clean up. They were really trying. But his mum didn't help, pushed them deeper into their addiction with her cruelty.

“Good job you're not pregnant, Max,” Dad said aloud.

Hmmm. That would soon change in a year. Take a real turn.

“I really want to give you a hug,” I whispered.

Time moved forward again because Dad sat there for twenty minutes, doing nothing but watching the North Sea.

North he went in his little boat, the water choppy but not stormy. Nothing to throw him overboard.

I wouldn't be having fun in the boat if I was really here. I'd be hurling over the side.

North and north and north until he saw it, making a strange noise in his throat—a gurgled gasp, slightly high-pitched.

The Rift.

A scary, floating scar of red storm clouds a mile wide, fifty miles tall.

I gulped.

The boat bobbed on the water, the lights of security patrol boats in the distance. If he was spotted, he'd be arrested. The Rift was out of bounds, the five miles surrounding it forbidden waters.

What could he possibly want with The Rift?

Dad checked his notepad, his hands shaking. He needed a hit, to shoot up. But even being a slave to drugs didn't diminish some of his common sense. Coming up here to The

Rift would take a clear mind, no matter the frenzy of cravings assaulting his body.

“Under to over,” he said. He sniffed, preparing, thinking.

The song became clear, more like a heart beating than anything else. He heard it calling from up there in those red clouds, the thump, thump, thump.

He’d rather not be here. He’d rather be back with Maxine in bed, making love, drinking, riding on those blissful waves. Maybe reading. He liked to read, especially Stephen King novels.

“You like him too?” I asked.

Dad enjoyed my favorite author as well.

God, that really stung, a claw of mourning dragging dirty talons across my heart.

“Oh, Dad.”

Time shot forward slightly to Adam Christmas diving into the cold waters of the North Sea. Despite the summer night’s heat, the water remained bloody freezing. He was scared he wouldn’t make it to the other side as he swam down, searching, but the current took him.

The thumping rhythm sped up, the current pulling him down in a curve—down in order to go higher.

Into The Rift.

Whoa.

Sucked through the dark water, Dad kept calm, his body a bullet shot through the long barrel of a gun. Rushing, rushing, diving deeper, holding his breath, then shot upward, the speed increasing until he broke out of the water into...

...heat.

The memory broke apart, fractured as he landed... I couldn't see, white noise crackling in my ears, spreading across the memory as an army of white flies.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Time jumped forward, Dad pulling himself out of the water into his boat. He lay on his back, drenched and breathless, brimming with magic. Magic he couldn't use. Arcana sat there, right bloody there, but he couldn't make it work. In fact, it hurt him, made him sick to his stomach. God, the nights he'd spent puking over the bowl, worse than any drug could.

Maxine was worried.

Then the demon woman came into the pub one night. She charmed him. He charmed her. Got himself so caught up in her beauty. He knew she was a demon right away. She showed him her white eyes. Gorgeous. He bought her drinks, the money meant to top up the electric and gas meters that were so low, but he didn't give a fuck. He loved Max, but this woman, this otherworldly creature blew his mind no matter how much he tried to resist her.

He should.

Weak.

Pathetic.

They fucked in the alleyway behind the pub, his jeans and boxers around his ankles, the queen's legs wrapped around him, pinned against the wall.

I wanted to be sick, looking away as they grunted.

Thankfully, time moved forward some weeks, whizzing past so much pain, so much sadness, then the happiness.

Pregnant! Max was pregnant! He could change and straighten up, sort his life out to be a good dad. This was it, what he needed to be a better man. No more drugs, no more nothing, no more hoping to fuck the demon queen again or going back to that place in the north he tried to remember. Tried to draw a map, tried to write his way to remember in his notebook.

Happy. Happy. Happy. Wow! Twins! Maxine was going to have twins.

Wow.

Wow.

Wow.

Something was wrong.

Maxine was ill. She suffered badly through the pregnancy. Always sick, always crying.

Two boys born in the hospital, addicted to heroin because Maxine couldn't take it anymore in those last few weeks. The methadone failed. She had to have a hit. He tried to stop her, but he was weak, taking it with her.

They both cried when the boys were born June 18th, healthy boys crying, coming ten minutes apart. The first one they called James. The second one they called Clay.

I blinked at the memory. We were born addicted to heroin? Oh, gosh.

It played on.

Fuck. What was wrong with them? Where was the new man he was becoming?

Maxine cried every night after the boys were born. Dad thought it was because they were still in the hospital, that social services might take them away. But no. She told him this was all wrong, that the boys were wrong, her body wrong.

“Someone put them there,” she said to him, smacking her belly.

“What are you talking about?”

“They were put there, Ad. Someone put them there.”

He laughed, smoothed back her sweaty hair. “I did, didn’t I?”

She cried until four in the morning that night, him holding her.

One day, she went to see them under supervision with Adam by her side.

“Little Geminis,” Maxine said. “We made two little Geminis, Ad.”

“We did, babe. We really did.”

That was the last time Maxine referred to them as her children, back to saying something was wrong hours later, that the boys weren’t hers.

She died two nights later.

Dad’s heart broke. He couldn’t cope.

We were taken away, removed from his life.

His heart couldn’t take anymore.

He

died not long after Maxine.

My heart broke, the memory falling away from me, Raven Tower tuning back into focus. I burst into tears, hands over my face, hunched forward as sorrow convulsed inside me.

Dad...

Oh, Dad...

My poor mum and dad.

TWENTY

TAE



I held him to me, his head against my shoulder, his hands not moving from his face. He sobbed and sobbed and sobbed, a horrible sound of devastation.

What had he seen when he'd been in that trance? What was he feeling?

All I could do was hold him, bask in his vanilla scent, watch as his twin brother watched him. That monstrous twin, that creature I'd wanted to kill so many times.

I still wanted to. For so long, he'd been the button-eyed killer, a nightmare. Not this almost-human, this man who hugged his brother, whose edges were softer than before. I remembered him wanting to kill Clay, his jealousy overwhelming him. The fight they'd had at the Throne of Vines, his desire to be the apple of their mother's eye.

The Buttons of before wouldn't align with this one—with James Christmas.

But I let him stay close to Clay in this apartment because Clay wanted it. Because he was the key to Clay's power.

Anything for him, for my Clayby.

I hadn't told him those three words yet.

Clay removed his hands from his face, revealing red eyes, tear-streaked cheeks.

“I’m so sick of this,” he said. “I’m so sick of crying.”

He told us what he’d seen.

Buttons sat silently beside him, no tears, frozen with deadly stillness.

“It’s on the edge of the forbidden zone,” Clay said at the end. “When it grabs you in the water, it takes you down, then up into The Rift.”

The Rift. The answers were inside it.

“Shall I try again?” he said. “Try to see what happened at The Rift?”

“Yes,” Grindle responded.

Clay recast his spell, clutching the notebook. He drifted away, his eyes closed, his breaths so deep, so calm. I wanted to rest my head against his chest, flow with the rise and fall, enjoy the sounds of him.

After twenty minutes passed, he came out of his trance. “I... I didn’t see. It’s blocked. That part of his memory is basically closed.” He sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Possibly the trauma of being at The Rift?” Grindle suggested. “Or Arcana at work to distort the memory?”

“Maybe,” Clay said.

“But we have to go there,” I contributed softly.

Clay nodded. “It’s the only way.”

What if going there is your end?

He opened the notebook to a map drawn messily across two of the pages, waving his hand across the paper. The scribbles, the strange, jagged circles, they slid together, the blue ink moving like a special effect under Clay's palm. They became a clearer map, one for our eyes, a rough but obvious sketch of the UK, emphasis on the east. The Rift marked by a red dot in the North Sea.

"We see it, Dad," Clay whispered. "We all see it."

Whatever had happened to Adam had been wiped from his memory. What did that mean for Clay?

Buttons leaned in closer, his mouth slightly open.

Clay held his hand over the page for a minute, both of them gazing down at their father's work. As soon as he removed his hand, the drawing returned to its messy state.

"The Rift," Clay said. "Damn it."

I hated the idea of him going anywhere near it.

"Anything could be waiting in there," he added. "It'll be dangerous." He shook his head. "I love pointing out the obvious. But it doesn't matter. We have to go up there."

I watched his skin flush, then pale, as if both colors were at war with one another. I patted his thigh, wishing I had a flight spell to take him somewhere remote, somewhere no one would ever find us.

Clay faced Buttons. "I'm sorry you didn't get to see it."

"At least one of us did," his twin answered.

Clay took his brother's hand, the scene almost perverse. "Now we can do him proud. I... I don't know how, but I know we have to see what he saw."

“Would taking Arcana away make him proud?” Buttons asked. “Is that what he would’ve wanted?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to do. I kind of don’t want to go.”

“You don’t?” I joined in.

He faced me this time, those hazel eyes ringed with the red of too much crying. “I know I should try and end this, get rid of the magic. The world doesn’t need it. Not how I’ve been using it. The witches were managing fine against the demons. They don’t need my help. I’ve just made things worse.”

“Don’t say that,” I offered.

“It’s true. What have I done that’s good? Nothing. I haven’t achieved a single thing that’s made the world a better place. Someone like me can’t pretend to be a hero. I want to believe I can be better, but there’s no chance. Arcana has to go, even if I want it around because I love the power.” He licked his lips. “I really love the power.”

And therein lay the problem.

Clay had to be free of this.

“As soon as you want to leave, we will,” I said. “I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

He sat forward, elbows on his thighs. “Going to The Rift is the right decision.”

“I think it is,” I replied, stroking his slender back.

“Unless it isn’t.”

“You must make a decision,” Grindle said.

Here it was, his stirring of the pot.

“I know what you want me to choose,” Clay answered, his eyes downcast.

“It has to be your choice,” the fairy replied.

“Really?” I asked.

Grindle nodded. “It’s not about what I want, what anyone wants other than Clay. The biggest mistake everyone made was trying to use Clay as a weapon. Arcana shouldn’t be here. How many times do we need to be told that fact?”

Why did I sense more coming?

“But he is also the only real weapon we have against the demons now.” There was the extra.

“Can Quentin really pull that off with The Rift and the river monsters?” Clay said. “Well, his people, his wife?”

“I know my sister,” he said, “and she will be fully supportive of it. I only wish I could find her.”

“It can’t work. It just can’t. How can they control it to destroy Earth?”

“We’ve just found out your dad went into The Rift,” he replied. “I’m not closing my mind off to anything.”

Clay sat back. “I suppose you’re right.” He leaned to the side, his head coming to rest on my shoulder.

The fairy confused me. “Why this change of heart?”

“It’s not a change of heart,” he said. “

“Fine. Then why the compromise?”

“As I said, no one should try to control Clay.”

Correct. And I’d been one of those to make that mistake.

I reached up to touch my lover's face, sliding my body closer to him. "Whatever you decide, whenever you want to do it, is down to you now."

"Pressure."

"I'm sorry."

"Comes with the package, I guess." He sat forward again, hands in his lap. "Can we stay and take a moment to breathe? I need to just... decompress."

"Of course."

"You're heading for Africa," Grindle said, eyes on the TV. "We have plenty of time to hear your decision."

TWENTY-ONE

CLAY



Buttons took a shine to the chess set, taking a pew on one of the cushiony chairs at the low table.

“I only ever played alone,” he said, picking up a rook. “It’s not easy being the enemy as well as the protagonist.”

Okay, then.

“Would you like to play?” Grindle asked him, holding a cup of steaming black coffee.

“Yes, please.”

“Then take a seat.”

I looked to Tae, the two of us over by the Christmas tree, his expression unreadable as he looked on. The multicolored tree lights painted his features in rainbows, highlighting every corner of his facial beauty.

Yum.

When his eyes moved to mine, he smiled.

He’d just come off a phone call arranging safe passage through London to the Port of Felixstowe where a boat would be waiting to take us to The Rift.

Grindle had some face cream with him for that extra layer of espionage. Safe passage to Richmond Park proved much

more difficult—should I choose to go back to the demon realm and take out the queen.

Which path did I want to take? Revenge? Truth?

I massaged my aching chest, wishing I had some special comb to detangle the horrible knots within. Wished I had Fizz and my yellow Walkman with me.

The arrangements would take a while after the global events of recent days. Security was tight everywhere, a scrutinizing ADU eye on everything.

We had time. I liked time. It delayed decisions.

Kill them all...

No...

Yes...

“I need to have a shower,” Tae said.

“Me, too.”

“Shall we, then?” He ran his fingers through his hair, pulled a tuft of it to his nose. “I’ve never been so smelly.”

“I stink too.” Loaded up on relief to finally be in his presence again, I stared at him like a lovesick poet ready to compose some flowery lines for him.

I’d do anything for him.

I scratched at my inner forearm. Damn itchiness. My spells were up. What more did Arcana want?

Kill them all...

Ignoring that creepy inner voice, I followed Tae up the stairs to the second floor, grabbing myself an eyeful of that

arse encased in denim. Even in grubby clothes, battered and in need of ten spin cycles, the vampire made them work.

Yeah, so annoying.

And so hot.

“There’s still some clothes in my room,” I said. “Thank God. I’ll see you after?”

“You’re not joining me?”

I mean, I wanted to. “Didn’t want to be presumptuous.”

“Presume away, Clay.”

“Oh. So, we’ll shower together?”

“Not like we haven’t before.” Whoa. Husky overload.

I’d jump him right now in this hallway if we were alone.

I stepped back, annoyed at myself for being so horny when I’d done what I’d done. It was really catching up with me, all of it.

How dare you be so relieved?

I scratched my left wrist.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Just... things.”

He took my hand. “There’s something I have to say.”

A pleasant shiver ran up my spine. “What is it?”

Those twin pools of darkness threatened to floor me. Gosh, what a stunning pair of eyeballs.

His lips spread into a small smile, pinpricks of crimson joining the midnight of his eyes. He seemed to glow more than usual, his hair silky tendrils fanning the face of an angel.

My angel.

“What is it?” I asked, my cheeks heating a little.

“I love you, Clay.”

Okay, that did floor me. At least it would have if he hadn’t caught me before I hit the plush carpet.

Not a bad place to crash land in shock, I suppose.

“Are you okay?” he asked, holding me steady.

Did he really just say *that* to me?

I pushed off him, getting vertical. “What did you just say?”

“I love you.”

“You... do?”

Gosh. I couldn’t breathe.

He stepped closer, looming over me deliciously. “I love you, Clay. When I was stuck in the Fairy Wilds, I finally understood me. Us. What we are. Falling for you means... It means so much more than that. It means I love you.” He cupped my chin.

Breathe, Clay. Breathe.

“I’ve let myself see it, feel it in here.” He tapped over his heart. “You’re in here completely. Without guilt, without anything but love.”

Whoa. Whoa.

WHOA.

“Am I dreaming?” I asked, finding my voice.

“No, Clay. This is really happening.”

“It is? You’re really standing there telling me you love me?”

“I am.” A purr, thick and sweet as molasses. “I really fucking love you. I’ve missed you so much I can’t even tell you.”

My chest tightened, eyes ready to leak again. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Don’t say that.”

I held back the waterworks as best I could. “Remember what I said about not achieving anything with Arcana? I meant it. Well, I’ve achieved causing pain and suffering and destruction. And self-pity. Listen to me whine, thinking about me again when people have died, families have been destroyed. The best thing you could do is walk away from me, Tae. Run for the fucking hills before you end up dead or broken beyond repair.”

I was really dancing at the pity party.

“Fuck you,” he countered, his deep, penetrating tone making me jump.

“W-what?”

“I’ve declared my love for you, and that’s your response?”

“I—”

“I know what’s happened. I know what you’ve done. You are dangerous, and that’s on me. I pushed you into the demon hunting life.”

I grabbed his right bicep. “No. You didn’t push me. I wanted it. I wanted to be around you, with you, to help you find closure. And I’ve failed to do that.”

“That was never your responsibility.”

“And I was never yours,” I countered. “I made my choices, no one else. I went deeper because I wanted to. I don’t regret it, not one bit. I regret the pain I’ve caused, not falling in love with you.” The sigh burned as it left my body.

There. I said it.

“I love you, Tae.”

He smiled briefly, knowing I had more to counteract the niceness.

“The problem is, where do we go from here?” I delivered my next crappy shot. “How can we ever have the life we want? I’d feel too guilty to be happy.”

His eyes bore into me. “I know what that feels like.”

“But you didn’t blow up houses. You didn’t—”

He cut me off. “I’ve killed before to get what I want. I’ve done things to demons after beating them to a pulp. Terrible things.”

I knew that. I’d never asked him for the details, but in lieu of killing them, he’d done stuff to cover his tracks.

He ran a hand through his hair. “Buried them alive, for example. No healing baths to fix them, so they stay down in the dark forever.”

God, I felt sick. “Were they…” I needed water. “Were they the Poppy Love kind of demons?”

“Yes. They were scum,” he replied. “They were the worst of the worst.”

“You didn’t make a mistake? Like I did with Jarod Woods?”

“Would it make a difference?”

“I guess not.”

Both of his hands were on my shoulders. “Clay, there are no such things as angels in this world. Everyone has regrets. Everyone has made terrible decisions. There is no escaping that. You can’t fix everything, and you cannot always find forgiveness. I don’t forgive Winter, and I’m sure there are plenty of people who won’t ever forgive me for things I’ve done—be that through violence, business, or matters of the heart. Because I’m not perfect. Because angels only live in stories.”

Man, he really hit several nails on the head. “Ironic that angels don’t exist considering the world we live in.”

“It is.”

“You’re making a lot of sense,” I said. “But it hurts. It feels so dirty.”

“I’m not trying to lecture you, Clay. Or tell you how to feel. I’m only trying to help. I’m with you through all of this. But you deserve love. You deserve to live your life outside of this. You’ve been manipulated, lied to, abused, given this power against your will. Whatever your dad found in The Rift, you and James bore the brunt of it. You were given this version of Arcana. You didn’t choose that.”

“You’re... You’re right. But I should’ve looked for answers harder.”

“You did look. Once again, things were hidden from you, out of your control.”

“You’re making excuses for me.”

“I don’t care. I’m not losing you to this.”

“But what—”

“I’m not losing you, Clay. Not to your guilt, to Arcana, to no one. You’re mine, and I want to live a life with you.”

I blushed, insides a riot of anxiety. “You say the nicest things.”

“They’re true. I want to court you some more.”

“The courting thing got shafted,” I said.

“I think courting extends beyond the declarations of love.”

I smiled, my cheeks throbbing. “Is that so?”

“It really is. I like to treat every day like a courtship. An endless stream of dating, but with a solid foundation.”

“I’m that solid, am I?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “You tell me.”

“Dirty man.”

He kissed me, so soft, so sweet. “Seriously, Clay. We can have a future. You don’t have to fall apart. You don’t have to hate yourself. Again, I’m not telling you how to feel. I’m simply laying myself down as yours.”

“Mine?”

“I’m yours, Clay Christmas.”

Gosh, did I want to blub like a baby. “Oh, Tae. You’re so amazing. I love you so much. I want to see the future. I want so many years of you. And I’m yours, too. I really am.”

“Then let’s make those years happen.”

The sunshine me was all for this, but the other side doubted... everything. Would we even make it past the next few days? Would going to The Rift take Arcana and kill me?

Would I go crazy and blow myself up along with everyone else? Kill Tae? Do something worse?

He touched my chest, his fingers splayed out across the fabric of my jumper. Those magnificent eyes of his flushed with sexy crimson.

Fuck doubt. Fuck everything. This vampire loved me. If the future was bleak, I'd enjoy the hell out of the present.

“Sorry I snapped at you,” he said.

“You can make it up to me with your dick.” Whoops. That was meant for me, not him. I planned to communicate that feeling with my actions.

He chuckled. “I certainly will, Clayby.”



MY BACK RESTED against his chest, his cock pressed against me. He kissed my neck as water cascaded down our melded bodies. I clung to the back of his head with one hand as he sucked my skin, fingers buried in his wet hair, his lime scent engulfing me as the steam consumed us.

One of his hands rested on my stomach, the other working my cock. Stroking, pulling the foreskin back and forth, that other hand moving to my nipples, teasing swollen nubs. I let him take control, explore me, use me as he saw fit. I liked to be used by him, to be wanted by such a gorgeous man.

He moaned against my neck. “I think we’re clean enough to get dirty again.”

“Yes...”

“Come on.”

He peeled himself off me, took my hand. Led me out of the cubicle in his steamy bathroom.

“Let me dry you off.”

Droplets of water ran down his magnificent body, across the rose and thorns tattoo dominating his right side. His hair shone in blue-black tones, intensifying his sexiness, those wet curls dripping.

“You’re amazing,” I said. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” He pulled a towel from a heated bar. “I’m sorry I let you slip away.”

“I’m sorry I ran away. I should’ve never gone with Buttons.”

“You didn’t know he’d take you to London.”

“I know he didn’t mean... He didn’t mean it.”

His left eyebrow cocked. “He didn’t mean what? To lie to you?”

“Erm...” I swallowed. “Yeah. He wanted to smooth things over with me and the queen because he thought it was the right thing to do. Stupid maybe, but his feelings were valid.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Okay, was he trying to start something here? “I’m sure.”

“Buttons suddenly isn’t such a bad guy.”

The heat between us dropped to a nasty chill. “Things have changed.”

“Have they?”

“Yeah, I think they have.”

He flung the towel over his shoulder, saying nothing.

“As much as it messes with my head, I know he wants to do good. He doesn’t want to hurt me anymore.”

“I don’t trust him, Clay.”

“You’re allowed to not trust him. I’m... confused.”

Silence.

I broke it. “But I need him.”

“I know you do. That’s why I’m not throwing him from a window.”

Whoa. “He’s seen a lot of the queen’s true nature now. I’m hoping it’s starting to sink in.”

He stepped forward. “Look, let’s not say what’s already been said. This is the situation we’re in. That’s it.”

Warming up again. “I’d love to not fight with you.”

“I’m sorry. I almost started one.”

I ignored the dark clouds moving inside me. Tae blew them aside with one look, from simply being inches away from me.

“It’s okay,” I answered.

He had every reason to say what he said. This situation was insane.

“It’s not, though,” he said. “I finally have you back, and this is what I do?”

“Now you sound like me.”

“What?”

“You don’t let me beat myself up, and now I’m throwing it back at you. Stop. And if you really want to go down this road, then why not start blaming me for—”

A finger on my lips. “No.”

I kissed his finger, glad to have it there.

“Can I dry you now?” he asked, sliding his finger down my chin.

“Yes, please.”

The finger trailed down to my throat, coming to a stop at the center of my chest.

Anticipation built between us, the air thick with the good kind of tension. His eyes roamed my naked body, full of promise, telling me some really yummy things were on the horizon.

I lost myself to him, to the moment. So over being scared and guilty and anything that didn't feel good. Even if just for a few hours, I wanted to feel amazing.

Tae knew how to make *that* wish come true.

He got to work with the towel, taking his time to run it across my shoulders, down my arms. Once again, I gave him the steering wheel.

He dropped to his knees, ran the soft cotton across my torso, over my back, my arse, down my legs, between them. Tossed it aside, took hold of my balls. Gently massaged them, blew on my shaft.

“Oh, fuck...”

He chuckled, stood, took another towel to dry himself with.

What was coming next?

He moved so fast my head spun. Before I could blink, he scooped me up into his arms. Carried me to the bed, laid me

down on my back so tenderly.

Oh, gosh.

Tae began a journey of kisses, exploring my thighs, avoiding my hard-on on his way up my body. As he passed my dick, his damp hair brushed against it, a silken stimulator making me arch my back. The same happened to my swollen nipples, tresses of inky black caressing, driving me wild. I moaned. He brushed his hair back and forth in response.

“You like that?” he asked.

“I love it,” I breathed.

I clawed at the bed, electricity dancing down to my groin, spreading through my body. Making me forget the world, forget time, letting me languish in this bubble we were building for ourselves.

He pinned my arms above my head, devoured me with a kiss, body flush against mine. I was helpless under his strength, a willing toy for his lust.

Our lips were one writhing, pulsing entity. His tongue broke through to find mine, coaxing it into action. I met it, giggled into him. He laughed right back, deepening the kiss, holding me in his thrall.

He loved me.

I bloody loved him.

I could kiss him forever.

When the kiss ended, he shifted his body, turning so his cock was in my face, mine in his, our bodies sideways and ready for a sixty-nine moment.

Yum.

He looked at me, eyes asking.

I obliged, wrapping my hand around his shaft. He shuffled closer, a leg thrown over mine. Precum leaked from the tip of him, a bead of it there for the taking. I lapped at it with my tongue. He quivered against me.

I gasped as he took me into his hot mouth.

How long would I last in that wetness? He rocked back and forth straight away, stroking the strip below my balls.

I resolved to last as long as I could.

Hmmm. Kind of impossible.

With my tongue, I played with him. I liked to play, to enjoy. I kissed that alabaster cock, ran my lips against it, my teeth. Sucked the end, listened to the sounds he made, watched him suck me, enjoy me. His eyes were crimson infernos.

I took more of him inside me, adjusting my position. He hit the back of my throat, barely setting off my gag reflex. Fuck that. I could take him. I'd take two of him.

Imagine two of him. Oh. My. God.

My cock throbbed at the thought, almost ready for climax.

Tae flipped the script. Got me on top of him without pulling his cock out of me, or me him. I groaned in surprise at being up here with my backside in the air but held onto him with my eager mouth.

That dick wasn't going anywhere until I was done with it.

He popped me out of his mouth. "Give me your hand."

Okay, so I guess that cock *was* going somewhere. "What for?" Damn him interrupting my Tae feast.

“So you can finger me.” He lifted his hips and legs, adjusting our positions slightly again. This new angle granted access to his booty for a, erm, finger dip.

“Really?” I asked, thrilled at the idea.

“Really, Clay. Can I do it to you?”

“Please do.”

“Good.”

I reached under myself to give him my hand. He spat into his palm, his vampire saliva a lube for sexy occasions. He slicked my fingers for me, then took my cock back into his mouth.

His finger took the lead. *Fingers*, I should say. He started with one, probing, entering, diving to my G-spot. The second finger followed, his thumb stroking my nerve-rich strip.

Whoa. The sparks. The fucking sparks.

I entered him the same as he did me, returning the favor. Curved my finger in a beckoning motion inside that incredible vise, so happy when his hips bucked. Bingo! I’d hit the sweet spot. The second finger joined it, but my thumb couldn’t get to his strip. So, I bobbed my head faster, took more of him to the point of my eyes watering. Worked my arse off fingering him, sucking him. I wanted that cum down my throat, his lime-tinged protein.

Protein? Really?

Ignoring my stupid self, I moaned on his dick, his efforts racing up so many notches, taking me toward *that* place.

I took a moment to breathe, the moan demanding it. His dick slid out, resting against my cheek.

“Holy shit...”

I tried to get his cock back in my mouth, but he made it impossible. He struck my sweet spot with pure expertise, a master of the prostate. I moaned again and again and again, unable to stop, hurtling toward climax.

My balls tightened, everything quivered. So ready, so on fire.

I came down his throat, calling his name, trying not to collapse as pleasure thundered through me. My finger paused inside him as I shot down his throat.

His moans were sweet vibrations, getting more cum out of me.

Believing I'd never stop climaxing, I finally found the strength to get on with pleasuring him. Skin tingling with delicious heat, breathless, I powered forward. His thighs tightened against me, trapping me. He grabbed handfuls of booty cheek, licked me *there*. Fuck! I'd cum again.

His cock throbbed inside my mouth, spread my cheeks, pushed his tongue inside me, groaned and moaned and set off the second rise of pleasure within me.

Oh, bollocks.

He whispered my name into my backside, both funny and super-hot, then shot his load into me. Huge bursts, my throat working overtime to drink him down as he kept on eating me.

Once again, he moved me. Positioned me so I properly sat on his face, his tongue delving deeper, his fingers parting my cheeks wider.

“Oh my gosh...” I breathed, swirling in ecstasy.

A hand on my cock.

I came in five seconds and about as many strokes. Shot across the bed in a messy stream, collapsing forward, face landing on his hard, sticky cock. I devoured it, moaning as he continued to eat me more.

Bloody hell.

When he'd had his fill, he pulled out his tongue and patted both cheeks. "Delicious."

I rolled off him, panting and completely spent. A hand resting on my belly, an arm flung over my head.

"I'll say," I answered.

He moved to lay beside me, facing me.

I angled my head, never wanting to leave this bed. "That was so good."

He rested the back of his hand on my chest, his hair pooling under his head. "Agreed."

"Bloody hell."

"My thoughts exactly."

"I really needed that."

His knuckles gently rubbed my ribcage. "What we need is another shower. I think your cum has glued me to the sheets."

I pushed myself up. "What? Oh. Oh shit. I messed up your bed."

"I like you messing up *our* bed."

More lovely heat spread across my skin. "You what?"

"This is our bed now. One of many beds."

Gosh, he'd make me cry again. "I like that."

"I like it too. You are my home."

“And you’re mine.” I rolled on top of him. “You’re my sanctuary, the one place I feel safest in.” My brows pinched. “I’ve made you sound like a building or something, which I didn’t mean as I was going for a metaphor and cocked it up and—”

He lifted his head and silenced my ramble with a kiss.

Man, it felt good to ramble again. Like I was the old me again.

“I know what you mean,” he said. “I’ll always be here for you. No matter what.”

I slid down him a little, wanting my head on his chest. He held me close, locking me in.

“This is nice,” I said. “I like Tae cuddles. They’re even better now.”

“With extra llluuurrrrvvveee.”

What was it with him and these funny curveballs? First, the Clayby thing, then this done in a hilarious, husky accent.

I laughed against his chest.

“Did you like that?” he asked.

“Luuurrrrvvveeeddd it.”

“Super cool.”

I snorted so loud it echoed around the bedroom.

He laughed sexily into my ear, gave it a nip.

“Oooo, I *really* like that.”

He nipped it again.



TAE'S BATHROOM was big enough for a shower and a generous bathtub.

“Our water usage is shocking,” I said.

“Maybe we need to prepare for sex better.”

“Boring.”

We lay together in the tub, soaking in the hot, bubbly water. My back against his chest, his chin resting on my head. Man, this was bliss. The heat, his naked body on mine.

My mood took a bit of a downturn in an instant. Bollocks. I guess too much nice is going to breed some gloom for balance.

“What happens if we... when we get through this?” I said.

I tried my best to believe the *when*, wanted it to be true. But the endorphins were wearing off now.

I want to run away with you...

“When this is over, we'll do whatever you want,” he answered.

“Or what *we* want. I don't want to make the rules.”

“There will be no rules,” he said. “We'll be free.”

“Free sounds good.”

“Free to travel.”

I smiled. “Sounds even better. Where to?”

He drew his thumb across my left shoulder. “Where would you like to go?”

“Gosh. All over the place. But my dream is to see the Pyramids of Egypt.”

“Me too.”

“Really? You’ve never been there? How is that possible? Erm... Sorry, I didn’t mean that to sound so judgmental, but, well, you’re a billionaire who’s been around for centuries and I just thought... I’ll stop right now.”

“You never cease to be adorable.” He kissed my cheek. “There are a few places I’ve never been, contrary to your belief.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Relax, Clay. Just relax.”

“I’m an idiot.”

“Don’t call my boyfriend an idiot.”

I turned my head, his lips inches away from his. “Boyfriend?”

“I think we’ve upgraded from lover, don’t you?”

I kissed him. “Yes.”

My boyfriend. A man who loved me, and a man I loved.

How long until Arcana tore us apart?

“So, boyfriend,” I said. “What about Egypt?”

“We’ll make it a date.”

“I reckon that’d be a cool place to start our travels,” I replied.

You don’t deserve it...

“Then let’s do it,” he said. “Let’s make a deal right now to make it our first stop when this is over.”

Were we reaching for stars too distant?

“Deal,” I said.

This was all fluffiness, delaying me making a decision.

I loved the fluffiness.

“I don’t know what to do,” I said, killing the mood. “Well, I know I want to stay in this bath. Actually, I do know what I want to do. Jump on a plane to Japan so I can cuddle Fizz.”

“I’m sorry, Clay. I wish that were possible.”

Man, I missed that bundle of fur and purrs so damn much.

“She’s better off where she is.” I hated her being a world away.

“Waiting is the worst,” I added.

He smoothed my hair back, kissed my crown.

Waiting really was the worst because it sent the brain spiraling in various directions, exploring things I’d been putting off talking about.

Like this one.

“One day, I’ll age past you,” I said. “You’ll watch me turn into an old man.”

“Clay...”

“Don’t answer that. I’m being an idiot.”

“It’s a valid question.” A pause. “Would you ever consider changing?”

“Into a vampire?”

“Yes.”

“You would change me?”

“Is that what you want?”

Butterflies fluttered in my belly and chest. “I actually don’t know the answer to that. It’s too much of a mind-blow.”

“It is.”

“What would it do to me if Arcana is still inside me?”

“A good question.”

“Probably send me right over the edge. I’d have way too much power then.”

He didn’t offer an answer.

“I guess we can only take this by the hour, by the day,” I said.

“Yes,” he answered softly.

“Sorry, I’m chatting crap.”

“No, you’re not. I’ve been thinking about this.”

“Snap.” The butterflies threw a party in my belly.

“You might not want to live for centuries,” he said. “Some don’t. There have been vampires who have ended their lives after a hundred years because they cannot take watching the world moving on so fast. Time moves so quickly, faster from the point of view of a vampire.”

“I can only imagine.”

“Becoming a vampire is irreversible. There is no going back after you’ve made that choice. It has to be the right one for you. Not for me, not for anyone else.”

This conversation... “You are the right one, Tae. I love you.”

“Forever is different.”

“How?”

“I thought Winter Gold was my forever. I thought my love for her would never die, that we’d walk through time together. I was wrong.”

“What are you saying? We might be wrong?”

“Not at all.” He held me tighter. “None of this feels wrong to me. I never want to let you go. But this is only one conversation we’ll have about this. We can’t make any decisions until we’ve really talked this out.”

“Yeah.” So, so true. Changing myself like that was the biggest step I’d ever take.

Did I want it?

He kissed my cheek, nuzzled his face against mine. “You’ve snatched my soul, Clay Christmas.”

A vampire. Me? It’d be the only way to be with him. In twenty years, I’d be in my mid-forties. He’d stay twenty-five in appearance. In June, I’d turn the age he was when Winter Gold turned him. But we wouldn’t share the journey of age with me. We’d never hit those milestones together, watch our hair turn gray, our faces line, our bones ache, our bodies tire. Only me, never him.

I pictured it, the youthful him, the older me using a walker. Him beside me, caring for me, beautiful as the day I met him, watching me fade. With me on my deathbed, holding my hand as I slipped away. Time gone too fast, our hearts breaking.

This is what it meant to be mortal.

“It scares me so much,” I said, my breath a shudder.

“Clay?”

“I don’t want that to happen. Aging without you.”

“Clay...”

I moved to the other side of the bath. “Would you want to spend forever with a messy dick like me?”

“I want every part of you.”

My mouth ran away with itself. “What happens if we all die and your wife’s waiting for you, and she’s super pissed you’re with me?” Oh, God. What a bloody idiot. “Sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to say that.”

He sat forward, putting his hands on my legs. He slid them up to rest on my knees. “Our entire relationship has been me pushing and pulling you, so consumed with guilt over falling for you.” He removed his hands, sitting back, arms hanging over the sides of the tub. Steam curled from his body. He looked like a painting, slumped there in the bath.

Gosh, I’d made him slump with my stupid crap.

“I wanted to die so many times,” he added. “To be with her, to be with my son. But taking my life seemed like a disservice to them. I came close to it once, though, the future too endless to face.” My vampire boyfriend looked to the side. “As painful as the memories were, as desperately I missed them, I carried on. Bent on revenge, cold, closed off. Then you came.” He sat forward again. “I know my wife would have been disappointed in me closing off like I did. I can see her with her arms folded, her eyes rolling, her tongue whipping me out of my stupor. She would want me to love, to move on. I know so many say that about those they’ve lost, but it’s true. I had to accept it myself, and I have.” His hands returned to my knees. “She was and is the love of my life. And so are you. I’m lucky to have found two people to claim my heart. If we

are ever in the afterlife together, that love will continue. My love will never die for either of you.”

I covered his hands with mine, leaning forward. “That’s so lovely.”

“It’s the truth. I love you. I want to be with you. She would want me to be with you.”

God knows how I didn’t sob my guts out. “Oh, Tae.”

“There is nothing to feel bad about. This is wonderful. This is a rebirth. Now come here.”

I went into his arms, my cheek returning to the comforting place known as his chest. He held me in the hot water, my beautiful boyfriend.

Another choice waited for me.

To vamp or not to vamp...

Yeah, if you don’t explode first...

Damn. I really knew how to hurt myself.

TWENTY-TWO

CLAY



There was nothing to do but wait. We weren't going anywhere until a safe route was finalized, stuck in Raven Tower until the coast was clear.

Not a bad place to be stuck.

I lay in Tae's bed with him beside me, the TV playing a rerun of the classic British comedy *Absolutely Fabulous*. It always made me laugh, but I wasn't paying much attention to it right now.

After a while, I closed my eyes. Maybe a nap would do me good.

Straight to The Rift or back to the demon realm?

Choices bloody choices.

They both sucked.

Never leave, Arcana whispered.

Did Dad find destiny at The Rift? Did he see the future? Did he see his sons fighting the demons, saving the world? Or were we its destruction?

I had to know. I had to go up there.

Yeah, I wasn't getting any sleep.

My spells dropped, my body jolting.

I opened my eyes, no longer in bed, floating beside Buttons as he ran through the dark London streets.

“What... What’s happening?”

“I have to go, brother. I have to go back and see her.”

Oh, bollocks. “Not this again.”

“I have to.”

“Why? She’ll hurt you. Come back here.”

“No. I need to look her in the face again, to ask her more about our father, about her heart.”

“She doesn’t have a heart.”

He didn’t answer, running down a narrow alleyway.

“You’ll get caught,” I said. “Come back. I need you. We need each other. We need answers once and for all. We can—”

“End this?” he finished for me. “Take away the magic that brought us together?”

“It shouldn’t be here,” I responded, still completely torn up.

“What happens when it’s gone?”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t be in your life, Clay. Not without Arcana.”

“Why...” Okay, he hit a really sensitive point.

“Do you still want me around without me being your battery?”

“I... I...” How did I answer that? What did I want? A brother? A life with this demon? Could we really have a real relationship?

My brain hurt. My soul hurt.

“I don’t know,” I said, telling the truth. “I’m so confused. You really confuse me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t I confuse you?” I asked as he paused at an empty bus stop, his hood hiding his face in shadow.

“Sometimes. You did in the beginning. I even hated you. But so much has changed. We’ve been shown so much, learned a lot about each other. And there’s still lots more to discover. I think I want to see it all.”

He took off again, clinging to the shadows like a well-trained soldier. He always impressed me with his skills—the fighting ones and now these. He scared the crap out of me too, but he was still impressive.

But what about us? Blood wasn’t always thicker than water, and our blood came from a stagnant pond.

Man, this sucked.

“Just come back,” I said. “Please. You can’t see it all if you go back to her.”

“I might make things worse if I do,” he answered, darting into a small street, ducking behind an electricity box to take a breath. “You might lose yourself again.”

I thought he enjoyed it the first time. He seemed impressed as I destroyed Barking Park.

Ah, it wasn’t fair to assume. “Come back.”

“Maybe we weren’t meant to be,” he said. “Doomed from the start.”

“Don’t say that.”

“You think it, too. You hate Mother. You hate everything about your demon side. Don’t deny it.”

He got me there. “We’re not... You can’t go back there. She’ll be furious.”

“Good. I want her to punish me for hurting her.”

“Don’t—”

“I love her, Clay. I want her in my life. I feel this pull, this overbearing need to be close to her. She’s my mum.”

“She’s...” I licked my lips, my head spinning. “She’s not good enough for you.”

He angled his head to the side, still crouched. “She’s all I know. She’s the only parent I have.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. Beryl Christmas was our grandma—look at how she behaved.”

He stood, ran to a ladder, climbed to a rooftop. “I know that. I know there are those who have no parents at all. But I do. And I have the chance to make a family.”

“Not now. Not after everything. She’ll make you pay.”

“I know.” He crouched again behind a wall, staring at the ground. “I make no sense to you, do I?”

“I get what you’re saying.” He did deserve better than her, than *them*. He’d suffered so much, had his life fucked with. Given demonic blood and powers he didn’t ask for, his eyes replaced with those buttons.

Making excuses for a murderer again...

Just like me...

Damn.

“Come back, James. Please. I’m your... I’m your... I’m your family.”

Oh, gosh. Did I really just say that?

“Family?” he responded.

“Maybe we can be brothers after Arcana.”

“Do you mean that?” he asked, his voice soft.

“I think... I think I do.”

“You think?”

“I don’t... Come back, and we’ll talk.”

He looked to the sky, then to me. “You will never not see me as the button-eyed killer. As much as you might try to, you won’t shake it. We can’t move on. I see that. I’ve always seen that. But I just wanted to be your brother.”

“You can be. It’ll be better than being with her, with those arsewipes.”

“Until you decide it’s wrong.”

“I—”

He stood again. “I’m making the decision for you, Clay. I’m removing myself from your life. Your magic will be muted while you go to The Rift.”

“How can I go without you?”

He stuffed his hands into his pockets. “You don’t need me there.”

“I do. And I don’t even know if I should go because... because I really don’t want to let go of this magic. The idea sickens me.”

“You should go,” he said.

“Why? Because that means I don’t kill the queen?”

“Partly.”

“What’s the other part?”

“You’re not built for violence. You have to be free of this.”

Okay. That didn’t sit right. “All I’ve ever seen is violence living on the streets being a warlock. I’ve not lived in a fucking cave. I don’t come with built-in cotton wool.”

“Maybe not, brother. But you’re not like me. You weren’t forged in blood.”

“Bollocks!”

Another cock of his head, no words.

“You got the shittiest end of the shit stick, but that doesn’t mean I’ve missed out on the crappiness.” I sighed. “Now it sounds like we’re in competition. That’s not what I mean. You just make me sound like some little flower who needs protecting.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s not true!”

He smiled, pissing me off. “I’m not denying your strength, Clay. I’m simply saying you’re too sweet for the darkness.”

“That’s even worse!”

“I don’t mean to upset you.”

“Too late.”

“Sorry.”

“I know how to handle myself.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Tae might have saved my backside a few times, and I might be, well, a mess, but I can handle myself. I always did before. I survived. I fought for my place in this world.”

Okay, I was taking this too far.

“Now I’m done,” I added. “Move on.”

“I really am sorry, brother.”

“Change the subject.”

You are never too sweet for this darkness. For this power.

Buttons turned his back on me, attention on the city. “I’ll always upset you. We can never be real brothers.”

“But we are.” And he was kind of right, which upset me.

“I only wish we were, Clay.”

“Come back,” I said for the umpteenth time. “Just come back, and we’ll talk. Don’t go to the demon realm. Stay with me. Let’s see things through together.”

“And what about you going to the demon realm?” The wind ruffled his hair. “I can’t be by your side if you attack.”

“I haven’t made my final decision.”

“I won’t tell her,” he said. “If you decide to... I won’t tell her you’re coming. What does that make me? Loyal to you? A traitor to her?”

“She’d turn on you in a second?” I countered.

“And you wouldn’t?”

“I—”

“You don’t know how to answer that. There’s no need. I’m as dangerous as you are. Worse. I could flip, go on another killing spree. I won’t because I have no desire for such things.

Not now. But if the queen asked me to do it again?" He shook his head. "I can't be sure."

"You'd tell her bollocks," I fired back. "Keep reminding yourself that she plans to send you back to the lava. Don't tell me that's an act of love. It's not."

He glanced at me over his shoulder. "Do you really want me to come back?"

"You're the one who gave the big speech about us being better together. Okay, so things have changed as they always bloody change, but I still need you around. I want to find what Dad found up there together."

As genuine as I was, I felt super weird saying these things to him. But at my core, I wanted my brother with me. A sibling instinct called to him, wanting me to keep him safe and alive. To hell with the complications. He was different now, no less complicated, but definitely different.

He's my brother...

Man, I'd never get over this twist.

"You don't know how much I want to return," he responded. "I miss you already."

Why the hell shouldn't we get the chance to build a relationship? How was it fair that we were dragged through the bullshit by the manipulations of others? It wasn't fair, and we should push against everyone trying to deny us a brotherhood.

"Just come back," I said, followed by a long sigh.

Buttons turned from me again. "I need to think about this. What's best for you, for the future. Can I have this time, Clay? Do you promise not to come after me?"

“I can’t leave you out there.”

“Please. I’ll keep out of sight, out of mind.”

“Shit.”

“Please, brother.”

The fact he got out of Raven Tower without Tae hearing, apparently, or one of Tae’s team spotting him was some feat.

“What if you go back to the demon realm, and I let you do it?” I said. “I can’t let that happen.”

He smiled, bringing a softness to his face, his button eyes shining. “You’re worried about me?”

“I, erm, yeah. I am worried.”

“That means a lot to me.”

“Enough for you to come back?”

“Not yet. I just need some time alone.”

“I’m scared you’ll get caught.”

“Nobody ever caught me before.”

I shivered, remembering his blood-soaked days—memories I’d never shake, if I were honest.

God, this was so screwed up.

“Give me some time,” he said again. “I won’t go to the demon realm.”

“You won’t?”

“And if it makes you feel better, I’ll come back to Raven Tower. Not inside, but there.”

What a relief! “I’ll tell Tae’s people.”

He smiled, and I slipped away from him, back to the bed beside Tae. I sat up, the covers sliding off me.

The unsleeping vampire sat up with me. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Buttons...” I rubbed at my dry-feeling throat, my skin beginning to itch. The cravings were starting up, Arcana needing Buttons back to give me the juice.

“What about him?” Tae asked, a warm hand on my spine.

“He’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“He left, but he’s coming back to hang around outside.”

“I didn’t hear him. I would’ve heard him. Someone on my team would have seen him.”

“I guess... I guess he’s good at sneaking about. You have to tell your people.”

He growled, swinging his legs off the bed. Made a call.

“What is he playing at?” he said after ending the call. “He’s putting us at risk.”

“Tae...” I slid across the bed, wrapping my arms around him. Kissed the back of his neck. I filled him in on our chat.

“I see.”

I sighed, my chest tight as fuck. “I feel like I’m drifting.”

“I can’t believe he left so easily.”

“That’s him for you.” My forehead creased. “He said I was too sweet for violence.”

I didn’t expect the gentle chuckle vibrating through his body. “He said that?”

“It’s not funny.”

He reached around to touch the back of my head, fingers curling in my hair. “I agree that you’re sweet.”

Gosh, he knew how to stretch my smile muscles. “Aw, stop.”

“My sweet Clayby.”

I kissed his neck again, drawing circles on his abs. His hard cock brushed the back of my hand.

“Ready again?”

“I’m always ready for you.”

I sighed. My dick firmed up, but my mind kept drifting to my brother. “No nookie until he’s back here.”

“Did you mean what you said to him about being brothers?” he asked me.

“I did. I know it’s crazy, but I did. I want him to be in my life, the kind, warm James who loves candy floss and plays chess. Who cares about me, who wants love.”

Tae moved to face me, straddling me. Took me by surprise as he clasped my face, his dark hair spilling over my head.

“What—”

He pushed his hair back, kissed away my words, pressed himself downward as my cock brushed against his crevice.

“Tae...” I whispered into his mouth.

He pulled his lips back slightly, leaving mere inches between us. “You really are a beautiful soul.”

No way... “I... I...” My hands were planted on the bed, my nerves dancing deliciously. He was straddling me. So much bigger than me, a powerhouse, up there, gazing down at me. So breathtaking, so amazing.

Man, I was so lucky.

So undeserving.

My desires swirled, calling me to get lost in them. It'd be so nice to be lost in them. To be nothing but a body of pleasure.

But what kind of pleasure? Why was he positioned like this?

“Clay...”

“Tae...”

“We can't do this now,” I said, craving nothing more than to slide in *there*.

“I know.”

He didn't move. I made no effort to get him off me.

His phone rang. “Yes?” he answered. “Okay. Thank you. How much longer? Thank you.” He hung up, facing me again. “James is downstairs in a room just off the lobby.”

“He came inside?”

“Yes. He's safe.”

“He's... he's here?” I sagged, so happy he wasn't out there anymore.

“Our route to Felixstowe is approximately an hour away from being finalized. The ADU checkpoints are heavily manned, so it is complicated.”

“I can imagine.”

“What do you want to do, Clay? Go downstairs?”

I shook my head. “I said I'd leave him alone.”

“Okay.”

“I...” My body was pure heat, tingling with anticipation. “I guess we have to wait some more.”

Tae brushed his lips across my mine. “I want you inside me.”

“I... Oh, gosh.”

“Only if you want to.”

“I...”

“I’ll stop if you’re not—”

I grabbed him by the hips, shutting him up. “Don’t you dare stop.”

“Are you sure?” His breath was a sexy breeze stirring endless shivers in my balls.

“I need to work off some tension.”

Sex would help with the Arcana cravings.

Inside of him? Topping Tae Frost?

Whoa.

He licked his finger, slid two into his mouth to slick them with his saliva. His eyes stayed on mine, twin rubies glinting wickedly as he sucked.

“Wish that was my dick,” I said out loud.

He removed his fingers, glossy with spit. “Don’t worry, I’ll make you forget my mouth in a moment.”

This blew my mind. I never thought Tae would want this. I mean, he was opening up his body, had let me do things to him. But this?

He added saliva to me, stroking my shaft, running a thumb over the slit at my tip.

“Precum already?” he asked. “I like it.”

Removing his hand, he reached between his legs. I looked down, watching him push fingers inside himself, drawing soft groans from his lips.

“I could watch you do that for hours,” I said, bold with my dirty talk.

He kissed me, then returned with, “Maybe next time.” He took my cock, his touch enough to tighten my balls. Drew it back and forth along his entrance, eyes still on me.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Y-Yes...”

He moaned, still teasing.

A spike of insecurity from me. “Am I... Am I big enough for you?”

He paused. “What are you trying to say? I’m too loose?”

My cheeks flushed with irritating heat, positively nuclear. “I, erm, didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know what you meant, Clayby.” He gave my cock a stroke. “You’re perfect for me. Don’t worry.”

“I do worry. I want to be good.”

He kissed me again, positioned my cock, bore down on me. I broke through his tightness, sliding into the velvet glove.

I held onto his back, shuddering from the sensations of his muscles hugging my dick.

“Holy shit...” I breathed.

“Agreed...” he whispered in response. “You feel so good, Clay. So fucking good.”

“Can I...” Wow, it was hard to speak. “Can I lay back?”

“You can do whatever you want,” he purred.

So, I lay back, stretching my arms up above me. Pinned to the bed, buried deep inside the man I loved.

He moved his hips, upright, his arms above his head. Moved to a beat I imagined—the beat of ‘Slow’ by Kylie Minogue. Amazing how he worked with me to the throbbing bass, that sexy laidback beat. As if we were in sync.

“Gosh you’re so... wow...” My toes curled. He worked me harder. Up and down, back and forth, an expert in driving guys wild with those hips.

His hair fell around his face in blue-black waves, his skin as bright as moonlight, sparkling with otherworldly wonder. Him keeping his eyes glued to mine was hot as hell, one of the most amazing parts of this mind-blowing moment.

I can't believe he's riding me!

TWENTY-THREE

TAE



Hot inside me, an incredible fit.

How adorable for him to doubt his size. I didn't care about size, only him being inside me, his skin on mine. And he was a nice size, giving me enough of the delicious burn, perfectly shaped for striking my G-spot.

Ever since our time on the island, I'd been thinking about this. Dreaming of it. The last person to be inside me had been a man, a feeder in a vampire club long before I met my wife. A dark and stormy night in Victorian London, this man pounding into me.

A long time ago.

Clay was so much better. I enjoyed the flutter of his eyelids, his skinny body squirming beneath me. The throbbing of his cock inside me, his moans, his beauty.

So incredible.

So adorable.

So mine.

I moved forward, hair brushing his face, my hands planted on either side of his head. I leaned in to kiss him, swallowing his moans. His hands were on my back, fingers digging into my skin.

I moved to lick his neck, nip at the skin, kiss and suck and enjoy the vanilla-infused sweat.

“You taste so good,” I moaned.

“Tae?” he whispered.

“Yes?”

“Can I... Oh, fuck. I’m about to cum.”

“Then cum.”

“No... Please... Please stop.”

I stopped. “What’s the matter?”

“I...” His cheeks were a gorgeous fresh pink. I lapped up beads of sweat from his forehead.

“Oh, gosh...”

I couldn’t stop kissing him. I wanted his blood. Break that vein, drink him down.

“Tae...”

“Sorry, you’re too irresistible.”

He parted my hair like a drape. “I have something to ask.”

“What?”

“Can I... Can I be on top?”

“On top?”

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

“The top on top.” He licked his lips, radiating nervousness.

I kissed him again, our lips locked in a wonderful writhing.

“Yes,” I said after the kiss. “Take me however you want me.”

I always ended up dominating my partner. It came naturally to me, even if we started out with me being the submissive one. I liked to be in charge, to bring pleasure to my lover.

Not to say I didn't enjoy giving myself over to someone.

"How do you want me?" I asked, kissing his neck again.

"What do you like?" he responded in a riot of sexual shivers.

Oh, did I want him to pound me.

"Do me from behind," I said. "Fuck me as hard as you like. I'm your willing slave."

He giggled. "Erm, that's... great."

"Too much?"

He lifted his head, met my lips in a peck. "Never too much."

More kissing followed, his cock still inside me.

"I'm ready," he said after getting some air.

One more kiss, and I moved, positioning myself on all fours for him. Back arched, quivering with anticipation. I swept my hair back at a sideways angle, watching him come up behind me, his dick so hard, so on the brink of exploding.

He gazed down at my hole, caressed it, bent to kiss my cheeks.

"You naughty tease," I said.

"Such a pretty behind."

"Thanks, Clayby. Now get in there."

He laughed, entered me with surprising ferocity. Gripped me, moved his hips in slow thrusts. I kept my eyes on him, enraptured by the look of him taking me back there, at the sensations erupting across my body.

The warlock increased his speed. Deeper, harder, building into a frenzy of balls slapping against me, of fingers digging into flesh. I lifted my hips for him more, my head pressed into the pillow. I groaned for him, called his name as he fucked me. I reached for my cock, stroked, palms slick with precum. So hard, so wet, so close to the edge.

Harder still, grunting, his sweat dripping onto my back.

“Fuck, Tae. Fuck...”

“Oh, Clay...”

Harder, deeper, faster.

Incredible. A piston, a drill of flesh and vigor.

“Fuck!” he cried, his grip intense. He shot hot jets into me, shaking against me, driving himself deeper as he filled me up.

I ejaculated over the bed moments later, explosion after explosion. Collapsed into it, him falling onto me.

“Wow...” he said.

“That was wonderful, Clay.”

“Really?”

“You really know how to give it to a vampire.”

“I can’t... I can’t believe I did it.”

“How do you feel?”

“Nice and numb.”

He rolled onto his back, spreading out beside me. I wrapped an arm and leg around him, nuzzled my face into his neck.

“I love you so much,” he said.

“I love you, Clayby.”

As happy as I was, as nice as it was to take our minds off things, I knew sadness would hit again. I knew my worries would return as a hurricane, ripping through bliss, upturning joy.

TWENTY-FOUR

CLAY



Tae pulled a navy jumper over his head after we cleaned up. Again.

I hurried off, naked, across the second-floor hallway to the room formerly known as mine. Retrieved a maroon jumper he'd bought me, some black jeans, underwear, boots. Dressed quickly, ran back to him because I had to see much more of his face.

He was already outside the bedroom door.

I squeaked with surprise. "Bloody hell!"

"Sorry, Clay."

"It's only my heart, don't worry."

That amused him, the corner of his mouth twitching up into a smile.

His phone rang. "Yes? Thank you."

"He's in the elevator."

"Buttons?"

"Yes. Come on."

When we got down to the first floor, Grindle was waiting by the elevator as it whirred.

“James isn’t here,” he said, scratching at his blond curls. “I was asleep.”

“He’s in the elevator,” Tae answered.

“Why?”

“It’s fine,” Tae said. “He’s safe.”

“Why didn’t you wake me when he left?”

Because our brains live inside our cocks, I thought.

My magic reignited before the doors opened. When my twin stepped out, I ran at him, hugged him.

Call it instinct. Really confusing instinct.

He hugged me back. “This is nice.”

“I’m so glad you’re back.”

“So am I.”

I broke the hug, keeping my hands on his biceps. “Are you still coming with me?”

His white buttons bore into me for a few seconds. “The idea of returning to the lava holds no appeal.” He smiled again.

“As it shouldn’t.”

Smile gone. “I want to be here. We share a magical bond, and I want to see it through with you.”

“Is this you not wanting to kill the queen, Clay?” Grindle butted in.

“Leave it,” I snapped.

“Yes, leave it,” Tae said. “I thought you weren’t interfering.”

The fairy grunted. “Apologies. I need coffee.”

Tae went with him into the kitchen. “Can I get either of you anything?”

“No, thanks,” we said at the same time, a real twin moment.

Buttons patted my arm. “Do we need to keep apart?”

“I’m fine. No tremors here. Just happy to have you back.”

And the spells.

“Would you like to play chess with me?” he asked.

Under different circumstances, he’d be getting yelled at. Grindle wanted to, simmering in the kitchen as he waited for the espresso machine to finish brewing. But what was the point in yelling? No one got hurt. No one saw him. The news still followed our adventures in Africa. He was safe. We were safe.

And I guess I was playing chess.

“You’ll have to bear with me,” I said, taking a pew at the table.

He explained the rules, and we played a match. Of course, he kicked my arse.

“Quite fun, really,” I said as we set up again.

“I’m sorry I ran off, Clay.”

“It’s okay.” I put the king and queen in the wrong place, switched them around. “You’ve already explained yourself.”

“The perks of our connection.”

“Right?”

He reached across the table and took my hand. His was dry, warm. “Are you really okay?”

“Ask me when this is over.”

He kept his hand on mine. “Thank you for the kind words. They mean so much to me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I know this is strange. *I* think it’s strange, especially after trying to kill you.”

I felt Tae’s energy from here as if it were a living creature telling the penthouse it was about to pounce.

“I can’t believe I ever wanted to do that,” James added.

“Different times, I guess.” *Though not that long ago...*

He removed his hand. “Emotions can change on a whim, can’t they?”

“They can.”

“I did you wrong, Clay. I’m sorry I brought you here.”

“It’s done now. Don’t worry.”

“I took you away from the people you love and denied Seoul the chance to fight back.” He sniffed. “So much for being a hero.”

It was my turn to take his hand. “You know what? I’m sick of that word. It’s loaded with problems. Comes with too much pressure. I don’t know how *Superman* does it.”

A smile to light up that button-eyed face. “I like *Superman*. The comics, the movies.”

“You do?”

He nodded. “Christopher Reeve is my favorite.”

“Do you want to watch one of his movies while we sit around?”

“I’d rather keep playing.”

“Whatever you want.”

It was nice not being mad at him.

Four matches in, Tae brought over some pepperoni pizza he’d ordered.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Thank you,” James added.

“You’re welcome.” Tae bent to kiss me, then left us to it.

“He’s very kind, your vampire lover.”

“He’s my boyfriend,” I said. “We made it official.”

“Congratulations. That’s wonderful. Does he hate me?”

I almost took my first bite, pausing. “He’s processing.”

“Strange to see me in his home.”

“Exactly.”

“I’ve been a bad man.”

“Hey! None of that now. Let’s eat and play some more. I almost beat you last time.”

“You wish.”

Maybe this was heavy gloss, a papering over the cracks of reality. Whatever. Give me a bucket of gloss and sheets and sheets of paper. I’d happily slap it over those pesky holes, things coming back to bite me in the bum be damned.

The eighth match...

I almost locked him up in check mate. Nope, he beat me.

“So close...”

“Again, brother?”

“Hell, yes.”

The next match was a total flop I never wanted to think about again.

Tae moved across the room to the TV, watching the news. Made some calls.

“All quiet,” he said, standing by the coffee table.

Flop Match: The Sequel.

“Shit. I’ve fallen off my rise,” I said.

“Your rise?” Buttons questioned.

“Don’t get cheeky with me.” I huffed, sitting back in the chair. “My brain hurts.”

“Do you give in?”

“I need a break.”

“Then I win.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” I looked around at the fairy sat on a stool at the breakfast bar. Reading.

“I’ll play you,” Tae said, appearing beside us.

“Thank God.” I practically threw myself out of my seat, making a beeline for the sofa. This was the moment where Fizz would jump in my lap.

That paper and gloss started to fall apart. This wasn’t happy families with chess and pizza. This was...

A weather report came up on the TV. Snow tomorrow, pretty heavy. Expect the usual chaos. Made me think of Trace,

how I kind of missed Trace Fall, frolicking in the snowy magic to charge myself up.

“Oh.” Buttons’s voice sounded like mine.

I looked over to see his mouth open in shock.

“Did you beat him?” I asked Tae.

“Yes.”

Even Grindle turned around.

“Already?” I questioned.

“Yes.”

“Impossible,” Grindle said. “It’s been no more than a minute.”

“See for yourself,” Tae gestured at the table.

“It’s true,” Buttons said. “He did it. He really did it.”

Grindle went over to look. I was too comfy where I sat.

The fairy scrutinized the board. “You really did it.”

“Told you.”

“I have to see this for myself. May I?”

Buttons moved for him, standing to the side.

The fairy and the vampire played for less than a minute, Tae declaring checkmate.

“What?” the fairy countered. “How... You did it again.”

Tae shrugged, completely modest.

“I don’t understand,” the fairy said, totally aghast.

“I’m not revealing my tricks.”

“Good. A magician never reveals his secrets,” Grindle said. “I respect that.”

Tae’s phone rang.

Oh, gosh. Was this it?

“Yes? Thank you.” He hung up, eyes on me. “Both routes are ready. The boat is waiting for us.”

“Shit.”

“What have you chosen to do?”

TWENTY-FIVE

CLAY



Sat in the back of the SUV between Buttons and Tae, Grindle in the front seat, I'd made the only choice I could make.

The Rift.

I had to have answers, maybe remove Arcana and spare the world this added danger.

No...

Yes...

My hands clasped together, I sat ramrod straight in the middle seat. A ball of intensity, every muscle tense, every nerve on edge, watching the city roll by through tinted windows, fairy cream hiding my real face once again.

The journey was smooth but slow. The checkpoints were choked with vehicles, the ADU taking their time to wave people through. But one by one, we got through with no problems.

As we left the limits of London, the first blast of green energy tore up the road before us. Our driver braked hard, spinning to a stop.

A huge tremor shook the ground, the SUV rocking violently.

This wasn't me.

A second blast destroyed a nearby bridge, the vehicles on it smashing into the road below or exploding in balls of fire.

“What the fuck!” I cried.

Cars hit other cars behind us, smashing into the crash barriers, spinning out of control. Our driver slammed the car into reverse, avoiding three cars tangled together screeching toward us just in time.

The third blast came down like a missile, ripping through the fields to my left. Tore gouges into the grass and dirt, a green river bubbling up moments later.

Rivers everywhere. From the destroyed bridge to the split road in front of us. Rivers were being made.

Oh. My. God.

Monsters climbed out of the new rivers, clawing at the ground as they pulled themselves out.

The driver took off, finding a clear service road. Took the winding road past trees, up a hill toward an adjoining country road.

Tae took my hand.

Another two blasts ripped through the fields around us.

Tae's phone screamed.

Quentin's plan had begun. An attack on the security forces protecting the waters around The Rift, ships turning up with monsters, witches and demons. Coming out of the blue, apparently hidden until the last minute by magic.

There was footage of The Rift turning from red to green, blasts of energy shooting out of it. Soaring across the sky in

every direction.

Oh, God. What had they done? This wasn't taking control.

"My sister," Grindle said.

More blasts behind us, around us, in front of us. The driver slammed on the brakes as the road ahead got sliced open, angled the car toward a field. He hit the pedal, taking us across country, the ride bouncy to the point of puking.

At least the guy knew what he was doing, tearing across the terrain with expert ease.

A demon tower came to life half a mile away, the red light pulsing against demonic activity. Then another farther away, another, another, another.

Tae's phone rang again.

Oh, God. What now?

"Demons are pouring out of the Richmond gate," he said after an extremely brief conversation.

He opened the news on his phone as we rattled around. I held onto him, Buttons leaning over to see.

They charged out of the tree gate, launching into a frenzy of attacks against the ADU. The towers worked to take those down who'd manifested their scary sides, giving the witches the upper hand. Those in their humanoid forms fared no better. But there were so many of them. I'd never seen anything like it before. It looked so desperate.

Their numbers might be great, but so was the magic of the demon towers and the witches. There was a reason demon takeovers were a failure, no matter the years spent trying. But that didn't stop the odd witch being taken down in this footage, the news turning into a war movie. Synth and swords

and gunfire, a terrible frenzy for the world to see. Blood and violence and screaming.

So much screaming.

What was the demon queen thinking?

“Oh, gosh...”

A report from a helicopter played on the screen, filming The Rift pulsing like some alien egg sac in the sky, shooting those green beams everywhere.

The report ended abruptly after the helicopter got taken out.

Back to the other horror for the viewers, then.

The demon advance seemed to be contained to Richmond Park. But there were already loads of demons on Earth, so they had a head start, ready to fight for their queen.

Fuck.

Reports came in of demon attacks everywhere. A rising.

This was all so fucked.

Kill them all...

I clenched my hands into fists, resisting my anger.

Just look at this mess...

Show them all what you are.

Show. Them. All.

A blast took us off our trajectory. The vehicle spun to a stop, spraying mud across the windows. Two more blasts came dangerously close to the SUV.

Man, the tremors that followed each hit. Awful. Earthquake after earthquake. Worse than anything I'd ever felt

or summoned up myself.

My stomach rolled as the driver took off again.

Tae's hand had slipped from mine as he kept his attention on his phone screen. I couldn't look anymore, but I heard it.

I have to do something...

Yes. Show them.

Show them.

Kill them.

Arcana flared, hungry for action. *I* was hungry for it, to get out there and end this madness. I had the power. What was I doing with it? Running away from my responsibilities?

Arcana was reborn. I had to seize the opportunity fully. Destroy the demons, then end the reign of the witches.

Show them all...

End them all...

A river monster landed on the bonnet. The windshield cracked, and the brakes slammed again, the car spinning, the monster thrown off. My heart flew into my mouth, Tae's arms around me.

As the SUV came to a stop, the river monster jumped up, smashed a hand through the windshield. A massive, clawed hand popped the driver's head like a grape, blood and brain splattering the driver's window.

Darkness descended over me.

Kill them all...

Tae and Buttons moved at the same time, flinging open their doors and charging into battle. I followed, hot on Tae's

heels.

Buttons released his demon side, black tentacles bursting forth, attacking the flurry of river monsters coming at us. Tae spun in a fury of vampire speed.

Grindle got out of the car, throwing blue glass flowers. They were exploding charms, sending monsters spinning through the air.

These monsters were different. When they climbed out of the water, they weren't ready to go like the others I'd encountered. They needed a moment, a few seconds or longer to lay flat on their bellies after crawling from that green crap. Weak for a small window.

But there were loads of them coming. Too many.

I readied my wall spell but fired off a push spell, taking down two at once. The arsewipes flew backward into the water with a hearty splash.

Spinning, I shoved back another who came for me, turned to mist to avoid more of them. A dance of magic and athleticism, quick on my feet, bristling with power.

I didn't want to dance. I wanted to obliterate.

Fire and wind spells, spears of ice hurtling through the air, skewering monster after monster. I burned those fresh out of the water, sent others on flying lessons.

The green energy kept on ripping through the sky, the ground an endless earthquake underfoot.

The world was falling apart.

That damn fairy...

A river monster landed a blow on Grindle. He slammed into the car, groaning as his spine met metal.

I killed the monster with a bolt of electricity between the eyes, hurried over to my slumped friend.

“Are you okay?”

“Nothing a brandy won’t cure?”

“Huh?”

He pulled out a flask from the inner pocket of his tweed jacket. Gulped back what I assumed was the brandy.

“Ah. Better.”

I offered him my hand to help him up.

“Behind you!”

A monster grabbed me by the back of the head, flinging me to the ground.

Ouch.

I rolled, becoming mist as it tried to stamp on my chest. Rolled some more, became solid.

“Not happening.” I hit him with a huge stream of ice. He froze up good.

Tae went down, struck by an uppercut. Landed hard, my insides wincing. I ran for him, getting sweep-kicked by a river monster. My turn to land hard on my front, my hands breaking my fall on the muddy ground.

Ouch again.

The river monster landed on top of me. I hit the arsewipe with a fire spell. It went up like paper, jumping off me, running madly across the field.

“Wanker...” I muttered, getting to my feet.

Tae was okay, snapping the neck of a monster, backflipping away from another before pummeling it to the ground.

Buttons was doing his thing.

This wasn't enough. An endless wave of monsters crawled onto the riverbanks, adding to the numbers. One of them sprouted wings, another much taller than the others. Soon there would be a giant one like the one at the demon palace.

Too much, the green energy from The Rift making more rivers, the ground caught in an endless riot of shaking.

Green energy ripped the ground beside me, so close, so hot it set fire to my coat.

“Clay!” Tae roared.

I cast a water spell on myself, the cold air biting at my drenched arse. Better than being chargrilled.

I went to move, not seeing the river monster barreling toward me in time. The green fucker slammed into me, and together we splashed into the toxic water.

TWENTY-SIX

TAE



It happened so fast. The monster and Clay. I tried to get there, missing a grab of the monster by inches as he took my boyfriend into the water.

I staggered to the edge.

“No!” I roared, going to dive in after them.

Not like this. Not like this. The river would kill him, melt him down to soup.

But I dove.

A force on my leg stopped me from hitting the water, yanked me back, slammed me down on solid ground. I went down to my knees upon impact.

A tentacle. Buttons had stopped me.

I sprang back for the river again. He caught each of my limbs, lifted me into the air.

“No!” he bellowed, black tears running down his cheeks. “Don’t you dare!”

“I have to save him!”

“You won’t survive the river!” His other tentacles stopped two monsters from attacking him, brutal whip-cracks bringing them down.

I ripped into his slimy flesh, an inferno of rage and fear consuming me. Clay was in there, burning in *there*. I had to get to him, get him out, save him. And this prick held me back. This creature who wanted my love dead.

“Get the fuck off me!” I cried, my eyes hot. “Clay!”

I screamed his name, my chest set to explode.

“Clay!”

No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No.

He wasn't dead. He wasn't dead.

No.

No.

No.

No.

No.

Not him. Not Clay.

Not him.

The kernel of agony returned, a fresh one. A new one just for him, to sting me every hour, reminding me I'd failed another lover, lost yet another piece of my heart.

Fuck these demonic tentacles!

“Let me go!”

“No, Tae!” he bellowed back, tightening his grip, adding more appendages to hold me. “I can't let you die.”

“Clay...” I strained against his hold, pulling as hard as I could. He was stronger. In that moment, he was so much stronger.

I'd rip him apart piece by piece until he couldn't stand it any longer. Parts of him were already torn open from my attack.

“Clay...”

“He's not dead... He's... He's still... I feel him...”

Buttons released me, collapsing. He shook in the mud, his limbs thrashing wildly.

“What's happening?”

A splash. The surface of the river rippling. A burst of bright green light from below, shifting to Arcana orange-gold.

Arcana fire in the water? It spread through it, a strange, terrifying sight.

“Clay?”

He rose out of the green, his arms outstretched like some holy being, wreathed in magical fire.

“My brother...” Buttons whispered, rising into the air.

TWENTY-SEVEN

CLAY



Down in the toxic river, the surface right there yet so far away. I clawed for it, the water hot against my skin, a million teeth set to chew me down to the bone, then take care of the bones until nothing remained.

Waste not want not.

But my skin remained intact.

The river monster held me down in the shallow river, a super firm grip around my leg.

Arsewipe.

My magic stayed active, which meant Buttons was right there by the edge of the water. And I wasn't dead.

I blinked through the haze of green, floating with fetuses. Raw, not the solid metallic-like creatures I was used to seeing. Big white eyes, fleshy and transparent green blobs, a network of veins and sinew drawing circular, alien patterns through their bodies.

I wasn't melting.

I wasn't dead.

God, there were so many creepy baby monsters packed into this river. I bumped into one. It whined softly, drifting

away, bumping another, which whined right back.

A different fetus grew in size, quickly transforming into a proper monster. It looked at me, floating there horizontally, then twisted and propelled itself to the surface, the water and the babies churning as it departed.

And I was still alive, every inch of me hot, as if I'd been sitting out in the sun too long. Itching like crazy, chest full of hurt.

Not dead.

Why wasn't I dead?

Arcana laughing. Resistant to this. My body began to shake, wracked by those tremors. Power surged through me, supercharging me, the heat retreating from my skin.

Kill them all...

The fetuses jolted, swimming away from me. Sluggish, no strength in their tiny bodies. Was that a gentle shriek I heard?

The river monster released my leg.

A louder shriek, an ear-splitting whistle. The water itself stirred, trying to move away from this invader.

You're scared of me...

I wasn't just some regular body tumbling into this watery death trap. Hell no. I refused to go out this way. No victim here, but a nightmare for this green shit.

Hell yes!

My body rocked. I convulsed and laughed, the water filling my mouth. I lit up in green light, Arcana fire quickly erupting to swallow it. A cocoon of orange-gold swirled around me, my magic a storm. Intense. Incredible. The monsters screamed as

fire raged through the water, defying physics. Fetuses popped as flames ate them, the inferno engulfing everything.

Good.

Fucking good!

I rose out of the water, arms outstretched.

Kill them all.

He came with me, my brother, into the air, fueling my power.

Fire dripped off me like liquid, raining more death upon the river. I felt it dying, broken by the fire, the flames hunting every last particle, every last monster in there.

Destroying...

River...

I had the power to destroy toxic rivers.

Whoa.

A final burst of power erupted from me, an explosion of fire and light roaring across the river, flames bursting into the sky. Turned me into a torch, drawing mad laughter from me. Beams of my own erupted from me, taking out the river monsters, dove into the surrounding rivers. They burned. They died.

I'd done the impossible! I'd destroyed a toxic river, something the witches had failed to do over all these years. They'd tried so hard, only strong enough to contain them.

Not like me.

The ultimate power.

Oh, shit. Here I go again...

Yeah, so shut up!

The flames died. I dropped to the ground into an empty trench, landing in wet mud. My magic fizzled around my edges, worn out, needing a moment for my battery to recharge.

“My brother...” I heard Buttons say.

Tae was on me, scooping me up. He got me out of the trench.

“Are you okay?” he asked. His normally cool face was contorted beautifully with concern. Fear in his obsidian eyes.

He looked so scared.

I smiled. “I destroyed it, Tae. I destroyed the river.”

His eyes flicked to the trench, another bust of green ripping into the ground nearby. He held steady against the earthquakes.

“I can end them,” I said, completely breathless. “I can...”

I rolled my head to the side as my stomach lurched, green liquid spewing out of me. I gagged and vomited up more of it.

“Clay!” Tae panicked. He put me down, let me bend over to hack my guts up.

Acidic as it came out, it steamed in green pools, dying off to a dull gray before dissipating.

“Oh, shit,” I wheezed after getting a respite. “That hurt.”

“You need water.”

An earthquake cracked the ground beneath me.

“I need to stop The Rift before it destroys us all.”

“Clay,” he said again. “Oh, fuck.” He could barely get his words out.

“I can... I can end it all.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

TAE



T races of green river lingered at the corners of his mouth before turning gray.

My beautiful Clay. Alive, destroyer of rivers. Weak in my arms.

Could he really end the toxic rivers after all these years? Was he the answer the witches had been looking for?

At what cost?

I pulled him closer, lower to the ground.

The green energy bursts seemed to have stopped suddenly. Or left on pause.

Footsteps approaching. Buttons and Grindle standing above us.

“Brother,” the button-eyed demon said. “Are you okay?”

Clay’s lovely hazel eyes moved to him. “I just need a moment.”

“You did it,” Grindle added. “You actually did that.”

“I did,” the warlock responded.

“How do you feel?”

“Like the weight of the world is inside me.” He coughed, wiped the gray traces of river from his mouth. “But I’ll be back on my feet in a second.”

“It seems there really is only *one* plan,” the fairy said.

I suppressed a growl, a snap back. Destroying the world’s rivers didn’t bode well for Clay’s life.

I’m not losing you...

“Are we still going to The Rift?” Buttons asked.

The Rift had changed, become this river-making thing. It was the key to everything.

Don’t leave me, my walking sunshine...

“Yes,” he answered his twin. “We have to stop it.”

“Clay...” I said.

Eyes back to me.

I loved him so much. Why should I let him slip away? Why shouldn’t I be selfish? Humans wanted to go up against witches, used Synth, caused the destruction, The Rift, the rivers. This was their doing. This wasn’t on me, and this wasn’t on Clay.

Only, it was. If we wanted to live in a world together.

What if he doesn’t get to live?

“I have to do this,” he said gently to me, reaching up to brush a curl from my face. “This is how I make things better.”

“I don’t want to lose you.”

“Who says you will?” His eyes glistened, understanding within them. He knew this might very well be a one-way ticket, especially now.

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

I pulled him into a hug, as tight as I could crush him. “Don’t leave me, Clay. Please don’t leave me.” My eyes were hot, leaking. “I can’t stand it.”

He sniffled against me. I broke my crush to catch his tears.

He caught mine. “My crybaby ways are infectious.”

I laughed, kissing him softly through my veil of tears.

“Dad came back from The Rift,” he said.

“The Rift’s not the same one he went to.”

He kissed me. “I have to do this, Tae. After everything I’ve done, it’s the least I can do.”

“You didn’t decide to—”

He cut me off with a kiss. A long, soft joining of our lips.

He broke away. “It doesn’t matter. The world is going to shit. I can’t sit back and let it happen. And neither can you.”

I hated him being right, that I wasn’t strong enough to take him and walk away from everything.

There wouldn’t be anywhere to run to.

I closed my eyes, thinking back to the first time I saw him summon the Mark of Arcana. The wonder it brought, the hope for my cause. How things started to change between us, when I dove deeper into the man, into what made him tick. Falling for his sweetness, wanting to be more than a working partner, but a romantic one. The conflict between my blooming love and the love for my wife, the first time we kissed, fucked, such great memories within a meadow of anguish.

“My sunshine,” I whispered.

“Like the song?”

“I think that song was written for you.”

His bottom lip trembled, his eyes closing, releasing tears. “No one’s ever meant more to me than you.” Eyes open again. “You saved my life. You changed my life. You showed me what it’s like to fall hard for someone. You turned my world into a romance novel.”

My heart ached, threatening to break. “Where is our happily ever after?”

“I... We can still have one.”

If only I were strong enough to believe it. “I can’t let you go, Clay.”

“But you will.”

“I want to hold you forever. I want to take you to Egypt like we said, see it for ourselves.”

He released a soft, agonized sob. “This is bullshit.”

“I’m making it worse. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I love hearing you say these things.”

“But it doesn’t change anything.”

His eyes bore into mine as he slowly shook his head. “I wish it did. I really bloody wish it did.”

“I suppose there’s no wish spell in your repertoire?”

He smiled. “Would’ve saved us a lot of drama, right?”

“It would.” I kissed him again, always hungry for those sweet lips.

“Okay,” he said after the kiss. “I need to stand up.”

I helped him. “Are you back up to strength?”

“Big time,” he answered, eyes on his brother. There was a ring of orange-gold around his hazel irises.

“What now?” Grindle asked.

Clay looked at me, reached up, and cupped my face. “I want to say thank you.” He released me, turning to the fairy. “For everything. For getting me this far.”

I took his hand. “Clay? No. We go together.”

“I love you, my cuddly vampire. But this is it.” He pulled his hand from mine, running to his brother.

Hand in hand, they were both in the air thanks to the flying spell, leaving us behind.

I ran across the field, leaping into the air. They were too high, already too far away.

“Clay!” My heart fractured, my body ready to collapse in agonizing defeat. “Clay!”

Leaving.

Leaving me.

Heading for death.

An engine roared, a headlight beam in the distance.
Heading this way.

I roared, plunged into a vortex of sorrow and rage.

“Tae?” the fairy said from behind me.

Demon. Another demon. Never free from demons.

Fucking demons. A demon on a motorbike.

ADU sirens followed, blue on the horizon.

I charged toward the SUV, removing the body from the driver's seat. As furious and ready to implode as I was, I wouldn't ever toss aside the body of such a loyal man. I mentally thanked him, promised to send him off to the afterlife properly after I saved my boyfriend.

Grindle jumped into the passenger seat, and I took off.

When I said I wouldn't lose Clay, I meant it.

TWENTY-NINE

CLAY



I t felt as if I'd ripped myself from everything good and happy. But if I turned around now, I'd be back in his arms thinking of Egypt. Wrapped in his love, never to leave his side as the world went to a steaming pile of poo.

I had to make up for the things I'd done so those who'd died in and around Barking Park didn't die in vain. This was for them and for the people I couldn't save from the demon realm. For Roy from the shopping center and the friends I'd lost when the center was destroyed.

"For you," I said.

"What did you say?" Buttons asked.

"Nothing," I said.

Finding love and having to leave it behind really took the biscuit. The winner of the worst pain award. I finally found someone to love me for me, a super-hot vampire billionaire at that, but stars were aligned in a different way. Pointing me toward destiny.

Because of witches, Dad went to The Rift, did something to find Arcana and pass it onto me and James, slept with the demon queen, the consequences rife in the present. And it was

at The Rift this would all end, coming full circle. Hopefully. We might even see the end of the toxic rivers.

And the end of me...

I was pinning a lot to this—a hell of a lot.

Gosh, imagine a world without toxic rivers. Without The Rift. It wouldn't solve every problem, but it'd be the end of a real biggie.

We hovered up the miles in silence, flying northeast over the devastation below us. Bright green veins cut through the landscape, fires burning in towns and cities, fields on fire. There was even a green lake as we approached the coast, cut off from the sea by a tiny sliver of land. Humans and demons and witches, all fighting. Screams and death, another Seoul incident playing out below us.

But the monsters were staggering around like zombies, falling over each other, crawling weakly.

Huh? What was happening to them? Did I do this? I watched the rivers, as bright as they ever were. No Arcana fire drying them out, nothing like that.

Then what?

I carried on. The land came to an end, handing over to the North Sea. I swallowed, The Rift closer and closer, Tae further away.

A blast of obsidian magic rushed at me, a crackling firework. It came too fast for me to respond. Hit me in the chest, snatching the air from my lungs. I lost focus on the spell and my grip on James. We fell. He manifested his tentacles and locked himself to me.

“Fuck!” I screamed out.

I managed to cast the spell again before we turned to pancakes a few meters above the ground.

The arsewipe who'd shot at us fired again. This time I got my wall up in time, the magic bouncing off turquoise energy.

Fairy magic.

But Arcana said demon, not fairy.

And the demon was our mother.

THIRTY

TAE



The motorbike followed us all the way to Felixstowe. Taking every unexpected swerve with us, avoiding every pitfall.

I let it follow us, not willing to stop despite my fury at the demon tailing us.

River monsters fell to the ground as we passed the new rivers, crawling in verges, lumbering on roads and paths.

I didn't question it, only took hold of the advantage. Questions were for later.

Had Clay reached The Rift already? They were heading in a northeasterly direction, miles away from us already.

Too far.

Clay...

Grindle held two orange fairy glass flowers in one hand—charms he pulled from his jacket pocket.

“Prepared, I see,” I said.

“Whoever this is behind us, they won't be leaving this port.”

“Good to know.” If only I had some of my grenades with me, yet my fists would be more than enough right now.

Nothing or no one would stop me from getting to my love.

Then what? Stop him from saving everyone else?

I took a sharp right, the vehicle tilting slightly, then took a hill.

The bike kept up with us.

“Who do you think it is?” Grindle said, eyes on his side mirror.

I suppose some questions were for now.

The ADU was still far behind, possibly following us. I wasn't sure. Plenty of them would be at the site Clay had cleared of rivers. He'd been a bright beacon rising into the sky, ripe for a witch's radar.

Please be okay...

We came to another hill. At the top, the sea and port coming into view. The road ahead was blocked by a river. Monsters lay around it, some on their knees facing us, two of them with sagging wings. The green liquid spread across the road and the fields on either side of the road down to the port's entrance. Easily clearable on foot, not for an SUV.

“Come on,” I said, flinging the door open.

“I'm not as fast—”

I hurried around to the passenger side. “Get on my back.”

To my surprise, he climbed on without argument as the motorbike came too close.

Grindle jumped off my back and threw an orange charm. It swallowed the rider and the bike, stopping them in that wretched jelly.

Phillipe was the demon rider.

“Phillipe?” I said.

Grindle released him from the jelly. The demon wobbled on the bike, then jumped off, the vehicle crashing to the ground.

“Tae! Quentin’s free!” he cried.

A river monster pawed at my boot. I slammed it down on his head.

“How?” Grindle questioned. “The queen took his limbs.”

An engine roared, a car screeching to a halt at the top of the hill. The passenger door flew open.

Demons.

Gunfire.

Phillipe’s left eye exploded, half his face torn off his skull. The grin of his exposed jaw and the wide shock of his other eye were a horror. He fell to the floor. Not dead but removed from this dreadful game.

The scent of demons. Gunfire again.

A bullet hit me in the left shoulder, shoving me backward. I kept upright, pushing through the sudden, nasty jolt of pain.

“It’s over, vampire!” came the familiar voice of Isaiah.

“Shoot his face off!” Quentin Dawn bellowed.

They were a team now?

And were there four demons in that car?

Yes.

I grabbed Grindle, flinging him over my left shoulder, and ran.

Did the demon prince have a hand in the sudden restoration of Quentin Dawn?

Most likely.

Running from Isaiah left a dirty stain on my soul. But Clay came first. I wasn't wasting my time here with them.

A third crack of gunfire. A miss.

I poured my energy into my run, aiming straight for the water.

THIRTY-ONE

CLAY



They gathered in the Great Yarmouth Harbour, an army of demons, their queen leading them. Hundreds of them, cars turning up at the back to throw out more of the fuckers.

A cold wind blew in from the North Sea, the sky darkening as if a portent of things to come.

Damn.

“Mother?” Buttons said as we hovered behind my wall.

She pointed her wand with the black glass flower tip at us.

Bitch.

Princess Isobel was by her side, sneering.

“You traitor!” the queen spat at him. Her serene skin shone, covered in grime and blood. Her hair was a mess, and she looked exhausted, her royal black, red, and gold clothing covered in mud.

Not so regal tonight.

God, she gave me a stomachache just looking at her.

“Mother...” James added gently. “I—”

“Save your excuses, you disgusting creature.”

Isobel narrowed her eyes at me, also in royal colors. No bikini, though, as bedraggled as her mother.

“Been running the gambit?” I questioned, following it up with a chuckle. “You look like shit.”

I couldn't help myself.

Isobel hissed and snapped her fingers. Her power struck the wall uselessly.

I hit her with a push spell, sending her onto her arse. She landed in a puddle.

Yes!

“You wanker!” she cried.

“Enough!” the queen barked at her.

The princess stood, keeping her vile mouth shut—the best outcome for everyone.

Queen Imelda kept her weapon pointed at me, as did her loyal army of demons behind her.

Buttons stayed super quiet, pressed against my side.

“You cannot win,” she said.

“And I suppose you can?” I responded.

“The time for demons on Earth is now.”

“Really? What changed? You don't have any upper hands here, queenie pops. This is all so desperate. Where's the other prince?”

She growled, ignoring my last question.

Isobel went for another finger snap.

The queen stopped her. “Ignore him, Isobel. This is nothing but his constant disrespect. He thinks he is funny

when he is anything but.”

“Not trying to be a comedian... or is it a royal fool in your presence? Who the fuck knows. What I do know is you’re screwed. You’ve come running out of the demon realm with nothing.”

“We are strength in numbers.”

“But you could’ve done this ages ago. You’re not strength in numbers. You’re desperate. Irrational. Hey, I get it. You really, really want to win. You really want a summer house in Italy or something, right?” I shrugged. “Don’t actually care. You can’t win. The witches are still better than you.”

“Loads of witches are dead,” Isobel chimed in. “I’ve killed five already.”

I laughed. “Quick! Someone get her a blue ribbon!”

She flipped me the bird.

“Anyway, I’ve got stuff to do. So, well, toodles.”

“James?” the queen said. “Is this it?”

“Don’t talk to him,” I countered. “He doesn’t want to talk.”

“I do,” he said.

Oh, crap.

The queen grinned, her white eyes wicked flares. “I knew you would. I knew you would hate disappointing me. But you can make it better. Mother is in pain, but you have the power to make her better.”

Time to go.

“Release yourself from him,” she added. “Take away the power. Give him to me. He will never be one of us. But you

will. You are. Things were going wonderfully, weren't they? We were bonding, becoming a family. I was a fool before, but I see Clay for what he is now. A burden. He hurts. He does not love."

Okay, so her words shouldn't impact me. Not now, not after everything. But they got through my defenses, landing some blows.

"Fuck you," I said when I should be flying off.

Her smile cut into me.

"Talk, Mother," James said.

I blinked. "What? No. We have to go."

"Not yet."

"Don't listen to her, James."

"Mother?" he said, ignoring me.

If I tried to fly away, he'd dump me.

Is that what it all came down to? His loyalty to her? No matter what?

"I've said what I need to say," she answered. "Come down. Let's end him together. He isn't your family. He only sees a monster, not the special side of you."

My mouth was too dry for anymore comebacks.

"She's right," Isobel said. "Let's be together."

I faced him, his face close to mine, his buttons on her. What was he thinking? Would he believe her? Would he let everything we'd built crumble? She'd infected his life before he started being nice to me. He'd killed for her, devoted himself to her cause.

“Don’t leave me,” I whispered. “I need you.”

He turned his head, not quite looking at me. “I know you do.”

“I love you, Son.” Gosh, she made those kind words sound like poison.

Bollocks. “She doesn’t.”

A long arse beat. “I know.”

“You do?”

“Love reveals itself in actions.”

“Oh.”

“I know you care, brother. If you didn’t, you’d have never told me about our father, held me when I cried. You had no reason to, not after everything I’ve done to you.”

“James...” Man, my heart really, really ached. So confused, so torn up.

He snarled down at our mum and sister. “Kill them.”

“What?” That shocked me.

“Kill them. Now. I can’t stand looking at their faces anymore.” He spoke quietly, enough to be out of earshot.

“James!” the queen roared. “Drop him! Now!”

“I’m no longer yours,” he returned, much louder.

“James!” she seethed. “Do as your queen commands.”

My demon-killing arrows came to life.

Her surprise, along with Isobel’s, was awesome.

Kill them all...

They backed away, the demon army surging forward. The queen fired her weapon again, the magic barely making a dent in my protective wall.

More arrows, so many hovering around me like a flock of deadly, orange-gold birds.

I set them loose.

The queen and princess screamed, the army releasing a collective roar.

Blood poured over my lips as the arrows flew, the magic intense, breathtaking. I squeezed my brother's hand so hard I almost snapped his finger. I wouldn't let him go, not until they were all dead.

The demon army tried to protect the royals, cut down as they hurried their queen and princess to the cars.

Isobel died first, an arrow hitting her in the back of head. She fell forward, face smacking off the rear passenger window of a black car.

Queen Imelda turned to face me as an arrow hit her in the heart. She looked down at her chest, then back up to me. For a moment, I thought she'd withstood it or needed more arrows seeing as she was the demon queen.

She went down face-first like a stone, face-planting the ground.

Dead. The queen was dead. Goodbye, Your Majesty. Goodbye to my mum and my sister. I felt nothing but relief seeing their bodies turn to black ash, mingling with the ashes of their fallen soldiers.

And then the tremors began, the charging of my power to its deadliest capacity. Drawing on Buttons, me spiraling into

the depths of my darkness.

“Kill them all,” I said. “I’ll rip it all apart until I see ashes everywhere. Taste them on my tongue.” More blood poured from my nose. “The end. The end. The end.”

“Please stop.” A soft voice, a sorrowful sound.

“Stop?”

“Please, brother. Not this. Not now.”

I frowned, hands trembling claws. “But I have to kill them all. Demons, witches, show this world who to bend their fucking knees to.”

“Please... You have to stop.” Breathless, my battery, his energy being sucked out of him by me—his leech of a brother.

“Clay...” he said again. “You have to stop.”

Stop? Really? Why? Why should I stop? Why should I pull back from this? I can fly across this planet and right every wrong, then pass through each demon level and leave it in ashes.

Destroy.

End it.

I can burn the royal witch palaces, strip them of their power. Fuck them over.

And then what?

Power...

No...

Yes...

“Please, brother. Please just stop.”

His pleas got through. My reason wasn't supposed to be here when I lost it like this. But there it was, pulling me back, turning my volume down.

"I... Whoa."

Down to a nice simmer, full of flavor but no ridiculous heat to spoil it.

I rolled my shoulder, drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

Crisis averted.

For now.

Every time this happened, it strengthened the case against Arcana. It really, really did.

"They're gone," Buttons said.

I looked down at those pitiful ashes. Really, I wanted their endings to be a lot more painful.

Black tears ran from my brother's button eyes. "They're gone."

"I'm sorry," I said, and hugged him. Just hugged him as we floated, let him sob into me.

It lasted ten seconds before he broke it up. This is when I expected him to turn against me, blame me, snap because he couldn't take this loss.

He didn't.

"Let's get this done," he said.

"Okay." I wasn't about to argue with that.

THIRTY-TWO

TAE



I found a small speedboat in the water. “Perfect.”

I put Grindle down, jumping into the boat. No keys. Not a problem.

I broke open the engine, lengthened my right index fingernail, cut through the wires, brought two ends together. They sparked as they kissed, the engine coming to life.

Sirens screamed in the air. I waited for the car carrying Isaiah, Quentin, and those other two demons to arrive—probably Tasmin Vacquier and the man I’d banished years ago.

They didn’t arrive, no sound of an approaching engine, of them running after us.

Strange.

Grindle followed me into the boat, taking a seat and holding onto a rail.

I gunned the throttle, cutting through the water toward The Rift.

“What will you do when you find him?” Grindle asked loudly over the engine and spray of the water.

“I don’t want him to be alone.”

“He’s not.”

Fuck you, Grindle. “I want to be with him.”

“When?”

“When what?”

“You tell me. The Rift isn’t exactly going to—”

“Stop talking.” I knew what he meant. He was asking if I meant to die with Clay.

I wouldn’t allow that nastiness into my mind.

THIRTY-THREE

CLAY



The Rift pulsed, a throbbing heartbeat as green clouds rolled with it, green lightning forking through them. Still no blasts of energy, though the energy of this area crackled, the hairs on my arms standing up, fear licking the back of my neck.

It was too quiet. The calm before the storm.

There were rivers on top of the water, layered on, monsters floating on their backs, pawing at the sky.

Ten ships bobbed on the waves, some of them drifting out of the forbidden area, over here near the spot Dad took his plunge. They were packed with crawling river monsters and comatose witches. There were demons, too, in small boats beside each large vessel. Hanging over the sides, floating in the water, as knocked out as the witches they'd been possessing.

What'd happened here? Did I spoil the party?

I eyed the water, taking the opportunity of the eerie silence to get to The Rift. Recalled Dad's journey here, where he'd jumped into the water, that spot right...

...there. The beating of a heart, drums in my ears.

"Can you hear that?" Buttons asked.

“Yeah.”

We flew down, slowing as we approached the waves.

“Are you ready?” I said.

“More than ready, brother.”

With a deep breath, we took a dive.

The current grabbed us, sucked us down into the cold dark,
then up.

Up.

Up.

Up.

THIRTY-FOUR

TAE



“**M**aybe Clay did this,” Grindle said as we arrived at The Rift, the floating ships.

The odd calm.

“Maybe he did.” I killed the engine, scanning the water for a sign of the entrance to The Rift.

Amid the chaos since we left Raven Tower, the notebook seemed to be lost. Without Clay and Buttons, it was useless anyway.

I closed my eyes, casting my mind back to the map revealing itself under Clay’s touch, the position of The Rift’s entrance. But there hadn’t been one marked. Only Clay knew where it was, the one to have seen the memory of his father here.

No...

For years this spot remained a secret, the witches not discovering it. But I could.

I had to.

Hope began to slip away.

I tensed, cursing myself for not having the power to join Clay on that memory walk. The area smelled briny, with hints

of his vanilla scent. Confused, too tangled up with the sea air to indicate an exact location.

“Clay!” I called rather pathetically.

But he wasn’t here, already gone to do his... duty.

Not gone. Don’t say gone.

“I’m going in,” I said. “To see if I can find it.”

“You fuckers!” came a cry from the closest ship.

A blue fairy charm flew at us.

Grindle’s reflexes responded within a millisecond, an orange charm thrown to meet it. Orange jelly swallowed the blue charm before it exploded, dropping to the water. An orange ball floated past us helplessly.

On the ship’s deck, Gretchen leaned on the barrier.

“Sister,” Grindle said.

“Brother,” she snarled back.

A speedboat approached. Fast.

“You ruin everything,” she said. “You always did.”

“What happened?” Grindle asked.

She didn’t answer.

That boat came into view, four demons in it.

Just what we needed.

Gretchen grinned, revealing gaps in her teeth. “My darling husband has come to save the day.”

Grindle glowered up at her. “Since when did you rely on any man?”

“I don’t.” She looked out to sea, still grinning, then pulled out two more blue charms. “Stay right where you are, both of you.”

Grindle pulled out two more orange glass flowers. “If this is what you want, bring it.”

She laughed. “Bring it?”

Grindle didn’t respond.

I looked to the water.

“What is it, vampire?” she asked. “What are you looking at?”

Hadn’t she noticed Clay? Did she not know anything about The Rift and Adam Christmas’s notebook?

“Where is your warlock?” she asked.

She knew nothing, so I kept quiet.

A dead body floated past, a familiar man dressed in white.

“Brad Smith,” she said. “A brilliant witch. Such a shame he drowned. We’d only just got him back from the clutches of Princess Isobel.” She shrugged.

So, that was it for the leader of the London ADU? A man who wanted to lock Clay and me up?

As much as I loathed him, I wished him peace. His final weeks had been spent as a pawn to this insane cause.

“Well?” Gretchen said. “Where is your warlock? Still in Africa?”

I refused to answer her.

“No? Don’t want to talk?” she said as the boat roared closer. “How was your stay in the Fairy Wilds? Enjoy it? Not

sure how you got out, but I'm impressed. I could use a guy like you on my team. I still believe that."

I had no interest in interacting with her.

The boat arrived, slowing to a stop. Quentin and Isaiah, their faces bruised and cut, covered in grime, stood at the front, guns pointed at our heads. In the back was Tasmin, a fair-skinned woman with short red hair and piercing blue eyes, scars all over her face from her disobedience to the demon queen.

Behind her, sitting down, was the nameless demon I'd banished—sickly pale, his hair thinning, a fuller mustache on his face compared to the last time I'd seen him.

"Here we all are again," Quentin said, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth.

I still held my tongue.

"Do you think this was the end of me?" Quentin asked. "Did you, Tae?"

Silence.

"You remember Prince Isaiah, don't you? He helped me. He helped us." He bowed his head. They all did. "The demon queen is dead."

I expected something like 'long live the king' to follow. It didn't.

She was dead? Did Clay...

...I had to get to him.

The demon prince lifted his head and glared at me, his teeth bared. "He remembers me."

Nothing but silence, even as my blood boiled.

“I’ve been wanting to see you again,” he added. “To return the favor. Rip out your spine, shower in your vampire blood. The best thing about it is you won’t bounce back like I did. You’ll be as dead as your family, nothing but a corpse for me to piss on. And I’ll take great pleasure in it.” He growled, stroking the side of his gun perversely. “I just can’t decide how long I want to draw this out for.” He licked his lips. He clicked his fingers, locking me and the fairy in his demon magic.

My resistance failed as my heart raced too fast, my anger too hot.

“I really want to hear you beg,” he said.

Tasmin laughed and added, “A show I would enjoy so much, Your Highness.”

He would not get to me. He would not hold me.

I got to planning my attack. Get free, leap across the water. How many feet sat between our vessels?

“My darling,” Quentin called up to her. “It is wonderful to see your face again.” He blew her a kiss.

She caught it, pressed her palm to her lips. “And you. How did you escape?”

“His Highness, as I said,” he replied, placing a hand on the prince’s shoulder. “While his mother planned her foolish attack on the human realm, he came to me. Helped break me free. He believes in our cause.” He frowned. “But I see we’ve had a setback.”

“I’m working on fixing it,” the fairy said. “There is something wrong with The Rift. We were all knocked out, the color changing from red to green, the rivers...” She looked behind her. “The magic of the monsters has changed the magic

of The Rift it seems, becoming a river maker of sorts. But this is merely a glitch. We *will* fix this.”

The consequences of insane dreams there in the sky, those new green scars back on land.

This had to stop.

Gretchen’s eyes roamed the water. “I’m the only one to wake up so far.”

“I believe in this cause even more so now,” Isaiah joined in with the conversation pompously. “Look at how my mother’s obsession ended.” He sighed heavily, shaking his head. “My beautiful mother. My queen. I will miss her so much. I will avenge her death.” His white eyes glinted with menace. “Where is he, vampire? Where is my warlock brother? I have a bullet for him.”

How I kept silent under this cloud of fury was beyond me.

The nameless demon snarled at me. “Idiot.”

Tasmin chuckled. “The vampire thinks he is brave when he is nothing but a weak fool. A once important vampire in the world of business brought down by his love of warlock cock. Tell me, Tae, how does Clay taste? Is he as sour as I imagine him to be?”

They all laughed together.

Tasmin continued her vicious onslaught. “How does it feel to be so low, so hated? They all hate you, the people of this world. For being by his side, for letting the warlock live. You aided and abetted a man who burned down houses, slaughtered so many, including a plane full of ADU witches—though that’s not so bad.” She laughed, Nameless chuckling with her. “But his damage doesn’t stop here. Look at my realm. Look at what he did there. He killed the queen and princess, and still,

he walks free somewhere. You should have killed him the moment you saw him summon the Mark.”

No response from me, only my best, coldest stare.

Her vitriol gave me an idea.

Gretchen entered the conversation. “I want the vampire alive.”

“No,” the prince growled.

“Yes, Your Highness. He is a tool to be used.”

“My mother believed Clay and James to be tools, and look what happened there. The vampire must die.”

They were all clueless about what lay in the water, where Clay had gone. Gretchen might have been part of the witch experiments, but not the aftermath with Adam.

“I can’t wait to destroy those demon towers,” Nameless whispered.

“In good time,” Tasmin responded, her brows pinched together.

“We must continue this work,” Quentin said. “You will be my queen, Gretchen. The future will be wonderful.” He blew her another kiss. “Hold on, I’m coming up.”

Fighting only worked so well. They were armed, had a fairy on their side along with their numbers, and me in a demon’s snare.

But I still had control of my mouth.

I used a potent weapon against them—words. Tasmin attacked me with them, and I sent them right back. For the husband and wife. These words would hurt worse than any punch, any sword.

At least, I hoped so.

“Your husband had an affair with the demon queen,” I said to Gretchen.

Then I gave Quentin his medicine. “And your wife worked with the witches to try bringing Arcana back by using Clay’s father.”

Bomb dropped. The wind seemed to pick up, rocking the boat.

Quentin froze in the boat. His mouth fell open, as did Gretchen’s. They faced each other.

“What did he just say?” they both asked at the same time.

I added a quick breakdown of the witch experiments against the warlocks that made Adam Christmas, of things I knew—apart from The Rift. To my surprise, Isaiah didn’t click his fingers to shut me up.

“You... You did?” Quentin asked his fairy love.

She glowered at me, then softened for him. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s in the past? We have both had affairs. It is our love that matters.”

His gun trembled in his hands. “Not that. Arcana. You caused *this*. You brought Arcana back.”

“Of course, I didn’t.”

“But you did. Adam Christmas... You made him find... Where did he find it?” He threw that last part over his shoulder at me.

I didn’t answer.

“My darling, listen to me,” Gretchen said. “My intentions were pure. When I found out that the witches were conducting

these experiments, I wanted a part of it. To help you. To give you Arcana in some form if they were successful.” Her eyes flickered to me. “Is this true? They succeeded? How exactly?”

No answer from me.

“At least we have some sort of answer to this mystery, my love. Though it doesn’t change the fact he’s dangerous. Arcana shouldn’t be here.”

Quentin didn’t answer her either.

“Remember when we both wanted to use Clay?”

My skin crawled at her voice.

“We were fools,” he responded. “You are a fool. I trusted you. I have always—”

“Oh, piss off. Don’t take the high road with me, Quentin. Fucking the queen?” She huffed. “Can’t say I’m surprised.”

I threw fuel into the fire. “A fairy told me you both loved to cheat.”

Her eyes snapped back to me. “Fayette, I gather? That meddling whore.”

I offered her more silence.

“He’s stirring the pot,” the demon prince said. “Forget this and—”

But Quentin fired his gun, popping his wife’s head like an egg. Her body tumbled overboard, slamming into the water, gore raining down after her.

Grindle gasped but didn’t respond.

The demon’s gun smoked as black tears streamed down his face. “We always loved... We always loved... I loved her so much.”

“Focus, Quentin,” Isaiah said. “Get a hold of yourself.”

“Gretchen...” the demon tossed his gun into the sea.
“What have I done?”

“Quentin!” the prince barked.

Quentin Dawn, the demon I’d hunted for so long, who I’d even feared, dove into the sea after his wife’s body. He clung to her, sobbed into her bobbing corpse begging for forgiveness.

Words were deadly things.

Isaiah’s magic dropped in the distraction.

Grindle threw an orange charm at Quentin, trapping the demon and his dead wife in jelly.

Now for the prince.

Isaiah cocked his gun. “Time to die, Tae Frost.”

My shoulder throbbed from his previous shot, reminding me of its presence.

I dove as he fired, surging through the cold water toward his boat. Grabbed it, rocked it so hard he fell over, firing the gun again, dropping it. He roared with horror, trying to get to his feet. I launched myself into the boat.

Tasmin had a gun at my head. “Freeze, you—”

I snatched the gun, fired it into her stomach three times, spinning to blow Nameless’s head apart.

Isaiah snapped his fingers, driving me down to my knees. Not enough to get the gun out of my hand.

I blew his kneecaps off.

He screamed, crawling for his gun. I snatched it, threw both weapons into the water.

“Your Highness!” Tasmin cried in agony. “I—”

I snapped her neck, tossed her overboard. A storm of cold fury, putting this to bed once and for all. No real death, but enough to draw a line under it.

Under *him*.

“This isn’t fair!” Isaiah shrieked. A petulant, spoiled brat. “You can’t do this. I am the king!”

“Is that so?” I said. “I thought Quentin was set to be king.”

“He isn’t worthy of the crown. I am the eldest prince, the one to—”

Not interested, I grabbed his left leg and tore it from him, bones breaking, flesh ripping as black blood sprayed.

“I’ve saved you from a political headache,” I answered, getting to work on his other leg.

“Tae!” he howled.

I ripped his left arm off.

Blood oozed from his mouth as he screamed.

This prick destroyed my world. Ran away and left my wife and son dead, my heart in ruins. His voice haunted me, never gave me a moment’s peace. Always existing, breathing, living. He still would, even in pieces. But good luck to him trying to get back to his realm for a bath.

The chance for true death was probably gone now.

I had to get to Clay.

The dismemberment of the prince ended with his head.

“Here we are again.” I yanked it off, dumped it with the rest of his limbs in the boat.

For good measure, I stamped on his mouth, broke his jaw and teeth, his nose. He gurgled, black bubbles foaming between his lips.

“For you,” I said to my wife and son. “Always for you.”

I hope you have found peace together.

I miss you...

I love you...

Grindle watched me from the other boat.

“I’m sorry about your sister,” I said.

“Thank you, Tae.” He seemed calm. Too calm. “Can you bring that boat over here? Get her out of the water?” He pointed at Tasmin.

“What are you doing?”

“Clearing up a mess.”

I dragged the demon into the boat to join the prince and Nameless and jumped back into the sea. Swam the small gap between us, dragging the boat closer.

My shoulder sang with pain.

Done, I climbed back into our boat, finding the orange bubble of Quentin and Gretchen now occupying most of it. “What are you doing? How did you move them?”

“With this.” He flashed me a crescent moon pendant. “My fairy will.”

“What are you doing?” I asked again.

He smiled up at me. “Tae Frost, I want to thank you for everything. For being a loyal customer, for not cutting me out of your life when you found out I wasn’t as forthcoming as I should be. For trusting me, for being a friend of sorts.”

“Why does this feel like goodbye?”

“Because it is. The queen is dead, Quentin is... He will face more pain for killing my sister. I’ll make sure he suffers greatly before the end.”

“What end?”

“I’m taking them to the Fairy Wilds. These two, those inside that boat. We can all fade into oblivion together, but first, I’ll torture them, especially the parts of the prince. And when the end comes, it won’t be death for the demons. Much worse. Endless suffering with no escape. Think of it as my gift to you.”

The two boats bumped each other.

“But—”

“Please leave the boat. Also, there is an email in your inbox. It contains the scanned pages detailing the witch experiments, along with the location and safe code to the originals. Use them wisely.”

“Grindle. You can’t—”

“Jump!” he bellowed. “Now.”

He pulled a knife, cut out his tongue and two fingers from his left hand. He lunged forward, landing at the edge of the boat, grabbing the side of the other with his right hand.

I jumped into the water. A pop, a flash of light, and the boats were gone.

Grindle was gone.

Prince Isaiah was gone.

“It’s over,” I said, treading water.

Only, it wasn’t. This had been nothing but a delay.

Thunder rumbled within The Rift.

Clay...

THIRTY-FIVE

CLAY



Green. So much green. A chamber, like the inside of a heart. The walls throbbed and beat, riddled with green veins, an endless muffled thumping around us. Green liquid ran down the walls, vanishing into a gap around the edge of the chamber.

A downstairs part?

“Bloody hell,” I said, taking it all in. My voice echoed.

The air was thick and hot, drawing sweat to the surface of my skin.

“Shall we go this way?” Buttons asked, his voice echoing too as he pointed to a hole in the soft floor.

“Okay.” I walked over to it, taking care with every step. The ground was as green as the walls, a little on the sticky side. Kind of like a really crap nightclub I once went to where every step was like walking on Velcro. This place smelled better. No beer and shit stench.

I'm inside The Rift!

Or had I passed through it into this place?

A green pool rippled down in the hole, the liquid from the walls flowing into it.

“It’s definitely toxic water,” my brother said.

“I...” Why did that part of the wall over there look different?

“They did something to this place,” he added. “I think. Them and their terrible meddling.”

I heard him, my stomach flipping accordingly. But the wall drew most of my attention. It split, opening up like vertical lips, spreading into a smile. A red smile, revealing a small, separate chamber.

More splits cracked the walls, revealing more red chambers. There were sounds of laughter, of guns and screams, of music I recognized as being from the 1960s.

What the hell?

I rubbed my eyes. “Am I seeing this?”

A cold wind rushed toward us. My skin tingled, body responding to the strange chambers, shivering under the chill suddenly filling the main chamber. I wanted to know more.

I glanced at my twin. He was just as intrigued.

“Shall we look?” I said.

“Yes.”

I took point walking across the chamber to the first opening, rippling and flexing my fingers, my heart in my throat.

James took my hand. “We must be careful.”

The closer we got, the wider the entrance opened, revealing more of the chamber. Red clouds and flickers of lightning, blurred colors smeared across the walls, ceiling, and floor, distorted images breaking through. Flashes of a world

gone by, of witches and warlocks using Arcana. They struck my mind in chunks of history, showing me magic users at their peak, not riddled with darkness. Powerful. Amazing. The glory days.

And then the end of that magic. When it faded over the course of three days, losing its luster. Terrifying everyone because it was the only way of killing demons. People wept in the streets, witches reacted instantly by making Synth, taking power. Some blaming warlocks for the loss. Crushing us, refusing us Synth. Trace followed, a memory of Arcana, a weak snow every month to draw upon.

Arcana left because it was spent. It was done, used up. Not infinite. It had to leave, to change because all things change. Time moves us on. Always.

An orange-gold star floated before me. A solid pentagram, burning bright.

The Mark of Arcana. A wrong kind of Arcana.

“Wow...” I breathed. “Dad found this, didn’t he? This is...”

My magic called to it with an, *Arcana*.

“This is me,” I said. “This is everything.” I stepped closer to it, hand still in my twin’s. “This is...”

It told me.

It told me everything, like the campfire place had told me things in my own voice. This time I whispered inside my head, a creepy, echoey sound prickling my scalp.

This is a place of broken time, broken dreams, where traces of existence linger. A dangerous place, a cut, a slice, the

home of destruction, infected now, a bridge between worlds that should not exist.

Dad. He flashed in my mind, walking around in here like we did, when it was red and not infected with toxic energy caused by Quentin's stupid plan.

Dad looked into the hole, came over to the pentagram that spoke to him, its power worming its way into his head. He saw these things here, knew there was Arcana here. Those experiments opened his mind wide, made him see things, sense this wrong magic plucked from the past. Warned him to leave. The magic was wrong, here because of the chaos of the war twenty-five years ago. A change that should not be.

He didn't leave. He reached out to the pentagram, touched it, absorbed its power. Let it fill him, ravage his body. But he never managed to make it work. Never got to grips with it, only felt it squirming around inside him. Waiting for me, for us. Following its own path, evolving, changing, being something new. Being me and my brother.

“Oh, gosh...”

Arcana is wrong as The Rift is wrong, my inner whispery voice explained. The war between the humans and witches broke the world. The damage runs deep, pulling from time and space, bleeding into reality. Distorting, confusing. Arcana is lost in time, a dead magic, Yet it lives here, in this thing. Corrupted. Confused. Evolving.

Out of time.

Out of place.

Those other chambers are pieces of the past, from a hundred years ago back to ancient times. Offering things from those times. Twisted things. Things that should be lost.

The Rift will collapse after this new meddling of magic, smashing time and reality. It breeds new rivers when it should not. It evolves. It will end all things now, tomorrow, in a matter of days. It no longer sleeps in the sky. Changed.

Dangerous.

But the sudden evolution of The Rift offers a gift as well as destruction. It offers choice.

I took a step back, bumping into James, my mind set to explode.

“Can you hear this?” I asked him.

He held my shoulders, steadying me. “I hear it, brother.”

A choice to leap. A choice to leave.

The Rift is a threat to the worlds pressed against this one. Like the one with werewolves in charge of things, their massive tower with the wolf head looming over London. Like the world with angels ruling the roost, like so many others, so many realities on the precipice of being wiped out by this world's sins.

Worlds? Other worlds? I wanted to see them, know more about these alternative realities. Like the place with the dangerous, colorful blobs. What the hell were they about?

Not for me to know about. Not my... destiny.

Who was this voice in our heads really? Me? The Rift? Something else? Maybe a bit of both?

A heaviness slumped my shoulders for a moment. I pushed back, standing straight.

Leap or leave.

I turned to face my brother. “Oh, God.”

“These are the answers we wanted.” His voice was a rasp.

“Arcana is out of time, brought back by the war. It came back wrong. It’s been telling me it’s wrong all this time, along with wanting to stay. It really wants to stay now.” I looked down at myself.

“Clay. I’m... I don’t know what to say.”

“We can still be heroes,” I said.

He cocked his head to the side. “We can?”

“Maybe this was destiny. Something to make things right. Sure, it went around the houses a bit, but here we are. Ready to make things better, like you said, like I want to believe. There’s hope again. We can end the rivers, even take away The Rift. I think. No, I know we can.” I fought back tears for Tae and Fizz and the life I wouldn’t have. “This will probably kill us.”

He looked in the direction of the hole. “Jump.”

I nodded. “Jump.”

Or leave.

“Are you sure?”

“Are you?” I countered.

He faced me again. “I’ll follow you, brother. I will always follow you.” He smiled, the kind of smile to remove any sign of the nightmare he’d once been. “I only wish we had more time.”

What a strange place this was. A major problem with a solution inside it.

The universe really had a sharp sense of humor.

Hand in hand, we returned to the hole.

My Arcana resisted, tried to push me into a rage. Struggled against my determination. It knew Arcana was wrong, but its power had grown. It wanted to stay, to tremor, to rage. It wanted to kill. I wanted to kill, to take control. Be the top dog. A king. A god.

But The Rift would collapse one day now. I could choose *that* path, or I could choose to do some good. Each choice came with something I didn't like. A loss of great power, a loss of a future.

I'd been through the emotional wringer, losing parts of myself, sinking into darkness, trying to pull myself back out again. My sunshine slipped through my fingers time and time again, my life taking a really grim turn, but also an amazing one because of love.

Tae's love.

But you know what I never let slip away? My determination. It'd always been my greatest weapon. It kept me alive, out of the gutter I danced along the edge of. And it sunk its teeth into the good, the decent side of me I'd been losing. If I walked away, I'd probably destroy the world myself, never mind The Rift. How many tremors away was I to bringing an apocalypse?

I didn't want to find out.

"Shit," I said.

Buttons squeezed my hand.

I trembled with fear, sick to my core over what came next. Terrified through and through. I didn't want to jump into that hole, but wasn't that why I was here? I wanted to end this, to make up for... everything.

This was for Tae and Fizz, Archie and Victoria. For everyone who'd lost their lives, to those who still held onto them.

For hope.

For the future.

No...

Yes...

“Are you ready?” I asked James, my voice trembling.

He grabbed me in a hug. “No.”

I hugged him back. “Same.”

“We’ll always be family.”

Gosh, this sucked. “I’m sorry we never got the chance to be a real one.”

“Maybe in our next life.”

“Yeah.”

No...

Yes...

We fell together before Arcana stopped me, locked in our hug, plunging into the toxic green water.

THIRTY-SIX

TAE



The Rift grew in size, the thunder cracks deafening in their booms, strands of lightning bursting from its edges.

What was happening?

No. No. No.

“Clay!”

I was too late.

Too—

Arcana fire burned at the heart of the scar in the sky, quickly consuming the green.

Then it exploded.

THIRTY-SEVEN

CLAY



The fire.

The glorious Arcana fire.

It raged. It spread. It tore out of me, dragging my power with it, along with my brother's share of the magic. Gone. Sent off on one final quest. Spreading across the skies of the world, burning up the rivers, swallowing the monsters in sweet infernos, ending them.

To the demon realm, breaking through, finding the rivers. Ending them.

Ending me.

Goodbye to Arcana. For real.

Goodbye to the rivers. For real.

Goodbye to my dreams.

Yeah, for real.

My magic was gone, doing the good I wanted it to. Never really mine to begin with, a dead magic.

Dead.

Death.

Back to warlock Clay.

Back to me.

My body weakened, failing. Arcana ripped from me like a bee's stinger torn from its little body, an attack tearing out its insides.

Just call me...

Claybee.

Clayby.

Oh, Tae. If only we stood a chance.

THIRTY-EIGHT

TAE



The blaze of the Arcana fire surrounded me, burning so bright I covered my eyes. I bobbed helplessly in the sea as it did its work, destroying the rivers?

Hurting my love...

It lasted for agonizing minutes. Five, then ten, then twenty. I counted each one to the twenty-first minute when the green light died.

I looked up, The Rift shrinking to a small dot, that dot puffing away to nothing. Gone.

“Clay!”

I smelled him, his vanilla scent on the wind. Somewhere in the cold water.

I swam as hard as I could, searching frantically. He was somewhere here, somewhere nearby.

“Tae!” Not him, but Buttons. “Tae! Over here!”

I found them, Buttons struggling to drag Clay into an empty boat.

“I can’t... I can’t get him up...”

Reaching them, I grabbed Clay’s lifeless body, getting him into the boat and laying him down. My hair dripped water onto

his face. His eyes were closed, all of him terribly still.

I checked for a pulse. A small thrum met my touch. Too gentle, too weak.

He was shutting down.

With my fangs, I bit open the skin of my wrist. Opened his mouth, pressed my wound to his lips. Blood ran between them.

“Come on, Clay. Come on.”

He wasn't moving. Why wasn't he moving?

I pulled my wrist back, widened the wound for a heavier flow. Returned it, prayed for him to breathe.

“Just breathe... Please breathe.”

“Brother...” Buttons whispered. “Wake up.”

I froze, waiting, hoping, praying to any god who would hear me.

Let him live.

Please let him live.

His sharp intake of breath sent relief crashing into my soul.
“Clay. I'm here. Clay.”

He coughed, sucked in breath, coughed. Exhaled. Opened his eyes. Fluttering eyelids, hazel orbs rolling, landing on me. Focusing on me.

“Tae...”

I held his face. “You're back. You're back.”

“I feel like shit.” He winced, trying to sit up.

“Don't try to move.”

“What happened?”

“We did it,” James said. “We really did it.”

“James?” Clay moved his head to the side to face his brother. “We did it? We’re alive?”

“We are, brother.”

“We really did it,” Clay said. “We did... I remember fire. My magic’s gone. I should be... I should be dead.”

“But you’re not,” I responded. “You were dying, but I gave you my blood.”

“Really? I don’t feel horny.”

I stroked his face. “I’m not surprised after everything you’ve been through.”

Only, he should be. I should be. There was no sexual energy inside me, the one thing showing the healing properties of my blood worked.

Something was wrong.

“I have to get you out of here,” I said.

“Did you heal James?” Clay asked me weakly.

“No,” his brother answered. “I don’t need it. I’m a full demon, remember?” He sounded as if his voice had been dragged through barbed wire. He pulled at his clothes. “There’s no more Arcana left.” He shook his head. “I just need to sleep.”

“Then let’s go,” I said, going to pick up Clay.

Buttons collapsed, flipping over the side of the boat. Landed head-first into the water.

“James?” Clay said.

He floated. He didn't move. I plucked him out of the water, laid him down. He wasn't moving. There was no pulse, not even a slight flutter.

I gave him blood.

He didn't take it.

“James?” Clay said again. “What's happening? Is he okay?”

I tried giving him more.

Nothing.

Unmoving.

“James?” I said. “Can you hear me?”

“James!” Clay yelled. “Wake up!” He tried to turn, to push himself up.

“Take it easy,” I soothed.

“No. No. He can't... He was fine. He survived. He's a demon who can't be killed by Arcana.” He drew in a sharp breath. “He can't die now. That's not... It killed. It—”

Buttons's body collapsed into black ash, the North Sea air lifting parts of him upward in a chilly spiral.

Clay choked and threw up a heavy dose of gray liquid. Dead river.

Collapsed.

No.

Please, no.

He was still awake, fading. “Tae...”

I gave him more blood. He recovered slightly, less healthy than before.

“I’m dying, aren’t I?” he whispered.

“I won’t let you.”

“I can feel it. My body... my body’s too damaged. It can’t take the... the aftermath. I’m sorry. I’m... James... James is dead.... I’m...”

“You’re not dying. I’ll give you more blood.” My chest burned.

“That... that won’t work.”

“You’re not dying, Clay.”

“Tae...”

“No. I won’t hear it.”

“I... I did some good. I ended...” His eyelids fluttered.

I fed him more blood, then fired up the boat’s engine. Tore across the sea toward shore, constantly checking on him, trying to make him hold on, to be strong. I had to make things right. To get him away from here. To save him.

The ADU sirens were back, witches everywhere—on the water, in the air.

I wasn’t losing him.

He almost left me several times on our journey to shore, me having to stop and feed him. With each feeding, he diminished a little more.

The wind battered my face, stealing my tears. This pain, this fear, this horrible ache was all too familiar. But unlike that night in Paris, I still had time to save this love of mine.

I found a secluded beach, less sand and more mud, tucked away on the shoreline somewhere in the north of England.

Killing the engine, I scooped him up and jumped into the water, running through the shallows to the shore.

He was still with me, hanging on by a fragile thread.

I laid him down on the wet mud just out of reach from the tide. We were far enough away from the ADU now. They'd be more concerned with the ships, the demons, and the witches still comatose back there at the old site of The Rift.

“Clay?”

He moaned.

“Clay?”

“Y-yes?” A response so faint, so close to leaving me.

There was only one course of action left for me to try.

“Let me turn you. It might save your life.” My tears pattered his cheeks. “Please.”

“Tae...”

“I'll only do it if you want me to.” As much as I loved him, as much as I couldn't bear for him to leave me, this had to be his choice.

“Tae...”

“We can be together.”

“Tae...”

I sobbed, holding onto his face. So many tears, so much sorrow. Did I have to watch him die? Did I have to lose another piece of my heart?

Why did I fall for him? Why did I let love in again? What was the point of any of this? I never should have—

“Do it,” he said. “Do it.”

Making a human a vampire is an act of pure intimacy, a joining of two souls in love. Sexual and beautiful. Special. For the process to begin, the human has to be completely drained of blood until their heart stops.

I wasn't sure if this would work, but it was my last hope.

I bit his neck, draining him, his weak heartbeat slowing, slowing, slowing. Stopped.

Next, I fed him that new blood, my blood mixed with his. He drank, still here, sucking from my vein slowly at first, then greedily. Hurting me with a lovely pain.

My cock hardened, all of me consumed with a potent sexual energy. It was pure electricity full of life-giving powers, a magic of true love. That energy passed into him, drawing moans of pleasure as he sucked harder from my veins.

“Keep doing that,” I said, “while I make love to you.”

I removed his jeans and underwear, lifted his legs. Freed my cock, used my saliva for lubrication, entered him. Taking on the ritual of making, this mystical act. He gasped against my wrist.

“Don't stop drinking, Clay.”

I thrust gently into him, our bodies and blood joined. Heat and love, the power of life, a maelstrom of beauty and eternity surging between us.

He moaned and drank, his hazel eyes wide and changing. Flooding with darkness, then flushing with scarlet. Changing.

Everything was changing.

Again.

THIRTY-NINE

CLAY



Life came back to me. A new kind of life. Strong and so bloody different as Tae made love to me on this muddy beach. Saving me from death.

My bones hardened to something more diamond-like, my muscles taking on a new strength. I went to a place between life and death, an undead place. A thirst for blood, but not in the scary way. Just like I craved cake or something, only this time for the hot, red liquid, no icing and cherries on top of sponge.

I made the choice to be this new creature, to live. Undid my whole sacrifice because, well, I wanted to live. I wanted Tae and a future, all of it dangled right there before me like some juicy apple. I snatched, bit the hell out of it, enjoyed the juices and the ripe flesh.

Call me selfish. Call me a fool in love.

James is dead...

Me being alive meant I could keep my promise to Fizz.

I'd outlive her.

I'd outlive so much.

I'd be with my man forever.

James is dead...

Tae's thrusts were deep and slow, never a frantic fuck. But every single one hit my G-spot as I sucked his blood, my cock throbbing with an amazing ache. So hard, so fucking raw.

I came so hard, him following inside me.

Joined.

Done.

I dropped his wrist, sucking in the air with my new lungs—the lungs I didn't really need, there to make me move like my old self. Lack of air would never kill me.

“Wow...” I breathed.

James is dead...

He stayed above me, kissed me in the cold sea air, the waves rolling so close. A bloody kiss, a new kiss for our new life together.

My second chance.

The warlock side of me was gone.

Forever.

It hit me then, the same old guilt as before. I got to live when James didn't. He'd jumped with me, now ashes.

Nothing but ashes.

I burst into tears. “Oh, gosh...” I shot up with my vampiric speed, crashed into Tae. Held onto him so tight, sobbing for the umpteenth time.

We stayed like that until a helicopter flew overhead, its light finding us.

Together, we jumped up and tore off into the night, the countryside whipping past us in a blur.

Two vampire boyfriends on the run.

FORTY

CLAY



I curled up to Tae in the scratchy hay as the sun came up. We hid inside a barn with some cows, taking shelter at a farm. Battened down against the hunt for us. Tae's phone was water damaged, the screen cracked. Dead. There was a farmhouse nearby, but we left it alone. Too tired, too done with the world messing with us.

So we held each other all night. No kissing. No sex. Just us with the cows and all the smells they brought with them. Taking a break.

"How are you feeling?" he asked me, running the pad of his thumb across my lips.

"Like a vamp."

"I know what that feels like."

"Noooo," I drawled sarcastically.

He laughed, nuzzling against me. Pressed his lips to the side of my face. "Seriously, Clay. How are you?"

"I don't know. What about you?" My eyes were hot and watery.

"I don't know."

"We're a great pair, aren't we?"

“You’ve been through so much.”

He always did that. He always put me first. “You mean we’ve been through so much.”

He kissed my cheek again.

“I like being still,” I said. “It won’t last, obviously, but it’s nice to not move, to try not to think about James and everything else. Shit. I’ve screwed that up already.” I released a long, shaky breath. “We were supposed to be together in this. Jumped into the hole to end it together. But here I am.”

“He thought he’d survived because he was a demon.”

“But he wasn’t safe. I should’ve...” I didn’t finish.

“What, Clay?”

“Seen it coming.”

“You were dying.” Another kiss.

“So was he. I never got to say goodbye. It’s like I’ve just stepped out of a weird dream, one where I had a twin brother for five minutes. Got to know what that was like, even if he tried to kill me so many times. These feelings for him will never sit right. I don’t understand them, not really. But I do know I want him here. I want him to be back, to get a second chance too.” Tears rolled free. “He wasn’t supposed to die.”

Tae sat up. “I’m so sorry you’re hurting. I wish I could take your pain away.”

I sat up with him. “You’re hurting too, Tae. This isn’t all about me.”

“I’m so happy you’re here with me,” he said, his voice shaky. It surprised me, his usual steeliness properly shattered. “I wasn’t sure if turning you would work. I thought you’d die

in the boat. I thought my blood wasn't enough, that nothing would bring you back to me. Fuck.”

My turn to stroke his face. “Thank you for saving me. I'm so grateful you did.”

Another reason not to whine. Be thankful for a vampire who did everything to save me.

He closed his eyes. “I love you so much. Why can't we be happy?”

“We can.”

“It seems like everything is against us. The world, your guilt. I'm not invalidating your feelings. Not at all. But you don't need to seek out redemption for the rest of your life. You're just as much a victim of this as anyone else.”

“I...” Shit. I rubbed the back of my neck. “Tae...”

“Whatever you did, you saved the world. Remember that.”

“Tae...”

“I know it's hard. I know what it's like to carry guilt. I really do. I'll be here with you through it all. But I want you to step back and look at what you did. You were willing to die to save others.”

Butterflies in my stomach joined my exhausted sadness. I performed his favorite move, cupping his face with both hands.

“Tae...”

“Please, Clay. I—”

“Stop talking.”

He did.

“I want this life. I chose love. I chose you. I won’t ever take it for granted, no matter how much this fucking hurts.”

“Clay...”

“I don’t want to die. I want you.”

He took my face now. “I love you so much.” His tears were beautiful, breaking me apart.

We kissed, we held each other.

I meant every word I’d said. I carried guilt still, a real heavy load of it. But I’d made my choice. I wanted to live, to be happy.

Why the fuck shouldn’t I?

“What now?” I breathed against him. “Where do we go?”

He released my face, wiped at my tears. “We make contact with my people. We find somewhere safe.”

“Where?”

“Back to the island.”

“That’s safe?”

“It remains the safest place.”

“Can we make it that far without getting caught?”

He nodded, standing up. “We can. I’ll make sure of it.”

I swallowed. “Do you want to be that close to Seoul?”

“There’s destruction everywhere, Clay.”

Man, there really was.

We snuck into the farmhouse while the husband and wife who lived here were out in their ravaged fields, staring at the

deep trenches from The Rift's blasts. So much of their land had been ruined, but all their buildings remained intact.

Thank God for that.

Tae called his people on a landline, arranged for a pickup in a village nearby after he checked the postal address on a pile of letters in this quaint house full of family photos and a lot of floral wallpaper.

My senses were dialed up to a thousand. I heard the rustling grass outside as clear as anything, smelled the humans working in the fields. Tae's lime scent was richer, and my vision now worked in HD. Clear and crisp. I went to the window, able to see so far, nothing blurry until an alarming distance away.

A real vampire.

I itched slightly, fingers twitching, my inner self calling to my lost magic. Not Arcana, but my warlock power. No more shimmer trick for me, no more pretty fireworks, and no more Trace Fall.

I guess my dream of an arena show really was dead.

This would take some getting used to.

As would losing James.

We were robbed, James. Really fucking robbed.

And then there was Grindle. Gone. Out of my life after playing such an important role in it. He'd kept me safe. He'd helped me so much. Drove me crazy at various points. Now he was gone, waiting for the end in that dying world.

At least he was making Isaiah suffer.

Make it hurt, Grindle. Really make it hurt.

“Thank you,” Tae said into the receiver. He went to the TV, switched it on to the news. Kept the volume low.

The Rift blasts had scarred the world, shot through the skies, taking chunks out of the earth. Leaving the people shook when those new rivers died in Arcana fire. My name was thrown around, and then the rest of the news became one dull noise.

Tae switched it off. “Witch Queen Margarite and Witch King Lawrence want an audience with us. They would prefer face-to-face but will settle for a video call.”

“What do they want?” I lifted a hand. “Ignore that. What should we do?”

“We’re going nowhere near the palace, and we’re not going to the island. I’m sorry. The skies are closed.”

“Oh.”

“There is a cottage north of here by the sea,” he said. “Literally in the middle of nowhere. My people are setting it up for us now.”

“Oh.”

“We can plan our next move from there.”

I followed him into the sunshine, the rays as normal as they would be on my warlock skin. Sun and vampires in this existence mixed perfectly well together.

FORTY-ONE

TAE



It took my team four hours to make sure the Wi-Fi connections were completely secure and untraceable. Test after test by brilliant men and women confirmed full protection repeatedly, but these people weren't satisfied until everything was airtight.

My team never failed to amaze me. They even obtained fresh clothes for us.

Victoria was to be part of this, her connection also protected over in Japan. Safe, hidden from the authorities.

Clay and I were given the yellow-walled living room of this small cottage. It sat on the edge of a beach, alone against the elements. So isolated and cold at this time of year, yet a perfect getaway when the owners returned for the summer months—as they did every year, apparently.

They would never know we'd been here.

My people secured the surrounding area, constantly on high alert.

“Are you ready?” I asked Clay, our legs pressed together on the white two-seater sofa.

If only I could whisk him away, spare him this nonsense. But we had to clear things up for the sake of peace.

“I’m ready,” he said.

I pushed a button. Victoria popped up on the screen, sitting before a white wall, looking so much better.

She squealed. “You’re really there! Fuck me, I’m gonna cry!”

“Don’t do that,” Archie’s voice came from out of shot.

I’d been told he was awake, that after so many attempts to revive him, he woke up after Clay ended the rivers.

His face popped into view. He looked very tired, heavy bags under his eyes. But alive and smiling.

Seeing him unknit some of the tension within me.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” I told him.

He nodded, scratching at the stubble on his cheeks. “I got so lost, mate. That monster locked me in some weird limbo with no doors, no windows. No hope.” He sighed. “Not dead, not alive. I could hear you, I could hear the medical staff here, but nothing could bring me back. And then I woke up.” He smiled, his eyes on Clay. “Because of you. Thank you.”

Clay blushed. “I’m just really happy to see you again.”

“Likewise, mate. And it’s good to see your faces.”

“Oh, my sweetie pie,” my lawyer jumped in. “Look at you all glowy-skinned. If I didn’t know any better, I’d ask when it’s due.”

Clay giggled, leaning forward. “I really want to hug you right now. Both of you.”

“Same, mate,” Archie responded. “Was looking dicey for a while.”

Fizz jumped up into Victoria’s arms.

Clay wailed.

She meowed.

“Baby girl! Oh my God! My baby girl!”

She purred at him. He reached for the screen, longing for her soft fur.

“I’ll see you soon,” he said. “Real soon.”

I stroked his back.

“We didn’t think we’d see you again,” Victoria cut in. “Even before you destroyed The Rift. Thought Arcana would get the better of you and...” She stopped, shaking her head. “No point talking about that now. You’re safe and alive, and I don’t want those wanker witches to see me all tear-stained. It’s bad bitch time.”

“You’re not a bitch,” Clay countered.

“Aw, why not?”

“She wears it with pride,” Archie said.

“Oh.”

“She wears it well.”

She punched him in the arm.

It warmed me to the deepest part of my bones to see them again, to hear their voices.

The tone turned serious. Archie said goodbye and left the screen, taking Fizz with him.

“I’ve been talking to the royal lawyers,” Victoria said. “They’re not giving me any details on what’s to come, only that the king and queen will say what they have to say. Really

helpful, eh? Wankers. Anyway, they have stated the search for you is now called off.”

“Did they add anything to that?” I asked.

“Like fuck did they.”

Always without a filter.

“Here’s the plan,” she said. “I’ll be here with my gob shut unless I have to step in. Let them say their piece, then make sure you hit them with the evidence.”

The notes on the experiments performed on Adam Christmas and the other warlocks.

“When you’re ready, I’ll open the call,” my lawyer said.

Clay took my hand, fidgeting a little. “I’m ready.”

“Then I’m ready,” I said.

The screen split in two. Victoria on the left, the witch king and queen on the right. Sat in the familiar royal press room of silver and purple I’d seen so many royal addresses take place in. They were dressed in the formal royal robes of red and gold.

How strange, their royal attire bore the same colors as demonic royalty—barring the black. I hadn’t really thought about it before.

“Good morning,” Queen Margarite greeted us. Gray-haired, bronze-skinned, a woman with strong features. Extremely powerful in both magic and politics.

“Hello,” King Lawrence offered, colder than her, his fair face more lined, his gray hair thin and smartly slicked.

Clay shrank back from the screen slightly.

“At last, we get the chance to talk,” the witch queen said. “All we’ve ever wanted is to talk with you both.”

My eyes flickered to Victoria, who really wanted to unleash a tirade of expletives. I knew her so well.

But she remained quiet, professional.

“You hunted us,” Clay responded. “You didn’t listen to what you were told about the demons.”

“I know.”

“You didn’t need to hunt us.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Didn’t we? You were seen using an ancient magic. What other action were we to take other than bring you into custody?”

Awkward silence.

“But you are right, Mr. Christmas. This situation was not handled well. I admit I only saw you and your power, the shock hitting me too hard for me to think clearly. For all of us here in the palace to see reason. We didn’t want to hear the stories of Quentin Dawn, of anything. I will always regret that, wonder if I could have saved my son.”

Prince Wilfred, the first of the circle of witches to be killed to remove demonic banishment.

The loss of banishment would remain for a long time now, but at least the demon uprising had been crushed, the towers and ADU working overtime to keep it that way.

“We are sorry for your loss, Your Majesties,” I said.

Clay nodded in agreement.

The king remained silent.

The queen brushed down the front of her robes. “Once again, we’re left in shock by what has happened.” She looked pointedly at Clay. “Because of you and the button-eyed demon. I understand you were brothers.”

“We were,” Clay answered, shaking.

“Princes.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. But he’s gone. He died.”

“My condolences.” There was no sincerity in that response. “As is your mother, your sister, another prince. Your lawyer sent our lawyers much of the details surrounding your story. But will you indulge me, both of you, in telling me it yourselves?”

We agreed, telling it together from the beginning, taking turns at various points when the other needed a break.

“My jaw hurts,” Clay muttered when we were finished.

“What was that?” the king asked, speaking for the first time.

“Just said my jaw hurts,” he answered.

The witch king offered no response.

“Thank you,” Her Majesty said.

It took us forty minutes to tell the tale.

“What happens now?” I asked.

The queen looked to the king, back to us. “You destroyed many homes, Clay Christmas. You took many lives, including the lives of the witches charged with bringing you back to me from Seoul.”

I swallowed a growl, bracing myself to slam the laptop closed.

“I did mean to kill you,” she added. “My first instinct was to exterminate you, even with your Arcana magic. I could have used you, tested you, maybe restored the magic again. But the truth is, you terrified me. Even though we’d never met, I knew you were wrong. That there was something not right about this. How could there be? Arcana was dead.”

“You weren’t wrong there,” Clay said.

She nodded. Continued. “And then our son died. And then everything else happened. I quickly realized I had made a mistake in chasing you. That I pushed you into the shadows when I should have helped you. Tried to understand. I am as much to blame for everything.”

“Do you blame Clay?” I asked.

“Yes,” the king said. “We do. But that doesn’t matter because he saved us from a curse we never had the power to change. For that, we’re grateful.” He sniffed. “None of us are clean. Not one single person.”

Silence followed, a long pause no one stepped forward to fill.

Victoria stepped up to the podium. “What now, Your Majesties?”

The queen took a moment to speak. She was always the spokesperson, the figurehead of the family.

“We have consulted with the witch kings and queens of the world. Debated, argued in these hours since The Rift fell. In light of everything, the past is the past. No action will be taken against you.”

“Really?” Clay squeaked.

“What is the price of that?” I asked.

The queen steepled her fingers under her chin, ignoring her husband. “Nothing. Now is the time to heal, to recover as much as we can.”

No trial? No punishment?

“You are a hero, Clay,” the queen added. “The world knows that. I would only suggest you be careful. There are those, be they human or demon, that want you dead regardless of your actions.”

I bit back a growl. “I’ll keep him safe.”

“I’m sure you will. I’m sure he is capable, also. A vampire now.”

“Are you withholding any other information?” Victoria asked. “This seems too generous.”

“It is done,” the queen answered.

“May I remind of you of the information we have against you?”

The queen sighed. “Honestly? That has a lot to do with us leaving you be.”

“Right,” my lawyer said. “I want this in writing.”

“And you shall have it. And you have my word.”

“I would like a moment with my clients,” Victoria said.

“Of course.”

Victoria muted the queen and cut off the feed.

“I’d call that a win,” she said.

“Is it real?” Clay asked. “I can’t believe it. After everything.”

“They know they’re fucked if we leak those papers. So believe it. Plus, you’ve done a massive amount of good for every fucker on this planet, even for the demons. Who else can say they changed the world? Now you get to live. Take this and run with it. Spend your days doing sod all on a sun lounger with your boyfriend. Explore what it means to be a vampire. Don’t get caught up with things that’ll bring you down. You’re a hero, Clay. You have a big heart and are a serious sweetie pie. You’ve earned this.”

He bowed his head. “Thank you.”

I put my arm around him, offering him physical comfort.

He said nothing else.

“I’ll make sure it stays that way,” she added.

“Agreed,” I said.

“Let’s get back in there and wrap this up.”

Clay lifted his head as the details of our new life of freedom were drawn up.

I held him close in his silence.

FORTY-TWO

CLAY



After a plethora of kisses and cuddles, me weeping into her fur, Fizz called time on our reunion. She meowed her ‘back off now’ meow, and I knew better than to carry on.

“Sorry, baby girl.” I put her down. “You know I like to be over the top.”

She got to grooming herself at my feet.

A week after our video call with the witches, we returned to the island in the Yellow Sea. All five of us. Man, I was so relieved to be back there, away from the craziness of the world.

And it was crazy.

Holy shit.

The press was hungry for our blood. Well, our story, any picture they could snap of us. Where were we? Why were we in hiding? The island’s super tech left us invisible, unreachable.

Yay!

So many screaming headlines, so many theories. People wanted to thank me for what I did, scream at me for the other things.

The back end of the week brought the bigger story, though.

The demon talks.

Whoa.

Lead by Phillipe and a group of other demons. They wanted to work with the witches, reach some sort of peace agreement with them now that their queen was gone.

No demon had filled the role of monarch yet. Phillipe said there may never be one again.

Hello to change once again.

The witches agreed to listen, and the first of the meetings would kick off next week at a secure location. Victoria managed to get some details on it. The demons' argument was that there were so many of them here anyway, and that there should be a solution to living in harmony. Banishment was ended, so why not move forward in peace?

Of course, the witches weren't behind that at all. Neither were the public. But they were open to meetings and a lot of public scrutiny.

Be interesting to see how it all played out.



FOR OUR FIRST NIGHT BACK, we threw a party with a buffet, music, and fairy lights. Just for us to enjoy, to be silly, and shake off the past weeks.

I had a lot to shake off still, but I'd get there. I'd make sure I did, no matter how sharp and vicious the sorrow at losing James, over everything that'd gone down. I mean, a week was nothing, especially in this new immortal body.

Dealing with my grief for my brother would never not be confusing. How could it be anything else? But it was real. I wanted him here. I wanted to see what could have been.

Damn.

Outside the island mansion, I ran through the cold air, tearing across the rolling hills, the cliff edges, as breathless as a vampire can be. Amazed by my speed, by my strength, at this different kind of power.

I worked on acclimatizing to my new strength and speed daily. Tae said it would take a few weeks for me to slot into place. Of course, I giggled at that and thought about slotting into him because I'm an idiot.

The first time I climbed a wall with my vampire lightness—that ability to switch from hard to feather-like—really blew my mind. I wanted to climb everything, get my *Spider-Man* on, find myself some ultra-tall buildings to scale.

Learning the actions of my new body really helped.

I wish you could see it, I thought to James.

After testing my vamp self again outside the island mansion, I went back indoors. Rubbed Fizz's head as she sat by the window watching the night, parked myself on the sofa in the living room beside Tae.

“Having fun?” he asked.

“I can really get used to this vampire gig.”

“Forever, Clayby.”

“So weird.”

“That will never change.” He smiled and drank some vodka. “Want some?”

“Thanks.” I took a shot.

“I have something for you.”

“Oh?”

He leaned over the side of the sofa and revealed my yellow Walkman.

“It’s alive!” I declared.

He chuckled. “Alive and well.”

I kissed him.

The first bars of ‘Steamy Windows’ by Tina Turner kicked in.

“Yes!” Victoria cried and grabbed my hand.

“Not right now.”

Ignoring my protest, she dragged me to the middle of the room, singing loudly and making me dance.

Sod it. I danced. I loved to dance.

By the end of the song, we were giggling our heads off.

Archie applauded. “Nice one.”

A song by The Rolling Stones came on—‘It’s Only Rock ‘n Roll.’

That was Archie’s cue to get up and shake it, finger point, work those hips. I copied his moves, Victoria following. She snorted several times, hunching over with laughter.

Tae watched on, smiling and smoldering at the same time.

Yum.

Song after song kept the three of us up on our feet. From pop to rock to some hip-hop tunes Archie knew every word to.

“Wow!” I declared. “You were awesome.”

He shrugged. “Wanted to be a rapper back in the day.”

Victoria snorted, and he went to her, spinning her to a Tom Jones number.

And then it was Kylie Minogue’s turn. ‘On a Night Like This’ boomed from the speakers, sending me into a euphoric spin.

Victoria cheered, singing along. Archie bopped away.

Jaws dropped.

Huh?

I paused in my boogie.

What the hell? Tae was on his feet, dancing his way over to me.

“Tae?”

He twirled, hair loose, shimmering like a dark curtain.

What a sight to see. And, of course, he moved with silky perfection. Why wouldn’t he? Lucky git.

He reached me, took my hands, and we danced. He dipped me and spun me and sent me spiraling into pure joy.

By the end of the song, our noses were pressed together, lips ready to collide.

But Kylie’s ‘Love at First Sight’ got us moving again.

Man, what an awesome night.

FORTY-THREE

CLAY



Four months on, the demon talks were still ongoing, with no demonic attacks in the meantime as had been expected. Phillipe became a big name in the press, dominating most of the spotlight. Tae and I were still sought after, but things had cooled down.

In those four months, I found out Tae's birthday was August 18th. Just a piece of info I'd been missing.

After so much time spent on the island, watching the world begin to slowly rebuild, Tae donating money to various charities to help, we both thought it time to venture out into the world. But not without caution. We liked to be discreet, no tabloid darlings anymore.

Those days were long gone.

Phew.

It was dawn in Egypt. We stood at the Giza Plateau, the site opened just for us at 06:00am—two hours before official opening time. Tae made it happen like he made anything he wanted happen. But this was some feat, getting this tourist hot spot all to ourselves.

I barely functioned as we stood before The Great Pyramid in the sunshine, the air still relatively cool.

I was here. Really here in this ancient place with the sand and the history and, well, just wow.

Even Fizz was along for the ride, in my arms, eyes on this amazing place.

“I’m so glad it never got damaged,” I said.

None of the plateau or the Sahara Desert was hit by The Rift or ever infected with toxic rivers after the war.

I also couldn’t believe it’d been four months since the end of The Rift. Since losing James. I’d made him a grave with stones and a wooden cross on the island. He deserved to be remembered. I’d always remember him. Everything about him, how we could have been... brothers.

Maybe that was an impossible dream. But it would never not hurt.

We walked across the sand, drinking in the atmosphere. Sharing this first time together, basking in the wonder. I touched the stones of the Great Pyramid, the Pyramid of Khafre, got super impressed by the Great Sphinx.

“How the hell has this stuff lasted so long?” I said.

“Incredible, isn’t it?”

Later on this trip, we were going to Abu Simbel and Karnak. Doing it all. Being proper tourists. Man, my excitement threatened to pop me wide open.

He moved, lowered himself beside me.

Fizz meowed inquisitively.

“What are—”

He was on one knee.

I rubbed my eyes. “Is this some sort of mirage?”

There was a black ring box in his hand. “No, Clay.”

My vampire heart raced, the air suddenly hot. “But... But...”

He opened the box, revealing two platinum rings, a row of five diamonds imbedded in the gleaming metal.

“Gosh...”

“Will you marry me, Clay Christmas?”

I lost my voice, trying to find the one word I wanted to say.

Man, shock was brutal to the vocal chords. So were the butterflies really going for it inside my stomach.

Was this really happening?

“Whenever you’re ready, we’ll do it. If you say yes. I know this may seem so soon, but not really. I love you.” God, he looked so beautiful, so enchanting down there. “I just want to be with you, to be yours and you mine.”

You know, I do worry about my mouth sometimes. Rather than a simple yes, I answered with, “This makes a change, me looking down on you.”

It was supposed to be a joke about our height difference.

It flopped. Hard.

His left brow cocked. “That’s your answer?”

I bit my lip, tears welling up. Damn. “Sorry, I meant to say, well, yes. I say yes.”

He smiled. “Yes?”

Tears ran free. “Of course, it’s yes. I’d love to marry you.”

He beamed, his face heartbreakingly lovely. He took a ring, slipped it on my finger. Put the other one on him, then

stood up to wipe my tears and kiss me.

My world. My everything. My savior.

My fiancé.

“As long as Fizz is Maid of Honor,” I said.

She meowed, purring away with approval.

He chuckled. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Are you sure?” I asked him.

“So sure, Clayby.”

“We’re engaged?”

“We are.”

Talk about a shock overload. “I can’t believe it.” I looked at the ring. “What a beauty. What do you think, Fizz?”

A soft meow.

I kissed her head.

“A beautiful ring for a beautiful soul,” Tae said, his voice as deep and darkly seductive as always.

“You know how to charm me, Tae Frost.”

He bopped my nose. “It’s a gift, Clayby.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“We need to celebrate,” he said.

One day, Tae Frost would be my husband.

Wow.

“But I’m in the mood for some *glitter* first.”

Translation: Kinky sex. Glitter was our safe word for when we played with chains. Tae loved to tie me up and be tied up.

And so did I.

“Randy vampire,” I responded.

“Under your spell.”

“Cheesy.”

“You love it, really.”

“I love *you*.”

I slipped away from the Pyramids, arriving at a clear, crisp river on a lovely day, sunshine glittering on the surface of the water.

Sitting on a stool on the riverbank, his fishing line waiting to snare a fish, was my twin brother.

He turned to face me, his buttons gone, replaced by hazel eyes, his smile so bright.

“J-James?” This wasn’t real. This couldn’t be real.

He smiled. Just smiled. He looked so calm, so happy.

I returned to the Pyramids to the sound of Fizz meowing, Tae’s hand on my face.

“Clay? Are you okay?”

I blinked up at him, taking a moment to process what I just saw.

“I... I think my brother came and said goodbye.”

“He did?”

I nodded. “Unless... Unless it was my imagination.” My lips spread into a smile of my own. “But I don’t think it was.”

“What happened?”

“Fishing. He was fishing. He was at peace.”

“That’s really nice.”

“Yeah, it is.”

He kissed my hand. “Your eyes are like jewels.”

I giggled at the sudden soppy turn. “Wow. Just wow.”

He offered me a wry smile. “What?”

“Never stop being you.”

Hand in hand, our rings sparkling in the sunlight, we continued our Egyptian adventure.

The first of many adventures to come.

The End

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading the Midnight Magic series. I hope you've enjoyed Clay and Tae's story as much as I have writing them. As always, it's hard to say goodbye. Sniff. But I think they've earned their HEA after all the shit I put them through...

Clay: Yeah, thanks so much for coming along on this journey, everyone!

Fizz: Meow.

Tae: We really appreciate it.

Fizz: Meow.

Clay: I really fancy a cup of tea.

Tae: Now or *after*?

Clay: After? We've only just got out of bed.

Tae: Your point?

Clay: *giggles* Fine. I'll get my knickers off.

Fizz heads off to stare at some birds through the window. Our guys return to the bedroom and hit the sheets... again.

Right. We'll leave them to it.

Thanks again for reading! I appreciate it so, so much!

Big lurve,

Richard Amos



To stay in the loop with all the latest news, come join my [Facebook Reader Group \(Richie's Round Table\)](#). There you will find updates, giveaways and good old chit chat (and cake).

If you fancy grabbing yourself a FREE short story (**River Shadow**), then go ahead and sign up to my [Free Newsletter](#).

You can also follow me on [Amazon](#), [Bookbub](#), and my other socials [HERE](#).

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Curse of Dawn (December 29th, 2023)

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Spirit of Snow

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Amos is an author from England who is constantly lost in the worlds he writes about, and the ones in the queue yet to be written. He also has more books in his house than anything else and is never without a book (and chocolate) in his hands when he's not writing. He's a proud nerd who loves to dance. Hard.

In a former life, he was definitely a merman.

Richard writes kick-ass MM Fantasy and Urban Fantasy, all with good doses of action, adventure, and romance.

CONTACT RICHARD AMOS

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