



WOLF
SHADOW GUILD: WOLF QUEEN
QUEEN
BOOK FIVE

LINSEY HALL

WOLF QUEEN

LINSEY HALL



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Thank You!

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Eve

Sleep was my only escape from the interminable hell of my own mind. Time passed slowly underground, though. I'd probably only been in this cell for a few days, but it felt like years. It didn't matter that my friends had decorated it like a palace—I was still a prisoner.

And so I slept.

A lot.

Except this time, my dreams were strange. They were no longer the mad ravings of a wolf succumbing to the dark moon curse, but rather something different.

In this dream, I was surrounded by people I recognized—friendly faces that made my heart bloom with love and loss. Though I didn't know their names, I'd adored these people once. But they were gone.

The other dire wolves.

I was the last of my kind—this had to be them. Every time they visited me in dreams, I felt the most overwhelming sense

of responsibility toward them, the deepest desire to protect, and the most aching sense of loss.

But the dreams always morphed, sending me to an ancient forest that I recognized somehow. The trees were as familiar to me as my own face, and I would find answers here. I would find a way to save them.

An ancient, gnarled oak called me, pulling on my soul until I found myself on my knees, clawing at the dirt. I dug and dug, desperation surging through me. *This* was the answer to bringing them back. I didn't have to be the only dire wolf, if only I could find it. It was down here, I *knew* it. Finally, my hand closed over an object, and—

I woke up.

Gasping, I sat straight up in bed.

Shit.

What had I been digging for? Something that would help me save the other dire wolves, wherever they were.

Dead.

And yet, their faces haunted me, their voices called soundlessly for me to save them. I could feel them like I could feel the earth beneath me, just as I could feel my duty to them.

I dragged a hand through my hair and stumbled out of bed.

The four walls of my cell still stared at me, stark and impenetrable. Paintings dotted them here and there, but it didn't matter. I was still underground, locked away as a threat to myself and others. It didn't matter that I had agreed this was the safest thing—it still made me want to tear my hair out.

It was even worse during my bad spells. They came over my mind like a black cloud, turning me into a murderous

monster.

The shadows crept in even now, and I gripped the bridge of my nose and squeezed my eyes shut. I needed to maintain control because I had to get the hell out of here and find that tree. Whatever was buried beneath it was as important as my next breath—I could feel it like I could feel the floor below my feet. It was the answer.

But how the hell could I get out? I was so far underground that I couldn't feel the power of the moon. I didn't have my goddess magic, so I couldn't tear the door off the hinges. And even if I could turn into a dire wolf now, I couldn't exactly claw my way out of here.

Ralph.

My familiar was the answer. That cute little bastard could break in anywhere to steal chocolate. He could definitely break me out of here.

“Ralph,” I called in a low voice, reaching out to him. He could usually feel me when I wanted him to come to me, and I prayed it would be the same now.

It took a few minutes and a little bit of stress, but he finally appeared in the middle of my cell, looking at me with confusion.

Are you nuts?

“In general, yes. Right now, no.”

He frowned and waddled closer, then pressed a little hand to my leg. I felt his magic seep into me, and it calmed my mind even more. He nodded, clearly satisfied. *What do you want?*

“A hug?” I felt like a lunatic in an asylum trying to convince the guard I was okay, but I really could have used a hug right then.

You're not the hugging type.

“I'm not quite myself right now, as you know.”

True. He hugged my leg, and I smiled. It felt good. I'd been alone too long in there, even though my friends visited to talk through the bars.

“I need to get out.”

He gasped and stepped back, pressing a little hand to his chest. *And you think that moi would help you with this perversion of justice?*

“It's not a perversion of justice, you numpty. I'm not in here for a crime. I'm in here because I agreed it was safer. And now I know I need to get out—just temporarily—to find something from my dream.”

You sound nuts to me.

“I'll give you as many chocolate bars as you want.”

He pursed his lips, clearly thinking about it. *How will you get them if you're stuck in here?*

“You know this isn't permanent, right? It's just until I can fix myself. And now I know how to fix myself!”

Why don't you ask your friends with the keys?

That was a good question. I could have just called them. But deep down, I knew they'd think it was too dangerous for me to leave the cell, and I *knew* I had to be the one to search for the map.

Not to mention, they knew how big a threat I was, and they weren't nearly as gullible as Ralph. So yes, he was on to something. I was definitely trying to pull a fast one on him.

"I'll come back here as soon as I'm done." And I would. But I was also trying to distract him from his first question. "Don't forget about those chocolate bars."

Fine. But I'm staying with you the whole time.

Thank fates for his one-track mind.

"Perfect, because you help keep me sane." That was the other reason I'd called him: his presence kept my mind clearer. Something about him being my familiar helped me maintain my grip on sanity.

How are we going to do this?

"Get the key, then lead me out of here. Surely you know a way past the guards."

Not that first guard, but otherwise, yes.

"I'll take care of the first guard."

He nodded, then gave me a hard look. *But I'm throwing you under the bus if you do something crazy.*

I gasped. "You wouldn't."

Okay, I wouldn't. But you're supposed to be the responsible one in this pair. He gestured between us. So with you off the rails, I can't be held responsible for my own actions.

"You'll do fine. This is an important job, and you're up to the task."

He preened. *I am. Now wait here.*

"Wouldn't dream of going anywhere."

He disappeared into the air, and I waited. It felt like my heart raced a mile a minute as I paced the cell. Anticipation raced through me. I could feel where the tree was—somewhere on Orkney, near Maeshowe, the ancient, chambered cairn where the Maker had forced me to transition into a dire wolf.

But what was under the tree?

Anxiety made my mind spin. I could feel madness at the edges of my mind, fueled by my excitement, but I had to pursue this. There was no denying that I felt a little *nuts*, to use Ralph's term, but I knew this was vital.

Finally, he returned.

“Well?”

He held up a big silver key. *Got it.*

I swooped it out of his hand and hurried to the door.

Wait! There are two guards!

Shit. I'd been so out of my mind with excitement that I'd almost forgot them. With a shaky breath, I tried to get my thoughts under control. The first thing I had to do was sneak out of this cell and through the castle. I'd need all my wits for that.

You're sure you don't want to ask your friends for help?

His question made it clear he thought I was mad, and I knew I was. This was crazy. But I also had to get whatever my vision was driving me toward, and they might try to stop me.

The curse was definitely influencing me, and it was stronger than my rational mind. But I was right. I was sure of it. I had to be the one to go to the tree and dig. It had to be *me*.

How to get past the guards, though? I didn't have a weapon, and they were trained in combat. I could hold my own in a fight, but not unarmed. If I transformed into a dire wolf, I could definitely take them, but I couldn't guarantee that I wouldn't hurt them with my fangs or claws. That wasn't an option, either.

I looked down at Ralph. "You can transport anywhere you want, right?"

Like a pro.

"Can you get two stunner bombs from my workshop and bring them back here?"

A wide grin spread across his face. *Why didn't you mention bombs sooner?*

Duh. That would have been a good way to get his immediate assistance. "Just do it and be quick."

He nodded and disappeared. I paced, waiting. When they'd locked me in here, my friends hadn't anticipated Ralph assisting me. Of course they hadn't. It had been *my* idea to lock me up...but I hadn't counted on needing to escape. Maybe I *was* mad, and my loony raccoon would go down for aiding and abetting before he became the voice of reason.

I shook my head violently, trying to drive away the doubts. I knew what I had to do.

Finally, Ralph returned with two shiny potion bombs in his hands.

"Gimme." I bent down and swooped them up, and he scowled. "All right, fine." I handed him one of the bombs, and he grinned. "But you *can't* miss. I'll take the first guard, you take the second."

You can count on me.

“I know I can.”

He grinned, and we turned to the door. Quickly, I used the key to unlock it and yanked the door open. A guard stood right in front of it, his broad back blocking my view of the hallway.

I could feel his shock in the way he stiffened. As he turned, I hurled the potion bomb at his back. It exploded, splashing him with the enchanted liquid. Within a half second, he hit the ground like a giant redwood, unconscious.

“Now!” I hissed, my gaze on the guard who stood a few feet down the hall, already moving toward us.

Ralph lunged forward and hurled the potion bomb at the guard. His aim was true, but the guard was fast. He darted to the right, taking the potion bomb to the arm. The glass shattered, but most of the liquid splashed uselessly to the ground.

Panic surged. I couldn't let him alert the others.

He staggered toward me, only slightly inebriated from a potion bomb that should have knocked him out cold. Ralph charged him, leaping onto his chest and climbing up to pull on his hair.

The guard hissed and swatted at him. I used the moment of distraction to dart by and trip him. As he staggered forward, I shoved him hard against the wall. He leaned forward in the perfect way, and his head slammed into the stone.

Ralph leapt off him as he collapsed and lay still.

You killed him.

Worry twisted my stomach. “I didn't,” I insisted, but I knelt down and tested his pulse. It thumped beneath my

fingertips. “He’s fine. Let’s go.”

I hurried away from the guards and up the stairs, looking back at Ralph to whisper, “Do you know a secret way out?”

Let me lead. He scampered in front of me and led me up the stairs. It was a long way to the main floor. We climbed ten stories before Ralph stopped at a little wooden door. *This way. Your friends usually hang out in a room at the top of the stairs, but this will lead us away from them.*

“Where does it go?”

It’s an old storeroom for the kitchens.

“Find anything good in there?”

Cleaned them out yesterday.

“Of course you did.” I tried the door, but found it locked.

I’ll get it. He disappeared, no doubt appearing on the other side of the door. I heard a lock snick, and smiled. When I tried the door again, it swung open easily. Dozens of crates stood against the walls, most of them appearing to be very old. A few held bottles of vinegar and wine, and one was totally upturned.

“You haven’t developed a drinking problem, have you?”

If you’re referring to chocolate milk, then yes.

Of course.

This way. He guided me through the room and toward a corridor on the other side. It was dark and a little damp, giving the impression that it was rarely used. We passed several dark storerooms before finding a narrow set of stairs that led to the main floor.

I held my breath as I pushed open the door at the top. Ralph peeked out at my feet. *Coast is clear.*

Quietly, I crept into the main hall. It had an old wooden floor that creaked ominously, but the lights that gleamed on the stone walls were dim. If someone saw me from behind, they might not realize it was me.

My advanced dire wolf hearing caught my friends' voices to the left. Mac, Carrow, and Beatrix, from the sound of it. They were worried about me.

I turned right to avoid them, feeling guilty but determined. My stride was swift as I made my way to the main door. Not many people lived at our Highland headquarters these days, and with any luck, I wouldn't run into a single one.

I'd made it to the front door when I heard my name—in Lachlan's voice. Low and rough, it was a delight to the ears. "Eve? What are you doing?"

I stiffened, a chill going through me.

Caught. Shit.

My mind raced, ideas for escape jumbling on top of each other. The shadows of madness crept in at the edges of my mind, the dark moon curse trying to take over.

Slowly, heart pounding, I turned to him. As soon as I laid eyes on him, a dark fog overtook me. Rage shot through my veins, blurring my vision. Suddenly, I was no longer in control of my own actions. A bone-deep desire to kill Lachlan flooded through me, and I charged him. A monster had overtaken me, stronger than anything in my soul.

I would be able to do more damage if I shifted, but something stopped me. Maybe it was my last bit of sanity, or

perhaps the rage was too strong to allow me to pause for even a moment.

I was on him a second later, swinging for his face. He caught my hand and grabbed me around the waist, spinning me around so that my back was pinned to his chest. Deftly, he bound my arms to my front, holding me tight.

“Let me go,” I hissed, struggling against him. His warmth surrounded me, strong and sure. At the edge of my mind, I could feel the desire to melt against him. We’d slept together before my life had turned into a disaster, and it had been the most amazing night of my life. I could live in those memories forever.

Yet the curse was stronger still. It drove me, filling my head with a dark sickness that made me want to tear his heart out.

“Calm down.” His voice rumbled against my ear, and I shivered. “It’s the curse, not you. Fight it.”

I drew in a shuddery breath, focusing on the feel of him behind me. The strength and heat. The pleasurable shiver brought by his breath against my ear.

“You can do it, Eve.”

I closed my eyes and remembered his kiss. Maybe it wasn’t the most rational idea, but somehow, I knew it would help.

And it did. Memories of Lachlan were as strong as my familiar’s touch. They calmed me, bringing me back to myself. The sight of him enraged me—perhaps it was the emotion it evoked—but his touch calmed me. When I felt Ralph’s little paws against my calf, I knew I had enough control.

“I’m fine.” My voice was rusty. “You can let me go.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Knock me out if I get weird again.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Then do whatever this is.” This embrace that stole my breath. Just feeling his warmth against my back was enough to make heat rise within me. Memories of his kiss, his touch, filled my mind. I tried to shove the thoughts away, but his evergreen scent filled the air, so amazing that it nearly made my head spin.

More than anything, I wanted to drop my head back against his chest and tilt it to the side so that he could kiss my neck. It was a terrible idea—a dangerous idea—and yet, it was all I could think of. The tension between us was so thick that I could have drowned in it, but it would have been a death I welcomed.

“I’m fine,” I said. “For now, at least.”

I could feel his indecision, but we couldn’t stand like that forever. Finally, he let me go, and I turned to him.

I’d only got the briefest glimpse of him before the rage had taken me earlier. Now, I could see all of him. Strong and powerful, handsome and fierce. The dark shirt he wore only hinted at the curves and planes of his muscles, but I knew how amazing he looked underneath. And his face. Beautiful. Brutal. A poet’s face and the body of a warrior.

It was unfair that anyone should look as impossibly glorious as him. Except his next words weren’t glorious. Not at all.

“I can’t let you escape, Eve. You’re going back to your cell.”



Eve

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Shit. Would he trust me? Believe me? Ralph stood at my side, and I drew strength from him. “I had a dream. A prophecy, maybe. Or a memory.”

The words spilled out as I described every moment to him. The people, the tree. My responsibility to them and the aching sense of loss I felt. It had all felt so real, and as I told the story, it was like I was back there again. I felt the wind on my face, the dirt beneath my fingernails. It was so real I could cry.

His face transformed from harsh to skeptical. When I finished, he asked, “And you’re sure you know where this tree is?”

“I can feel it pulling on me.”

“Tell me where it is, and I’ll retrieve whatever is buried there.”

“It has to be *me*.” I sounded crazed as I said it, and I even felt a bit crazed. Not by the dark moon curse, but by my desire to be the one to find the object beneath the tree. “I don’t know

how I know this, but I'm certain it has to be me. I promise I won't go mad."

"You can't keep that promise." Pain flashed across his face, and he gripped my arms gently. "You saved us all, Eve. But in doing so, you took the strength of a thousand curses onto yourself."

"I know. But I'm fine." I drew in a shuddery breath. "For now, at least. And the witches will be finished with the lucidity potion soon, won't they?"

"They will, but you know it takes time. Especially to brew one as powerful as you need."

He was right. That would hold them up. The longer the potion steeped, the more powerful it was. Since I was a damned goddess, we'd agreed it would take at least a few days.

"Come with me," I begged. "You're strong enough to keep me from becoming a danger to others."

"Barely."

"But you are. And I need this." I gripped his shirt. "I know it's going to help."

"It won't take long? You know exactly where you're going?"

I nodded. "Yes. Exactly."

"I'll tell your friends, then we'll go."

"No!" They would stop me for my own good. I knew that part of my fear was paranoia driven by the curse, but I couldn't help it.

"I'm telling them, Eve. It's safest."

I scowled, shamed that they'd know I'd tried to sneak away. It had to be done, but it didn't mean I liked it.

"Fine. We'll tell them as soon as we arrive. We need to go now—we can't waste a moment more. With a transport charm, we can be there and back in a flash. Have you got one?"

He nodded, looking at me like I was a feral animal who might tear his throat out.

I was.

"Then let's go." I tugged on his arm. "I promise this is the right thing to do. I know it."

"Fine. But we do it my way."

"No problem." I dragged him into the sunlight, then turned and held out a hand. "Transport charm. Now."

"You're a real piece of work now, you know that?"

"You just figuring that out?"

A small grin tugged at the corner of his mouth, and something fluttered inside me.

Damn it, *no*.

I couldn't allow myself to be swayed by him. There was a curse hanging over my head, one that had haunted me ever since the seer had told me of my fate years ago. Loving Lachlan would lead to my death. It was separate from the dark moon curse, and I had no idea how to break it. So whatever I was feeling for him, I had to ignore it. I had to ride this denial into the sunset and live happily ever after with it.

Ha.

As if.

“Get the charm.” I poked him in the chest, trying to be annoying so that he wouldn’t like me. If I couldn’t help how I felt about him, then I could drive him away. Totally genius plan. “We need to go to Maeshowe.”

He nodded and pulled the charm out of his pocket, then reached for my hand. I let his larger hand envelop mine, resisting a sigh of contentment at the feeling.

“Ready?”

I nodded, then looked down at Ralph. “Stick with me?”

I’ll be there.

Lachlan threw the charm to the ground, then stepped into the cloud of silver dust. I followed, letting the ether suck us in as triumph surged through me. As the ether spun us through space, I prayed that this wasn’t my dark moon curse manipulating me.

It’s not.

I could totally handle this. *I* was in control.

Maybe.

Finally, the ether spit us out on Mainland, Orkney. Ralph joined us a moment later. The wind was wilder here, the sea air biting. It whipped past my head, dragging my hair back from my face. I drew in a deep breath, feeling the cold air bring some sense back to my mind.

Shit.

I’d just escaped my cell and convinced Lachlan to bring me here.

It felt dangerous, like the actions of a madwoman.

But I *was* a madwoman. And I needed to find that damned tree. The flat planes and gently sloping hills of Mainland surrounded us, dotted here and there by cottages and sheep. There were very few trees on the island, but I could feel the one I sought. It called to me like a siren song, pulling at my soul. I started forward, dropping Lachlan's hand and running, Ralph at my side. "This way!"

He followed, but I paid no attention to him as I raced toward the small forest of gnarled trees that cast dark shadows against the ground. Maeshowe would be on the other side of those trees, but I wasn't going there. No, I needed to find *the* tree.

The wind whipped at my hair as I entered the forest, surrounded by the gnarled trunks and branches of the ancient woodland. These oaks had been here over a thousand years, and I could feel them like old friends. I'd once walked among these trees, over a thousand years ago when I'd been a goddess.

It was still hard to believe it was true.

I shook the thought away and began to search for the oak from my dream, inspecting each one for that special something that made it familiar.

Within minutes, I'd located it. The branches reached toward the sky like gnarled fingers, tipped with leaves that glinted dark green. I fell to my knees at the roots and began to dig. Ralph helped.

But we were too slow. Damn it, I needed a shovel.

Since I didn't have one, I tried my magic. If I could throw a lorry with it, surely I could move some dirt...and yet, the

operation felt unwieldy. Beyond my capability. Frustration surged through me.

“What’s wrong?” Lachlan asked.

“I’m not strong enough.” My goddess magic was useful, but I could feel that it wasn’t what it could be. There was something missing inside me, or something broken.

You have yet to ascend. Your power is half what it could be, and it will destroy you. The Maker’s words echoed in my ears. He’d said them to me two days ago, maybe three. Through my madness, it was hard to remember exactly how long. But I remembered the words.

Frustrated, I hurled a handful of dirt aside. “I should be able to move this dirt with my telekinesis, but I can’t.”

“Let me help.” He began to dig, and I joined him.

Together, we clawed at the dirt, removing handfuls and flinging them aside. In my hurry to escape, I hadn’t considered digging tools. I hadn’t considered *anything* but my desperate desire to find whatever was buried here. Even now, it threatened to overtake my mind.

But I couldn’t stop.

Finally, I felt it. My fingertips hit a wooden box, and I gasped. Shaking, I pulled it free.

“I didn’t imagine it.” The box was about the size of a liter of milk, ancient and worn.

“What’s in it?”

“I’ve got no idea.”

“Let’s open it back at the castle, where we have backup.”

“No, let’s open it here.” I reached for the lid.

Lachlan gripped my hand, stopping me. “No. We’ll go back. This is dangerous, and you know it.”

I fought the desire to snap at him. I could feel the madness creeping in at the edges of my mind, always waiting to strike. It was stronger around him and waiting to attack, likely because he made me feel strong emotions. I reached out to touch his arm, and the contact calmed me.

“Whatever is in this box could incite the dark moon curse even more,” he said. “We should go back, and you can take the lucidity potion. Then we’ll open it.”

He was right. In the rational corners of my mind, I knew it.

I drew in a shuddery breath and shoved the box at him. “You hold it, then.”

He nodded and took it. I stood, shaking slightly. He was right. I didn’t feel like myself. Not even close. I needed that potion before I could look in the box.

“Let’s go.”

He nodded and pulled another transport charm from his pocket. Together, we returned to the castle. I strode toward the main doors, desperate to find the lucidity potion that I prayed the witches had delivered.

My friends were waiting for us in the main hall—although *waiting* probably wasn’t the right word. It was chaos. Mac and Beatrix were running toward the front door while Carrow was shouting something about finding Ralph.

“I’m here!” I raised my hands as soon as I stepped inside. “It’s okay.”

Shocked, they stared at me.

“How did you get out?” Carrow demanded.

“I’m clever.”

She looked down at the raccoon, who had been my constant shadow. “Ralph helped you.”

“It’s fine. I’ll go back to my cell now. We can talk there.”

Carrow shook her head. “Maybe you don’t need to. *If* you have a good reason for escaping. The witches have brought the lucidity potion. I was going down to give it to you when we realized you were gone.”

“Fantastic.” Relief rushed through me.

She strode toward me, Mac and Beatrix at her side. Dark shadows hung under her eyes, and her golden hair was messy. Not as bad as Mac’s, though. She was growing out her short hair, and it was at a length she couldn’t pull back. My friends looked like they’d been through the ringer, and *I* had put them there. Guilt tugged at me.

“How do you feel?” she asked. “What was this field trip about?”

I looked back at Lachlan. “Show them.”

He held the box out so she could see.

“I had a dream that I needed to find that. Now that I have, we can open it.” I held out my hand. “But Lachlan and I thought I should have the potion first, in case there’s something weird inside there that will make me even crazier.”

“Fates, I hope not.” She handed me the small vial of lucidity potion. “But you seem pretty good.”

“Don’t be fooled.” I could feel the curse at the edges of my mind even now. Quickly, I uncorked the vial and swigged it back. I grimaced at the taste, but my mind felt a bit clearer

immediately. “That helps.” Still, the darkness lingered in my head. “Kind of.”

“Kind of?” Carrow asked.

I frowned. “Yeah. I’m better, but not totally.”

“You’re too powerful,” Lachlan said. “The potion can work on you, but not entirely.”

Shit. “Can you guys keep an eye on me?”

“Of course.” A worried expression crossed Carrow’s face. “But are you sure you should be out and about if you aren’t fully better?”

“I’m never going to get fully better unless I defeat the Maker.” Even then, I wasn’t sure it would cure me. But I had to take him down. My friends were powerful—extraordinarily so—but only I could defeat him. I felt it deep in my soul. “And there’s something more to it. I keep seeing faces of people that I miss, but I don’t remember them. I think they’re the dire wolves who died out, and I think I can save them. This is about more than just me.”

“All right,” Carrow said. “We’ll keep an eye on you. But one hint of you going mad, and it’s back in the cell.”

How the hell was I going to avoid even a hint of losing my mind?

Ralph. My familiar could help.

As if he’d heard me think of him, he touched my leg. *You rang?*

“Thanks, pal. Just stay with me, okay?”

He nodded, not even asking about payment. It was as if he knew how desperate I was.

“I want to figure out what’s in this box.” I looked at Lachlan. “Have you got a quiet room we can use?”

He nodded, then started through the hall with powerful strides. I followed, my friends at my side. I couldn’t keep my eyes off him as he walked ahead of us. Not just because he was attractive—I was used to that by now—but because I couldn’t turn my mind away from my feelings for him. They were going out of control.

I drew in a shuddery breath and glanced at Carrow. She squeezed my hand, a sympathetic look on her face. “I can’t read your mind, but I know there’s something tough going on there.”

“Yeah.” I squeezed her hand in return, grateful for the support.

Lachlan led us to a sitting room. A large hearth dominated the space, creating a cozy atmosphere when combined with the plush blue rug and squashy leather furniture. A few shelves lined the walls, each packed with books.

I took a seat on one of the couches, and Lachlan handed me the box. As soon as I touched the wood, a shiver ran through me. It felt familiar—*extremely* so.

With a shaking hand, I tried to open the lid. It stuck tight, and I frowned. “There’s no lock, but it won’t budge.”

“Magic?” Lachlan asked.

I nodded and focused on it, trying to discern the signature. “I’m not getting anything.”

“May I?” Carrow held out her hand, and I passed it over and waited.

It took her only a second. “It feels like your magic, Eve.”

“Mine?”

She nodded and passed it back.

I took it, once again getting that familiar sense. Of course I couldn't sense my own magic. It was my default, so it didn't register as different for me. But it did give me an idea. Carefully, I fed my magic into the box, hoping to unlock it. The trick worked, and the box popped open.

I grinned as I carefully lifted the lid.

Inside, a sparkling white gem glinted with light. It looked like the moon. I touched it gently, gasping when it sparked with power.

An image flared to mind, so bright and real that I could have reached out to grab it.

A crown, elegant but strong. It was missing a gem—*this* gem—but it was otherwise intact.

I needed to find it. This crown was *my* crown, and it would help me fully step into my power. When I put this crown on, I'd become the goddess that I still didn't feel worthy of being. The Maker had said I needed to ascend, and this was how I would do so. *This* was how I would become strong enough to save myself and the other dire wolves. They were dead, taken from this earth by tragedy, but they didn't have to stay that way.

But how would I find it?

The question triggered another memory. In my mind's eye, I could see myself burying this box. I could feel the stress and grief of my previous self.

I knew I was going to die.

Something had gone terribly wrong, and I was preparing for a far distant future. For *me* as I was today.

I'd buried this box with the intention of finding it in my next life. I'd imbued it with magic to send myself a vision in the future. It would lead me on a path to find the crown. But why hadn't I just told myself where to go to find it?

The Maker.

He was connected to me, so closely that he could also read this vision if he'd found the stone first. I'd been afraid that he would, and if he found my crown before I did, he'd thwart my plans. So I'd left myself a series of clues, and this was the first one.

My head ached as the knowledge flowed into it, as if my mind were trying to escape my head and merge with my consciousness from the past.

I knew what I had to do, but where was the next step?

Inchmurrin.

The gravestones.

I had to find the gravestones at Inchmurrin. They would lead me to the next part of my journey. I wished I could remember more of my past, but I was just getting bits and pieces.

As quickly as the vision had appeared, it was gone. My head stopped hurting and my sight returned to normal, suddenly filled with the faces of my concerned friends.

"Well?" Mac asked. "You looked like you were having a trip."

"A bad one," Carrow added.

“Not bad.” I rubbed my head. “But it did give me a headache.”

Lachlan reached for me, as if to grip my shoulder in comfort. But before making contact, he withdrew his hand and clenched it into a fist. My heart hurt to see it, and I wished he could touch me without worrying.

“What did you see?” he asked.

“I need to find my crown.” I explained the vision, finishing with the final clue, “Inchmurrin.”

“What is Inchmurrin?” Mac asked.

“I have no idea. A place, I believe.”

“According to Google, it’s an island in Loch Lomond.” Carrow looked up from her phone. “Biggest freshwater island in Scotland. That’s not saying much, though.”

“So we go to Inchmurrin,” I said. “There, we’ll find the next clue.”



Lachlan

We split up to prepare for the journey, agreeing to reconvene in ten minutes. Carrow would be joining us. I was ready to leave, so I stayed by Eve's side as she collected a jacket from the cell where her friends had set up a wardrobe. She'd stored the gem away in the bag she kept in the ether, though she'd looked at it with the strangest expression.

No matter how dangerous it was, I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

Hell, it was dangerous *to* take my eyes off her. She was different, that was clear as day. Teetering on the edge of madness, with her eyes flashing black for brief seconds before she dragged herself back from the brink.

I knew how much strength that took—how difficult it was to walk the line of sanity when everything in your soul pulled you toward the pit.

She'd cured me of that. Initially, I'd wondered if her sacrifice had saved me, too, since my curse had come on through genetics and not through an act of the Maker.

She had.

After the last few days, I knew it without a doubt. The madness was gone.

Because of her.

Eve's sacrifice had given me my life back, but it had torn hers away. The idea made my gut churn. I hated what she now fought, and the idea that I'd played a role in bringing this terrible fate to her.

"Stop looking at me," she said from in front of the heavy wooden armoire.

"I can't help it."

She turned, a torn expression on her face. "It's too dangerous, Lachlan. What we have between us..." She drifted off, her voice wistful. "It's amazing. But it's too dangerous."

"It *was* too dangerous. When I was cursed, there was no hope for us."

"Now *I'm* cursed."

"But you're a goddess, and we're going to cure you." Somehow, curing her felt more possible than curing myself ever had. Perhaps because I couldn't live with the idea of her staying like this. Saving her *had* to be possible.

It was impossible not to imagine being together. The memory of our night together—of all our past time together—filled my mind. I strode toward her, unable to help myself. When I reached her, I barely managed to hold myself back from pulling her into my arms.

"I want you, Eve. I need you. I'm done pretending I can live without my mate." I could hear the intensity of my voice,

the strength and the desperation. But I couldn't stay away from her any longer.

A shuddery breath escaped her. Hope and despair flashed in her eyes. "Lachlan, I—"

"Say you'll consider it. When this is all over and we've cured you of the dark moon curse."

Pain flashed in her eyes. "That's the thing... it's not just the dark moon curse that I'm worried about. The seer prophesied that if we fall for each other and truly become mates, I'm destined to die."

Shock lanced me, cold and harsh. "What?"

She nodded, her eyes glinting. "She prophesied it when I was young, and then confirmed it after my return to Guild City."

"It can't be. I've never heard of that."

"Check with her." Her voice was so sure that I knew the seer would confirm what she'd said. I had no reason not to trust Eve.

"We have to stop it," I replied.

"I have no idea how, except to avoid the fate that brings it on."

Avoid loving you. That's what she meant. And it killed me to hear it.

I'd do it. If it meant saving her, I could walk away. No matter what it did to my soul, I could do it—but not before I'd tried everything in heaven and earth to save her from that curse as well.

I nodded. “We’ll fix that, too. But for now, we’ll focus on the dark moon curse.”

Until we cured her of that, I would assume that a future for us was impossible. Cutting myself off from the idea—from *her*—was the only way to resist her.

“Let’s go.” She shrugged on the jacket and headed toward the door, taking the stairs two at a time, as if she couldn’t get away quickly enough.

I followed her, and we met Carrow in the main entry hall of the castle.

We made our way to Loch Lomond, taking a portal that led to Glasgow and picking up a car from one of my friends. I welcomed the buffer that Carrow provided. The raccoon was here as well, but he was an unusually silent shadow—as if he knew it was his job to keep Eve sane and he didn’t want a distraction from the task.

I drove the Range Rover up the twisting lanes to the banks of Loch Lomond. Despite my vow to ignore her, it was impossible to keep my eyes on the road when Eve sat so close. I’d only stolen two quick glances, however, and was surprised she’d noticed.

“Just keeping an eye on you,” I said.

“Fine. I suppose that’s necessary. Just makes me feel like a bug under glass.”

“Sorry.”

“A cute bug,” Carrow said from the back. “Are we nearly there? These roads are making me a bit ill.”

“Just up here.” A few moments later, I pulled into an empty car park at the shore of the loch. Trees surrounded it,

thinning out at the loch's edge to provide a view of the dark water. We could have used a transport charm to go directly to the island, but the journey hadn't taken more than an hour, and we didn't have enough charms to waste on such a short trip.

As I parked, I spotted a man standing by a large canoe—Ross, another old friend from my school days who'd retired up here to live the quiet life. "That's him," I said.

Eve climbed out, and I followed her toward Ross. My friend looked at Ralph, but the raccoon stayed silent at Eve's side.

It didn't take long to get the canoe and set off toward the little island. The sun hid behind thick clouds as we paddled our way across the cold, clear water. It was midafternoon, which I calculated should give us enough time to find the gravestones that Eve was looking for. Hopefully.

We reached the island without incident and pulled the canoe up onto the pebble beach. "Do you know where we're headed?" Carrow asked.

Eve shook her head. "I'm hoping I can feel it."

"Then lead the way," I said.

She took off into the interior of the island, moving slowly at first. Ralph stuck close by her side. Trees and large boulders dotted the land, and a cool breeze rustled through the leaves overhead. We passed a small stone building at one point—a church, from the look of it. Eve completely ignored the small cemetery behind it.

"We're looking for something older," she explained, closing her eyes and breathing deeply.

I could feel her magic flare as she reached out. A moment later, her eyes popped open. I was struck by her beauty, but I

tried to drag my mind back to the task. Now was not the time for that. Nor was it the time to consider the seer's prophecy, which still had me reeling.

"This way." She set off through the woods, then stopped in the middle of a section filled with smaller oaks. "We're here."

"There are no gravestones, though," Carrow said.

"Underground. They must be underground." She dropped to her knees and began to dig with her hands. "Damn it, I really need to carry a shovel around. This is getting ridiculous." Ralph joined her, doing a surprisingly effective job for a creature with such small hands. "They'd be a thousand years old, so they could be buried by now."

"I saw a work shed behind the church. I'll see if I can find a shovel," I offered. A quick check revealed three of various sizes.

By the time I returned to Eve with my bounty, she'd made an impressive little hole in the ground. She looked up as I neared, her gaze landing on the shovels. Her eyes glinted with an intensity that made concern shiver down my spine.

She jumped up and took a shovel, then began to dig. I handed one to Carrow, then asked, "Should we dig here or elsewhere?"

Eve pointed to a spot a couple feet away, and we got to work. The soil was rich and dark as I heaved it out of the earth, but it was Eve who held most of my attention. Her movements were fueled with a frenetic energy that only increased my worry.

Carrow also couldn't seem to keep her eyes off her. At one point, she leaned close to me and whispered, "Do you think she's getting worse?"

“I can hear you,” Eve said. “My dire wolf hearing is insane.”

“Sorry,” Carrow said. “Just concerned about you.”

“I know. Thanks.” Eve kept digging, an intense look on her face. “I’m fine. Fighting it off all right.”

“Let me know if you’re having trouble,” replied Carrow.

“Will do.”

Would she, though?

Carrow and I shared a look. She doubted it as much as I did. I trusted Eve—she had a core of honor that was strong as steel—but the curse could overtake a person without warning. If we didn’t need her help to defeat the curse that had captured her mind, I’d have locked her right back up in her cell and taken care of it myself. But as it was, we needed her if we wanted to save her, and I’d take any risk in order to do that.

Finally, Eve threw her shovel aside and dropped to her knees. She pulled a piece of dirty stone from the ground. It was roughly the size of a football, but pointed on one end.

“What is it?” Carrow knelt next to Eve, who was busy brushing the dirt off her prize.

“Part of the gravestone.” She frowned, inspecting the areas that had been carved away. “But not enough.”

“My hole is at least as deep as yours, but there’s nothing here,” I said. “Where is the rest?” I looked around, trying to see if there were any indentations in the ground that might indicate where we could find more.

“Not here.” Eve looked up, frowning. “Now that I can feel this one, I can sense that there aren’t any others in this clearing. I think they were taken.”

“By the Maker?” Carrow asked.

“Maybe.” She returned the stone to the dirt and stood, covering it with her shovel. “But maybe not.”

“The church might have a priest who knows,” I said as I refilled the hole I’d made. “I believe this is still on their property.”

“Let’s go ask.” She set off through the woods, her stride determined and Ralph at her side.

I grabbed the shovel she’d discarded and followed. As we passed the garden shed, I returned the tools, then hurried to catch up with her. She strode into the church like a general on her way to battle, instructing Ralph to stay outside.

I waited at the door of the small stone structure. It was ancient and dark, with a small stained glass window over the altar that shed a rainbow glow on the gleaming wooden pews.

In the church, her footsteps echoed on the stone tiles, startling the old priest who was napping in one of the pews, his head bobbing on his chest. He jumped up, groggy at first, with his white hair messy and his blue eyes foggy. His gaze landed on Eve. “How can I help you?”

“I’m here for a chat.” She slowed her pace, seeming to realize that it wouldn’t be wise to frighten the old human.

He nodded. “Of course, of course. Would you like some tea?”

“No, thank you.” She sat in the pew where he’d been napping, and he joined her, slowly lowering himself back to the hard wood.

Carrow and I hung back far enough to give them space but close enough to hear.

“There were ancient gravestones buried in the oak grove behind the church,” she said. “They were put there a thousand years ago, but they’re gone now. Do you know where they went?”

He frowned. “You mean the Govan Stones?”

“Govan Stones?”

“Yes. Our claim to fame. There was an excavation over a hundred years ago. They were taken to museums around the world.”

“What were the Govan Stones, exactly?”

“Gravestones, like you said. Special ones, though. Viking in origin, but found only in the areas where they lived with the native population, the Picts.”

“So they weren’t found where the Vikings had total control, like on the Northern Islands?”

“Exactly. We had the largest collection of them. Now they’re in a museum in Glasgow.”

“Which one?” There was a slight note of desperation to her voice that made me nervous.

“Scottish Museum of National History, of course.”

“Thank you for your help.” She stood and strode from the church.

The priest looked back at us, squinting. I nodded my thanks and dropped some money in the collection box near the front as I left.

By the time I made it outside, Eve and Ralph were already halfway back to the boats, and Carrow raced to keep up.



Eve

My mind felt laser focused as I strode toward the boats we'd left on the shore. We could be in Glasgow by evening, the perfect time to sneak in. I looked down at Ralph, who'd been following silently. "Can you go back to my place and collect a bag of assorted potions? Make sure to get a tiny pink vial of stuff labeled *alarm silencer*. Meet us at the entrance of the history museum."

He nodded, then disappeared.

Carrow joined me, slightly out of breath, and asked, "Eve, are you all right?"

"Fine."

"You are not fine."

Damn. She was right. And going with *fine* had been stupid of me. Of course I wasn't fine. I wouldn't be fine until I'd cured myself of this curse and killed the Maker. Pretending that I was just made me sound crazier.

"You're right," I said. "I'm a mess. But I'm holding it together."

"Are you?"

"With the help of that potion, yes. I can feel the darkness at the edges of my mind, but it's farther away now." I looked back and spotted Lachlan behind us by about twenty yards. He seemed to be giving us space, and I appreciated it. This was hard enough without the attraction between us distracting me.

“I just don’t feel worthy,” I said, finally voicing the concern that had been echoing in my mind. “I mean, am I *really* supposed to be a goddess? That’s insane.”

“It’s not. You’re powerful. Insanely so. And it’s not like goddesses are unheard of. Seraphia is one.”

“I know. But she’s *Seraphia*. Of course she’s worthy of being a goddess.”

“And so are you.”

“I have no idea how to prove that.” And I had to prove it for myself. If I didn’t, I knew I’d descend into madness with or without the curse.

“You will. I have faith in you.”

Quickly, I looked back at Lachlan. “Does he?”

“I think so.”

I hoped so.

Finally, I reached the boat and began to push it toward the water. The hull ground against the pebbles on the shore, the water lapping at the stern.

Lachlan joined us. “Get in and I’ll shove it off.”

I did as he commanded, followed by Carrow. Lachlan pushed us off and jumped into the boat. We each picked up a paddle, headed toward the shore. Ralph sat at the front, the wind ruffling his whiskers as he looked toward the castle on the far bank. It was a perfect Sottish ruin, evocative of past battles and epic romances.

Once we arrived at the shore, we dropped the boat with Lachlan’s friend and retraced our steps to Glasgow, making the journey in silence. My mind raced the entire way, and by

the time we reached the museum, I felt like I could have solved the mysteries of the universe if only I'd been doing anything useful with my head. Instead, I'd been recycling worries.

It was nearly dark as we stepped up to the front doors of the museum. Ralph stuck to the shadows, careful not to be spotted. Outside of Guild City, he was still an invasive species.

I nodded at him, then studied the big glass doors that revealed the brightly lit atrium beyond. The hours were embossed in gold lettering, revealing that they'd closed a while ago.

"We can't wait until tomorrow." I looked around at the city square. We were in one of the prettier old stone sections of town, and people were passing through. They weren't paying attention to us, but that didn't mean we could break in through the front door. "Let's find a back entrance."

I set off toward the side of the building, heading for an alley that looked promising. Ralph darted from cover to cover like the Pink Panther, but he kept up easily. We found a simple steel door that I assumed led to the working areas of the museum. No doubt they stuck the conservators down there or something.

"This should work." I gripped the handle and pulled. The steel lock snapped, and the door swung open. "So much easier to break into human establishments."

"What about the alarm?" Carrow asked. It hadn't gone off yet, but it would if we didn't type in the code.

"I've got something for that." I held out a hand to Ralph, and he fished around in the bag he'd brought, then handed me the pink vial. Quickly, I splashed the potion on the alarm

mechanism. After a few seconds, when I was sure it hadn't triggered, I started forward. "Now let's find those gravestones."

The others followed me through the dark, sterile hallway. Fluorescent lighting gleamed off the linoleum floor. As expected, we were in the working part of the museum. A wide set of wooden doors beckoned at the end of the hall, nice enough that they likely led to the public part of the museum, where the artifacts would be displayed.

"There will be guards," Lachlan murmured from behind me.

"Right. Of course." I'd totally forgot them. I was beyond obsessed with finding this stone, as if my past self were inhabiting my present self and driving my interests.

Hell, weren't we the same person, anyway?

And I wanted to know more about her. More about *me*.

I could feel the fractured magic inside myself. Great power was there, but I needed to do something to unite it. These stones would have the answer for how to find the crown that would do that.

Carefully, I pushed the door open to the main part of the museum, careful to peek out and check if there were any guards nearby.

"None here," I whispered before stepping out.

The others followed me into the dimly lit room. It was a cavernous space filled with glass display cabinets and statues set on pedestals. I could tell right away that this wasn't the room we were looking for, however. The artifacts were too modern.

I looked down at Ralph. “Run ahead and look for guards. Return if you see any.”

He nodded and scampered off, doing an expert job of sticking to the shadows.

It didn't take long to explore the entire ground floor of the museum. Ralph returned to report a guard at the front, so we avoided that area until the man had moved on.

Finally, we reached the entry hall of the museum. Massive stairs led to the floor above, and Carrow craned her neck to look at the balconies overhead. “Let's check the first floor.”

I nodded and started up the stairs, moving swiftly and silently. I'd taken the potion bag from Ralph and stored it in the ether, but I gripped a stunner bomb in one hand. It would only knock a guard out, thankfully.

We reached the first floor without incident, but as soon as I turned the corner onto the balcony, a shadow appeared in front of me.

“What are you doing here?” The guard was burly, with wide shoulders and almost no neck.

I slammed the potion bomb into his chest, darting backward as it exploded and doused him in the liquid. A moment later, he tumbled forward. Lachlan was quick and caught him before he could hit his head on the ground.

“Thanks,” I whispered, feeling a pull to the room from which the guard had come. “I think it's ahead of us.”

My footsteps echoed quietly on the stone floor as I made my way toward the shadowy space. The overhead lights had been turned off, leaving only the golden spotlights to illuminate the collections that sat on square white pedestals.

Awe swept through me when I saw it. Directly in the middle of the room was a half-moon-shaped stone. It was enormous, perhaps three feet tall and double that in length, with the ends tapering down to form points.

One had broken off.

I'd left the other piece in the dirt back on Inchmurrin, but annoyance swept through me. What kind of shoddy antiquarian had left part of the stone behind?

As I stepped closer to the dark gray stone, I caught sight of the carvings that cut into the rock. Excitement flared, and I hurried forward, dropping to my knees for a better look. The stone wasn't behind glass, so it was easy to make out the artwork that had been painstakingly etched upon it. There were figures and lines, swirling patterns that made no sense to me but lit up something in my soul.

"Do you recognize it?" Carrow asked.

I shook my head. "I feel like I should, though."

Lachlan walked around to the other side of the stone. "There are more designs on the back."

I hurried around to see for myself. There were just as many carvings, but I still didn't understand them. Gently, I ran my fingertips over the rough edges of the designs, then spun in a circle, looking for the other stones. When I saw none of them, I frowned. "Where are they?"

"In storage, maybe?" Carrow said. "Or sent to other museums, perhaps."

Damn it. That would slow us down.

Ralph hurtled into the room a moment later. *Guard coming up the stairs.*

Shit. “He says there’s a guard coming.”

Lachlan strode to the entry and waited.

He could take care of one guard, so I turned back to the stone to inspect it. I heard Lachlan scuffle with the guard, but my attention was on the stone. What the hell was it trying to tell me?

Movement flashed out of the corner of my eye, and horror shot through me.

The Maker.

He stood about fifteen feet from Lachlan, who was lowering the guard to the ground. The man appeared unconscious, and I hoped he hadn’t seen the demons before Lachlan knocked him out.

The Maker had his back to a huge glass case of old weapons. Half a dozen demons fanned out around him, all of them with dull gray skin and sawed-off horns. Each gripped a serrated blade and grinned with malice, like screwed-up backup dancers to the king of hell.

Shit.

As fast as I could, I drew my bag from the ether and grabbed a potion bomb. I hurled it at the Maker, but he dodged it. The weapon hit the demon who’d been standing behind him, though, and he dropped.

More appeared, popping out of thin air. Where the hell was he getting them from?

The Maker smiled and waved a hand casually, as if sending a waiter away. A blast of magic shot from his palm, plowing into my chest and driving me backward. My spine

slammed into the huge stone, and I slipped down to the pedestal, aching.

Lachlan charged the Maker, but two demons stepped in his way. They fought, Lachlan dodging the blades as he swung hard punches at their faces.

“But I need more time to decipher it,” I said, knowing the words were insane but unable to help myself.

“There are too many,” Carrow said.

I called upon my magic, using the power of the moon to lift a huge wooden bench and hurl it at the Maker. It crashed into him, driving him backward, but he didn't go down. Lachlan had transformed into a wolf and fought his way through three more of the demons. Carrow dragged me to my feet.

There were a dozen demons now, all prowling toward us or going for Lachlan. I was sure the Maker could conjure even more if he wanted.

“We need to get out of here,” Carrow said.

“We can't leave the stone.”

She shot it a desperate look. “Fine. We'll shove it through a transportation charm.”

“Is that possible?”

“If we're fast. You're mega strong now, right?”

“Let's do it.” I hurled a potion bomb at the demon who approached, my gaze on the Maker. He watched us with collected calm, as if confident his forces would overwhelm us and he could stroll in and take the stone.

We were going to prove him wrong.

Lachlan broke through the line of demons and charged him, taking him to the ground and chomping onto his throat.

As Lachlan grappled with the Maker and I chucked potion bombs at the demons, Carrow plunged her hand into her pocket and withdrew a transport charm. She pointed to one end of the stone. "Get over there and get ready to push." She looked at Lachlan and shouted. "Come on!"

With that, she threw the potion bomb to the ground at the opposite end of the stone, then joined me. Together, we pushed the stone into the silver cloud of dust. My back ached and my muscles sang, but it moved, grinding against the platform.

As the stone disappeared into the portal, I looked back at Lachlan. "Come on!"

His big head turned, and his green gaze met mine. He darted away from the Maker and followed us into the portal.



Eve

The ether sucked us in and spun us through space, spitting us out in the middle of the Haunted Hound pub.

The stone had made it, but it had splintered the bar on impact. Quinn stared at it incredulously. “What the hell did you bring to my pub?”

Panting, I turned back to the portal to make sure the Maker hadn’t followed us through before it closed. He hadn’t. Even better, Lachlan had arrived with us. I couldn’t have lived with myself if we’d left him behind.

I turned back to the stone and Quinn. “Sorry about this.” I looked at Carrow. “Wait, why did you bring us here?”

“I panicked.” She grimaced. “But frankly, I think we could all use a drink.”

Quinn groaned. “Really? I’m supposed to pour you a beer after you destroy my bar?”

“We’ll fix it.” Carrow smiled winningly, trying to lay on the charm.

“Bloody hell, you’re impossible.” He turned to the taps.
“But what’ll it be?”

“Lager for me,” Carrow said.

I had no interest in beer—not as long as this stone was here, trying to show me the answers. The faces of the dire wolves kept swirling in my mind, seeming to blend with the shadows of madness that always crept at the edges.

Help us.

Save us.

Only you can do it.

Things happened around me as I inspected the stone, but I barely noticed. Time seemed to slow as I studied every inch of it, running my fingertips over the ridges and indentations of the carvings.

“You have to eat.” The words echoed hollowly in my head.
“Eve, you have to eat.”

It wasn’t until strong hands gripped my arms that I startled awake, drawn from my trance to realize that the pub had nearly emptied out and Lachlan stood in front of me with a flaky golden Cornish pasty.

I blinked at it. “Where did that come from?”

“Quinn had some left over from tea.” He thrust the plate at me. “It’s been hours, and you need to eat.”

I took the plate, the savory sent of the pasty making my stomach grumble. He was right. I did need to eat. Ravenous, I scarfed down the beef and potato pasty, then turned around to look for Carrow. I swallowed and asked, “Where did everyone go?”

“Home. It’s well after midnight. Quinn tried to get you to leave, but you ignored him.”

“I didn’t even hear him.”

“No, you were gone. Carrow left, too, but she said she’d return if you needed her.”

I turned back to the stone. “I won’t.”

“Eve, you’ve been at this for hours. You need to rest.”

“I’ll be fine.” I knelt by the stone again, trying to interpret the carvings. I could *almost* figure out what they said. Almost.

Time started to slip away once more. When Lachlan gripped my shoulders for the second time, I lashed out, nearly punching him in the face.

“Whoa!” He grabbed my arms and held me still. “Eve, you need to calm down.”

I blinked. “Sorry. I didn’t realize it was you.”

“It’s been another two hours. You need to rest.”

Two hours?

Holy fates, I’d really been at this two hours? How was that possible? Time was escaping me while I tried to decipher the message on the stones.

But I had to.

I was running out of time, and there was too much at stake. The darkness at the edges of my mind threatened to overwhelm me, but I couldn’t seem to fight it.

Determined, I turned back to the stone.

“Eve, you need to rest.” Lachlan gripped my arm again.

“No.” I felt tears welling—crazy, asinine tears that I shouldn’t be crying. But I couldn’t help it. This was all just too much. The madness seemed to sneak inside my brain and make everything feel more intense. Madder.

My inability to interpret the stone was the last straw. I wasn’t worthy of being the moon goddess.

I felt the tears pour from my eyes and fell to my knees, sobbing.

Lachlan joined me, pulling me into his arms. I knew I shouldn’t go to him, but I couldn’t help it. I wrapped my arms around his neck and cried, the tension of the last days overwhelming me.

In that moment, it didn’t matter that we weren’t supposed to be together. That it was dangerous. It was just us. Lachlan was my port in the storm.

As he rubbed my back and murmured soft, comforting words in my ear, my crying couldn’t seem to stop. It just got harder and harder, unnaturally so. The madness circled my mind, creeping in during this moment of weakness.

Lachlan pulled back, studying my face. “Eve, your eyes have turned black. You need to take a deep breath.”

I dragged in a shuddering inhalation. He was right. The dark moon curse was sending my emotions out of control. In turn, the heightened emotions were letting the curse get to me even more. It was a vicious circle. No wonder I was weeping so much.

I wiped a hand under my eyes. “Sorry. I never cry.”

“These are extenuating circumstances, and the curse is intense.”

“You can say that again.” I looked back at the stone, frustrated anew by my inability to understand what it was trying to tell me. There were people counting on me, and I was failing them.

“You need some sleep.” He dragged a hand through his hair, and only then did I notice that he, too, looked tired.

“Okay. But I can’t leave the stone.”

“I’ll get some people over here, and we’ll move it to your tower.”

“Thank you.” The streets of Guild City would be empty at this late hour, giving us the perfect opportunity to transport the stone without too much hassle.

I stayed by the miserable rock as Lachlan called some of his shifters. They arrived twenty minutes later, a big wooden cart in tow. It barely squeezed through the door of the Haunted Hound. I watched as they loaded it onto the conveyance, trying to help but thwarted by Lachlan.

“You’ve done enough today,” he said.

I just nodded, not wanting to argue.

Together, we trooped out into the night, passing through the gate to Guild City and starting down the empty streets. The moon hid behind clouds, but the golden streetlamps provided enough light to make the journey easy.

We were halfway to my tower when the moon crept out from behind the clouds. It shone on the stone, and I gasped.

The stone glowed.

“Stop!” I held out a hand to the shifters who pulled the cart, and they did as I asked.

Heart pounding, I walked up to the stone and inspected it. Suddenly, everything made sense. It was as if the moonlight were a key to unlocking the message, and I could finally understand it.

“What’s happening?” Lachlan asked.

“I’m able to read it now.”

He looked up at the moon, seeming to comprehend but saying nothing. Finally, he said, “We need to get this back to your tower. Standing out on the street isn’t wise.”

“You’re right. We can go.” I could translate as we walked. Hope gave me greater energy, and I was ready to read the entire thing. To learn exactly what I had to do.

The shifters began to pull the cart, and I followed them, studying the stone as we moved. The message was clear. There were five stones in total, and they needed to be united under the moon at a specific spot. I needed all five to determine the spot, and then they would reveal the next step to the crown. Only then would I be able to save those who relied on me.

We just had to find the stones.

Finally, we reached my tower. Once again, the cart barely fit through the doors, and the shifters left it in the middle of the room in front of the hearth. I wanted to keep studying the stone, but I could sense Lachlan’s concerned gaze on me.

“I know, I know, I need to sleep.” Even now, I could feel exhaustion tugging on me.

“We’ll keep an eye on the stone.”

“It’s safe in our tower. He can’t get past our protections.”

“Just in case.”

I nodded, knowing he'd station his guards outside, no matter what. And I appreciated it. I was 99.99% certain the Maker couldn't get into our tower, but I wouldn't risk my soul on that last 00.01%.

When I reached the stairs, I turned back to look at him. He was impossibly handsome, and there was a look in his eyes that I couldn't quite decipher. Heat, definitely. Maybe even longing.

My skin prickled with awareness, and my heart raced so fast it hurt.

I wanted to invite him up.

Of course I did.

Instead, I turned and hurried up the stairs. It was the only reasonable thing. And if he were wise, he'd refuse to come up, anyway.

Despite the excitement of the last hours, it didn't take long for me to fall asleep. Ralph had been a silent shadow at my side all day, his presence helping my mind stay calm. He settled into his favorite chair to sleep, surrounded by chocolate bar wrappers that I didn't have the heart to nag him about. Anyway, it was important to let animals pursue their true nature, and he was a trash panda at heart.

It wasn't long before the dreams came.

The Maker.

He didn't speak, but he was constantly there, a presence at the edge of my mind. As the minutes passed, he drew closer and closer, until it felt like he was entirely inside my head. Reading my thoughts, interpreting my next moves.

It felt like he was part of me.

The horror of it had me shooting awake, a scream on my lips and my heart in my throat. Ice shot through me, followed by the most intense awareness.

“Are you all right?” Lachlan stood at the door, shirtless and barefoot.

I looked at him, wide-eyed. “He’s here.”

“The Maker?” He tensed, immediately in a fighting pose, and inspected the room. “He’s not.”

“He is.” I pulled the covers up to my chest and huddled back against the bed. “In my mind.”

“What do you mean?” Concern echoed in his voice as he sat on the edge of the mattress. His warm, strong hand came up to grip my arm, and I leaned into him.

“We’re connected somehow. Two halves of a whole.” I shuddered. “Moon and shadow. I’m not even sure we *are* separate people.”

“You are.”

I nodded, clinging to his words, taking comfort in them. Shaking, I ran a hand through my hair. “Fates, this is just too much.”

“You can do this, Eve. I know you’re strong enough.”

I drew in a shuddery breath and strengthened. He was right. I *could* do this. I’d survived so much already, I’d survive this, too. I gathered my power about me and set my jaw. My breathing calmed, and I felt my familiar strength return.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I slept downstairs in case you needed me.”

Oh, fates, was he for real? Too good to be true, this one. “It turns out I did.”

I wanted to kiss him then, so fiercely that the desire seemed to sweep me up and carry me away.

But no.

He seemed to get the drift and stood. “I’ll be going, then.”

No, stay.

But he couldn’t. It was so unwise.

And yet, I couldn’t resist.

“What if you just stayed? To sleep, I mean.” I wanted it so badly, my skin vibrated with longing.

“Will we just sleep?”

“We have to.” But I wanted this. The closeness. The quiet moment that I might never have again.

Anyway, Ralph was there, still snoring in a chocolate coma on the chair across the room. He could kill a sexy mood without even trying.

“Please?” I asked.

Lachlan nodded and climbed into bed next to me. I snuggled down into the covers, sighing when he pulled me against him. His warmth and strength sank into me. I shouldn’t have been able to fall asleep, but somehow, I did.



Eve

When I woke the next morning, Lachlan was gone. It was a good thing, even though it slightly disappointed me.

Fortunately, Ralph was there to provide a distraction. As I climbed out of bed, he held up a slightly squashed chocolate croissant.

“For me?”

He nodded.

“You must really think I’m in a bad way.”

He shrugged. *You looked like you could use some cheering up.*

I took the croissant and looked at it. “Where did you get this?”

Doesn’t matter.

“You got it out of the bin behind the coffee shop, didn’t you?”

There’s no need to be a snob about it. It was sealed in a plastic bag with other pastries. Perfectly sanitary.

I inspected my bin croissant, then bit into it. He was right. I’d been having a bad day, and my standards were low. It wasn’t half bad, either. “Thanks, pal.”

Anytime.

I finished the croissant on my way to the shower and made quick work of cleaning up. When I got downstairs, my friends were waiting for me. Lachlan had changed clothes and looked like he’d cleaned up, but I had no idea if he’d done it here or at his own tower. Mac, Carrow, Seraphia, and Beatrix sat on the couches in front of the fire. According to Mac, Quinn had gone back to work that morning.

She nodded at the giant stone in the middle of the living room. “That thing is pretty impressive.”

I nodded. “Yep. And there are four more we need to find.”

“Where are they?” Carrow asked.

“I’ve got no idea, but they were excavated along with this one over a hundred years ago.”

Interest lit Seraphia’s eyes. “So we need to find them.”

“Yep. Any interest?”

“You bet.” She grinned. This was the perfect area for her talents. Finding the missing stones would be a matter of research, and the library was perfect for the job.

“We can help,” Carrow said. “How are you feeling, by the way?”

“Okay.” My night with Lachlan had seemed to help, if only because it had been a lovely distraction. Like a spa day, but with more sexual tension than a person normally experienced with the technician. “I shouldn’t need another dose for a while. But I want to make a concealment potion. I can’t have the Maker finding me again.”

“Have you got one that’s strong enough?” Mac asked. “He’s proved extremely powerful.”

“I’ve got one partially made and sitting on a shelf. I just need to add the final ingredient to activate it.” The damned thing had cost a fortune to brew and had taken nearly a month. It had been for sale in my shop, but no one had bought it—thank fates, because it was going to come in handy.

“Good.” Carrow rose. “Let’s get searching while Eve makes her potion.”

Seraphia, Beatrix, and Mac headed to the library to begin the hunt, while I headed up to my workshop. It didn't take long to finish the potion and toss it back. The sickeningly sweet taste would have been right up Ralph's alley.

Finished, I joined Carrow and Lachlan downstairs. I used my old laptop to search for news of the stones and made a few calls when I thought I found leads. Carrow and Lachlan did the same, and it was impossible for me not to steal glances at him. Though I never saw him looking at me, I swore I could feel his gaze occasionally.

What had he thought about last night? It had been so lovely and normal, yet intimate. But if he had any thoughts about it, I couldn't read them on his face.

By lunch, we'd identified the location of three of the stones—hopefully. It was enough to get started, at least.

Everyone joined us back at the tower, and we made our plan. We'd split up into teams of two and go recover the stones, using the same method Carrow and I had used to steal the first one. Technically, this was just more theft, but I justified it to myself by saying that they belonged to me.

And they *did*.

I'd left them as a message a thousand years ago. And when we were finished, I'd find a way to return them to the church from whence they'd been taken.

For our upcoming missions, Carrow and Beatrix were headed to a museum in Inverness, Mac and Seraphia to a private collection in Germany, and Lachlan and I to Spain. It might not have been the wisest idea for me to work with Lachlan, but he'd insisted on sticking by my side. Anyway, he was strong enough to bring me back if the madness took me.

Not only that, but he was the best at identifying signs of it creeping in.

I Googled the Spanish billionaire who owned our target stone. “It looks like there’s going to be a massive party at this guy’s mansion.”

“Lucky you,” Carrow said. “Ours appears to belong to a hermit living in a mansion on the Rhine.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard to break in.”

Lachlan leaned over my shoulder to inspect the name on my computer screen. He stiffened, and I could feel his frown before I saw it. “Lorenzo Oliviero is an investor in films. An extremely wealthy one. But there are many rumors that he’s involved in illegal dealings on the Mediterranean coast.”

“Does that mean lots of security?”

“Lots. And we’re going to need an invite to that party.”

“Know anyone who might be able to get us in?”

He nodded. “Jaxson Laurent, in Magic Side. His family controls almost all the goods flowing in and out of the city. They’re well connected, especially in France and Spain.”

“Call him, please.”

“If it’s a party, you’re going to need a dress,” Carrow said.

“I hate the idea of going into danger in a dress. Or heels.” I tapped my lip. “I wonder if I can get something from the fae boutique.”

She smiled. “Just what I was thinking.”

The fae were well known for their charm and beauty. They were so talented at beguilement that many had made a living as spies. In Guild City, they were known for running a series

of high-end boutiques that specialized in formalwear for dangerous occasions. It was perfect for my needs, and we'd have just enough time to get a dress before the party tonight.

I grinned at my friends. "Let's go shopping."



Eve

Carrow and Mac accompanied me to the boutique, while Lachlan stayed back to get in touch with Jaxson about an invitation to the party. We'd called ahead so that the proprietor would be able to help us quickly, and she greeted us at the door with a smile and glasses of champagne.

I took only the tiniest sip of the sparkling beverage, and it was divine. One day, I'd come back when I wasn't fighting for my own soul and drink the entire thing. Two of them. Until then, I needed to keep my wits about me.

So I handed the glass to Ralph, who took it with grabby paws and bright eyes. The proprietor looked at me disapprovingly, and I just smiled.

All around, sleek dresses and sparkling shoes hung off of racks and sat on shelves. Magic sparked in the air, coalescing around certain items with extra strength.

"We have whatever you could require," the proprietor said. She was a beautiful, sophisticated woman with a short black

bob and brilliant red lips. “Will you be fighting, stealing, or perhaps breaking and entering?”

I looked at the nearest dress, a glittering silver mini that looked like silk but was probably strong as chain mail. “Sneaking into a party and stealing something.”

She smiled, not a hint of judgment on her face.

All the same, I added, “Something that belongs to me.”

At least, it had. The way I saw it, the stones still *did* belong to me, or at the very least, they belonged back in Scotland where they’d been found.

“I have just the thing.” She whirled and headed back into the store.

“She’s nicer than most Fae,” I whispered.

“You’re no longer faking being her species, so she’s probably more comfortable with you,” Carrow murmured.

“True.” Now that it was well known that I wasn’t actually Fae, the members of that guild were quite a bit nicer to me. I’d always been a weirdo to them, but no surprise, since I was a giant fraud.

The whole visit only took fifteen minutes, and I left with a bulletproof dress that would magically blur my face in photos and make people forget me minutes after they saw me. I also picked up a pair of the stilettos that would allow me to run like I was in trainers. I even had a silver cuff to hold my most valuable small-dose potions. It was designed to look like jewelry, and only I would know it was deadly.

We arrived back at our tower as evening approached. My friends split off to steal their stones, while Lachlan and I met in the foyer to go after ours.

He was dressed in a perfectly tailored tux that contrasted deliciously with his deadly fighter's build. With his animal grace, I was sure he'd look like a million pounds when he moved in it.

As I descended the stairs, his gaze swept down my dress, and I could hear his breath catch. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you." I joined him, moving swiftly and easily in the enchanted heels. "You clean up well yourself."

He ignored the compliment. "I've arranged for Jaxson to meet us in the village by Lorenzo's home. He'll pick us up, and we'll go from there."

"Was he planning to go to the party?"

"No. But he made an exception."

"In exchange for what?"

"It won't be a problem."

He wouldn't tell me, which meant it *would* be a problem. But whatever it was, I appreciated him arranging it without any fuss. I had enough on my mind without worrying about that, too.

"We're not meant to meet him for another two hours, so we'll be able to take portals and cabs to get there. Save a transportation charm."

"Perfect."

We set off with Ralph trailing behind us. My familiar had been good about sticking by my side of late, and I appreciated his efforts.

It took us two cab rides and two portals, but we made it to the little village on the Spanish coast without issue. The air

was warmer there, redolent with the scent of flowers and wine. I deeply inhaled the Mediterranean air, wishing that I was there on holiday. If I pretended hard enough, I was. Even better, Lachlan was my date.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

"Let's wait here." Lachlan guided me toward a little café with tiny tables on the ancient city square. Roses climbed up the warm golden walls, and a cheerful barista brought us a pair of espressos.

A long black car arrived right on time, and Lachlan left a twenty-Euro note on the table before rising. I followed him to the vehicle and slipped inside to find a powerful man dressed in a sleek tux that rivaled Lachlan's.

His signature was old forests and snow, and his dark eyes and strong jaw gave the impression of someone who would enjoy meeting Lachlan in the ring. He was a shifter, that was clear enough. Definitely a large predator, though I wasn't sure which kind.

"Jaxson." Lachlan nodded a greeting, then gestured to me. "This is Eve. Eve, Jaxson. Son of the Magic Side Alpha."

"Good to meet you." Jaxson's demeanor was entirely businesslike. He was here to get a job done, then move on. Still, there was an air of mystery to him that suggested hidden depths.

I had no interest in his depths, however. I was sure they'd prove to be dangerous, and I had enough of that in my own life.

"Have you known Lorenzo long?" I asked as the car pulled away from the curb.

"Yes, but never well. He's dangerous, for a human."

“He’ll have a lot of guards?”

Jaxson nodded. “You can count on it. Parties like these are often fronts for illegal deals, which is a good thing for us. People will be too busy to notice you.”

Good. “Thank you for getting us in.”

“My pleasure.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes, but I didn’t sense any subterfuge. He wore his honor close to the surface, like Lachlan. “I’ll let you know when the deal is going down and the power players are distracted. Most are likely to be human, so they shouldn’t prove a big problem for you, but I don’t need it discovered that my guests are thieves.”

“Understood,” Lachlan said.

Finally, the car pulled up to a beautiful Mediterranean-style mansion set on a cliff overlooking the sea. The warm orange roof tiles gleamed under the moonlight, and the windows glittered like diamonds. Brilliant red roses climbed up the front of the house, putting the ones at the café to shame.

I looked at Jaxson. “He doesn’t know about magic, right?” The vast majority of humans didn’t, but I wanted to make sure.

“He doesn’t. And I’d appreciate it if we kept it that way.”

Lachlan nodded. “We’ll try to keep a low profile.”

“Do more than *try*. Remember to wait for my signal before you move.” He swept out of the car and into a blinding flare of photographers’ bulbs.

“This was *not* what I was expecting,” I muttered. “Though they probably won’t be interested in us.”

“They will be when they see you in that dress.”

Warmth flushed through me, and I climbed out of the car. The bulbs flashed, but I had to imagine the photographers didn't care who we were.

Still, I felt a bit like a movie star.

Together, Lachlan and I made our way down the red carpet and into the palatial estate. The main entry was an open courtyard surrounded on all sides by arched walkways that led into the house. A shallow pool gleamed in the center, and golden fish darted within.

Dozens of people mingled around the pool, all of them impossibly beautiful and well-coiffed. They carried tiny glasses of brilliant cocktails and sparkling champagne, and tuxedo-clad waiters drifted gracefully through the party bearing trays of more drinks and tiny nibbles.

But it was more than just a party. It appeared to be some kind of movie premiere, with massive banners for a new film I'd never heard of on the far side of the pond. I recognized some of the faces, however. I'd never given much thought to the Hollywood elite, but they were a lot shorter than I'd expected. They were also here in Spain. *All* of them, it seemed.

"This is perfect," I said to Lachlan. "No one will be looking at us with all these famous people around."

"True. We'll just need to make sure there are no cameras near the stone when we attempt to steal it."

"I'm sure Ralph could come up with a distraction if needed." He was lingering in the shadows. I could feel his presence, though I couldn't see him.

I hadn't been sure how Jaxson would take to a raccoon in his nice car, so I'd told Ralph to catch up with us here. No doubt he was stalking the waiters and their trays of canapés.

“Let’s go inside.” Lachlan took my arm and led me around the pool. His touch was gentle and sure, and the way he moved in his tux made it seem like he wore them every day of his life. Somehow, the fight ring bruiser that I’d first seen had transformed into a prince. A deadly prince, but one all the same.

I caught a few of the Hollywood starlets eying my date and smiled. They had no idea how complicated it was to be involved with Lachlan, but it was clear they thought it would be worth any effort.

They were right.

The massive glass doors at the back of the courtyard led to a huge foyer that had been done up as a dance floor. An orchestra sat on the landing above, the strains of music filtering through the cavernous space. A small girl danced on the stairs, dressed in a pink nightgown. No doubt she was Lorenzo’s daughter and had sneaked out for part of the party. A nanny raced down the stairs after her, a harried look on her face.

We needed to search for the stone, but when Lachlan swept me onto the dance floor, I didn’t complain. Dozens of partners whirled across the gleaming wood, the women wearing a rainbow of dresses. Crystal chandeliers sparkled overhead, and the scent of roses filled the air.

It truly was a fairytale.

I looked up at Lachlan. “Do we have time for this?”

“For just a moment. Jaxson won’t give us the signal for a while. Anyway, it would look suspicious if we didn’t dance.”

“Of course.”

“And I couldn’t resist. Not with the way you look tonight.”

I smiled, unable to help myself. Was this what life with Lachlan would be like? A magical dream?

Yes.

It would be full of difficulty and danger, of course. There was no getting around that—not with lives like ours. Even if I defeated the Maker, danger wouldn't stop stalking us. Unless we moved to the human world and became accountants, there would always be something out there waiting to go bump in the night. Or day.

I shoved the thoughts away and focused on our brief moment of fun. Lachlan's tux was smooth and crisp beneath my hand, his shoulder strong and warm. I leaned against the broad hand that pressed to my waist, shivering at the memory of the night we'd shared. It had been dangerous, but magical.

Just like this.

Lachlan danced like a dream, his powerful arms guiding me effortlessly through the steps. I couldn't imagine a more handsome man than he. Subjectively *and* objectively, he was the most attractive male there, and that included the movie stars.

We weren't supposed to fall for each other, not as long as the seer's prophecy still stood—but that felt far off and distant now. The fact that I'd managed to cure Lachlan of the dark moon curse made it seem all the more possible that we could have a future.

I wanted that. So badly.

The fact that *I* was cursed seemed inconsequential. I might be fighting for my sanity every minute of the day, but I was convinced I could fix that. Finally, there was a way out of it. Maybe I could even abolish the curse forever.

The thought stole my attention away from Lachlan.

“We need to go find the stone,” he said, clearly able to read my mind.

“There’s so much at stake. This is so much bigger than just me.” We couldn’t attempt our theft until Jaxson gave us the signal, but we should start the hunt.

“Of course.” He led me off the dance floor a mere ninety seconds after we’d arrived. It had been too short and yet eternal all at once.

We made our way through the press of people toward one of the quieter rooms at the back. A champagne tower sat in the middle of the large space, the glasses piled high in a pyramid and filled with golden liquid. Tables full of food sat along the walls, each of them at least thirty feet long. Cream tablecloths swept the ground, the perfect backdrop for the dozens of platters of seafood, cheese, fruit, and fantastical canapés that were entirely unrecognizable but looked delicious.

As I passed one of the tables, I grabbed a small puff of pastry filled with some kind of seafood. I popped it in my mouth. Crab. Amazing. My stomach was constantly growling these days, and it was too much to resist such a display. No doubt Ralph could keep himself busy.

“I think I feel the stone,” I murmured as we passed into the next room, a familiar sensation tugging at my chest. “This way.”

I led Lachlan down an emptier hallway, heading toward the back of the house. We passed cavernous chambers—a library, a music room, an office. The crowds grew thinner with every step.

Finally, we reached an atrium filled with trees. A glass ceiling overhead revealed the glow of the moon, and I felt its power seep into me. I drew in a deep breath, enjoying the surge of magic that rolled through my veins.

My gaze moved from the potted trees that boarded the room to the heart of the space. The stone sat right in the middle, as if waiting for us. My heart thundered, joy flaring to life inside me.

Each stone was a step closer to the truth, to finding the rest of my power and defeating the Maker. And we were almost there.

We hadn't got the signal yet, so we still had time. I walked toward it, awareness lighting up inside me. Something in my soul reacted to the stone, like I was seeing an old friend. As I neared, I was able to make out the designs carved into the rock. They made no sense to me, but as soon as moonlight shone on the stone, they would.

"We should just take it," I said, running my fingertips over the carvings. "There's no one here."

"It's too easy," Lachlan said.

"Well, I'm certainly not going to wait for it to get harder."

"We need to wait for Jaxson's signal that everyone is distracted."

He was right—we hadn't heard it. But I was desperate to get this thing and get out of here. And there was *no one* here to witness. Torn, I looked between Lachlan and the stone.

"You're right," Lachlan said. "It's too dangerous to wait, and there's no one here to see us. We can take it, and Jaxson will be fine. Let's—"

Magic popped on the air, and I jumped. A split second later, a strong hand gripped my arm with painful strength and tore me backward, hurling me across the smooth tile floor.

My elbow sang with pain where it had slammed into the ground, and I scrambled upright, shoving my hair out of my face.

The room was filled with demons.

Damn it, *no*.

The Maker stood near the stone, his shadowy form seeming to vibrate with triumph.

Rage and fear shot through me, a toxic combination. Somehow, that bastard could follow me. It didn't matter that I'd taken the strongest concealment potion known to supernaturals. He could still follow me. It had to be our connection, which was probably far deeper than I feared.

His army surrounded me, more than a dozen demons. I called on the power of the moon, using it to pick up the massive potted palms and hurl them at the demons. I knocked over six of them, but the rest prowled closer.

In the middle of the room, the Maker approached the stone.

No!

Lachlan fought his way toward the bastard, but there were just as many demons surrounding him. In a swirl of magic, he transformed into his wolf and began tearing through the mob. With his powerful form and gleaming white fangs, he was magnificent. Demon bodies piled up around him, but there were just too many.

I dodged a sword blow from one of the demons and pulled my potion bag from the ether. Quickly, I plunged my hand inside and withdrew a bomb, then hurled it at my nearest attacker. The acid bomb hit him in an explosion of green liquid, and he shrieked.

Twenty feet away, the Maker stuck his hand into the pocket of his simple black trousers.

A transport charm. He had to be retrieving one.

As I hurled potion bombs at the demons who separated me from the Maker, I used the power of the moon to pull the stone toward me. It shifted, so massive and full of magic that it was difficult to move. Slowly, it scraped across the floor away from the Maker.

A low growl sounded in his throat, something I shouldn't have been able to hear from that distance. But I could, no doubt as a product of our connection.

A small scream sounded from the entry to the atrium, and I glanced over.

The little girl from the stairs stood there, a shocked expression on her face. A demon charged her and swooped her up.

Horror shot through me.

Lachlan was on the other side of the room, still battling his way toward the Maker.

The demon turned to me with a triumphant look on its awful face, and my stomach dropped.

He would kill her.

I abandoned the stone and lunged, breaking through the barrier of demons and spiriting toward them. Carefully, I

hurled a potion bomb at his legs. The acid hit his shins, and he howled. Though he went to his knees, he didn't drop the girl. But he was weakened enough that I could grab her from him, and I yanked her away. A swift kick to the face sent him onto his back, and I whirled toward the Maker.

He stood by the stone, so close he could touch it. In a flash of silver dust, he disappeared, along with the stone.

No!

Behind him, Lachlan was surrounded by demons. He tore the throat out of one, but another snuck up and sank a blade into his chest. The way he shuddered made my stomach drop and my skin chill.

With that last blow, the demons disappeared.

Lachlan lay still on the ground, blood flowing across the tiles. In my arms, the little girl sobbed.

Shit. This had all gone to hell.



Eve

Chaos filled the room around me. The stone was missing, and all of the potted palms had been uprooted, their containers smashed by my attempts to use them as weapons.

It tore my heart out to ignore Lachlan, but I had to deal with the little girl first. She'd only been in the room for a couple minutes, and I could erase that much of her memory.

Quickly, I set her on the ground and commanded, "Look at me."

The stern nature of my voice seemed to snap her to attention, and she stared at me with wide eyes. Swiftly, I removed a vial from my silver wrist cuff and dumped a tiny bit of powder into my hand. I blew it into her face, and she sneezed.

Thankfully, her features relaxed as her memory erased.

"Go back to bed. You saw nothing."

She blinked, then turned and left the room. Relief rushed through me, followed by stark fear.

Lachlan.

I lunged upright and raced toward him. He lay on the ground, his breathing labored. I'd only had twelve demons to deal with. He'd been fighting almost two dozen, and one of them had nearly landed a killing blow.

Maybe it had.

I dropped to my knees and inspected the wound in Lachlan's chest. He was still in wolf form, his huge body limp on the ground. It looked like the blade had pierced near his heart, so close that even his incredible healing power was having a hard time keeping up.

Frantic, I pulled a healing potion from my wrist cuff and tipped it into his mouth.

Nothing changed.

Tears heated my eyes. I couldn't lose him. Not now.

There had to have been some kind of poison on the blade if he wasn't healing himself. I needed to get us back to my workshop.

Panting, I yanked the transport stone from my bra and hurled it to the ground. As the silver smoke burst upward, I dragged Lachlan into the ether, leaving the destroyed room behind.

The ether spun us through space, spitting us out in the courtyard at my tower. I left Lachlan on the ground and sprinted into the building, taking the stairs two at a time and charging into the room.

It took only a second to find my strongest all-purpose antidote, then I grabbed my best healing potion. I combined them in a larger vial and sprinted back down the stairs.

Lachlan lay under the moonlight, so still that my heart leapt into my throat to choke me. I fell to my knees at his side and forced the liquid into his mouth, praying that he was still breathing. “Please,” I sobbed. “Wake up.”

He lay still, and I shuddered, sinking my hands into his fur as I waited, praying that my potion was working.

Finally, when I could no longer see through the tears, he moved.

“Lachlan?” I dragged an arm over my face to clear the tears away. “Lachlan, can you hear me?”

He moved again, his fur warm and soft beneath my hands. Magic swirled around him, and he transformed back to his human shape. Slowly, he blinked, opening his eyes. Though his face was pale, his breathing was steady. I pushed his shirt up to see a wound knitting itself closed on his chest. The blade had likely punctured one of his lungs and grazed his heart, from the look of it.

“Eve.” His voice was raspy, and I looked up toward his face.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine.” He groaned and sat up. “Thanks to you, no doubt. I could feel the poison on that blade as soon as it went into my flesh.”

“Bastards.”

“He got the stone, didn’t he?”

I nodded. “Somehow, he got past the concealment charm. I should have expected it.”

“How could you? No one ever has before.”

“He’s capable of the unspeakable. It was naive of me to think my potion could stop him.” I sat back on the ground and sighed, looking up at the moon. “Damn it, I thought we would get it. In and out quickly without anyone noticing us.”

“We’ll get it back.” He stood and pulled me to my feet.

As I turned toward the tower, Carrow and Mac appeared, a massive stone at their side. I grinned, then hurried toward them. “You did it.”

Mac wiped a smear of blood from her face. “We did, indeed.”

“Anyone see you?”

“Not any humans.”

I turned to the stone, my heart filling with light as I looked at it. Underneath the glowing moon, I could read the symbols. They were identical to the ones on the other stone, confirming that we needed to find them all and unite them to reveal the next part of my journey.

“Where’s yours?” Carrow asked.

“The Maker followed me.”

Shock flashed on her face. “No way. You took that concealment potion.”

“I know. He still managed it, though.”

“You don’t think it was just coincidence?” Mac asked.

I shook my head. “He arrived too close to our own arrival. I think we’re connected somehow.”

Carrow grimaced. “We’d better kill him soon, then. Can’t be good for your health to be connected to someone like that.”

“Definitely not.” I looked at Lachlan, whose color was returning. It wasn’t good for his health, either, not as long as dozens of demons accompanied the Maker everywhere he went.

A noise sounded from behind us, and I turned to see Seraphia and Beatrix. The two women stood next to another stone, their hair windswept and big smiles on their faces.

“Well done!” I strode toward them, quickly confirming that the stone was identical to the others. “We have three out of the five, now.”

“Three?” Beatrix asked as she tried to pile her hair into a messy topknot.

“I’ll tell you inside. Let’s get these things into a safe spot.”

“Do you think he can break into the tower if he can follow you?” Carrow asked.

I frowned. “He’s proved that anything is possible.” I looked at Lachlan. “Do you think you could arrange for these to go to a safe place I won’t visit or know about?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you.”

We waited with Lachlan as his guards came to help move the stones, and I told the story of the Maker.

“So we need to figure out where he’s put the stone he has,” Carrow said. “And beat him to the other one that we still haven’t found.”

I nodded. “But we need to be clever. I have no idea where he is now. He’s proved very adept at finding different hideouts for himself.”

“We’re going to need to follow him back to his headquarters,” Lachlan said. “Because we have no other leads.”

He was right. We hadn’t even managed to kidnap a demon. Hell, we’d been lucky to get out of Spain without humans seeing us fighting for our lives. I couldn’t imagine what they thought of the destroyed atrium.

“I have an idea.” I looked at Seraphia. “Where’s the other stone, again?”

“Miami. Owned by a billionaire there.”

Miami. It brought to mind images of tropical sea breezes and waving palm trees, cold drinks and tanning oils, but I had a feeling that would be distinctly different from my experience.

“Do we know where the owner keeps the stone?” I asked.

“He’s a hotel magnate. I’ll try to find out exactly where it is now. Should we meet again tomorrow?”

I nodded. “Perfect. Let’s do that.”

Seraphia departed, headed back to the library, no doubt.

“What now?” Carrow asked. “Because you’ve got a look on your face that suggests you’re not done yet.”

“I need a powerful stunner. Way more powerful than I can make alone.”

“Why, exactly?” Lachlan asked.

“In a perfect world, we’d get the stone from Miami, somehow follow the Maker back to his place, and steal the other one from him,” I said. “But it’s not a perfect world, so

we need to be clever. Pick our target wisely.” My head spun as the plan began to take form.

“What have you got in mind?” Lachlan asked.

“We let him have the Miami stone. Let him think that he’s won. While he’s pursuing that, I’ll slap a tracking charm on him.”

“Won’t he be suspicious?” Mac asked.

“We’ll put up a good fight. And I can make something subtle enough that he won’t notice. He’ll take the Miami stone back to his place, and we’ll follow. But we’ll need to incapacitate him for long enough to get both stones. Maybe we can even kill him.”

As much as I wanted that last part to happen, I didn’t have my hopes up. If there was something powerful enough to take him out with one blast, I’d already know about it. But I’d heard the witches talking about a spell once that could be perfect for our uses.

“What will we use to incapacitate him?” Carrow asked.

“I need to go to the witches.”

“I’ll come,” Lachlan said.

I shook my head, needing a break from him. It was getting to be too much, being close to him yet unable to touch him or kiss him. The whole situation was beginning to drive me mad. “It would be better if just us girls went. They’re having some kind of girls’ party tonight, from what I’ve heard. And we are going to need plenty of backup. Can you get some?”

He nodded. “I’ll work on that and meet you later.

I watched him as he left, my heart in my throat.

“You look at him like he’s got the answer to the meaning of life,” Mac said.

I grimaced. “I know. It’s a problem.”

“Maybe it doesn’t have to be,” Carrow said.

“Maybe.” But I didn’t want to rehash the reasons it likely was, so I stood. “Want to head to the Witches’ Guild?”

Carrow stood. “I saw the invitations they papered around town. It’s going to be an experience.”

“It always is, with them.”

“But we don’t need costumes, right?” Mac asked.

Carrow shook her head, and I was grateful. More than half of the witches’ parties were fancy dress, and they expected people to put a lot of effort into their costumes.

The three of us headed across town, Ralph trailing behind us. It was getting late—nearly ten o’clock—but the town was still bustling. Restaurants and bars were full, with people spilling out onto the streets with beers and cocktails. Laughter rang through the historic roads, and the light of the streetlamps glinted off colorful clothing.

“It must be Saturday,” I said, a bit bemused. I’d completely lost track of the dates.

“Or Friday,” Carrow said. “I don’t know, either.”

“I never know.” Mac dodged around a drunken pixie, who tried to grab her and drag her into a dance.

We made it to the Witches’ Guild at the end of town without further incident. As usual, the building looked a bit drunk, listing to the side with its pointed hat of a roof. Blue smoke wafted from the chimneys, and the blackened windows

stared out onto the courtyard with a serial killer's eyes. The shops behind us were still abandoned, and when a firework shot out of a chimney and landed on a nearby roof, I wasn't surprised the landlords hadn't found any shopkeepers brave enough to rent the spaces.

We set off across the dead grass of the courtyard, our feet disturbing the green smoke that hung low over the ground. Music thumped from the house as we neared the dark wooden staircase that wound around the structure. It terminated at a wooden door halfway up, and we began to climb.

As we reached the top, the door swung open to reveal the dour-faced butler.

“Jeeves!” Delight rang in Mac's voice.

Annoyance flashed in his eyes. “Macbeth O'Connell. I don't recall seeing your name on the invitation list.”

Mac laughed. “Oh, Jeeves. I'm always invited. Anyway, the invitations were plastered all around town.”

He grimaced, then stepped aside, knowing that she was right. As much as Mac annoyed Jeeves, the witches loved her. Primarily for the same reasons Jeeves loathed her—the pranks she played while in the house.

I nodded at him as I passed, but he kept his gaze above our heads.

Inside, it was pandemonium. Shouts sounded from a room to my left, and I headed toward it. The large space was filled with witches. They crowded around a table in the middle, upon which stood Coraline, one of the lead witches. Her dark hair was pulled up in a ponytail, and glitter sparkled along her cheekbones. Tight blue leggings adorned her legs, and she held up a matching pair by her side.

“This lovely pair of legging chaps is only twenty quid! And there are coordinating underpants for just another fiver. In orange!” She turned around, and I realized that the butt of her leggings had been neatly cut out to reveal her orange underpants. They were like the chaps cowboys wore, but insane.

Hands shot up, each waving money as the women screeched.

“What. The. Ever-loving. Hell.” Carrow looked at me, eyes wide.

“Legging chaps,” I repeated, “are apparently *a thing*.”

“And half the people here are wearing them.” Mac pointed to two girls in front of us. One had black leggings and a pink butt, while the other had silver leggings and a gold butt.

I blinked at my friends. “This is even weirder than the Tupperware party.”

They nodded.

“Actually, it’s a great money-making opportunity,” a voice said from behind us.

I turned to see Mary, the pale witch with pink hair who could always be found at Coraline and Beth’s side.

“Money-making opportunity?” I asked.

Mary nodded, sticking out her leg so that we could see her unicorn-patterned leggings. Then she turned around and wagged her butt, which was emblazoned with the colorful slogan *I Poo Rainbows*.

“You’re going to have to tell me more,” Mac said, her voice so enthusiastic that I thought she might float away on a cloud of delight.

Mary turned around. “Here’s the deal. Kate over there”—she pointed to a pretty witch in pink and blue leggings—“went to uni over in America. Except they call it college. Weirdos.”

“Get to the chaps.” Mac waved her hand to urge her on.

Mary grinned. “Anyway, Kate’s old friend from uni got hooked up with this amazing business opportunity where you can make money by selling legging chaps from your house! And if you can get your friends to do it, you can make even more money.”

I met Mac’s eyes and saw that she was about to expire from happiness. The witches had bought into an MLM selling legging chaps. For Mac, it was Christmas.

“I think that’s a pyramid scheme,” Carrow said.

“Duh.” Mary laughed. “Except we actually like the product.”

I looked around at the room of elated women. Without knowing it, the American college girl had found the perfect insane audience for her product. They knew what they were getting into—they just didn’t care. And fates help anyone who screwed the witches.

“Anyway!” Mary said. “I think you would look great in some. Coraline is about to do a three-for-one deal of matching leggings.”

Shoot me.

“We’re actually here about a spell,” I said.

Her eyes hardened. “Leggings first.”

Shit. It looked like I was about to buy some chaps.

Mary squealed and spun around, clapping happily.

Ten minutes later, Carrow, Mac, and I were the proud owners of matching chaps. We barely managed to keep our own trousers on, and I could tell that Mary was a bit disappointed that we didn't yank the new ones on right away.

Fortunately, she still took us to a back room to sort out the spell we needed. The space was quiet and dark, filled with ancient books and lamps that glittered with pale blue light.

She hopped onto a large wooden table and swung her legs back and forth. Somehow, she'd managed to change into another pair of leggings without me noticing. This pair was emblazoned with the Cookie Monster, but I had no idea what was on her butt. Carrow couldn't seem to take her eyes off the damned things, and when I nudged her for clarification about her obsession, she just whispered, "They've got this weird fascination with Sesame Street. I have no idea what's going on."

There was clearly a story there, but it would have to wait.

"So, what do you need?" Mary asked.

"A spell to contain a god. Kill one, if you've got it." The last bit was a shot in the dark, but I had to try.

"Kill a god, no." She made a swooning motion, her pink hair brushing the table behind her. "Though I *wish* we had that kind of power."

"Someone you would off?" Mac asked.

"Oh, honey. You have no idea." She wrinkled her nose. "As it is, I can't. But I can get you something to contain a god for a short while."

"Would they be incapacitated enough that we could kill them?" Carrow asked.

“Sadly, no. It’s a barrier that will hold them, but you can’t cross it.”

“We’ll take it,” I said.

“You’re going to need to buy more than one pair of leggings for a spell like that.” She eyed the pairs that we clutched. “And put them on.”

“How about cash?” I asked.

“That’ll do, too, but it’s a hell of a lot less fun.”

She wasn’t wrong about that. Honestly, if I had my way, I’d be drunk off the witches’ cocktails and dancing around in chaps myself. As it was, I needed to be sober, and that was not a state in which one wore legging chaps with an inappropriately placed eggplant.



Lachlan

“A Scottish-themed wedding on the roof of a Miami hotel?” Stunned, I repeated the words that Seraphia had just delivered to Eve, Carrow, Beatrix, and me. “You have got to be joking.”

“Sadly, I’m not.” Seraphia threw herself into the plush chair near the fire. It was eight a.m., and she’d just arrived from the library. The rest of us sat near the fire, which flickered cheerfully beside us. I was feeling distinctly *uncheerful*. Even the massive platter of croissants and coffee on the table between us couldn’t lighten my mood.

It was doing wonders for Ralph and Cordelia, however, who appeared entirely delighted. While we’d been discussing our plan for tonight, the two raccoons had somehow procured a dozen bags of pastries and had upended all of them onto a huge plate they’d dragged out of the kitchen.

Eve had already eaten at least eight of them, a gleam of determination in her eyes. Determination was far better than the blackness that overtook her irises multiple times a day. She fought the curse, but it was clearly taking a toll on her.

“Apparently, the hotel magnate’s daughter is obsessed with that new Scottish TV show. She’s insisting on a pretty elaborate themed wedding.”

“In Miami,” I said. “The groom will be wearing a kilt in Miami.”

“It’s ridiculous, I know.” She nodded. “But the stone is going to be the centerpiece of the wedding, situated right at the top of the hotel tonight.”

“So we’re talking about hundreds of humans, along with a lot of photographers, all situated a couple thousand feet in the air,” Eve said.

Seraphia gave a grim smile. “Pretty much.”

Kill me now. “Can we just break in this afternoon?”

“It’s being transported from one of his other properties. It’ll be on the road, but I’m not sure where.”

“This could be okay,” Eve said. “Hotels have fire alarm systems. We’ll just pull it and clear it out.”

Could it really be that easy?

Of course not, but it was a start.

We spent the next hour hashing out our plan, then Eve disappeared upstairs to her workshop to get started on the potions she’d need to make for tonight.

I rose, wishing that I could follow her but deciding it would be a bad idea. Garreth was rallying our troops, but there were things that needed tending back at my guild, and I could only be a distraction here.

And she would be a distraction to me. There wasn’t a moment that I could keep my eyes off of her. I wanted to

breathe her scent and hear her voice, sit in her company and be permitted the luxury of a kiss.

It felt impossible.

But now that I was no longer cursed, maybe it wasn't. If we could heal her and prevent the tragedy that the seer foresaw, perhaps we had a chance.

I wanted it almost more than I wanted my next breath.

“Are you all right?” Carrow's voice cut through my thoughts, and I realized that I'd been standing in the middle of the room, staring into space like an idiot.

“Fine.” I nodded. “I'll be back here this evening to begin the plan.”

“See you then.”



I arrived back at the Shadow Guild tower late that night, once again dressed in a tux. The first one had been ruined in the previous fight, and I'd had to get another from the fae shop down the road. It was imbued with some kinds of powers, but I hadn't been paying attention to the shopkeeper when she'd listed its features.

My mind had been on Eve. I needed to get control of the damned thing before it ran away without me or I got caught standing in the middle of traffic.

A contingent of shifters accompanied me to the Shadow Guild tower, Garreth among them. It was a gift to have my brother back, and I could thank Eve for it. Tonight, I would have my attention on her, and Garreth would lead them.

They'd be our silent backup, hiding in the shadows until it was time to strike.

I reached the tower and turned to Garreth. "There's not quite enough room for everyone inside. Can you wait here?"

He nodded, and I left.

Eve and her friends waited in the main room, gathered around the fireplace. They were dressed in simple uniforms of black pants, white shirts, and bow ties. Though I knew they hoped to blend in as the waitstaff, they stood like warriors, confident and sure. With any luck, the guests would assume they were soldiers with side jobs, because they looked ready to fight rather than serve trays of champagne.

"What are you looking at?" Eve asked.

"Nothing." I frowned. "Well, perhaps you should all try slightly softer expressions. You look ready to tear someone's head off."

Eve grimaced. "That's how I feel, but thanks for noticing."

"Ditto." Mac cracked her knuckles. "I'd like nothing more than to tear the Maker's throat out, but I'd settle for half a dozen demons."

"Well, try to look nice and bored by the time Lachlan calls us," Carrow said.

Mac scoffed. "Take some of that advice for yourself, cap. You look ready to strangle the Maker with his intestines."

Carrow grimaced. "Personally, I'm more into a clean beheading. But if intestines were the only weapon available, I suppose I could wash my hands a hundred times afterward."

"Enough. We can chat once Lachlan is gone." Eve looked at me. "Ralph will be right down. He wanted a bow tie, but I

told him it would be too weird. I think he's trying to fashion something from my lingerie drawer."

The little raccoon was going to be my partner in crime while I made the first mission into the party in search of the fire alarm.

A moment later, he plopped down the stairs, no bow tie in sight. As he passed Eve, he grumbled, *You need some black underwear.*

"Trust me," I told him, "it's in your best interest that you couldn't make a tie out of that. It's not like we're guests at the wedding, anyway."

You're in costume.

The tux had come with a white handkerchief in the pocket. I pulled it out and rolled it up, fashioning a little kerchief that I tied around the raccoon's neck. He preened.

At Eve's questioning look, I said, "Better to have him happy if he's got an important job."

Exactly.

"Get out of here," Eve said, but there was a smile in her voice.

I nodded goodbye to the women and departed the tower, Ralph on my heels. In the courtyard, I updated my guards. As planned, they would accompany the women when it was time, but they'd stick to the shadows. They were dressed in regular clothes and would hopefully pass for hotel guests, wedding crashers at worst.

When it was time to go, I looked down at Ralph. "Remember, stay hidden and wait for my call."

He nodded, twisting his little hands with excitement.

I hurled the transport charm to the ground, then stepped into the pale silver cloud. The ether spun me through space and spat me out in an alley that we'd chosen using Google Earth. As expected, it was empty and quiet. The air was warm, despite the late hour, smelling of the sea and a few more unpleasant things that could be attributed to the alley and the rubbish bin nearby.

Ralph appeared a moment later and looked up at me, his eyes alert.

"I'll call you soon," I said.

He nodded and hopped up onto a bin, looking at it with longing on his face.

"Keep your head in the game," I said. "No distractions."

I'm a professional. I wouldn't dream of it.

"Of course not." I left the alley, blending easily with the crowd on the sidewalk outside. I'd chosen an alley at the back of the hotel, but it didn't take long to make my way around to the front.

Palm trees waved in the breeze, and the air smelled more strongly of the ocean as I neared the main entrance of the building. A massive fountain shot sparkling water into the air, and I cut around it to reach the enormous front doors. They opened seamlessly, and I stepped into the chrome and glass lobby, which had as much soul as a Wall Street hedge fund manager.

There was no sign of the wedding except for a troop of women in identical dresses. They stood at the bar on the far wall, throwing back shots of liquor with raucous laughter. The bride was right in the middle of them, wearing the biggest white dress I'd ever seen. She swayed on her feet, hiccupping.

I didn't pay much attention to human wedding customs, but this had to be unusual. The ceremony wasn't meant to start for another hour, and she was already listing heavily to the left.

Ah, well, maybe it would work in our favor.

I cut through the lobby and made my way to the bar. I was sure there would be a fire alarm back there—I just needed to find it. The bridesmaids hooted at me as I passed, and I inclined my head in greeting. The last thing I needed was to be rude and piss off a troop of drunken women.

The back of the bar was full of businessmen in suits, all drinking American beer from cans. Behind them, I spotted a narrow hallway that led to the restrooms.

Right between the doors, a little red box sat on the wall. Just what I was looking for.

It would be too much for me to pull it—security would try to toss me out immediately, and I didn't need my face on camera for that. But Ralph was small and quick. He could pull the thing without anyone the wiser.

I tucked myself up against an empty table near the wall and murmured, "Ralph."

He appeared a moment later, his eyes gleaming. He stuck close to the shadows of the table, but it wasn't necessary. No one was looking at the ground.

I tilted my head slightly to the left to indicate the fire alarm, and his head swiveled, his eyes growing even larger.

He charged it, leaping into the air and kicking it with his foot. He was back on the ground before the shrieking filled the air, and gone a half second later.

The bar turned to chaos. The businessmen gripped their beers and hightailed it to the door, shoving the bridesmaids aside in their haste.

The women shrieked their outrage. A tall one with massive yellow curls hurled a pint glass at one of the retreating men, hitting him in the back of the head.

A grin cracked my face, but there was no time to stand around enjoying the show.

I strode toward the main part of the lobby, looking for the security room and the stairs to the roof. It would be a long climb, but better that than getting stuck in an elevator.

Ralph had headed straight back to the Shadow Guild tower to collect the others, and they would transport directly to the roof. I needed to be there to greet them, though Eve would be the last to arrive.

I felt like a fish swimming upriver as I pushed my way through the crowd toward the back of the hotel. My first stop was the security room. It was empty, as I'd hoped, and I turned off all the recording equipment in the hotel. Then I looked for the stairs. They weren't crowded when I entered, and I took them two at a time all the way to the top. Just a few stragglers passed me on their way out of the building, their faces harried and their steps quick.

When I stepped out onto the roof, I was immediately assaulted by the scent of heather. There had to be a thousand bouquets of the stuff spread out across the space, looking strange as hell beneath the massive potted palms. Tartan tablecloths covered the tall tables, and rapidly melting ice sculptures of bagpipes and Nessie filled the buffet to the right.

It was the most intense décor I'd ever seen, and I could confidently say I'd spent the entirety of my life not once using the word *décor* or giving it a single thought. This place made it impossible not to think it.

But the most important part was right where I'd hoped it would be. Sitting in the middle of the space on a pedestal covered in tartan was the stone.

A moment later, Carrow and her crew appeared. Immediately after, I could sense my guards, even though I couldn't see them.

The stage was set.

Eve appeared, quickly glanced around, then spotted the stone and ran for it. A split second after she touched it, the Maker and his minions popped out of the air. He must have had some way of knowing when she made contact with the stone.

Eve spun toward the Maker, and fear iced my spine. Would he try to take her as well?

I sprinted for them, shifting in midair. It felt good to shed the restrictive tux and take on my wolf form. The air smelled sharper, and the sounds came louder. With all of my senses now highly attuned, I could make out the fights exploding around me.

As before, the Maker had brought backup—loads of it. More demons than I could count, actually. My team streamed out of the shadows and shifted as they leapt at the demons. Blood sprayed and weapons glinted in the light.

Meanwhile, Carrow's friends fought with weapons and magic. Seraphia lifted four demons in the air with her vines,

while Carrow and Beatrix threw potion bombs. Mac was a maniac with a sword.

I darted through the crowd as I raced to Eve, determined to help her achieve her goal and keep her from getting taken by the Maker. Following him to his lair was our final goal, but I wanted it to be on our terms. She needed to be free to fight, not bound as a captive.

In the distance, she grappled with the Maker. It looked like she was trying to drag him back from the stone, but I knew she was just planting her tracking device on him.

Two demons lunged into my way. They were both huge, with hulking shoulders and dark gray skin. Their sawed-off horns had been filed into serrated edges, and their blood tasted like ash when I sank my fangs into the neck of the nearer one.

He roared, trying to tear me off him. I just bit down harder and tore out his throat, spitting blood to the side as I whirled to find the other.

The bastard had a blade raised over me, his eyes glinting with feral light. He brought the heavy sword down, but I dodged, narrowly avoiding a second strike.

While he recovered his swing, I leapt on him and took out his throat. It was too easy, and there was no sense of victory in it. But I wasn't here for a sense of victory. I was here to protect Eve.

Satisfied that my target was down, I whirled and charged toward her. The Maker had a hand around her arm, and she wasn't struggling.

She must have landed her tracking charm on him. I lunged between them, breaking them apart. She darted back, and I went for the Maker's throat.

He hit me with a boom of percussive magic that made my organs feel like they'd gone through a blender. The force blasted me backward, and I tumbled across the slick stone floor. Palm trees waved overhead as the light of the moon gleamed on their leaves.

Panting, I surged to my feet and looked for Eve. I spotted her to the side, grappling with some demons about fifteen feet from the Maker. I sprinted toward them, knowing that the Maker would be getting away with the stone. I hated to let him have it, but I had to trust the plan.

And I couldn't let those demons hurt Eve.

Not that she needed much help. She was using the power of the moon to throw the melting ice sculptures at the demons' heads. They shattered on impact, the force knocking the creatures unconscious. Behind me, the battle still raged.

I reached the bastards who attacked Eve and dragged one away from her, shaking him viciously by the throat until he lay dead.

Out of the corner of my vision, I spotted the Maker disappearing with the stone. A few moments later, the demons vanished.

It was done.

Quickly, I transformed back to human, my muscles aching from the fight.

"Eve, are you all right?" I strode to her side.

She stood staring at the spot the Maker had vacated, an expression of satisfaction on her face. "He fell for it."

"Of course he did. It was a good plan."

Carrow and the others approached. All looked bloody and a little beaten, but there had been no deaths. Mac's arm looked like it was broken, and her face was pale, but that seemed to be the worst of it. "Little help?" she gasped.

Eve grimaced and pulled a healing potion from the cuff at her wrist. "You okay?"

"I'm good." Mac threw back the potion and sighed. "Better now."

"Let's get out of here," Eve said. "We can follow him now and grab the stone before he locks it up."



Eve

The warm ocean breeze whipped across the rooftop so strongly that it shook the palms in their pots. It was as if the ocean knew that something big was about to happen.

We needed to be quick if we wanted to follow the Maker. My friends gathered around to use the transportation charms, and I called the witches to get that ball rolling.

“It’s time,” I said when Coraline picked up.

“Be there in a sec.”

A few moments later, the three witches appeared. They were dressed in sleek black catsuits, each wearing a domino mask.

“Really?” Mac asked, gesturing to her own face.

“What?” Coraline shrugged. “We like to be prepared. Also, it’s not every day you get to dress like Batman.”

“And we look good,” Mary said.

Mac shrugged. “That’s true.”

“All right, we’re about to go.” I pulled a small box from my pocket and flipped it open to reveal the sparkling powder within, which had been enchanted to link us to the charm I’d stuck to the Maker’s clothes. Carefully, I sprinkled it on the ground to create a large circle, then looked up at my friends. “The transport charms must be deployed in here.”

They nodded, and I shot Garreth a look to make sure he’d heard. He stood in the back with the shifters that Lachlan had brought. I recognized many of them by now and even knew most of their names. I prayed that none were killed in the fight to come. Ralph mingled with them, seeming to like a couple of the bigger ones in particular.

“We’ll start now,” Coraline said.

“Thank you.”

The witches began to chant words in a language I didn’t recognize, their voices carrying in eerie unison over the breeze. The spell was meant to make the transport charms last longer so that we could get more people through.

Lachlan deployed his first, and I linked hands with Mary and Beth. Ralph joined us, sticking close by my side. We’d be the first line of defense, and the two witches would go through with me to incapacitate the Maker.

Together, we stepped through the portal and let the ether suck us through space. It spun us wildly around and spat us out in cool, dark night air that smelled distinctly of heather.

The Highlands. It had to be.

We stood in the middle of a wide open space, our boots planted on broken cement. Scrubby grass pushed up through the cracks, and it was clear this place had been abandoned for a long time. Long, low buildings crouched in the distance,

hidden by the late-night shadows. I couldn't tell where we'd landed—it might have been an old industrial park, for all I knew—but we'd come to the right place.

In front of the buildings, I spotted a group of figures. It was too dark to see exactly who they were, but I could feel the Maker's vile magic. I pointed. "There they are."

"Let's go." Mary raced forward, and we followed, sprinting across the cement as the highland wind howled down from the mountains in the distance. Ralph kept pace, unusually silent for once. He was clever enough to understand the danger we were in.

In my hand, I clutched the glass charm that the witches had made for me. It was my job to deploy it, theirs to activate the magic within.

As we neared, the Maker turned. I couldn't make out his face through the shadows, but I could feel his surprise.

Two can play at this game, you bastard.

He raised his hand to throw one of his sonic booms at us, but I hurled the charm right before he launched it. The glass shattered on the ground in front of his feet.

He laughed triumphantly, then threw his magic right at us. I dove in front of Mary and Beth, taking the hit full to the chest. It threw me backward, pain exploding in my ribcage and eyes blurring. My organs felt pulverized as I crashed.

I dragged my aching body upright and gasped, trying to recover from the shock of the blow.

The witches' voices filled the air, and satisfaction simmered through me. As their eerie, unintelligible words carried through the night, the broken glass in front of the Maker began to glow.

“Get them!” he shouted, gesturing to the demons who surrounded him.

Aching, I tried to leap to my feet, but I was slow. His magic was so damned powerful, and I was no match for it. Yet.

Thankfully, Lachlan appeared at my side and helped me up. His strong hands were a welcome assistance as I watched the witches’ magic begin to surround the Maker. As arcs of blue light shot from the ground to create a cage around him, my friends streamed forward to battle the demons.

They’d come through the portals quickly, and nearly all of them were there. Beneath the glow of the moon, I spotted two dozen wolves and other shifters charging toward the demons. Mac raced forward with her sword, and Carrow and Beatrix threw potion bombs with perfect aim.

The battle exploded as the Maker raged, beating his hands against the glowing bars of his cage. Coraline arrived, adding her voice to Beth’s and Mary’s. Their spell rang through the air, imbuing the cage with strength.

Mary turned to me, her mouth tight with effort. “Hurry. It takes a lot of power to hold this, and we won’t have enough for long.”

I nodded and looked at Lachlan. “Ready?”

He nodded, though I could tell he wanted to come with me, to protect me. Our future was too uncertain, too dangerous, but he couldn’t escape that protective drive.

We’d decided that he was the best suited to retrieving the Miami stone, however. It sat behind the Maker, guarded by six demons. They were clearly taking it to storage, and we’d beat them to it. He’d get that stone; I’d go for the other.

Seraphia raced up beside me. “Time to go?”

“Yep.”

We’d planned for her to accompany me since she was able to take out multiple demons at once with her magic.

“Be careful,” Lachlan said, his gaze dark.

“You, too.”

He nodded, then turned to the demons. Seraphia, Ralph, and I sprinted away from him and the rest of the crew who stayed behind to fight the Maker’s demon backup. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lachlan transform into a wolf, his form massive and strong. He charged toward the Miami stone, taking out two demons on the way.

Seraphia and I left the chaos behind and headed toward the low buildings up ahead. They were old, perhaps a century in age, but not as ancient as many of the structures in the Highlands.

“It’s got to be in one of those,” Seraphia said.

I nodded, trying to reach out with my magic to determine which one the stone was hidden in. Each was at least one hundred feet long, their multiple doors large enough to drive a lorry through.

We passed an old sign that was half broken, the letters faded away by time: *RAF Wigtown, Baldoon Airfield*.

Holy fates, it was an airfield. An old one, too—probably from World War II.

“The Maker really has a knack for finding the creepiest abandoned places,” Seraphia said.

“No kidding. It’ll be an asylum next. Or a clown school.”

“You’re going to give me nightmares.”

Together, we reached the first building. I didn’t even have to go inside to know it wasn’t there. The place felt dead as a rock.

“Next one,” I said.

We sprinted past the huge hangar doors to the next building, which was also a bust. But the third proved promising. I could feel the faintest glow of magic from the place.

Seraphia pointed up ahead. “Look, one of the doors is cracked.”

At the far end of the building, I spotted it—an open hangar.

“Jackpot.” I picked up the pace and reached into the bag at my side to retrieve a potion bomb.

Right on time, a duo of demons stepped out of the hangar door, their eyes bright and black in the darkness. They stared at us in shock for the briefest moment, as if they couldn’t believe they’d have to actually do their job as guards.

I hurled my potion bomb at the one on the right and nailed him in the middle of his broad chest. He was wearing some kind of strappy leather top that made him look like he should be modeling for a demon fetish calendar. The glass exploded against his gray skin, spraying him with brilliant green liquid. He shrieked and collapsed backward, hitting the ground with a thud.

Beside me, Seraphia raised her hands. Massive vines rose from the ground and wrapped around the other demon. As four more demons sprinted out of the hangar with their clubs drawn, she caught three in her vines, raising them up and squeezing the life from them as they thrashed.

Quickly, I drew another potion bomb and hurled it at the remaining demon. As it sailed through the air, he hurled a blast of smoke at me.

I dove right, taking the hit to my legs. Pain sang up to my thighs as I slammed to the ground and rolled, but I looked up just in time to see my bomb hit him in the chest. It exploded brilliant green, and he went down with a crash.

Seraphia threw her demons aside, their limp bodies landing with a dull thud on the cement.

Together, we raced toward the interior of the hangar.

Ancient airplanes sat in the space, all of them looking like they hadn't been touched in a *long* time. The heavy weight of history hung around the hangar, and I couldn't believe that historians hadn't come to collect the planes.

Unfortunately, they were all I could see.

"Where the hell is the stone?" Seraphia asked, a frown in her voice.

"I have no idea. I can feel a bit of its magic, but I don't see it." There were also no more demons.

Shit.

Frantic, I raced through the hangar, looking into every nook and cranny that I could find. The witches wouldn't be able to hold the Maker forever, and once their spell died, he'd be too powerful to defeat. Staying one step ahead of him was my only hope of victory.

The hangar echoed with our footsteps. Soon, the rough sound of my breathing joined it. Panic began to grip me, darkness creeping in at the edge of my mind.

Chill out.

Ralph's voice echoed in my head, and I stopped abruptly.

Shit, he was right. I really did need to chill out.

Gasping, I leaned over and gripped my knees. He raced up and hugged my calf, bringing a blessed wave of calm to my mind. With his strength and some slow breathing exercises, I was able to pull my mind back from the shadows into which panic had driven it.

Seraphia appeared at my side. "I haven't found it, and I've searched everywhere."

I straightened. "We need to change our approach. If we can't see it, maybe I can feel it."

"Just tell me how to help."

I nodded and closed my eyes, breathing slowly and deeply. With Ralph still wrapped around my calf, my magic was a bit stronger. And the calmer my mind, the easier it was to sense the currents of magic that floated on the air.

Gradually, I began to get a feel for where they were stronger. It was like swimming and finding the warm spot in the water, just a little less gross. I followed them, walking slowly across the floor with my eyes closed and my arms outstretched. Ralph hung on tight, and I didn't shake him off, despite the fact that he weighed as much as a large dog. Eventually, the signature was strong enough that I stopped.

When I opened my eyes, I saw nothing.

Shit.

"Why'd you stop walking?" Seraphia asked.

"The magic is strongest right here, but"—I looked down—"the stone must be underground."

There wasn't a trapdoor that I could see, but magic could hide that.

I listened carefully with my new hearing and picked up the faintest sound of a heartbeat from below. I looked at Seraphia and whispered, "Definitely a trapdoor. I can hear a guard below. Probably several."

Quickly, I pulled a little vial of powder from my bag. It was similar to the one I liquefied and put in a spray bottle, but a little more convenient when the hidden object was on the ground and smaller.

"This will reveal the hidden latch." I sprinkled it on the ground and waited as it glittered in the dim light, its magic going to work. As the powder changed from silver to blue, a little latch revealed itself.

"Perfect." I knelt, then looped my fingers through the latch and looked up at Seraphia. "Ready?"

She nodded, her gaze determined.

I heaved the heavy trapdoor open, and chaos exploded.

Blasts of smoke shot from the ground. Seraphia dove, narrowly avoiding a hit, and I protected myself behind the trapdoor. Ralph crouched next to me.

Three demons charged out, their swords drawn and faces set in menacing lines.

Seraphia grabbed them with her vines and forced them into the air. The biggest demon raised his sword and slashed through the coiling vine, then landed in a crouch. I hurled a potion bomb, taking him out with a stunner that sent him right back through the trapdoor.

Shouts and clattering sounded from within. He must have hit another demon on his way down. Two for the price of one.

At my side, Seraphia kept her prey suspended with her vines, squeezing the life from them before throwing them aside.

“How’s it coming, there?” a voice asked from Seraphia’s comms charm—Carrow, from the sound of it.

“Getting close,” Seraphia said.

“Hurry. We’re holding off his demons, but the witches are losing strength.”

Shit. I raced to the trapdoor and looked down. Shadows moved below, demons on their way up.

Swiftly, I pulled a poison gas bomb from my pouch and chucked it onto the stairs, then darted back. “Hold your breath,” I warned Seraphia.

A yellow plume arose from the stairwell, and I heard the faint sound of bodies hitting the ground. I gave it a few seconds to let the mist dissipate, then moved toward the stairs.

I led the way into the darkness, climbing over the bodies that were beginning to disappear back to their underworlds.

The air was cool and grew colder as we descended. About two stories later, the stairs terminated in a large room that appeared to have been carved out of the earth itself. A short search would reveal if it had been made by the Maker or the humans who’d built this place nearly a century ago, but I didn’t have time for that.

The stone was waiting. It sat in the middle of the room, huge and ornately carved.

“I’ve got this,” Seraphia said. “You push it in, I’ll make sure it gets where it’s going.”

We’d all agreed I shouldn’t know that information, just in case the Maker could get inside my head. I doubted he could, but better safe than sorry. I nodded as she pulled a transport charm from her pocket and went to stand at one end of the stone. I positioned myself at the other end, ready to heave it into the charm. It was a good thing I had my improved strength, or we’d have needed more backup.

“Three, two, one.” She hurled the transport charm to the ground, and it exploded into a silver cloud. As I began to push, she used her vines to pull the stone toward the portal. Slowly, it disappeared inside.

I looked down at Ralph. “Go with her, just in case.”

But you—

“I’ve got plenty of backup, and I’m not going to lose my mind in the next twenty minutes.”

He nodded and went to join her.

Before disappearing into the portal, Seraphia looked back. “See you soon. Be careful.”

Finished, I turned and raced up the stairs, leaping over the bodies that had almost entirely disappeared. When I reached the hangar above, I transformed into my dire wolf form for the extra speed and strength.

Pain tore through me as I shifted, and I sprinted from the hangar and out into the cool night air. The sound of battle drew me back to the Maker. I passed the area where the Miami stone had been sitting, grateful to see that it was gone. Lachlan must have succeeded.

As I neared the fight, I caught sight of bodies littering the ground. Fortunately, they were all demons. Of the remaining fighters, there were fewer of our side than when I'd left, indicating that we'd had wounded who'd needed to be taken back to London. I prayed we hadn't lost anybody.

“Hurry!” Coraline screamed. “He's too strong for us. We're going to lose him!”



Eve

In the middle of the abandoned airfield, the witches looked pale and drawn, gripping each other's hands for strength as they chanted. Mac, Carrow, and Beatrix were covered with blood as they continued to fight the demons.

I spotted Quinn tearing the throat out of a big bastard, his golden coat splattered with demon blood. The Devil, Carrow's vampire mate, didn't look much better. His normally pristine clothing was covered in red, no doubt from the demons he'd killed.

"He's breaking out!" Mary yelled. "We need to go."

One of them would need to help make the portal that would get our troops out of there. If only two of the witches chanted the spell that held the Maker, would it be enough?

Maybe not.

I turned and raced toward him, ready to hold him off if he broke free. The glowing blue bars of his cage were already looking thinner and weaker, but the rage with which he beat at them hadn't diminished.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Beth break off from the group of witches and begin the chant that would enhance our transport charm.

Immediately, the bars of the Maker's cage grew even fainter. Victory flashed in his eyes as he threw magic at them, making the bars shake with a ferocity that sent a chill through me.

Lachlan appeared at my side. His dark fur was covered in blood, and I could see sections where his flesh showed through, wounded by blades or claws.

"Just delivered the stone," he said. "It's safe."

"Come on!" Beth shouted. "The portal is ready!"

Our troops began to sprint toward her. Lachlan and I stayed between them and the Maker, watching as he destroyed the cage that contained him.

"Can't hold it any longer!" Coraline shouted.

The cage that held the Maker winked out of existence.

Half our troops were still there, though.

I charged the Maker, determined to hold him back while they escaped. He hurled a massive blast in my direction, the magic vibrating the air as it flew toward me.

Lachlan threw himself in front of the blast, taking it full on.

"No!" Fear iced my skin. I wanted to stop to check on him, but there was no time.

The Maker was striding toward his collapsed body, a look of menace on his face. I charged him, leaping up to take him

down. My paws landed on his chest, and he slammed backward.

A growl rose in my throat as I went for his neck. He reached up, diverting my attack with his hands. I snapped and bit, landing a blow to his wrist that made him wince.

Just touching him sent a dark shudder through me. My magic seemed to reach out for his in some kind of strange, unhealthy way. Like they were connected, but through something vile.

“We’ve almost got everyone out!” Coraline’s voice filtered through the chaos as I grappled with the Maker, trying to keep him on the ground.

A quick glance showed that she was right. There was nearly no one left, and Lachlan was rising unsteadily to his feet. I just needed to hold the Maker off for a little longer.

With a great burst of strength, he threw me off him. I scrambled upright and lunged again. Though he managed to send one blast toward me, it was a smaller one. Still, the blow felt like a giant mallet to the gut. Gasping, I kept going, taking him back down to the ground.

He was strong, but I was stronger—not in magic, but in muscle. If I could just keep him distracted and on his back, he wouldn’t be able to use his greater power against me. He grunted and thrashed, his touch nauseating.

As we fought, it felt like I was growing more connected to him with every second. It was the most horrible, disgusting sensation, like tar seeping through my veins. Touching him was poison.

But there was a familiarity, too. A terrible one. We’d known each other in the past, as he’d said. That meant we’d

been enemies for over a millennium.

But now that I touched him, I could feel something else.

He wanted my power.

And he had a way to take it. Maybe I'd always known it, and the knowledge was locked away with the other memories of my past.

His original goal had been to turn the wolves mad so that they would worship him. Then they would help him with his final goal—taking my power.

“Ah, I see you've realized,” he hissed. “Your power will be mine.”

I growled, trying to sink my teeth into his throat. But memories kept distracting me, new knowledge barreling into my head. It was all I could do to keep him pinned.

He's going to take my crown.

And when he did, he'd absorb my power. And me.

My essence would become his, and I'd cease to exist. He'd have all the power I would have had, but he'd use it for terrible purposes.

Fear froze my veins.

I had to stop him.

“I'm gone!” Coraline's voice shocked me out of my trance just as the Maker hurled me off of him.

As the Maker rose to his feet, Lachlan burst forward, his powerful muscles carrying him through the air. He landed on the Maker with a heavy thud, then turned to me, his eyes screaming *Go!*

I turned and raced for the portal. He followed, leaving the Maker on the ground. The bastard would be up at any second, so we had to be fast.

Without a backward glance, I plowed into the portal. It hurled me through space and spat me out in the courtyard in front of my tower. Lachlan followed, and we spun around to make sure it closed before the Maker followed us.

It did.

Safe. Thank fates.

I transformed back to human alongside Lachlan. The courtyard was silent and empty, the moon our only companion. The portal had been designed to send everyone else to the stones to protect them in case the Maker followed. I had been sent elsewhere, since we still weren't sure what he was capable of where I was concerned. The last thing we needed was to save the stones and have him follow me right to them.

“Are you all right?” Worry echoed in Lachlan's voice. He strode to me, cupping my face and tilting it so that he could search my eyes. “Are you hurt?”

“I'm fine.” The concern in his voice made my heart race. He'd been terrified for me.

“Eve.” His voice sounded rough. “Seeing you in danger, it —”

“I know.” I felt it when I saw him in danger, too. Despite everything—curses and death prophecies and constantly fighting for my life—I couldn't help but reserve fifty percent of my mind for worrying about him.

I'd been able to control it until now. At least, I'd been able to tell myself I was controlling it. I couldn't even lie to myself any longer.

He was part of me.

I felt it like I felt the breath filling my lungs. Whatever happened, I had to be with him. Somehow.

“Eve.” He groaned, something tortured flashing in his eyes. He looked desperate to resist, to tear away and stalk off across the courtyard. To preserve himself and me.

Yet he couldn't.

I leaned up and kissed him, the stress of what we'd been through lowering my guard. He was impossible to resist.

Another groan tore from his throat, and he swept me closer, pressing my body flush against his. He kissed me like it would be the last time, with a desperation that made my head spin and my heart race.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back, not caring that this was a bad idea. Time raced and slowed simultaneously, sweeping me into a moment more incredible than any I'd ever experienced.

I felt like I was declaring my feelings without words, which was the only way I could. To say what I felt would be catastrophe. It would send me over the edge.

But the magic disappeared as quickly as it had come on, and darkness crashed into my mind. Feeling such strong emotions must have awakened the dark moon curse. It rushed to the front of my thoughts, turning them dangerous.

I gasped and pulled away.

“Eve, what is it?” Lachlan asked, gripping my arms.

I tore away, hissing at him. Actually *hissing*.

Stunned, I staggered back.

“Your eyes are black,” he said.

“I know,” I rasped, looking away from him. A murderous rage rose inside me when my gaze was on him, an insane feeling that I couldn’t fight.

I wanted to tear his throat out. I felt it like the deepest hunger, the most ravenous desire that I couldn’t resist.

Ralph.

He’d gone with the stone to help protect it, but I needed him now.

Ralph. Help.

I gripped my hair like a lunatic, hoping the pain would help settle my mind.

It didn’t.

Fortunately, Ralph arrived a moment later, Carrow in tow. He threw himself at my legs, grasping my right one tightly. My mind calmed the slightest bit—not enough to give me total control, but enough that I didn’t attack Lachlan.

“What’s wrong?” Carrow strode forward but stopped when her gaze met mine. “Your eyes.”

“Yeah.”

“Here.” She fumbled in her pocket and pulled out a tiny vial. “The witches gave me some more of the lucidity potion, but they said this is the last of it for a while.”

“It’s fine.” I yanked it from her grasp and threw it back, swallowing quickly. Blessed relief rushed through me, my mind calming immediately. I could think again, and I sagged, nearly dropping to the ground.

Lachlan wrapped an arm around my waist, keeping me standing, and I leaned gratefully into him. “Thank you.” I looked at Carrow. “The stones are safe?”

“Yes, and everyone is getting cleaned up after the battle. We’ll be ready for you to visit them after we’ve all rested a bit.”

“Perfect, thank you.” I wanted to see them now, but I knew it wasn’t an option. Because of the time zone difference in Miami, it was nearly morning here. We’d all been awake for far too long. They had to feel as shattered as I did. If the Maker could follow me directly there, we needed to be strong enough to fight him off. That meant allowing time to heal.

“I’ll walk you up,” Carrow said, giving me a look that said, *Unless you want Lachlan to?*

I definitely wanted Lachlan to, but it was a bad idea, so I just told her, “Thanks.”

Lachlan released me and watched us go. I gave him one last look as I headed into the tower, unable to stop thinking of the kiss. But there was too much on the line to be distracted by things like that.

“You okay?” Carrow asked as we climbed the stairs. Ralph toddled along behind us, unusually silent. Perhaps he was thinking about Cordelia like I was thinking about Lachlan.

“Yeah, fine. It’s just a lot.”

“Feeling any better about being the moon goddess?”

“Ha. As if.”

“You’re doing a great job,” Carrow said. “Really, you were meant for this.”

“Maybe.” I didn’t believe a word of it, but I just nodded. Fake it ’til you make it, right?

We reached my room, and Carrow said goodnight, heading toward her flat in the tower, where I was pretty sure the Devil of Darkvale waited for her.

I went to the window. Lachlan stood in the courtyard with about a dozen shifters, many of whom I didn’t recognize. More bodyguards for me, probably hired this time, since most of his pack had gone to fight the Maker and were now recovering.

I stepped backward and sat heavily on the bed.

Shit.

I buried my head in my hands. People were putting so much effort into me. So much faith.

How could I possibly be worth it?

Something small and heavy landed in my lap.

I removed my hands to look down and spotted the chocolate bar that Ralph had delivered. He was already across the room, heaving himself up into the chair where he slept.

“Thanks, pal.”

You looked pathetic.

“Thanks for that, too.” I didn’t take offense—I was sure he was right. Instead, I unwrapped the bar and flopped back on the bed, shoving the chocolate in my mouth as I stared up at the ceiling.

More like the goddess of chocolate bars, Ralph muttered.

“Definitely feel more qualified for that.” I finished the bar and rolled over to go to sleep, not even bothering to take my

boots off.



Eve

Late the next morning, I met Mac and Lachlan in the courtyard of my tower. Lachlan had brought a sack full of sausage rolls from the bakery down the way, and I ate six of them.

“Thanks,” I said, polishing off the last of my half dozen.

He nodded.

“I wish I could do that,” Mac said enviously, killing her third roll.

“What, and not gain weight?” I asked.

“Nah, I’m not worried about that. I just get full. But I’d definitely murder three more of these if I could.”

“Ha.” I’d seen her try to eat an extra-large pizza by herself before, but her enthusiasm always outpaced her stomach, and she ended up moaning on the floor.

Between that and their love of explosives, she and Ralph had a lot in common.

Carrow came out of the tower toward us, completing our group. “Everyone else is already there. Beatrix and Seraphia, Quinn and the Devil.”

“So are my shifters,” Lachlan said.

“Great. Thank you.”

Lachlan deployed the transport charm, and the four of us headed through. The ether sucked me in and spun me through space, spitting me out in a darkened forest where the moonlight filtered faintly through the trees. There was a chill to the air that suggested we were somewhere in the northern hemisphere. Given that it was dark, I figured America.

“We’re near Magic Side,” Lachlan said. “In some woods owned by the local pack.”

“Perfect.” We’d have backup, and it would allow me to have the moonlight in case I needed it. I was sure I would.

“This way.” He set off through the trees, and I followed, my friends at my side.

About five minutes later, I spotted Jaxson striding toward us with predatory grace. His build suggested savage power, but his movements were precise and controlled. He’d helped us get into that party, and now he was helping us with this. I’d owe him.

“It’s just over here,” he said as we neared.

“Thank you so much.”

He nodded, then turned and gestured for us to follow. He led us between trees that rustled in the faint breeze. I caught the scents of other shifters—a *lot* of them.

Soon, I saw the line of figures—dozens of them making a circle, each standing about five feet from their neighbors, facing outward. Pale white magic arced between them, forming a barrier of some kind.

They were guarding the stones, I realized.

As we neared the biggest shifter, he inclined his head at Jaxson. Jaxson nodded back, and the man stepped aside to

allow us through. I felt the magic spark across my skin as I passed through the barrier.

Once we'd all entered, the man stepped back into place. Magic fell around us like an iron wall, cutting off the outside world.

“Without Jaxson, we couldn't have gone through,” Carrow murmured.

It was powerful magic, and we were lucky he was helping us.

In the middle of the circle of people was a small clearing. The five Govan stones sat there, glowing under the moon.

I hurried up to them, feeling their magic pulse. A faint light arced among them, similar to the magic that connected all the shifters. Now that the stones were reunited, there was something different about them. Their magic connected with my soul, sending a shiver across my spine. Familiarity bloomed.

But how did I get them to reveal their secrets?

I walked around the stones in a circle, inspecting them. Instinct led me to one on the far side of the clearing. I'd already studied this one—it had come from the Glasgow museum. But there was new writing on the top, something I hadn't seen before.

I leaned over it to read it.

United under the Highland Moon.

Hmm. That was new. I walked to the next stone and read the message that had appeared at the top of it.

At the center of power.

All right. That was more info, but not enough. Instinct drew me to the Miami stone.

Among your brethren, you shall see.

Now we were getting somewhere. Next stone.

Mysteries of what you could be.

Crap. The last one had better be more explicit, because I had no idea what to do next. I reached the final stone and inspected it, but there was nothing written on it.

Shit.

But there *could* be something written that I just couldn't see. The stone had space for a message, waiting to be filled with writing. Moonlight was shining on the stone, just like it shone on the others.

So why hadn't the writing appeared?

Did I dare touch it? I frowned, chewing on my lip and wishing I had a candy bar to clear my head.

“What are you thinking?” Lachlan asked.

“I want to touch it, but I’m not sure if the Maker will show up. I’m pretty sure that was the trigger before. He always appeared afterward.”

“If you need to, go ahead. The barrier will hold.”

I drew in an unsteady breath, looking at the backs of the shifters who stood around us. In the distance, I caught sight of the shadowy figures of some women—witches or sorceresses, I had to guess, helping with whatever this spell was.

I nodded and reached out for the stone, then rested my fingertips on top of it. Magic sizzled beneath them. No writing appeared, but a thought flashed into my mind:

Glencarrough.

That was the center of power and the place that I could expect to find my brethren. I looked up at my friends. They watched me expectantly, and I said, “I think we need to take the stones to Glencarrough tonight.”



Eve

That night, we found ourselves at Glencarrough as the sun began to set. Lachlan had accompanied me, along with the entirety of the Shadow Guild and Lachlan's shifters. My troop of weirdos had never been to the headquarters of the Shifters' Council, as far as I knew, but it wasn't like I'd visited enough to be able to give them a tour. Ralph kept close by my side, but I could feel his desire to go off and find the kitchen.

"Chill out," I murmured. "I'll get you a takeaway when this is all over."

You'd better.

They got to see the courtyard, at least. It was a massive space surrounded by huge stone walls. A few oak trees dotted the courtyard, their trunks and roots breaking up through the cobblestones. The castle loomed across from the main gate, looking like a throwback to medieval times. I'd have thought we *were* actually back in time if it weren't for the cars parked in a row along the left wall.

Eleanor met us on the main steps. Her long green dress swept the stairs as she descended. I could feel her studying me intently and straightened my spine, sensing the silent support of my friends behind me.

I was potentially the most powerful ally Glencarrough could have, or the most dangerous enemy. If the curse overtook me—or even if I lost my power to the Maker—I could cause untold damage. I looked away briefly, hoping my eyes wouldn't turn black while I was talking to her. It felt like I was on the brink every second, and the last thing I needed was for my eyes to show her how on edge I was.

“Eve. Lachlan. The other alphas are here,” she said.

“They are?” Tension tightened my muscles. That was a lot of people to witness whatever this was going to be.

She nodded. “These are unusual circumstances. When you told us what was happening and the potential risks, I called them in.”

As much as the audience made me uncomfortable, I meant it when I said, “Good idea.”

Glencarrough's walls were strong, and it was protected by enchantments, but the Maker had proved resourceful and unusually powerful.

“The stones arrived just an hour ago. We'll move them outside when it grows dark.” Eleanor looked at the sky. “Which will be any moment now. I'll get started. You want them in the courtyard?”

“That'll do.”

“Would you like to come in?”

“I'm set out here.”

She nodded and turned away, striding up the stairs. I watched the door shut behind her.

All of the alphas were in there. Because of me.

I drew in a deep breath, trying to subtly shake out the tension in my muscles. If I weren't careful, I'd stiffen up like a fainting goat and fall over.

Lachlan reached for my hand and gripped it, squeezing comfortingly. I couldn't help but lean against his shoulder, even though I knew I shouldn't. The seer's prophecy still hung over my head—but did I have any choice in it?

What did it even mean if I *didn't* have a choice? I would succumb to our bond and then die? No other option?

The idea sent a rush of cold water over me. I didn't like that result any more than I liked the idea of never being with Lachlan.

Damned prophecies and curses. Sometimes I wished I were just a human accountant in London, where my biggest worry would be the cost of my flat.

Actually, hell, no. That would be awful.

“You doing okay?” Carrow's voice sounded from behind me.

I turned to smile at her. I knew it was a weak one, but it was better than nothing. “I'm fine. Just ready to get this over with.”

“Do you think the Maker will be able to see what's happening here?”

“I assume he'll be able to follow us somehow. It's part of his plan, and this whole situation was put into motion a thousand years ago.” *I'd* done that, a memory that was coming

back to me in bits and pieces. And the Maker had played a role—one that was bigger than I knew, I was starting to realize.

The doors to the castle opened, and the alphas began to file out. Their power filled the air, magical signatures competing for supremacy.

I straightened my spine and didn't look away from them. I might not feel worthy of being a goddess, but I wasn't going to let them know that. Anyway, I'd seen them all before and even taken responsibility for the problems shifters were facing now. This was nothing new.

The few alphas that I recognized nodded at me, and I nodded back, grateful to see some friendly faces. But most of them wore expressions of mild suspicion. Nothing outright terrible, but definitely confusion and lack of faith, as if to say, *Her?*

Carrow leaned close and whispered, "What crawled up their butts?"

"So it's not just me?"

She shook her head. "Nope. They're being a bunch of dicks right now. But you'll show them."

I sure hoped she was right.

Want me to tie their shoelaces together?

I looked down at Ralph, childishly tempted to say yes. "Thanks for the offer, but it's okay."

Well, I've got your back if you need me. Ralph clutched my leg, and I leaned into him, appreciating the support as I tried to stand up straighter. The alphas' doubt just gave me more determination, and I was going to cling to it.

As soon as they were all out, the stones began to arrive. Each one sat on a wooden pallet carried by a team of four shifters. Nerves prickled my skin as I watched them carry the stones down into the middle of the courtyard. By then, dark had fallen, and golden lamps glowed on the space, illuminating the courtyard and large trees within. A soft breeze drifted across the night, making it feel like a lovely evening for drinks at a rooftop bar or a stroll down the road.

That was something I wouldn't be doing anytime soon, however. Instead, I'd be facing down my destiny in front of a skeptical audience of old werewolves. Yippee.

I turned to trail after the stones, feeling the alphas do the same. Eleanor, who'd accompanied the stones, turned to me. "Where do you want them?"

"In a circle." I pointed to the stones in the order that they'd revealed their last message, asking the shifters to position them in a clockwise circle so that they touched end to end. I stayed in the middle as they set them down, Ralph still sticking by my side. The alphas surrounded me, along with my friends, and I felt all eyes on me.

Yep, this was rather different than making potions in the back of my shop. My life had really gone off the rails with this whole goddess thing.

As the last stone was put in place, magic sparked across my skin. Light began to shine from the stones. From *me*. When I looked down at my hands, they appeared to be glowing like the moon.

Holy fates.

I flipped my palm over to look at the little symbol there, which was glowing like the high beams on a Ferrari.

With a shuddery breath, I turned in a circle and looked at the stones. Beyond them, the alphas surrounded me. They'd positioned themselves in a perfect circle as well, each standing equidistant from the others.

Had they planned that, or was it instinct?

Whatever it was, they'd started to glow as well. I could feel their magic like it was my own. Lights sparked up from them, filling the sky.

My brethren.

That's what the stones had said. Apparently, the alphas needed to be here. I certainly hadn't been clever enough to invite them, but fate had taken over, anyway.

Fate had a hand in all of this, it was becoming clear.

As power vibrated through me, I could also feel the emptiness inside me.

You have yet to ascend. Your power is half what it could be, and it will destroy you. The Maker's words filled my head.

I shook them away. Though I believed the words, I couldn't focus on them. They might *be* true, but they didn't have to *remain* true. I'd find a way around that.

But I could feel him here—somewhere beyond the circle, watching. He was racing toward the crown as much as I was, but he was using me to get his clues. That gave me an advantage, and I just had to stay one step ahead of him.

The magic in the air increased until it was almost blinding. Most of it came from the stones and me, and it focused the glow toward the sky.

I looked up, feeling the power rush over me as the light coalesced to form shapes. In the inky blackness of the night

sky, an odd, jagged line formed. One part glowed brighter than the other, but I didn't recognize it.

"I know what that is." Lachlan's voice cut through my trance, and I looked at him across the tops of the stones. His face shone from the light, making him appear a god. "Should I say aloud, or is the Maker watching?"

"He could be." But thank fates Lachlan recognized the symbol, because I didn't. "Come inside the circle."

He climbed over the rocks to join me. As soon as he stepped inside the boundaries of the stones, I immediately felt more complete. *Everything* felt more complete, as if he was meant to be there.

"The Witches' Step," he whispered at my ear. "It's part of a mountain ridge in Ayrshire, and the peak is called the Witches' Step."

As soon as he said it, knowledge hit me. "We have to go there."

"Agreed. I feel it, too."

The glow died abruptly, as if the stones knew that I'd got the information I needed. Somehow, Lachlan had known it before I had.

Strange.

The magic seemed to have cast a trance over everyone, and as it faded, the alphas shook themselves. When they looked at me this time, there wasn't as much skepticism as there had been before.

In fact, there might even have been a tiny bit of awe on some of their faces.

I climbed out of the stones and approached Eleanor, speaking low so that the Maker couldn't overhear. Perhaps I was being crazy, but better safe than sorry. I just wished I knew what he was capable of.

"Is the alpha of Ayrshire here?" I asked.

She nodded and pointed to a man nearby. His gray hair was weathered but full. An aura of power and competence radiated from him, and I liked him immediately.

"Could you ask him to join me in the castle?"

She nodded. Though there was confusion on her face, she just turned and did as I asked.

I strode to my friends, who stood clustered in a circle by the stones. I was pretty sure the stones had given me all the information they could, but just in case, I said, "Will you please see that they get put somewhere safe?"

Carrow nodded. "On it."

As I walked by the stones, I caught sight of something I hadn't seen before. New writing on the fifth stone—the one that had been blank before.

The Witches' Step.

Huh. So the magic of the alphas and Glencarrough *had* changed the stones and given us a clue. Yet Lachlan had also recognized something that was so unclear to everyone else.

He'd joined me, and I turned to him. "How did you recognize that peak? It was almost indistinguishable as a mountain, much less *that* mountain."

"Honestly, I don't know. I'm not sure if I've ever even seen it. Somehow, I just *knew*."

A chill raced over my spine.

There was more here than I realized—more to do with Lachlan and with my past. From the weight of his gaze, he seemed to think so as well.

“We’ll figure it out,” he murmured.

Shortly after we arrived in the main entry hall, the alpha of Ayrshire joined us. He strode toward me and nodded in greeting. “I’m Ian.”

“Could we speak about the Witches’ Step?” I asked. “We’re not very familiar with it, and we need to visit.”

“Of course. There are no witches there, if that’s what you want to know.”

“Were there ever?”

He shrugged. “Not that I know of, and I’m fairly well versed in the history of the region.”

Damn. “We need to get up there as soon as possible. What’s the best way?”

“You’ll want to wait until morning to make the final ascent, but we can take you as far as the roads will go.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded to a big car parked with the others. “Meet us by that Range Rover when you’re ready to leave.”

“Sure thing.”

He left, joining several of the other alphas, who were huddled together, *definitely* gossiping about me. Was he going to tell them what I needed?

I looked up at Lachlan, who seemed to understand what I was worried about. “I’ll take care of it.”

He strode after Ian, and I went to thank Eleanor for setting this up.

A short while later, Lachlan, Carrow, and I met Ian at his car. “Are you sure you don’t want more backup?” Carrow asked. “I can come with you, if you want.”

“No, we’re good. I’m sure the Maker wants to keep me alive. For now, at least. He’s following us to the crown.”

She nodded, then looked at Lachlan. I knew she wondered why I’d chosen to bring him, but it was obvious he had to come, considering that he’d mysteriously recognized the mountain.

“Good luck, then,” she said. “Keep in touch.”

“Of course.”

She left, and we loaded into the car behind Ian. Ralph took the cargo area, sprawling out and immediately beginning to snore. Ian’s second, a woman named Gale, took the passenger seat, but the back was more than spacious enough for Lachlan and me. It was late at night, but we’d be able to sleep on the drive, thank fates. I seemed to be perpetually exhausted these days.

The roads twisted and turned away from Glencarrough, and I was soon asleep across from Lachlan. At some point, I drifted over to his side and rested against his shoulder. I was conscious enough to know it was a bad idea but too tired to care, and it just felt so good.

When the dream came, it almost seemed real. Lachlan and me, in a grove somewhere in Scotland. The trees were ancient and stunted, the moss a verdant and velvety green.

“I love you,” he said, his eyes full of such emotion that it made my heart ache.

“I love you, too, but you can’t do this. The price will be too steep.” Fear chilled my veins as I gripped his leather tunic.

We weren’t in the present, I realized. Lachlan looked like himself, but his clothing was of an ancient design. Viking, definitely. Tattoos wound around his neck, a fearsome, twisty design that appeared to be some kind of dragon or serpent. My own clothing wasn’t modern, either.

This wasn’t real.

But the feelings felt true—love and fear and desperation. Loss was coming. Great loss. This would be the last time I ever saw him, and it broke my heart.



Lachlan

Ian pulled the vehicle to a stop at the bank of the Firth of Clyde. The tiny ferry dock was empty at this late hour, the night silent. Ralph continued to snore softly in the cargo area, and shortly after we'd left Glencarrough, Eve had fallen asleep against my shoulder. If I could freeze this moment forever, I would.

"We're at the ferry to Arran," he said. "The next one will go in a few hours. Do you need to get there sooner?"

"Will this route have us to the start of the path at dawn?" I asked softly, not wanting to wake Eve.

Ian nodded. "Right as the sun comes up, if you don't encounter any delays. And you *don't* want to try to ascend in the dark."

I nodded. "This will be fine, then, thank you."

"Good. You can take this car. I've arranged pickup for us. Just let me know where you leave it."

"Thanks again."

Ian looked at Eve and murmured, “Is she really a goddess?”

I nodded.

He whistled low, then climbed out of the car, followed by Gale. The door slammed, and Eve jerked awake, gasping. “Where are we?”

I frowned at the panic in her voice. “Are you all right?”

She drew in a shaky breath and dragged a hand through her hair. “Fine, fine. Just a weird dream. Are we at the mountain?”

“At the ferry.”

“Of course. It’s on the Isle of Arron, I forgot. Where are Ian and Gale?”

“They’ve left us the car and arranged their own transport home.”

“Kind of them.”

“They know you’re important.”

“Ha.”

“Don’t do that,” I said.

“Do what?”

“Diminish your accomplishments or capabilities.”

She sobered, staring at me. “You really believe in me, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. How could I not?”

“Hmm.” She climbed out of the car and went to stand at the front, reading the ferry schedule on the sign. It was a quiet terminal on the western coast, and no one was around except for a few sheep on the hill next to us.

Ralph woke and let himself out of the trunk, oddly efficient at popping it open from the inside. Now that I thought about it, he seemed the sort to sneak around by hitching rides in unknown vehicles.

I joined Eve and Ralph, staring at the timetable. “We’ve got three hours until the first ferry. That shouldn’t be too late. It’ll give us time to reach the path by dawn.”

“Sleep in the car?”

“That’ll do.” It would have to. The only building nearby was a small shop. Even if it had been open, the only thing we could have done would be to buy a packet of crisps and an Irn-Bru.

We took the front seats and reclined. Ralph grumbled but scrambled into the back seat, and he was asleep within seconds. Silence filled the air between Eve and me, but there was nothing to say. Nothing that I knew how to say, anyway.

Eve quickly dozed off, and though I hadn’t expected to sleep, I finally did, my exhaustion catching up with me.

When we woke, it was nearly time to load onto the ferry. I stopped in the shop to pick up coffee and breakfast, then returned to find Eve in the driver’s seat. Cars had gathered behind us, and I joined her.

She eyed the three bags full of pastries that I’d bought. “Think you got enough?”

“That depends on you.”

She laughed. “True, I’ve got a pretty impressive appetite these days. What did they have?”

“Chocolate croissants of questionable quality.”

“My favorite.” She grinned.

From the tone of her voice, she was only partially joking, and I found myself stupidly pleased that I'd got it right. Somehow, she'd made me care about things like this.

Finally, men in orange vests removed the barricade from the ramp that led to the boat, and we filed onto the flat platform.

The trip was uneventful, and we made it to the base of the Witches' Seat without trouble. The island was mountainous and rural, with houses scattered far back from the road and huge flocks of fluffy white sheep in the valleys. I navigated using the directions that Gale had written for us on the ride, telling Eve where to turn. As the sun rose, we neared our destination. Finally, we pulled the car over at the spot Ian had marked on the map.

Eve climbed out and looked at the steep path up the mountain, Ralph behind her. The path was surrounded on either side by gorse and heather, and the early morning breeze whipped across my face.

"I don't recognize it," she said. "Do you?"

"Not like I did last night."

She began to climb, and I followed. The morning air was cold as we ascended, making our way up the narrow path between the gorse bushes. It was only a path in the most generous sense, however, and it was clear people didn't come here often.

"Feel that?" Eve asked a moment later.

Magic shivered over my skin, and an almost overwhelming desire to turn around overcame me. "Protective charm."

"No wonder the path is so bad. It's pretty much nonexistent from here."

“We should shift.” It would be easier and faster as wolves.

“Good idea.” Magic swirled around her, the scent of her power rushing over me like a drug. A moment later, a massive white wolf stood in front of me, her blue eyes keen on my face.

I transformed, feeling the pain tear through my muscles before my senses heightened. The air smelled sweeter, the breeze warmer. Together, we began to climb, moving twice as fast as before.

Don't worry about me, just got shorter legs is all, Ralph said.

All the same, he managed to keep pace pretty well. Up and up we climbed, the sun rising and the clouds gathering on the horizon. Storms threatened the clear morning, but it felt like magic instead of weather. There was something strange about this place that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Eve seemed wary, too, her movements becoming twitchier and her reflexes faster as she climbed the mountain. A swooping bird had her ducking down, then shaking herself before continuing on.

The terrain became even less welcoming as we neared the summit. The wind whipped, and the gorse thinned, replaced with more rocks and larger boulders. I could finally make out the pointed rocks at the top—a craggy point shaped like great granite steps rising into the sky.

Something triggered in my mind—not a memory, but familiarity. Like I'd been here before. But I hadn't—not in this lifetime, at least.

I couldn't have had another life, could I?

Eve had been reincarnated. And the things I felt for her... they couldn't have grown so much in such a short time. It was as if they were taking me over, encompassing my entire mind and heart.

Finally, we reached a flatter part of the mountain just below the steps. It was as barren and austere as the rest of the ascent. I quickly transformed back to human, and Eve did likewise. The wind whipped her silver and pink hair back from her face, and I couldn't help but suck in a breath at her beauty and power.

“Do you recognize any of this?” She brushed her hair aside and spun in a circle to inspect the area around us.

“I don't, I—” The strangest sensation hit me. “Wait a moment.” I walked forward, heading to the base of the stone crags that formed the Witches' Steps. It was the only part of the mountain that extended further upward. The rest of the small plateau upon which we stood was smooth rock and boulders, scattered with smaller pebbles and one tiny, lonely tree that had scraped out an existence on the barren peak.

“What is it?” Eve followed me.

“There was once a house here. I don't know how I know, but I do.”

“I believe you.”

“Why?”

“I just do.”

I turned and looked around the rest of the space, waiting for something to strike me. A spot to the right of where I stood caught my eye, and I pointed to it. “There was a small barn. And three women lived here, long ago.”

“The witches.”

“I think so.”

“You definitely lived before, just like me.” She approached, stopping just in front of me. Shock flashed across her face, followed by hope. “We knew each other then. We must have.”

“You want that?”

“I—yes.” She looked away, clearly trying to gather her thoughts. “Because I care for you, and because it means I would be less alone in this.”

“I care for you, too. I lo—”

“Don’t say it.” She slapped a hand over my mouth, stopping the words that I found myself almost uttering. Surprise flashed through me. I’d been about to confess love.

Stupid.

She didn’t want to hear it. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to say it, not with everything facing us. Not with the risk to her. Now certainly wasn’t the time, when the Maker could possibly be watching us.

“Yes, I think I lived before. It’s the only explanation.” I turned away. “I’m going to keep looking for clues.”

“Good idea.”

I stepped back and searched the area. The stone steps called to me, and I began to climb. Each one was at least ten feet tall, and I had to find tiny handholds to ascend. Eve followed, skillfully scaling the stone behind me. Ralph, who’d been so silent for most of the journey, even managed to keep up without trouble.

As we neared the top, magic began to spark in the air. The feeling of familiarity grew, and I strained my mind, trying to remember anything from my previous life. Nothing came. But when I reached the very top step, which was just a narrow pinnacle of rock, I spotted a symbol carved in the stone.

Eve joined me as I knelt, running my fingertips over the grooves. “I carved this.”

“It must ignite a spell.” She touched it, then gasped and withdrew her hand. “There’s magic there that feels like you.”

I considered pricking my finger to see if a drop of blood would ignite the spell, but that felt too obvious. It often worked for enchantments such as these, but this required something different.

Slowly, I pressed my entire palm to the rock, covering the symbol completely. I tried to feed my power into it, something I had little experience doing. But I understood the theory, and eventually, magic sparked between my skin and the stone, swirling up my arm and into my mind.

Suddenly, I could recall flashes of the past—scenes that I might have witnessed a thousand years ago. The most riveting one was Eve, staring up at me as she told me that she loved me.

Longing like I’d never felt crashed into me.

How could we have been torn apart back then? And why was fate determined to repeat that once more?

Just then, Eve’s voice cut through my racing thoughts: “Lachlan, I think someone else is here.”



Eve

From the top of the Witches' Step, I stared down at the base, where three shadowy figures stood. They were all roughly middle aged, their clothing simple dresses of heavy fabric. Their faces were very lightly lined, but they were all beautiful in a similar way. Sisters, for sure. There was an ephemeral quality to their bodies, as if they weren't quite there.

“Are they the witches?” I murmured to Lachlan.

“They are. But I don't recognize them. I don't recognize much, actually.”

We made our way back down the stairs, Lachlan in the lead. I figured he should take point on this one, since he was the one with the memories of this place, vague though they were. Ralph disappeared, but I could feel him nearby. I could count on him to stay close.

We reached the bottom and stopped before them. Their power washed over me, ancient and fierce. Though they appeared unassuming, they were clearly capable of great magic.

The middle one frowned, looking us up and down. Her power appeared to be the strongest, but only by a slight margin. Her simple green dress was woven through with gold thread that formed beautiful, twisty designs. “So,” she said, “you have finally returned.”

The language that she spoke sounded ancient and unfamiliar, yet I somehow understood her words.

“We have returned,” Lachlan said to her. “But how do we know you?”

“You haven’t remembered yet?” she asked.

The woman to her left elbowed her. “Of course not, you nitwit. They might have remembered bits and pieces, but they don’t have their most important memories back. That’s our whole purpose for being here!”

Her sister scowled at her, then turned to us. “How long has it been?”

“A thousand years, roughly.”

She groaned. “I *thought* I felt old.” She gestured to herself. “I am Astrid. This is my sister, Hanne.” She pointed to the woman on her right. “And this is my other sister, Mette. We are the Witches of Strathclyde.”

“I’m Lachlan, and this is Eve, the moon goddess. What do we need to do to recover our memories?”

“We can’t return all of them to you. But we can return the ones that Lachlan saved.”

He’d saved them for me? Holy fates. This was so much bigger than I’d realized. “How did he save them?” I asked. “And why?”

“Because he loved you, of course. Desperately. He loved you enough to sacrifice his life to seal the magic that would bring you back. It was a plan between the two of you, you see. You faced insurmountable odds against your enemy, and this was Lachlan’s way of helping you.”

I felt the breath whoosh from my lungs, and my mind buzzed with shock. “I...had no idea.”

“Of course not,” Astrid said. “You don’t have your memories yet.”

“What don’t I remember?”

She sighed. “Quite a lot, in fact. In your first life as the moon goddess, you had a brother, the shadow god. Both of you were born of magic, not of a mother.”

Whoa. I’d known we were gods, but we’d been born of magic? Wild. “But we weren’t Norse gods, right? So much of the dire wolves’ history is tied to the Vikings who colonized Scotland, but I wasn’t a Norse god. Their moon god is Máni, and that’s definitely not me.”

“You were not he, that is true. Neither of you were Norse gods in the strictest sense. You and your brother were something new, a product of the culture that was born of the union between Vikings and Scots.”

“So what happened? Because there is *no* familial love between my brother and me. I don’t recognize him at all.”

“You lacked any fraternal bonds due to the nature of your creation. You’re more like two sides of a coin rather than a traditional sibling pair.”

“Thank fates.” I didn’t want to share *anything* with that monster. “What else?”

“In the beginning, neither of you was good or bad. But after you created the dire wolves with your magic by combining the light of the moon with the wolves of the forest, you proved yourself capable of creation. They were a new breed of werewolf—similar to the ones that existed, but different. More powerful.”

“Wow.” It all seemed so impossible that I could have created them. “I can’t believe I did that. I don’t remember it.”

“You will, eventually.”

“What happened next?”

“The shadow god grew jealous. He didn’t have your powers of creation, but he wanted to. He devised a plan to kill you and take your power.”

Bastard.

“You fought for years, and a product of that battle was the dark moon curse. He nearly succeeded in taking your magic—he got some of it—and the dark moon curse was the first thing he made. It was a product of both of you because he took your magic to make it, but it was his creation.”

“The Maker,” Lachlan said, sudden realization in his voice. “That’s why he’s called the Maker.”

“Yes.” Astrid nodded. “Her powers of creation are what he most coveted, but the thing he created was terrible. The dark moon curse haunted all werewolves for a thousand years, until you cured them.”

“It was a great sacrifice,” Mette said. “You took the curse onto yourself. I can see it inside you, struggling to break free.”

“It’s awful.” I could *feel* it, even now. “I have to fight it every minute. But I can cure it by killing the Maker, correct?”

“You are correct,” Astrid said. “You must now do what you failed to do in the past. Back then, the moon goddess fought a bitter battle against the shadow god. For years, no one thought he would defeat her.”

“Until he did.” I didn’t know how he’d done it, but I was certain I’d lost.

“He was willing to do things that you were not. As a result, it became inevitable that he would find victory and take your life, your power. But you knew that if he did, he’d be too strong. He always turned to darkness, and the wolves would turn with him. Not only would he be capable of creating

something new, but he would steal the souls of your progeny. He even began to accomplish that, drawing on the dire wolves' power and weakening them."

Horror filled me as I recalled the faces that had been haunting my dreams. It all made sense now. "I had to save them."

"And you did save many of them, but at great cost, and you haven't finished yet. There's more left for you to do."

"What do you mean?"

"You knew that you had to kill yourself before the shadow god could get you in order to keep him from taking your power, but of course you couldn't end the fight there, with defeat in death. So you devised a plan with Lachlan that would allow you to be reincarnated."

"Both of us?" Eve asked. "We knew he would live again? And what about my wolves?"

"The plan was meant to save you and your wolves. You hoped that it would save Lachlan as well, but you didn't know for certain that it would. It was your only chance."

Shock, awe, and horror all flashed through me as I tried to imagine what she was saying. I looked at Lachlan but found only a calm expression on his face. Whether he remembered this, I couldn't tell, but I hoped he didn't regret it.

Astrid continued to speak. "Lachlan scarified his life for the magic that would ignite your reincarnation and bring you back. We were the only ones capable of performing that spell and also holding the secret of your past, but our magic required his death."

I reached for his hand and squeezed it, unable to help myself. I drew in an unsteady breath, looking at Lachlan. He'd

done all of that for me. I couldn't believe it.

“What about the Govan Stones?” I asked. “It took us a long time to find you.”

“They were the clues that you left yourself. You wanted to leave something permanent that wouldn't be destroyed, and they suited the job. They were also something that only you could interpret, because you knew that when you returned, so would the Maker. He still wants your power, but you wanted a way to stay one step ahead of him. He'll stop at nothing to defeat you this time.”

“When will I remember all of this?” I asked, hating that I could only recall tiny bits. “I want to remember.”

“We've just told you what happened.” Confusion flashed on her face. “What more do you want?”

“But I want to *feel* it.” Did Lachlan?

“You will when you find the right catalyst.”

The vagueness of her answer was a disappointment. But what about my wolves? Their faces still haunted my mind and heart. “How do I bring my wolves back? You said I'm not done yet, and you're part of the clues I left myself.”

Astrid raised her hand and approached me. “I can't tell you, but I can show you.”



Lachlan

I watched as the witches approached Eve. She waited patiently as they surrounded her, murmuring low spells under their voices. Magic popped and surged on the air, swirling around her in currents that lifted her silver and pink hair.

Her eyes flashed black as they worked, the dark moon curse trying to overtake her. They'd been darkening more since the witches had arrived, their news apparently such an emotional hit that she was having a harder time fighting off the madness.

A shiver of foreboding passed over me as I watched. I hadn't remembered any of what the witches had said, but I'd *felt* it—the desire to protect her, the willingness to sacrifice everything. The details of it all were still trapped too far away for me to access them, but I could understand why I'd done it. I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

How different had I been in the past?

Eve's eyes turned from pitch black to glowing white as the witches' spell reached a crescendo. She gasped and stepped

backward, nearly losing her balance. I caught her.

“The island,” she whispered. “We hid the island and saved their souls there. That’s what my death accomplished.”

“What island?” I asked.

Astrid touched my shoulder, her magic zipping inside of me. Suddenly, a vision of an austere island surrounded by gray waves flashed into my mind.

I remembered.

There was an island in the North Sea, situated between Scotland’s northern isles and Norway. It had been the first home of the dire wolves, and we’d hidden it with magic that had come at an incredible cost. I’d sacrificed my life to get the witches to create the resurrection spell and hold this information for us. Eve had sacrificed hers to save the souls of her wolves on the island she had hidden. She hadn’t managed to save all of them, but she’d saved many.

“We need to go there,” I said.

Eve nodded. “Immediately. We need to reincarnate them.” She looked at the witches. “That’s what I’m supposed to do, right? It’s the whole purpose of this?”

“It is. The next steps will be revealed to you when you’ve reached the island. I’ve unlocked your memory—you just need the catalyst. Go to the island and retrieve the vessel holding the souls, then continue on your way to find your crown. It will give you the power to reincarnate them.”

“Thank you.” Gratitude rang in Eve’s voice. “Thank you for everything.”

Astrid smiled. “Our work is done.”

“What will happen to you now?” Eve asked.

“We will return to our afterlife. It was nice to see Earth for a bit, but it’s better there.”

“Wait.” I reached out, stopping short before making contact with her shoulder. “There is a prophecy about Eve’s death coming as a result of our matehood. Is it true?” I knew it was true, deep in my heart. Our seer was never wrong. Still, I couldn’t help but ask, hope driving me forward.

“It is,” Astrid said. “But it’s not a curse like the dark moon curse. It’s balance. A result of you sacrificing your life for her.”

“I did that freely.” Panic rushed through me. “Fate can’t expect payment for that.”

“It is not payment, but balance. You sacrificed your life for hers in a spell over a thousand years ago. This was set in motion then. There is no going back.”

“So we never had a chance of fighting it?” Eve asked.

“No chance at all. This was determined in the past. It wasn’t something you could prevent in this lifetime.”

Panic made my heart race. “How long does she have?” Desperation tinged my words, and I was sure it was on my face. “How do I stop it?”

“You cannot,” Astrid said. “Fate rolls forward, whether we want it to or not.”

“That’s unacceptable.” Anger rumbled in my voice, and I tried to rein it in.

“It’s neither acceptable nor unacceptable. It just is.” Astrid turned, and her sisters followed her. “We will be going now.”

Before I could stop them, they disappeared.

Eve let out a shuddery breath beside me, and I turned to her. “I’ll find a way to stop it.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that right now.” Though her words were calm, her face was pale. “We have bigger concerns.”

I gripped her shoulders and pulled her toward me, stopping myself just shy of crushing her to my chest. “I can’t lose you.”

“You’ve barely had me,” she said. “You don’t remember the past, do you?”

I shook my head, grief filling me. “Shadows of memory, maybe. But what I’ve grown to feel for you in this lifetime is enough for me to know that I don’t want to live without you.”

“I can’t believe you sacrificed your life for me.” Her eyes were wide with surprise. “I can’t believe that you could love me so much.”

“How could you possibly be surprised? Of *course* I loved you like that. How could I not? If you were anything like the person you are today, it would have been impossible not to.”

“I—”

She was going to protest, I could tell, so I crushed my mouth to hers and kissed her. I’d planned to make it quick, just enough to silence her doubts. Instead, I fell into the kiss, unable to stop myself. She tasted so sweet and felt so good that it was impossible to resist her, and she was the one to end our contact.

“We’ll continue this later,” she said, her gaze lingering longingly on my face as her hands stroked the back of my neck. “As much as I want to finish this here, there are things we must do.”

“You’re right. The island.” It didn’t matter how desperate I was to hold her. There was something greater at stake here.

“Their souls pull at me. I can feel them, just on the other side.”

“You remember them?”

“Bits and pieces. I’ve had dreams of them. Visions. They come with an aching sense of loss, and now I know why.” She gestured between us. “But I want to finish this. Whatever *this* is. We need to figure it out.”

I’m afraid that fate might figure it out for us, I started to say, and we won’t like the results.

But I couldn’t say it. I had to believe we’d find a way around her death, or it would tear me apart inside. “Did the witches tell you what to do next?”

She nodded. “We need to go to the east coast of Unst, the northernmost island in Shetland. It’s the closest beach to the island that I hid with my death. I also hid an ancient navigation device on the beach at Unst a thousand years ago. It’s meant to help us find the island.”

“Then we travel by boat?”

She nodded. “We’ll need to arrange one, though. Can you check with the alpha in Shetland?”

“I’m sure she can arrange for us to borrow one.”

“Thank you.” She drew in a shuddery breath and ran her hands through her hair. “I can’t believe all of this.”

“I can. You’re special, Eve. The fact that you’re a reincarnated goddess who sacrificed herself to save hundreds of wolves doesn’t come as a shock to me.”

“Ha.” She rolled her eyes. “It does to me. I’m going to call my friends and let them know what’s going on.”

While she did that, I made arrangements with the alpha of Ayrshire to pick up the car he’d loaned us. Then I called the alpha of Shetland to arrange a boat on Unst. Fortunately, I had two transport charms left on me, and we could use one to get to Shetland.

When Eve finished her call, she turned to me. “Ready? Have you got a transport charm?”

I nodded and withdrew it from my pocket, then handed it to her.

“Thanks.” She held out her hand for mine, and I took it. “One, two, three.”

She hurled the transport charm on the ground. When the silver cloud burst upward, she stepped into it. I followed, feeling the ether sweep us up and spin us through space. It spat us out on the windy shore of Shetland. The sea was iron gray. Whitecaps tipped the waves that crashed on the beach. Cold salt air whipped across my face.

Eve winced. “It’s going to be a miserable ride across that ocean.”

I nodded. A gray sky rose above the waves, austere and foreboding. All we needed was a storm at sea to sink our boat. “Where is the navigation device?”

“Give me a moment.” She closed her eyes, and I felt her magic flare. “I just need to try to see it again. The vision was quite clear about what I should be looking for.”

I spun in a circle to inspect the area around us. We stood in a deep, rocky cove with cliffs rising in a half-moon shape

around us. Verdant green grass topped the edges of the cliff, with white sheep dotting the landscape above.

“This way.” Eve opened her eyes and began to walk. “I can feel something coming from this direction. We’re looking for a strange, tall rock formation. It sticks out from everything else.”

Together, we cut across the rough ground away from the sea, heading back toward the cliffs. Magic seemed to glow around Eve, stronger than before. It was almost as if getting close to her hidden island made her goddess power bloom.

We reached a part of the steep cliff that was slightly more gradual. For a short distance, the land sloped upward at an angle that was climbable—barely.

“We need to go up.” Eve began to scramble up the slick rock slope, grabbing onto outcroppings to keep her balance and muttering about the convenience of her missing fae wings.

I followed, sticking directly to the path she cut in case there was any magic she was feeling that I didn’t. The last thing I needed was to trip a booby trap she’d put in place a thousand years ago.

“We’re getting close, do you feel it?” she asked.

I nodded. “I can now. A slight protective charm.”

The signal grew stronger the farther we climbed, until I was filled with a deep desire to turn around and race back down the hillside. I pressed on, following her until we reached a tall, lumpy pillar of rock that jutted up from the slope.

“This is it.” Eve climbed around to the back of the pillar, which was about twice as thick as a person, then knelt down.

I followed her.

There was a larger boulder wedged against the base of the pillar, appearing to be stuck so solidly, it would never move. Eve gripped it and tried to pull it up, but it didn't budge. I tried as well, to no avail.

"Looks like we need a bit of magic." She pressed her hand flat to the stone, and her magic glowed from her palm. It was the hand that bore the moon tattoo, and as she kept it flush to the stone, it also began to glow. Finally, she grinned and picked up the stone. It came away easily, appearing to weigh nothing at all. I leaned over to see a dark hole carved into the cliff. A small metal device sat within, gleaming silver and bright.

"Grab it," she said.

I picked it up, feeling the spark of power against my palm. It was a complicated little tool, with different spindles and holes on its round surface, and I'd never seen anything quite like it. "How does it work?"

She put the stone back and took the device from me, holding it up to inspect it. "There are no moving parts, which is good." She closed her eyes tightly, clearly trying to remember something. "I think I vaguely recall holding it up to the moon. And some of these holes need to line up with certain stars."

She opened her eyes and traced the holes with her finger, stopping at the biggest one. "This must be the North Star. Most important for navigation."

"What's that tiny spindle there?" I pointed to one at the edge that jutted out.

She flipped the device over to inspect it. "There's a mountain carved here. I wonder if it's meant to point to land."

“Your guess is as good as mine. Better, actually, since you made it.”

“If only I could remember more.”

The worry in her voice tugged at me. “When we get to the island, something might be triggered. Try not to worry.”

“True, I’ve got plenty of other things to focus my worry on. Can you call about the boat?”

I nodded. “They should deliver it soon. The sun has set.”

She looked up at the sky. Because of our position on the east coast, we couldn’t see the glow of the sunset, but the sky was rapidly darkening. Fortunately, the clouds had begun to clear—a massive bit of luck, considering we needed the stars to navigate.

I called the alpha of Shetland to check on the boat and received directions to the small cove where we could find it. “She has a pack member delivering the boat to a nearby cove,” I told Eve. “We should be able to walk.”

“Will they drive?”

“Yes. She said he’s an accomplished pilot and knows the waters well.”

“Good, because those waves still look nasty. It won’t be fun in the dark.”

It wouldn’t, but it would hardly be the worst thing we’d faced. Together, we climbed down the steep hill and set off along the shore, heading toward the cove that should be on the other side of the rocks ahead.

We walked in silence, and I couldn’t help but try to remember the past that we’d had together. There were faint

snippets of memory, but not much beyond images of her face or feelings that made my heart twist.

We reached the rocks and climbed over the boulders, sticking to a path that kept us away from the crashing waves. On the other side, we found another cove, much smaller than the first.

A wooden fishing boat had been pulled up onto the rocky shore, and we hurried toward it. The grizzled old captain stood on the bow, his white beard whipping in the wind.

“Are you my cargo?” he shouted over the breeze.

“We are!” Eve stopped in front of the bow. “I’m Eve, and this is Lachlan. Thank you for coming.”

“Anything for my alpha. I’m Colm.” He looked over his shoulder and grimaced. “Though these waves are almost a bit much to ask.”

“If it weren’t an emergency, we wouldn’t,” she said.

The captain nodded, his expression understanding. “You can board on the port side.”

He walked over to meet us, and we climbed up a small rope ladder at the middle of the boat. When we were aboard, he pulled up the ladder and headed toward the small wooden pilothouse at the back. “Make yourself comfortable anywhere you like. It’s going to be a bumpy ride. Once we’re away from shore, you can tell me where we’re going.”

He waved a hand and muttered some words under his breath, and magic flared on the air. The boat lifted a few inches off the ground and retreated from the beach, landing smoothly on the waves.

It was the last smooth motion we felt. The waves began knocking us around like a toy as the boat headed out to sea.

As Colm piloted away from shore, Eve held up the navigational tool. The sky had darkened enough that the stars were beginning to appear. She squinted through the device, frowning.

Waves pounded the boat, and we braced ourselves against the railing. Eve was so focused on the device that a sudden surge nearly knocked her over. I reached for her waist and braced her.

“Thanks,” she said, still staring through the device she held over her face.

“Any luck?” I asked.

“I’ve got it lined up with the North Star, which is just visible, but nothing is happening. I’m going to try my magic.” A moment later, her magic swelled on the air, so powerful that it forced me to step backward.

“Whoa,” she said.

“Do you feel that?”

She nodded. “Maybe it’s because we’re closer to the island, but I definitely feel stronger.” She raised the hand with the moon-shaped marking, which was glowing brightly. “Let me try something.”

She held the navigational tool with her other hand, positioning it toward the stars, then held her glowing palm behind it.

Immediately, light shot through the holes on the device and projected brilliant spots on the night sky. They appeared like large, fuzzy white stars, far closer than all the others.

“That’s amazing,” I murmured.

The captain leaned out of the pilothouse and shouted across the wind. “Do I need to follow those to the island?”

“Just a moment.” Eve adjusted the device, and glowing lines began to connect the dots. The image was so clear on the inky blackness above that it should have been impossible, but her magic could make anything happen. The lines and dots seemed to point in a direction away from the shore, toward Norway. Waves kept pounding the boat, and even though the lines on the sky bounced around a bit, it was clear which direction we should go.

“Take this heading and follow it,” Eve shouted.

“Aye.” The captain returned to the pilothouse for a moment to take the heading, then stuck his head back out the door. “I’ve got it.”

Eve lowered the device and looked at me. “That was crazy.”

“A museum would certainly be interested in that little thing.”

She nodded. “Probably not going to give it to them, though. Don’t want the attention.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“How long do we follow this heading?” the captain shouted.

Eve frowned and looked up through the device again, using her hand to shine light through it. Everything looked the same to me, and she looked just as confused. She lowered the device and shouted back at the pilot. “Not sure. Just keep going, and I’ll let you know.”

He frowned but kept his hands on the wheel. Salty sea air whipped past us as waves jostled the boat. Eve gripped the railing and stared out at the dark night, her brow creased in concentration.

Twenty minutes later, she gasped. "I feel something."

"We're close?"

"I think so." She drew in a shuddery breath and squinted. "There, up ahead. Do you see an island?"

The stars and moon didn't provide much light, but there was just enough to illuminate the shadows. "I do."

Eve turned back to the captain. "Island up ahead. Do you see it?"

He squinted through the glass, then leaned out of the door to look. "According to all my charts, there shouldn't be an island there. But I do see it. Looks like bad news, though."



Eve

The captain wasn't wrong. The island *did* look like bad news. The ground sloped upward slowly to form a pointed hill—almost a mountain, but not quite. Though the night was dark, foreboding shadows seemed to hover around the land.

I shivered.

Something about them made the madness beat at the edges of my mind, trying to break through the lucidity potion that the witches had given me. Pain flared in my head, and I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to focus on the ache instead of the call to madness.

“What now, lass?” the captain shouted, looking at me like I was crazy. I had no idea how long I'd just been standing here, trying to fight off the curse.

“Keep going!” I called to the captain.

He grumbled, a sound audible even over the wind and waves, but kept the boat directed toward the shore.

It was so dark out that we shouldn't have been able to see shadows. They had to be magical. As we neared, the shadows

seemed to part. Right after we passed them, my mind felt a bit clearer, the curse further away. The place didn't seem quite so terrible now.

“The shadows must be part of the spell I used to hide the island.” I turned back to the captain. “You're sure you've never seen this island before?”

“Lass, this island doesn't exist on a single chart made in the history of man. I've seen them all, so I would know.”

I turned back to the island, trying to feel the Maker's presence. Had he already followed me here? How quick was he?

As we neared the shore, the island seemed to pull at me. I stared at the rocky beach and sloping hill, feeling like I was looking at the face of a lost loved one, familiar and beloved. Joy surged through me.

Faster.

I wanted to shout it at the captain but resisted. The last thing a boat captain would want to do was speed up as he got closer to shore, and we'd be there soon enough.

Excitement and fear raced through me as we neared. Memories seemed to be pushing in my mind, right at the shadowy edges but powerless to break through. Unable to help myself, I reached for Lachlan's hand and gripped it.

When the hull scraped against the rocks of the shore, I released his hand and jumped over the side of the boat, landing hard on the beach. In my excitement, I didn't have my usual grace, but it didn't matter.

I was here.

I fell to my knees on the rocks, picking up some of the smaller pebbles in my hands. They felt familiar, as if I'd carried them with me in my pocket for a thousand years, pulling them out whenever I wanted something to distract myself.

The salty breeze smelled like home, with undercurrents of grass and heather that made my head spin. Memories began to push to the front of my mind, forcing themselves in.

Lachlan.

My first life.

My wolves.

My fight with the shadow god.

The thought of him made me shudder, so I focused on the others. In a flash, my mind was sent back in time. Whether the boat was still there, I had no idea. Even Lachlan was gone. It was just me, alone on this island with my memories. *In* my memories.

I no longer knelt on the beach, but stood on it. A deep blue dress whipped around my legs, and the wind tore my hair back from my face. Grief ripped my heart in two.

Lachlan.

He was gone. I could sense that he was dead, and it felt like there was a hole in my soul. I'd last seen him two days ago, when we'd devised this plan under the moonlight. The shadow god had won. He'd taken nearly all my power, and as soon as he caught me, my death would be inevitable.

Worse, if he took me, he'd also take my wolves. He'd already started to steal their power, weakening them nearly to the point of death. I couldn't let him finish the job.

Determination cut through the grief, dulling the edges.

Lachlan and I had come up with the plan, and we'd parted two days ago to accomplish it. He'd gone to the Witches of Strathclyde, the most powerful of their kind in all of Scotland, to obtain the spell that would reincarnate us.

I prayed it would work.

If it didn't, that meant the last time I'd seen him had truly been the last, and the grief of the idea nearly made me collapse. Determined to press on, I drew in a steadying breath.

My wolves needed me. Lachlan's sacrifice had been for a truly noble reason. Now that I'd felt his death, it was time for me to do my part.

Tears rolled down my face as I clutched the simple stone box in my hand. I could feel the souls within, their warmth against my palms.

My creation.

My wolves.

Just a day ago, they had been alive in their dire wolf forms, their lives fading because of the shadow god's actions.

Now, they were souls in a stone vessel, waiting to be hidden until I could save them again.

My brother's dark magic seemed to surround me where I stood, pushing in on the island.

"You are forbidden from stepping on this land!" I screamed. I'd hidden it already, blocking the land from his access. All that was required was my death to seal the spell until I returned.

But I could still feel his rage. I'd led him on a game of cat and mouse for years, starting out cocky and brave. I'd been sure I could beat him, or if not, I could evade him. I'd been wrong. Over the years, he'd stolen my magic piece by piece, using dark spells that shouldn't exist.

And he'd almost succeeded. I could feel the last vestiges of power fading from my soul. Within days, he'd have it all.

Then he'd have my wolves.

I'd *never* let that happen. He'd turn them mad with the curse, stealing their joy and their loyalty. It would be a fate worse than death.

So I would die to save them.

And because Lachlan had helped, we would come back.

I prayed we would come back. I prayed *he* would come back, and my wolves as well.

I stood on the windy hilltop in the middle of my island. At my side sat a large stone box. Ornately carved with warriors and mountains, vines and flowers, it was the size and shape of a sarcophagus, large enough to fit my body and the small vessel that contained the souls of my wolves.

I gripped the side of the stone box tightly as tears fell from my eyes. I hated what I'd had to do to them. *Hated* it. But the shadow god had been stealing their life as he'd also been stealing mine. They'd been dying slowly, their magic sucked from them by that bastard that fate called my brother.

This was the only way to save them.

I fell to my knees and pressed my hand to the ground. My magic was weak, nearly gone, but I could still feel the moon. I used it to pull away the earth, digging a hole deep into the

earth. Once it was big enough, I used my power over gravity to pick up the stone sarcophagus and deposit it in the pit.

Fear shot through me, cold and bright.

I didn't want to die.

I especially didn't want to die like this, choking to death underground. The sarcophagus would make me mortal, and when the earth closed over me and I'd sucked the last of the oxygen from my prison, my life would fade away. But that death would seal the spell that would allow me to bring my wolves back, and I'd do anything to save them.

Carefully, I used my magic to lift the heavy stone lid of the burial vessel and prop it open against the dirt wall of the hole. With one last look at the moon, I climbed into the grave, my heart pounding so loudly that it nearly deafened me. When I reached the sarcophagus, I slipped inside. I hugged the smaller stone box to my chest as I lay down. Within, the souls of my wolves rested peacefully.

Please work.

I lay down and closed the sarcophagus, cutting out my beloved moonlight. Then I used the last of my power to fill dirt back over the hole.

As the air dwindled in my dark grave, my heart thundered and my mind raced.

Lachlan.

All I could think of was my beloved. I prayed that his death had been swifter and kinder—that he'd felt no pain as he'd sacrificed his life for us.

The fact that I hadn't been there would haunt me in the cold afterlife that awaited me. For this was a far greater risk

than true death. True death would have taken us to an afterlife where we might have been able to find each other, but then my wolves would have died—hundreds of them, suffering needlessly.

The spell that Lachlan had bought with his life would bring us back, but we'd spend a millennium waiting in the darkness, apart from each other for the first time in years.

I couldn't bear the pain of it.

A sob rose in my throat, and I sucked down the last of the air. Pain and panic exploded through me as I suffocated, and I —

“Eve! Eve!” Lachlan's panicked voice cut through my consciousnesses as strong hands shook my arms. “Wake up, Eve!”

I gasped, opening my eyes. Suddenly, I was back on the island, kneeling on the hard stones. The boat bobbed a few hundred yards offshore, the captain waiting for us on the bow. I was no longer buried, but back in my body in the present day.

I scrubbed the tears from my eyes, finally able to see him properly.

Lachlan.

Suddenly, I could remember it all. Our past. Our love. He was more familiar than ever to me, every inch of him beloved beyond reason.

“I remember,” I gasped. “And I love you. I can't not love you.”

“I remember, too.” He pulled me toward him and clutched me close. I burrowed into his warmth, breathing in his scent. If I'd thought my feelings were strong before, they were nothing

compared to how they were at that moment. They nearly overwhelmed me, the magic and pain of my memories giving our present a greater depth.

“Eve,” he murmured into my hair, “I love you. I can’t believe we found our way back to each other.”

I clutched him close, crying tears of joy. “We did. Because of you.”

“And because of you.” He pulled back and met my gaze. “I was but a small part of the equation.”

“Not true.” I pressed my lips to his, kissing him like it might be my last chance.

Screw the prophecy that foretold I would die for loving him. The witches were right. I *already* loved him. There was no going back from that. I had as much power to stop loving him as I did to walk to the moon. What would happen would happen—I could just live in this moment. In this kiss.

It was the most amazing kiss of my life, full of everything I’d ever felt for him and everything I felt now. Full of the pain of loss and the joy of being reunited.

He kissed me back, and I wanted to stay like that forever, wrapped in his embrace on the island I’d once called home.

But we couldn’t. The souls of my wolves called to me.

I pulled away from Lachlan, and he drew in a ragged breath.

“We need to find them,” I said.

He nodded. “Lead the way.”

I could feel them now, so clearly. They called to me, drawing me forward. I climbed up the beach and began to

ascend the hill. Cold, fresh wind whipped my hair back from my face. It might have been summer, but we were between Scotland and Norway, far into the North Atlantic.

Everything smelled and felt familiar as I climbed, even the dark shadow of the Maker as he hovered around the edges of my island. He'd found me. I could feel his greed and his anger spurring on the madness that stalked me. It was a connection to him that I loathed.

"You can't come here!" I shouted to the sky. "I saved it from you!"

The memory of suffocating in the coffin would haunt me forever. It had been a nasty spell that had protected this island and the souls of my wolves, but it had been worth it. Nothing good came cheaply, and that spell had given me a second chance to save them.

The moon gleamed overhead as we climbed, the stars helping to light our path. The faces of more of my wolves flashed in my mind's eye as my memories returned. Dire wolves in their animal forms running across these hills. Wolves in their human forms, having celebrations between the small houses they'd built on this island after leaving Norway. It had been a hard life, but a good one. And if I could succeed tonight, I'd see that they were reincarnated into an even better life.

Finally, we reached the top of the hill. I spun in a circle, taking in the barren landscape around me. There were hardly any trees on the island, but I could remember there being more, just like I could remember the houses. Though they were long gone now, their shadows remained.

I drew in a deep breath and looked down at the ground, feeling the pull of my wolves. "They're here."

“How far do we need to dig?”

“Pretty far. But I can do it.” I’d had trouble before, trying to move the dirt away from the Govan stones. But now that I was home, I could feel my magic even more. I wasn’t as strong as I would be when I finally found my crown, but I was stronger than I had been, and I was determined.

Damn, was I determined. After everything I’d gone through to get here—including dying—I wasn’t going to let a little dirt stand between me and what I wanted.

“Ralph, come here.”

My familiar appeared at my side, then clung to my leg. His magic calmed and strengthened me, and I reached deep into my soul, feeling the power pulse within me. The moon above gave me more strength, and my tie to this land made me feel more grounded.

Slowly, I began to pull the dirt out of the ground, creating a hole that looked just like the one from my vision. Deeper and deeper, I dug into the earth, until finally, I saw it.

The sarcophagus. The carved stone box was caked in old dirt, and it was easy to pull it from the earth.

Lachlan walked up to it, his face pale. “This is how you died.”

The memory made my stomach turn, but when I looked up at him, it was clear he felt much worse. Deep grooves cut through his forehead, and pain glimmered in his gaze.

“Oh, Eve.” He cupped my face and tilted it up so that he could look into my eyes. “I wish I could have taken this death for you.”

“It’s okay. You suffered for your part.” I kissed him, then pulled back. “Anyway, it was a long time ago, and there’s no time now for this. We need to keep moving.”

He nodded, turning to the sarcophagus. It was clear that the idea of what I’d gone through still tortured him, but he got himself back on task with the discipline he’d always shown.

I drew in an unsteady breath as I braced my hands against the stone lid and pushed. It was massively heavy, and Lachlan had to lend a hand. Together, we heaved the stone lid onto the ground. As it fell, I braced myself for the sight of my skeleton.

Please don’t have any squishy bits left.

A decayed spleen was the last thing I wanted to see right then.

When I opened my eyes, I was grateful to see that there was nothing left of me. No corpse or clothing, just the box containing the souls of my people. Perhaps my body had disappeared when I’d been reborn. Or maybe a thousand years was enough to decay the whole thing, though I had no idea. I didn’t care.

The most important thing was in there. The box.

With shaking hands, I reached for the small stone container and drew it out. It was a miniature replica of the larger sarcophagus where I’d lain, and the magic that pulsed around it felt like family. Like love.

They hadn’t been my children in a traditional sense, but I felt great responsibility toward them. I’d created them, and it was my job to see that they survived and thrived. I tried to open it, hoping I could just release the souls now.

But the lid was stuck tight.

“Damn it, I’m not strong enough.” I needed my crown and the last bits of my power it would give me.



Eve

“I need to find my crown,” I said. It had been part of the vision that had started this journey, bringing with it the knowledge that it would help return the last of my magic to me. “Then I can release the souls so they’ll be reincarnated.”

“Where is it?”

“A mountain.” I gripped the side of the sarcophagus tightly, fighting back the curse. Ralph appeared and pressed against my leg, his strength flowing into me. “I remember now. I was weaker in my first life because I hadn’t yet become worthy of my crown. I tried to find it at the heart of Sleeping Warrior Mountain—*my* mountain—but I wasn’t strong enough to reach it. Or worthy enough.” Sleeping Warrior Mountain was a range in Ayrshire that looked like the profile of a warrior lying on her back with her hands crossed over her chest.

“What about the Maker?” Lachlan asked.

Memories flooded back. “He had already got his crown. It made him stronger. That’s how he was strong enough to defeat me.”

“This time, he won’t be. How do we get to the mountain?”

“It’s close to the Witches’ Steps. They’re actually part of the range. It’s why they were able to help us. When I have my crown, I’ll be strong enough to release the souls of my wolves from the box so they can be reincarnated.”

“You need to rest first.”

I hated to do it, but he was right. Not only did I need to be strong enough to defeat the challenges that would face me while I tried to get to my crown, but we would also need my friends as backup. I’d tried to get the crown on my own last time, my hubris making me think I was strong enough alone.

I wasn’t, and I probably never would be. That was the point of being the moon goddess: I wasn’t alone. I was connected to everything that the light shone upon. As a dire wolf, I was a member of a pack. It didn’t matter that my pack was made up of a bunch of magical misfits instead of wolves—I still needed them. The idea that I would try to face the most difficult challenge of my life without them was absurd.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go back to Guild City and update everyone. Then we’ll go after my crown and end this once and for all.”

He nodded, clearly relieved that I’d chosen the path of reason, and pulled the last transport charm from his pocket.

“Ready to leave?” he asked. “I’ve let the captain know we have our own way back.”

I looked around the island, knowing that it would disappear once more when I left. Though it had the familiarity of a childhood home, it wasn’t *my* home. That was in Guild City. And once I reincarnated my wolves, they’d go on to live full lives elsewhere, finding their way back to their mates and

original families. But they wouldn't return here, to this nearly barren rock. They'd have to join the real world.

But it was time. I put the little box in the bag that I stored in the ether. The Maker couldn't access it there. "I'm ready."

Lachlan took my hand and gripped it tight, then threw the stone to the ground. We stepped into the silvery cloud and arrived in Guild City, and Ralph joined us a moment later. Clouds covered the moon here, but the streetlamps illuminated my guild tower, turning the roses a deep blood red.

"I'm going to alert Glencarrough about what's going on," Lachlan said. "Meet you inside later."

I nodded, then hurried in and found Carrow, Beatrix, and Mac sitting in the living room, deep in discussion. As soon as they saw me, they hopped up.

"Are you all right?" Mac demanded. "It's been ages."

"I'm fine." I held up the box to show them. "And do I have a story to tell you."

"What is that?" Carrow asked.

"The souls of the people I told you about. The ones from my dreams." I sat on the couch, exhausted, and began my tale.

They joined me, faces rapt as I told the story of my first life and how I'd discovered it. At some point, Lachlan joined us, but he stayed by the wall. When I finished, there was silence for a moment.

"So you can really bring them all back?" Mac asked.

"That's what's supposed to happen." I clutched the box. "They'll be reborn once I get my crown and am strong enough to open the box and release their souls. I might never meet

them because they'll be different people, but maybe I will. In the end, it doesn't matter, just as long as I can save them."

"Wow." Mac whistled low under her breath. "That's some responsibility."

"You're telling me." And the journey to the crown wouldn't be easy. "Will you guys come with me?"

"Duh." Carrow looked at me like I was insane, and Mac just rolled her eyes. "But first, you need to rest."

I nodded. "You're right. I'm too tired to face the Maker now, and we can guarantee he'll follow us to the crown. This is his best shot to steal my power."

"We won't let him," Mac said.

"Not a chance in hell," Beatrix added.

I thanked them and headed up to my room. I could hear Lachlan following me and didn't turn around to stop him. I *wanted* him to follow me. Ralph, however, did not. Clever raccoon. He'd been a huge help to me, but I wanted to talk to Lachlan alone without my candy thief familiar eavesdropping on our conversation.

Lachlan appeared in the doorway to my room. "I can leave, if you want."

"Not a chance in hell." I walked over to him, taking in his strong features and broad shoulders. It was nearly dark in my room, but there was just enough glow from the streetlamps outside that I could see the strong edge of his jaw and the fullness of his lips. The dark gleam of his eyes. "I can't believe we're together again. And that I can remember."

"Neither can I." He cupped my face and my waist, drawing me to him. "I knew there had to be more between us than just

the mate bond. I could feel it.”

“So could I.” The past was a distant memory for me, but at least I could feel it now. Those old emotions gave depth to the ones that I currently sensed. They were so strong that they threatened to drag the madness to the front of my mind. I could feel the dark moon curse pushing at the edges of my thoughts, trying to take over.

I focused on Lachlan, whose face filled my vision and whose scent filled my head. He grounded me, keeping me here with him instead of trapped with the madness.

“I love you, Eve. I did then, and I do now. I wanted to say it before, but—”

“I wouldn’t let you. It was stupid, but I was afraid.”

“I understand. But whatever the prophecy says is going to happen to you as a result of our love, I’m going to stop it.”

I wished that he could. His confidence almost made me believe it. Lachlan was the strongest person I knew, but no one was stronger than fate. And I believed what the Witches of Strathclyde had said—this fate had been put into motion a thousand years ago. I had no idea if it was possible to stop it, but right now, I didn’t want to think about it. The moment was too precious to tarnish with those worries.

So instead of dwelling on my fear of the future, I leaned up and kissed Lachlan. If I was damned if I did and damned if I didn’t, then I was going to be with him tonight.

He groaned low in his throat and pulled me to him, kissing me deeply. His touch brought back memories that swirled through my mind—us kissing in so many different places in the past. Under a waterfall, on the edge of a cliff, in a cave.

We'd stolen every minute we could, until there were no longer any minutes left to steal.

The thought nearly made me gasp with sadness, but I shoved it aside and focused on him. No matter what happened tomorrow, we had tonight.

He swept me up into his arms with skillful grace, then carried me to the bed. When he followed me down, I pulled him on top of me, welcoming the weight that I hadn't remembered I'd missed.

But oh, how I'd missed it. To have this last day where we remembered each other was more than I could have ever hoped.

Carefully, he removed my top and bra, pressing kisses to my shoulders and breasts. Trails of fire followed his lips, and I arched up as he reached my stomach.

"So beautiful," he murmured, unzipping my jeans and pulling them down.

He pressed a kiss to the front of my panties, making me cry out. When he pulled them down and pressed more hot kisses to my center, I sunk my hands into his hair and rode a wave of pleasure that carried me for an eternity.

As it tapered off, I tugged him up. "Please, Lachlan, I want to feel more of you."

He pulled off his shirt, revealing the broad planes of muscles that were now so familiar and beloved to me. I ran my palms over his chest and down the ridges of his stomach, reaching for the placket at the front of his jeans. As quickly as I could, I tugged down the zipper and took him into my hand.

He groaned, a low rasp that sent shivers over my skin and made my heart race. As I stroked him, he propped himself

over me on his elbows, his body shuddering with pleasure.

Finally, it was too much. I couldn't wait anymore. "Now, Lachlan."

He stripped off the rest of his clothes and moved over me, sinking into me with perfect grace. Pleasure overtook me, controlling my body as I found a rhythm that matched his. Time and space hadn't been able to keep us apart, and the beauty of it made tears spring to my eyes.

As the ecstasy coiled tight within me, I wrapped my legs around his waist and clutched him to me, never wanting to let him go.



Eve

The next morning, Lachlan and I woke tangled in each other's arms. We didn't talk of the night before because there was no need for words. What had been so difficult between us no longer was—except for the bone-deep knowledge that I would die today.

“Why do you have that look on your face?” he murmured.

I had a dream that the seer visited me.

In fact, I think she really had visited me, using some of her magic to make contact through my dreams. But I didn't say it. There was no need to confirm for him that the prophecy would come true. It was just depressing.

In the last twenty-four hours, I'd learned so much. There was far more at stake than I'd realized in the beginning—not just my life and the Maker's threat of growing so powerful that he could cause untold damage, but the lives of the dire wolves.

Not to mention the past with Lachlan. I didn't want to waste his sacrifice by failing now.

“Nothing,” I murmured. “Just thinking about our past. How happy and sad it was.”

He nodded, believing my story. It was mostly true, anyway. I *was* thinking about those things. “We should get up. Time to go.”

As much as I wanted to linger in bed all day, it wasn’t going to happen. I had important work to do, and it had waited far too long. Over a thousand years too long.

I gave him one last kiss, then climbed from the bed and took a quick shower. When I was finished, I dressed quickly and found Ralph in the kitchen. He’d created some kind of monstrosity of chocolate and eggs that made me grimace.

What? They complement each other perfectly.

“You’ve got no idea what you’re talking about,” I replied, but fretted to myself. Who would take care of Ralph when I was gone? Surely Carrow would, having a raccoon familiar of her own. Ralph and Cordelia had been sneaking off into corners lately, whispering to each other. I wasn’t sure if they were committing crimes or falling in love. Probably both.

I made you some.

“Um.”

Without chocolate, because you’re a heathen. He pointed to the pan on the stove, and I spotted a pile of scrambled eggs that nearly overflowed. *I made a dozen and a half, just like you like them. Some for Lachlan, too.*

I was pretty sure I could eat all eighteen, but I saved some for him anyway. What was love if not sharing half the eggs?

He joined us a minute later, and after eating, we rose to get started on the day.

We'd agreed that we would begin our ascent of the mountain at midafternoon, shortly before the moon was meant to rise. It would be stupid to attempt the greatest challenge of my life without the moon in the sky to provide me with extra power. Fortunately, it was going to rise early tonight—several hours before sunset.

Lachlan joined me as I spent the next hours crafting potion bombs for my friends and whoever accompanied us. Ours would be a dangerous journey, and making potions was the only thing I could think to do that would help us. Maybe our companions wouldn't need the bombs at all, but I needed something to do with my hands, and this made me feel useful.

“Can I help?” Lachlan asked.

I gave him sets of empty glass bombs and told him to fill them up with the potions I created. Together, we made a good team. I was able to make more bombs than I would have otherwise, and it just made me appreciate how much we'd worked together in our past life, and now in this one.

He was the perfect partner.

And it broke my heart that I might be leaving him soon. I squeezed my eyes shut and forced away the sad thought, focusing my attention on the work ahead. It kept my mind blessedly occupied, thank fates, because I couldn't allow those thoughts to drag me to madness with the curse.

When it was time to go, I handed off some of the packed bags of potions to Lachlan, and then we went down to the main sitting room. Ralph and Cordelia shared a chair by the fire, and I smiled at them. Carrow was already with them, and Mac and Beatrix came barreling in the door a moment later.

“Quinn's right behind us. So is Seraphia,” Beatrix said.

“Thank you.” I prayed my friends would be okay today. I didn’t mind risking my own life, but I hated to risk theirs.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mac said.

“You can read my mind without touching me now?”

“I can’t quite do that even with touching you. But I don’t need to be a psychic to tell that you’re worried about us. I know you.”

“Yeah, well, the Maker is dangerous.”

“So are we.”

I huffed a small laugh and handed out the bags of potion bombs that I’d brought down. I even gave Ralph and Cordelia two each, and the delight on their faces brought on another small laugh.

“Can I join?” A masculine voice sounded from the door, and I looked up to see Garreth. What was Lachlan’s brother doing here? “I’d like to help.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Garreth nodded and walked in. “I owe Eve, after all.”

“You don’t.” I’d saved him from the curse, but that didn’t mean he owed me. I didn’t want anyone to owe me for fixing something that was my responsibility in the first place.

But just the thought of the curse made pain stab through my head. I cried out and reached up to my temple, feeling the fuzzy thoughts that accompanied a bad bout.

Lachlan hurried to my side and gripped my shoulders. “You’re okay. It’ll pass.”

I clung to him, trying to breathe deeply as I felt my mind go in and out. The faces of those that I’d fought to save drifted

to the front of my thoughts, making agony rise in my chest.

I'll save you.

Fates, this was terrible.

Gasping, I looked up. "Are my eyes black?"

He nodded.

I looked at Carrow. "Have the witches dropped off another potion?"

"Yeah. I'll get it."

As she ran from the room, I worked on my breathing, trying to slow it as I focused on good things—how I felt about my dire wolves. My friends. Lachlan.

But those were strong emotions, too, and they just made the madness sink its claws in even deeper. A dark rage began to rise in my chest, and I clutched at it, digging my fingernails in over my heart, hoping that the pain would focus my mind.

It helped, but only a little. The nearly overwhelming rage still seethed within me, making me want to go on a rampage through the tower, destroying everyone I saw.

The thoughts were so strange and foreign that they made my stomach lurch. My soul rejected the idea of attacking my friends, so much so that I choked, nearly retching on Lachlan.

"Here!" Carrow raced into the room and shoved the potion into my hands.

I took it and gulped it down, sucking in a grateful breath as I felt the rage and fuzziness recede. "Thank you. That really helps."

"Your eyes are normal again," Lachlan said.

“Thank fates.” I turned to the others in the room. Quinn and Seraphia had arrived while I’d been having my attack, so everyone was here. “I think we should go before this wears off. The last one didn’t work as long as the first did.”

The others nodded, and Carrow drew two transport charms out of her pocket. Garreth nodded at us, then said, “I’ll transport with the others outside.”

“Others?” I asked.

“The pack, of course.”

I walked to the window and looked out at the massive group of people standing in our courtyard. “Holy fates.”

“You’re part of our pack,” Lachlan explained. “Even if you’ve got your own now.”

“Thank you.” My heart swelled. I recognized some of the people from my childhood, but others I’d never seen before. It appeared to be the entire population of the Guild City pack that was old enough to fight. There were even some alphas from the other packs here to support me. Wow. “Hopefully, the Maker will be more interested in me and won’t have his demon army.” In a perfect world, the shifters wouldn’t have to risk their lives at all.

“It’s fine if they’re there, we can handle them,” Lachlan said.

“Thank you.”

“Of course. I’ll go with you to the mountain, and then I’ll return to help establish a portal to the correct place.”

I nodded, then turned to Carrow. She handed me a transport charm and kept one for herself. “I’ll come with you, too, so I know how to bring the others back.”

I nodded and hurled the charm to the ground, then took their hands. Together, the three of us stepped into the portal. The ether sucked us in and spun us around, spitting us out partway up the ridge known as the Sleeping Warrior.

The late-afternoon sun gleamed brightly on the mountain above, far too cheery a scene for the task that awaited us. We were at the more barren part of the mountain, as high up as I dared take us. As I recalled, the area above was fraught with challenges meant to test my worthiness to reach the highest point of the mountain—the folded hands of the warrior that rested over her heart.

“Got it.” Carrow looked at Lachlan. “Shall we go back and lead the others here?”

He nodded and gave me one last quick, hard kiss before following her through another charm. I waited for the briefest moment alone on the mountainside before Ralph arrived, and together, we stared up at the peak.

Can't believe your crown is there.

“Were you not with me in my first life?” I asked. “I don't remember you.”

Nope. I'm a modern-day gift.

“A gift?”

I call it like I see it.

“I can't argue with you there.”

A moment later, people began to appear. Lachlan came through first, along with Garreth. They'd established a more permanent portal, and the shifters were able to walk through quickly. I had vague memories of dangerous challenges, and I didn't want them to face them if they didn't have to.

Once everyone had arrived, I climbed up on a small outcropping to address my army. “Thank you for coming. I can’t begin to tell you how much it means to me.”

There was a low murmur of sound, and I caught snippets of phrases like *of course* and *you’re pack*.

“There will be challenges ahead,” I said. “They’re meant to keep me from getting to the crown. I need to pass through them, but you don’t have to. As long as you follow as close as you safely can, you’ll be greatly appreciated backup in case the Maker brings more of his demon army.”

“Miserable bastard,” Mac muttered.

I cracked a smile, then turned to look up at the mountain. It was steep and somehow appeared even darker at the top.

One last time, I turned back to the crowd. “Thank you again, from the bottom of my heart.”

With murmurs and nods of agreement from the crowd, I turned to begin my ascent, looking toward the horizon when I felt the pull of the moon. The pale moon was beginning to rise in the blue sky, and I welcomed its comforting presence. Strength flowed into my soul, giving me an extra bounce to my step.

The wind rustled softly across the slope as we climbed the narrow, nearly non-existent path between boulders and rock outcroppings. We’d left the trees behind long ago, and eventually, even the grass faded away.

The mountain became so steep that it was nearly impossible to walk upright. Soon, I had to use my hands and knees. When the Maker’s dark magic cracked around us, I stumbled.

“He’s here.” I whirled around, searching for him.

Though the Maker himself was nowhere to be found, more than a hundred demons had appeared. They were all different species, with skin tones ranging from burnished orange to a dull, pale gray, and their magic lit the air as they began to hurl smoke bombs and other blasts of magic at us.

The shifters, who had nearly all transformed into their animal selves to make the journey easier, charged the demons. Throwing themselves between the horde and me, they provided me with a chance to keep going toward the top. Eleanor, the leader of the Shifters' Council, turned to me and jerked her head up the mountain, indicating that I should continue on.

I hated to leave them to the battle alone—just watching them charge the demons and take hits of smoke bombs was enough to twist my heart—but Lachlan grabbed my arm and pulled. “Come on,” he said. “This is what they signed up for. They knew their job was to fight the Maker’s army to give you a chance to get the crown. Let them do it.”

I drew in a ragged breath and nodded.

My own guild had stayed at my side, and Carrow met my gaze. “Do we stay and fight or accompany you?”

“Come with me,” I said, remembering the challenges from the past. I’d need their help to make it the last half-mile.

She nodded, and the five other members of the Shadow Guild followed me up. I led the way, with Lachlan bringing up the rear. Carrow, Mac, Beatrix, Seraphia, and Quinn stuck to the middle. As we climbed, I kept looking behind to watch the shifters in their fight. Every time one of them took a hit from a demon’s magic, it felt like my heart would tear in two.

“They’ll be all right,” Lachlan said.

“Yeah.” I clung to his words, desperately needing to believe them.

The path grew steeper and more dangerous as we progressed. When the earth began to break apart beneath my feet, my heart rocketed into my throat. I’d fallen into one of these crevasses last time, sustaining an injury that would have killed me had I been mortal.

Mac appeared at my side and looked into the crevasse. “Shit, there’s spikes down there.”

I spotted the all-too-familiar bits of rock that jutted up from below and grimaced. “The ground will keep splitting. We need to be careful.”

This crevasse was narrow enough to jump over, and we continued on. Every step of the way, I could feel the Maker’s presence. It was like an oil slick on the air, disgusting and foul.

“Why doesn’t he approach?” I muttered.

“Maybe he’s hoping this takes you out instead,” Mac said.

As if to agree with her, the earth rumbled ominously. Right in front of me, the ground broke open, the dark stone splitting in two. I lunged backward, but the crevasse had appeared too close to me, and I lost my balance, nearly tumbling into the deep pit.

Mac’s and Carrow’s strong hands grabbed my arms and yanked me back.

“Thanks,” I said, panting.

“Anytime,” Mac replied.

We kept going, narrowly avoiding three more sudden crevasses that threatened to swallow me up. One moment, the earth was solid beneath my feet; the next, it disappeared. Each

time, my friends saved me. It was as if the earth were designed to break away from beneath me when I appeared on top of it. The chasms opened so fast that I couldn't react quickly enough. By the time we made it past the fourth pit, my skin was sweaty and my heart pounding.

Thus, I was nearly unprepared when the first shadow beast appeared. The creature lunged up out of the ground in front of me, going for my throat with claws made of black glass. The rest of it was ephemeral as mist, but its grip was strong and fierce.

When its hands closed around my throat, I gasped, trying to grab its arms and drag it off me. Fear and doubt crashed into me, followed by massive feelings of unworthiness. It was like the monster could force my most terrible thoughts into my head at one hundred times the normal volume, and they sucked the strength from my body.

Beatrix happened to be closest to me, and she managed to get the creature around the waist and yank it off. She tossed it aside, and it disappeared into the air.

Behind me, Mac cried out. I spun around and spotted another of the shadowy monsters gripping her throat. She clawed at it, trying to get ahold of it to force it away, but she couldn't. I grabbed it by the waist and yanked it off, and the creature disappeared in a wisp of smoke.

More of the beasts materialized, each grabbing one of my friends. We soon realized that it was impossible to fight the demon clinging to you, but someone else could pull it off. By the time we'd each broken free of one of the monsters, we were all pale and shaky.

"Fates, that was terrible." Beatrix shoved her dark hair away from her face. "Like facing down my worst nightmares."

We continued on, climbing the mountain as the Maker's dark magic accompanied us. Surely he was waiting until I got my crown to attack and take my magic...unless he planned for me to reveal the location of the crown to him, and then he'd swoop down and take it away from me.

Didn't matter. I'd beat him.

Finally, I was able to spot the very top of the mountain. Up ahead, a steep cliff jutted toward the night sky. It was like the Witches' Steps, but a hundred times worse.

"It's up there," I said, staring at the peak. Full dark had fallen while we'd climbed, but there was just enough starlight to make out the details of the ascent.

It looked awful.



Eve

We reached the base of the wall that led toward my crown. I stared up at the foreboding peak, knowing this was the last part of my journey. If I'd had my wings, I could just fly up. But that wasn't the point. I had to prove myself by climbing the vertical ascent. I hadn't made it last time.

“Let's go,” Carrow said.

“No.” I shook my head. “You've done all you can, and I have to go alone. It's dangerous.”

“We can support you.”

I turned to her. “You already did. I wouldn't have made it past those shadow monsters without you. Last time, I didn't. I wasn't strong enough to fight my demons on my own.”

“Are you sure?” Her brow creased. “I hate to leave you.”

Behind her, each of my friends had an expression that mirrored hers.

“Thank you. But you should go and help the others against the demons. This part I have to do alone.”

She nodded, clearly torn, then gave me a hard hug and turned. The others did the same, until it was just Lachlan and me.

“You can’t follow,” I said.

“I’m not letting you do this without me.”

“Stay here. I promise this is where I need you to be.”

His brow furrowed. “Damn it, Eve, I won’t let you go alone.”

At the determination in his voice, fear shot through me. He would die up there—somehow, I could feel it deep in my soul. This part of the journey was my challenge, and it would kill anyone who attempted it that wasn’t me. Hell, it might even kill *me*.

“You *must* stay. I can feel that I have to go alone.” If I told him I feared for his life, he wouldn’t consider that a worthy reason to stay behind. I had to make him believe it was all about me. “It’s a challenge, Lachlan. This part, I must win on my own. You know I can do it, so trust me.”

Pain and worry flashed across his face, and his jaw tightened.

“Please.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

“Thank you.” I kissed him, hard and fast. This could be the last time I saw him. I had no idea when fate would take over, but it would be soon. I could feel the clock ticking down.

As soon as I got my crown, something big was going to happen. I desperately wanted to tell him that I loved him, but I wouldn’t be able to get the words out without tears. If that

happened, he would know something was up and might not let me go.

So I whirled around and raced to the base of the steep cliff. Ralph appeared beside me, staring up.

The magic keeps me from coming with you. He twisted his little hands, fretting. *I want to come with you.*

He was a good climber, and fates knew I would love to have him at my side, but it wasn't possible.

“I have to do this alone, Ralph. That's the point.”

Be careful.

“Of course. This mountain doesn't stand a chance against me. Now go help the shifters.” I ruffled his head, then began to climb. I could feel Lachlan's gaze on me as I ascended, hand over hand up the steep rock. It was like our ascent at the fjord in Norway, only ten times as bad because I didn't have a harness.

I drew on the moon for strength and courage. Even though I'd stashed the soul box in my bag in the ether, I could feel the souls of my wolves. They were with me, convincing me every step of the way that this was worth it. They overpowered my conviction that I was moving toward my death.

This was the only way to save them. The only way to defeat the Maker. And the only way to save myself. Even if my mortal body died, there was no way I could rest if I didn't save my wolves.

Soon, my muscles began to ache. Even the moon couldn't stop that, and as the wind whipped my hair back from my face, exhaustion crept over me. The higher I climbed, the colder the air grew—unnaturally so. It dropped below freezing within

minutes, a product of magic rather than nature. It froze my muscles until every movement was agony.

I gritted my teeth and kept going. If this damned mountain hoped to test my reserve, I would let it, because I could beat it. Nothing would stop me. I'd already made it so far, and I had so much to fight for. The misery of losing my wolves, of suffocating under the earth, drove me forward. Yet every terrible thing I'd ever lived through, every fear and moment of despair, pummeled my mind. If I just turned back, I would be okay...

No.

The mountain lied to me.

It was trying to trick me—to make me weak. I couldn't turn back. This was the only way.

Even though the rocks became so sharp that they cut my hands, I kept climbing. Up and up, with blood dripping down my arms and my muscles frozen to my bones, I kept going. I was more will than person, relentlessly driving onward.

With every miserable step upward, I could feel the Maker. He watched me, waiting.

I would beat that bastard, no matter what it took.

Finally, *finally*, I reached the top. With shaking, bloody arms, I dragged myself up over the highest part of the peak. It was flat up there, the wind howling past and making my eyes water. Muscles aching, I struggled upright and staggered forward, driving myself step by step toward the middle of the platform. The golden glow of a slender crown beckoned me forward.

It was a simple thing, made of a slender wire of gold with tiny silver circles that looked like moons. An empty spot

appeared where the white gem should sit. I'd found that under the tree, and now it was time to unite it with the crown. My hand shook as I reached for it, so weak that I could barely pick it up.

I am worthy.

Elation surged through me. Shaking, I removed the white gem from my bag in the ether and stuck it into the crown, then placed it on my head. Magic surged through me, illuminating me from the inside. It felt like the moon filled me with all of its energy, lighting my soul in a way that made me invincible.

Strength and magic flowed through my veins, healing the wounds and the damage from the journey. I rose to my feet, my skin glowing so brightly that I shone on the landscape around me. Below, I could see all the way to the fighters who battled the demons.

I felt like the moon.

Maybe I *was* the moon.

When I reached up to touch the crown that had filled me with such power, I found it gone. I had absorbed it into myself, making it one with me.

I was complete.

All I had to do now was open the box that contained the souls and release them. I should finally be strong enough. Worthy enough.

Heart pounding, I reached for the box.

But before I could take it out of my bag in the ether, a massive cloud of dark magic appeared in front of me, slamming into me with a force strong enough to shake my heart inside my rib cage. I crashed to the ground and skidded

across the top of the tall platform of rock, nearly blacking out from the pain. I barely managed to stop myself from going over the edge.

Aching, I opened my eyes.

Across from me, the Maker stood in the middle of the stone platform. He'd been waiting until I'd taken my crown to attack.

Bastard.

I staggered upright, every inch of me feeling like it had been put through a meat grinder.

"I tried to take it myself, you know." He strolled toward me. "I wanted to beat you to the crown. I even went to the effort of stealing the Govan stones. Then I realized that it was impossible. You'd protected everything too well. Well done, I didn't expect it of you."

I laughed, feeling the power rise within me. "Then you won't expect this, either."

I called upon the magic that filled me, feeling it glow bright as the moon. It filled me with such strength and power that I felt like I could move mountains or the sea. When I shot a blast of moonlight at him, it lifted me off my feet. The glow slammed into him, driving him off the huge pedestal of stone.

Hopeful, I raced toward the other side and stared down at where he fell.

It couldn't be that easy, could it?

When he appeared a moment later, standing right in front of me, I launched myself at him. My hands burned with a brilliant white light. I gripped him around the throat, and he shrieked, the pain making him shudder.

“You are but a shadow of me,” I said. “Weak and powerless.”

He slammed his palm into my chest, driving a shot of his dark magic into my soul. It blasted me off him, and I skidded against the ground, pain surging through me.

Rising to my feet was more difficult, but I managed it, sending a blast of moonlight toward him that knocked him on his ass. Back and forth, we traded blows, weakening each other but never winning. Our magics were opposites, and the fight was deadly.

When he disappeared, I nearly went to my knees in shock.

Where was he?

He'd just delivered a powerful blast of shadow magic to my midsection, making my stomach feel like it had been pulverized, but then he'd disappeared.

A plan.

He must have a terrible plan.

What if it succeeded?

I was beginning to doubt my ability to win. We were too equally matched. If he came back with something up his sleeve, he could take me out for good.

Fear iced every inch of my skin.

I couldn't let him do that before I released the souls. I needed to do it now, to take the opportunity while I had it.

Frantic, I dug into the bag I had stored in the ether and grabbed the box. It vibrated and glowed warmly against my palm, filling me with calm and determination. I sucked in a

deep breath and opened it, feeling the moonlight go wild inside me.

I no longer felt human or even earthly. Instead, I was part of the cosmos, infinite and eternal. As I watched tiny glowing lights escape into the sky, I breathed a sigh of relief. Love and hope filled me as I watched them float up toward the heavens.

They would find their way into new bodies, being born to live again. I might not be alive to see it, but that didn't matter. I'd saved them.

Hundreds of the lights escaped, taking only a few seconds to disappear into the night. When I was finally alone, the earth seemed to go silent.

Until the Maker's horrible voice sounded from behind me: "When I've taken your power, I will find every one of those souls and destroy them."

"You won't be able to." Confidence surged within me as I watched the soul lights disappear into the sky. "That was part of the spell I devised. *Nothing* you do to me—not even taking my power—can hurt them now. They will be forever hidden and protected from you." Triumph surged through me as I turned to face him.

When I spotted his arm around Lachlan's throat, I nearly went to my knees. "No!"

The Maker grinned evilly. "Come to me and complete the spell to give me your magic, and I'll let your shifter live."

This was why he'd disappeared. Yes, he'd given me the perfect opportunity to save my dire wolves, but he'd also got the ace in his hand by taking Lachlan.

Fear like I'd never known shot through me. In that moment, I knew one thing better than any other.

The Maker and I couldn't defeat each other, especially not as long as he had Lachlan in his grasp. And there was no way I could let the Maker get ahold of me and do his horrible spell. But I could save Lachlan and take the Maker with me into death.

Fate always won, and I was willing to let it have this victory if it meant I could save Lachlan.

Enraged, I threw a small blast of light at the Maker, just enough to shock him. The light slammed into his shoulder, hitting Lachlan as well. But it wouldn't hurt my beloved. My magic could never hurt him.

It was poison to the Maker, however.

He staggered backward, releasing his captive briefly. I charged, racing past Lachlan to throw myself at the Maker. I wrapped my arms and legs around his body, clinging to him like a monkey. His disgusting, shadowy magic burned into me, feeling like acid all over my skin. But he screamed as well, emitting agonized howls.

Our opposing magics were deadly to us. I had no idea what spell he'd planned to use to safely absorb my magic, and I was grateful I'd never know.

As I clung to him, I felt the life being driven from my body by his magic, but I could feel mine killing him as well. We were the two ingredients that created a bomb, and when the explosion went off, I felt it deep in my soul, tearing us both apart.

Lachlan's shout was the last thing I heard before I left the earth forever.



Eve

When I opened my eyes, I stared up at a blank sky of blue.

Blinking, I sat upright.

Where was I?

There was no longer any pain in my body, but there wasn't much else, either. I couldn't feel my limbs or my breath, couldn't smell or taste.

But I could see.

And as I spun in a circle to inspect the stark, stony landscape that I inhabited, I caught sight of the Maker. He lay on the ground about forty feet away from me, his figure still ephemeral and gray.

He'd never escaped his nature as the god of shadow. Not even in death.

I raised my hand and looked at my palm. It glowed with brilliant white light.

I still have my power.

Holy fates, I still had my power. If I was dead and still had my magic, then so did he. Which meant he could still wreak havoc.

Panic gave way to determination, and I sprinted toward him. I had to stop him. No matter what it took, I'd drive his magic away forever.

As I neared him, he sat up. A look of rage flashed across his face as he saw me, and I leapt on him, wrapping my arms around his throat and slamming him back onto the ground. His shadowy magic burned into me like fire, but I fought the pain, pinning him down as I forced my magic into him and driving away the shadows. He thrashed and punched, shooting pain into my body with every blow.

"I won't let you," I said. "*I won't let you.*" I repeated the words, an insane litany driven by fear and determination.

But it worked. My new magic, so powerful and bright, was able to drive the shadow magic from him. All around, power flowed through the air. I drew on it, forcing more of my magic into his body.

He tried to fight back, shooting jets of his shadow magic into my chest. Every blast felt like a hit from a train, but nothing could stop me. I used every ounce of moonlight I had to burn off the shadows of his power until he lay still beneath me.

Dead.

Truly dead.

Panting, I fell off of him and watched his body disappear. Pain still shot through every limb, whiting out my mind as I stared at the vastness above me.

I didn't know where I was, but I knew the Maker was no longer here with me. He was no longer anywhere, and that was what mattered.

And my mind was clear for the first time in days.

Elation shot through me. The curse was gone. I could no longer feel the fog of madness or the constant need to fight it off.

It's gone.

Muscles aching, I sat upright and rubbed the back of my neck.

Wait a second...how were my muscles aching? I'd felt the pain of his blows, but before that, I hadn't been able to feel my body at all.

Now I could?

Confused, I rose to my feet and looked around. I couldn't see anything but the vast stretch of rocky ground that surrounded me.

This was neither Norway nor Scotland. It wasn't anywhere I'd ever seen before.

Was I really dead?

"You are." The faint voice sounded from behind me, and I turned.

A figure stood before me, their body built of mist instead of flesh and bone. They had no gender that I could determine, but they didn't need one. They were pure power—good and bad, peace and war, love and hate.

"Who are you?" I asked.

“I am a creation of belief, just as you are. Just as all gods are.”

“You’re a god?”

The figure paused for a moment. “Perhaps. I am Knowledge. I was created by the beliefs of the same people who created you—the Vikings who blended with the people of Scotland. They did not create many new gods, but they did create us.”

“And the shadow god.”

Knowledge nodded. “Not all products of belief are good ones. Sometimes, belief creates terrible things. But you fixed that.”

“Have I destroyed him forever?”

The figure nodded. “You have. You burned off his dark magic so that he can never hurt anyone again.”

“What about me? My curse is gone, and I feel alive now.” A wry laugh escaped me. “Unless this is hell.”

“No, pain is reserved for the living. Or at least, it’s for those who can choose to live. You did die when you combined your power with the shadow god’s. Both of you died and were brought here, to my realm.”

I tried not to react to the fact that this realm was their home. It was so stark.

“Do not worry,” Knowledge said. “It isn’t always like this. It is a reflection of how you feel about this realm. You don’t want to be dead, and so it is appearing as an unpleasant, barren place.”

“Do I have a choice about being dead?”

“When you first arrived here, you didn’t. But it seems that your actions have given you a choice. Fate wants to honor you for your sacrifice and service in destroying the shadow god.”

I wanted to ask how this figure knew fate, but I was sure the answer would have to do with the fact that they were the embodiment of knowledge. Hell, they could probably read my mind.

“I can,” they said.

A startled laugh escaped me, and I felt almost crazy. I knew that all sorts of wild things were possible in the magical world, but I’d never imagined that this was possible. That I would have a second chance.

“You earned it,” Knowledge said. “And now, if you like, you can choose to return to your life.”

“Yes. Yes, I want to.” Hope flared within me. I could see Lachlan again. My guild. Maybe even my dire wolves one day. I would do anything for that.

“Then it will be so.” Knowledge swept a hand to the side, and the landscape changed.

I no longer stood in that barren place. Instead, I was on the tall pinnacle of rock where I’d died.

Lachlan knelt on the ground, his head tilted up to the sky and an expression of such grief on his face that it threatened to tear the heart from my chest.

“Lachlan!” I ran across the rock, going to my knees and plowing into him. Heart bursting, I wrapped my arms around his neck, and we fell to the ground.

He opened his eyes, shocked joy flashing within them. “You’re alive!” He cupped my cheeks. “*How?* I felt your

death.”

I rained kisses on his face, so overjoyed that I couldn't contain it. “I defeated the Maker, and they let me come back.”

“Who?”

“Fate.” Joy surged through me. I hadn't escaped the prophecy of my death, but I'd found a way around it. I'd found a way back to Lachlan. I kissed him again, so happy that I couldn't contain it. “The curse is gone, and the Maker is destroyed.”

He clutched me to him, his grip strong and his lips desperate as he rained kisses all over my face and neck. “I can't believe you've returned.”

Ralph appeared at our side. *You're back!*

The delight in his voice made me grin, but I didn't stop kissing Lachlan anywhere I could reach him.

Ew, get a room.

I laughed and hugged Lachlan tight, but I took my familiar's advice that it was time to quit. Quickly, I jumped to my feet and grabbed Lachlan's hand, yanking him upright. His expression of joy was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Somehow, it softened his features. I wanted to throw myself at him and cling to him for hours, reveling in the victory we had achieved.

But we had responsibilities first. “Come on, we need to find everyone else. The Maker's demons should be gone, too, but I need to know that everyone is okay.”

“Of course.” He pulled a transport charm from his pocket. “Let's use this. We could climb down, but we might die.”

“Yes. Definitely. I’m sure I only get one do-over, and I don’t want to waste it.”

Lachlan wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me toward him. He threw the transport charm to the ground, and we stepped inside.

The ether delivered us to a scene of chaos. The demons were gone, but our friends were scattered everywhere, helping each other to their feet and tending to the wounded.

Panicked, I raced through the crowd, taking stock of the injuries. I couldn’t bear it if people died on my behalf.

I soon found all of the members of my guild, injured but safe. But the wounded around them made my heart hurt. Everywhere I looked, there were injuries, broken bones and burns, cuts and horrible bruises...but I didn’t see any death.

Please, let there be no death.

“Eve!” Eleanor’s voice cut through the whipping wind, and I turned to her. Blood coated the side of her face, but her eyes glinted with determination, and her stride was powerful.

“Is everyone okay?” I asked. “Any deaths?”

She shook her head. “There were a few close calls, but we got everyone back from the brink in time.”

Relief rushed through me, gratitude so deep that it went straight to the bottom of my soul.

She neared me, then frowned in confusion, her gaze sweeping up and down my body. When she gasped and went to her knees, I reached for her, trying to pull her upright. “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

She raised her head, her face glowing with awe. “Eve, you are the wolf queen.”

I blinked at her. “What?”

“I can see it now, the way your magic shines around you. You’ve ascended.”

“I’m the moon goddess, not a queen.”

“One and the same. I can read your power as clearly as I can read any other shifter’s, and it is the greatest I’ve ever felt.”

“Well, get up. You don’t need to kneel to me.”

But all around, the other shifters were dropping to one knee. Shock raced through me, and I looked toward Lachlan. He smiled and lowered himself.

Holy fates, this was insane.

I spun in a circle, taking in all the wolves bowing. Even the alphas. Somehow, they could sense that I’d ascended. I’d absorbed the power of my crown into my body, but they could still feel my power the way wolves could sense the power of their alpha.

And I was the strongest of them all.

Holy fates, I *was* the wolf queen.

EPILOGUE



Eve

Ten Months Later

I drew in a bracing breath and reached for Lachlan's hand. He gripped mine tightly and smiled at me. "Ready?"

I nodded, grinning.

It had been ten months since the fight at the mountain, and life was far different than it had been. For one, I still had to get used to wolves inclining their heads respectfully whenever they passed me. I'd tried to get them to quit doing it, but they wouldn't. Even though I couldn't see a crown on my head, apparently, they could. Or at least they could sense it.

Fortunately, I wasn't a true queen in the sense that I had a kingdom and subjects. Thank fates for that. I would have hated the attention and bureaucracy.

This suited me much better. Everyone knew I was a badass and was nice to me without any of the baggage of having to rule a kingdom. Wolves didn't organize themselves that way, anyway.

Most importantly, the Maker was gone. The curse was banished. We were safe. Lachlan and I had been happy together for every single one of the days that had passed. Though we still lived in our own guild towers, we'd pretty much moved into each other's lives in every other sense.

My potion making business was even going well. I might be the moon goddess of the dire wolves, but there wasn't much work to do for that in the modern day. My job was basically over. I'd taken care of what I'd needed to do, and now I could just live.

But today was a very special day. I'd just got word that one of my dire wolves had been born.

After returning to Guild City following the fight, I'd tried to return to life as normal. But something kept tugging at me—the feeling that I wasn't alone. All around me, there was family, but I couldn't see them.

Until I'd realized they hadn't yet been born.

But they would be.

I'd put Ralph on the task of finding them. He could feel them just like I could, and he was better at sneaking into places and spying on people. The big day had finally arrived for some of them.

Anyway, I didn't want to be weird about it. They had their own lives to live, with their own families. One day, I'd probably meet them, but for now, they would be left alone with their families. For now, I just wanted a little peek.

This way! Ralph gestured for us to follow him into the London hospital.

“You aren't allowed in there, you ninny.”

Trust me, I know how to sneak around.

I couldn't even imagine the fit the hospital staff would have if they found a trash panda on their delivery ward. But there was no stopping Ralph. He was already through the doors.

"We'd better go, then." Lachlan tugged me forward, and I followed.

Together, we strode into the delivery ward like we knew exactly where we were going. And we sort of did. We weren't approved visitors, but Ralph had told me the room number, and I could feel him up ahead.

We passed busy doctors and nurses as we headed to room 502. As I neared it, I heard a baby crying.

I looked up at Lachlan, excitement nearly exploding out of me. Even from this distance, I could feel the dire wolf soul inside the baby.

When I reached the door—which was open, thank fates—I stopped briefly to look inside. Just a second, that was all I was allowing myself. I didn't want to disturb the new parents and their child.

As soon as I looked into the room, my gaze landed on the baby. Squalling and red-faced, it looked pissed as hell, but for the briefest moment, it stopped crying and looked at me. I grinned widely, then moved on down the hall, the memory of the baby's face emblazoned on my mind forever.

Lachlan caught up with me, and we joined Ralph outside again.

"Was it everything you hoped?" Lachlan asked.

“Yep.” Joy surged through me. I wanted to visit every new dire wolf baby, but I would resist. They needed time away from Nosy Nellies like me.

I had no idea what was going to happen for them in the future, but I hoped I’d be around to find out.

Lachlan took my hand and smiled at me. “What would you say to lunch?”

The invitation was so simple and perfect that I smiled and nodded. I could use a little bit of simple and perfect in my life, and Lachlan was just the one I wanted to spend it with.

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That’s it for Eve & Lachlan! If you enjoyed their story but haven’t read Carrow and The Devil’s, you can check out *Once Bitten* by [clicking here](#). Or [click here](#) to join my newsletter to find out more about new books and sales. You’ll also get two free novellas. The newest Shadow Guild adventure will be here in July 2021.



## **THANK YOU FOR READING!**

I hope you enjoyed reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. Reviews are *so* helpful to authors. I really appreciate all reviews, both positive and negative. If you want to leave one, you can do so at Amazon or GoodReads.

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Thank you to [Orina Kafe](#) for the beautiful cover art and Chris Sim for the guild crests.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hey there! I hope you enjoyed *Wolf Queen*. If you've read any of my other author's notes, you'll know that this is where I write about the history or mythology from the books. For *Wolf Queen*, I used quite a few historical tidbits from Scotland, but I modified them to suit the story.

The Govan Stones are the primary historical element that I used in *Wolf Queen*. They are a set of carved stones from roughly AD 900 - AD 1000 that were found near the Govan Old Parish Church in Glasgow, Scotland. Scholars believe that they were created to commemorate the rulers of the Kingdom of Strathclyde, one of the ancient kingdoms that rose to prominence after the Vikings invaded Scotland. The Kingdom of Strathclyde dominated south-west Scotland until the 12th century.

The most impressive of the stones are the five carved hogback stones (named for their shape, which resembles a hog's back) and the ornately carved sarcophagus. The carved hogback stones are particularly interesting because hogback stones have only been found in Scotland where Vikings settled alongside the native Picts. They are not found where Vikings had total rule. It is believed that their arched shape is meant to

represent Viking buildings. The five stones at Govan are the largest hogback stones ever found.

For the story, I moved the hogback stones to an island in Loch Lomond and the stone sarcophagus to an invented island off the north coast of Scotland. That wasn't the only thing I invented in the north, however. The trees that I describe as being on Orkney are no longer there in such great numbers. Though the islands are largely treeless today, that wasn't the case in the past.

Another real-life element that I used in the book was Sleeping Warrior Mountain. This is a mountain range in Ayrshire (the modern name for the region where the Kingdom of Strathclyde would have ruled) that looks like a warrior lying on their back. It is most convincingly viewed from the Isle of Bute. The Witches Steps are an element of the mountain. Honestly, this was the perfect type of inspiration for me—a remote mountain range with a set of romantic names.

The last real-life element that I used was Baldoon Airfield, also known as the former RAF Wigtown Airfield. It is an abandoned WWII airfield that still has many of the original elements, including control towers, hangars, and abandoned air raid shelters. There are no original WWII planes, however.

That's it for the historical and mythological elements of *Wolf Queen*. I hope you enjoyed Eve and Lachlan's journey—I know I did! Stay on the lookout for the next Shadow Guild series, which should be coming sometime in July 2021.

## **ABOUT LINSEY**

Before becoming a writer, Linsey Hall was a nautical archaeologist who studied shipwrecks from Hawaii and the Yukon to the UK and the Mediterranean. She credits fantasy and historical romances with her love of history and her career as an archaeologist. After a decade of tromping around the globe in search of old bits of stuff that people left lying about, she settled down and started penning her own romance novels. Her Dragon's Gift series draws upon her love of history and the paranormal elements that she can't help but include.

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