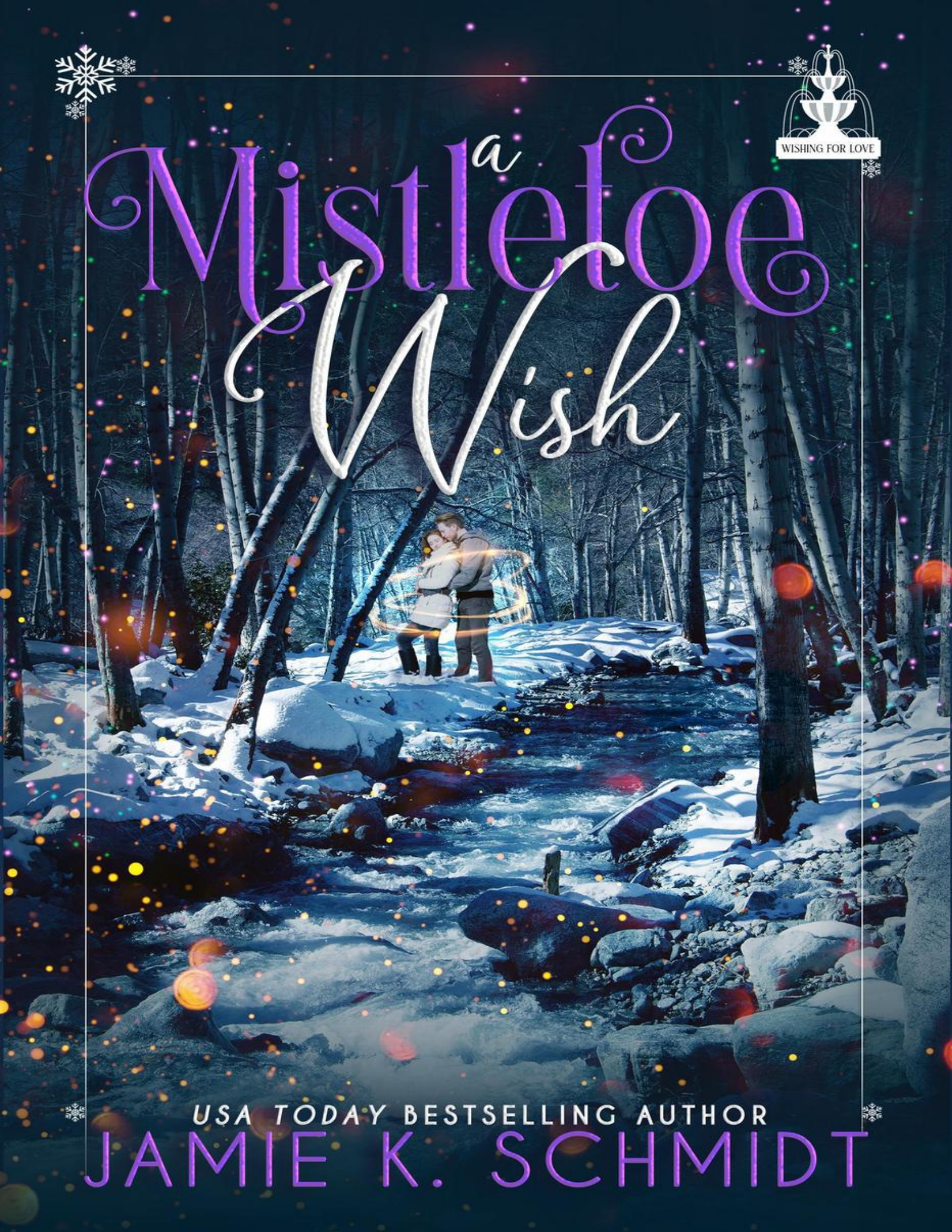




Mistletoe Wish



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CHAPTER ONE



Selena

It was a beautiful autumn day when Selena Moss was kicked out of her tribe. The elders had decreed that she would no longer be welcome among the ranks of their elite Fae warriors until she was curse-free.

“You may take three things,” the elder said. Her wrinkled face showed kindness despite the gravity of her decision.

Selena wanted to argue, to rage, to revert back to childhood and throw a tantrum on the dusty ground of the ancient tribunal. But any one of those things would shame her family further.

It wasn't fair. None of this was her fault.

“I choose Artegenos,” Selena said, amazed that her voice didn't quaver.

“Granted,” the elder said.

Artegenos was Selena's family's ancestral sword, forged with elven craftsmanship, a masterpiece of elegance and lethal precision. The slender, gleaming blade danced through the air in battle with an almost musical rhythm. It had saved her life on more than one occasion, and it contained the spirits of the Fae women of her lineage. Her mother stepped forward from the crowd and handed it to her. Selena resisted the urge to hug her goodbye. It was forbidden. She slipped the sword into her belt. Her mother hovered close with the scabbard, but Selena couldn't afford to ask for that as well.

“I choose the Map of Gates.” Selena wondered if she had gone too far by requesting this when the council withdrew and circled behind the dais where they had been seated at the hand-carved oaken table. Straining her ears, she

could only hear the brush of soft whispering as they spoke to each other in ancient Elvish.

The map was a treasured document of their tribe. It showed all the places in the mortal world where Fae artifacts had been left behind to grant boons to deserving pilgrims. Since Selena had been unable to find a way to reverse her curse in Fairy, it stood to reason that she might find the solution in the mortal world.

While waiting for the council's decision, Selena slid a glance at her sister, who had given her the idea to ask for the map. Fiona closed her eyes. The shunning had begun, and grief twisted Selena's guts.

Selena was being banished from the Faelands because she was cursed with bad luck. If she could find a cure, she would be allowed back into her tribe. But until she did, she was a danger to her friends and family.

When the curse first manifested on Selena's hundred and eighteenth birthday, it did so with harmless but annoying things, like milk curdling as she passed by or people near her tripping into a mud pile. But as she grew older, the effects had grown more dire. Just having her in the ranks could tank their army's chance of success in battle.

Not much was known about who cursed her or how her misfortune had come to be. Some said one of her mother's opponents had flung a death curse at her before she vanquished them, and Selena, as the eldest born, was doomed with it. Some said it had been Selena's own fault. Perhaps she had unearthed a dark sidhe during one of her explorations and had earned its wrath. Still, others said the unlucky instances had all just been unfortunate coincidences. Sadly, those voices were in the minority.

"Granted," the elder said reluctantly as the council returned to the table.

Selena let out a long breath of relief. If they had denied her request, she didn't have another way of searching for a cure.

“And your third thing?” another elder prompted, glaring at Selena's mother, who was standing too close to her.

Selena probably should ask for the scabbard. It had been similarly enchanted as the great sword Excalibur's scabbard had been in that it healed the wounds that the bearer took on in battle. Along with Arteenos, she would be safe in the mortal realm with both of them in her possession. And yet, she couldn't leave her family—perhaps for eternity—without protection.

“I choose a cutting of mistletoe from my family's estate.”

“What—?” her mother squawked and then immediately fell silent. Backpedaling into the crowd, her mother kept her head down.

If the elders were feeling capricious, they could sanction her mother for speaking out during the ceremony. But it seemed that Selena's request had also distracted them.

“Very well,” the elder said faintly and motioned to Selena's sister to go fetch it.

If Selena were unsuccessful in her quest, she would plant the mistletoe wherever she settled so that she would always have a reminder of home. She hoped it wouldn't come to that, but after twenty-five years, she was losing confidence that there was a way to end the curse.

Fiona returned quickly and handed Selena a craft-wrapped sprig. It was magicked to sprout wherever it was planted. Fiona also risked the ire of the elders by briefly clasping Selena's hand before she, too, faded into the crowd.

“Leave then, child of misfortune,” the elder intoned. “You do not exist for the Dawnstar tribe until you have rid yourself of the ill luck that surrounds

you.”

Selena bowed her head and remained that way until the crowd dispersed, and she was alone. As she walked out of the village, none of her tribe acknowledged her existence. It was as if she had become a ghost. Her parents wouldn't even catch her eye for one last farewell. Her battle siblings turned and busied themselves with other tasks as she walked by them. Selena walled away her feelings of hurt and misery. They wouldn't serve a purpose now. Still, they ached like a sore tooth. She would just have to live with this pain. There was no other choice.

Selena wondered if she should have chosen a bow and a quiver of arrows instead of the map and the mistletoe. Or maybe a canteen and a hunting knife would have been more practical. And yet, those were items that she could barter for or even make herself if given the right tools. She wouldn't go hungry or thirsty while she was in the Faelands, but the mortal lands were another matter. According to the map, she had a few weeks' walk to get to the nearest gate. She was confident she would find a solution before then.

Hopefully.

Over the following weeks, Selena was able to forage food from the wild plants that grew on the path to the gate. She sipped rainwater and the morning dew from the cuplike leaves of the many saplings of the connected Great Tree. At night, she cooked hearty root vegetables in her campfire that she started by striking her sword against a rock until the sparks lit the pine needles and other kindling sticks.

“I am not a common steel,” her sword said haughtily after several days of this treatment.

“Of course not, Artegenos,” Selena said soothingly. “But we need to warm ourselves by the fire.”

At her words, the fire jumped out of the carefully crafted pit she had dug and burned in a line towards the fragile sprouted saplings of the Great Tree.

“No, no, no,” Selena said, jumping up and stamping out the trail of flames before it could start a forest fire or, worse, kill the budding children of the Great Tree.

She needed to leave Fairy before her curse damned her to eternal banishment instead of this temporary one. She doused the fire and resigned herself to eating half-cooked potatoes and charred carrots that night. If she pushed on all day and all night tomorrow, she would make it to the mortal gate. There, she would have to find a job to support herself until she found something to break her curse. There had to be somebody who needed a warrior to fight their battles for them. Selena only hoped she could find someone honorable to hire her.

From the information on the map, the first Fae artifact that she would investigate was in a small town called Hope. The name seemed to bode well for her quest. The town was located in North America, in the forests of Connecticut. The artifact that was there was a wishing well created by rival Fae, who had been fighting over the town of Hope. The legend and lore stated that the Fae’s magic imbued the wishing well with the power to grant the supplicant’s heart’s desire if they were worthy.

Selena knew she was worthy. But she wasn't sure how she could prove it. Perhaps the wishing well would simply recognize her Fae blood, and her curse would be lifted. If that were the case, she would be back home for Yule, and there would be much celebration.

Or maybe she would have to do a quest or a noble deed. Whatever it took, Selena was committed to trying everything in her power. And if that didn't work, she had an entire map of other artifacts to visit. She only hoped that her curse wouldn't hurt anyone while she was investigating the well and its powers.



CHAPTER TWO



B^{en}

Ben Whitlock rose from his coffin precisely at sundown, as he had been doing for the last three hundred or so years. Back then, the town had been named Whitlock after his grandsire's grandsire. That was before two meddling Fae had decided to battle for Whitlock, and at the end of it, the town was renamed Hope.

Hope. Ben sneered. They should have named it *greed* because that's what brought flocks of tourists to the small town and their magic wishing well. As he exited his coffin, he was pleased that Sykes had left him a mug of warmed blood. It was body temperature, and he drank his first cup down the way most mortals did their morning coffee.

"You look stunning, my dark lord," Sykes said with the appropriate amount of snivel in his voice when Ben walked into his office in the town hall. Sykes was what the vampire community called a Renfield. He was a butler, servant, blood donor, and pretty much anything else Ben wanted him to be. He was a loyal and useful retainer, and if Sykes served Ben well, he would be changed into a vampire at the end of his life and granted a territory all his own.

"The violet of the cravat brings out the radiance in your eyes."

Because Ben could not look into a mirror due to his lack of reflection, he would have to take Sykes' word for it. But since Sykes was in charge of maintaining Ben's clothing in the current century's style, in addition to washing and ironing them, it was in Sykes' best interest to have everything perfect.

Ben was not a forgiving master.

“What is on the agenda for today?” he asked, already dreading the answer.

“Today’s the sanctification of the wishing well for the Yuletide season.”

“Is it December already?” Ben asked, glancing out of his office window. It hadn’t started snowing yet. Maybe the weather gods were waiting until the winter solstice this year. That would be convenient. He wouldn’t have to waste the town’s budget on snow plowing. If it were up to him, the tourists could wait out the snowstorm in the several bed and breakfasts around the area. But the local merchants weren’t too keen on that idea, so to make everyone happy, he would send out the plows if needed.

“Today is December the first.”

Biting back a sigh, Ben said, “Prepare the ritual space. Make sure the area is cordoned off. We don’t want a repeat of last year’s fiasco.”

“No, Master.”

Last year, a vampire groupie stormed through the barricades and past three of Ben’s best ghoul bodyguards and flung herself at him, begging to be bitten. Ben had nearly tossed her in the well. But there had been paparazzi present, so he merely smiled for the camera and then let his incompetent bodyguards lead her away. The crowd had been amused. Ben had not.

He wasn’t even sure why he still performed the ritual. In all the years that he had prepared the wishing well for the Yuletide season, it had never granted him his heart’s desire. And he had been one of the first to drink from the well after Candace Juniper and Roderick Stone had created it and transformed the town of Whitlock into Hope.

His heart's desire was simple but unattainable. He wanted someone to share his eternal un-life with. Sure, in the past years, he had bedmates and playmates. Some grew old and died. Some left him when he wouldn't turn them into a vampire. Some were just here for the season. A few vampires had pledged themselves to him, but while they were loyal and good friends, none of them were his soulmate. And even then, after a few years, they moved on. Vampires preferred to travel alone or in pairs.

The truth was he was lonely.

A melancholy, broody vampire was too trite of a stereotype for him ever to let anyone see him in that light. He was proud of his little town. He just wished the wishing well wasn't so popular. Every season, Ben would be forced to see people drink from the well and then walk around starry-eyed at the possibility of great wealth or the prospect of being cured of a disease. And on rare occasions, meeting their soulmate.

Even though the town posted many caveats about the success of the wishing well, it didn't stop his office from receiving bitter complaints when the recipient didn't get their wish.

"You were not worthy," he would tell them, and then have to listen to their wailing and arguments until he hexed them with his gaze, and they realized they really wanted a cronut from Adelaide's bakery.

He got a five percent kickback.

The six hours until midnight dragged on because Ben was dreading the sanctification ritual. It was mind-numbingly tiresome, and he'd been doing it for the past three hundred years without change. He tried to mix things up a few years back, but it hadn't been well received.

When he had poured a very good wine from one of his family's vineyards in France into the well instead of the champagne, the well rejected it and blew gamay rouge all over his best suit. When Ben had attempted to change the words of the ritual to something more modern and succinct, the waters had overflowed and soaked his thousand-dollar leather shoes.

Ben had stopped trying to improvise after that.

"Do you have a moment, Mayor Whitlock?" His secretary, Gertrude, asked from the doorway. She kept her eyes downcast but angled her bare neck at him as if he were a newly created vampire who couldn't resist the pull of a throbbing vein.

"Make it quick," he said, already bored with the day.

He would have fired Gertrude, except she was a computer genius and very loyal to him. Ben neither had the skill nor the desire to learn how to navigate the World Wide Web. He didn't have to read her mind to know that this year, she would ask the wishing well to be turned into a vampire. And like last year, she would be disappointed when it didn't happen.

"You've received some death threats from Humanity First."

So, what else was new?

"Does Security Chief Rahl think they're credible?" Ben asked.

"He's concerned." She looked up at him, risking direct eye contact. "So am I."

"Why?" Ben drawled.

Gertrude widened her eyes, willing him to hex her. But hex her into doing what? Ben wasn't sure. She was his secretary. She pretty much had to do whatever he said anyway.

“They mentioned replacing you as mayor with a human and running all the other supernaturals out of town.”

Ben made a “yadda yadda yadda” sign with his hand. “They keep running their mouths, but when push comes to shove, no one wants to face werewolf sentries with gargoyle air support.”

“Yes, but specifically this time, they’re calling you out. They’ve even put a price on your head.” She handed him a poster.

“Ten thousand dollars? That’s it?” That was almost insulting. He had half a mind to pay the bounty himself just to stop all this nonsense. Ben looked at the poster critically. He hadn’t aged since he was thirty, almost three centuries ago. “Is it a good likeness?” he asked, holding the poster up to his face.

“Oh yes. Yes. Sir. Master,” she said, babbling.

“I’m not your master,” he chided. “I’m your boss.”

“I would do anything for you,” she said. “You must know that.”

“Then, get me a mug of blood and send Rahl in to see me.”

Gertrude actually curtsied. “Yes, your greatness.”

Ben bit back a sigh. He supposed if Gertrude was his soulmate, it would make things easier. But she wasn’t. She was a nice enough girl. Pretty to look at. But she had watched too many vampire movies, and it showed. She was a vegetarian, for Vlad’s sake! What did she think she was going to survive on after she was turned into a vampire? Beet juice? Aside from that, she made him feel more ancient than he already was.

“You called for me, sir?” Rahl’s appearance was a testament to his dark origins. His once-human form had been distorted, marred by the ghastly

effects of his ghoul transformation. His skin, pale and sickly, clung tightly to his sinewy frame, stretched over bones that protruded unnaturally. His eyes, deep and sunken, bore a perpetual hunger that reflected the insatiable need for human flesh. He sidestepped Gertrude as she rushed over with Ben's mug of blood.

She looked queasy, and Ben could tell she was fighting not to gag.

"Care for a sip?" Ben asked her.

Clamping her hand over her mouth, Gertrude turned and ran out of his office.

Rahl frowned. "That was mean."

Ben often caught the ghoul staring hungrily at his secretary. He had thought it was because Rahl was considering her as a snack, but maybe he had romantic feelings towards Gertrude.

"If you say so," Ben said, a slight pang of conscience bothering him. Perhaps he would try to play matchmaker between the two of them. If a soulmate wasn't in Ben's future, it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that it was in Rahl's. Gertrude appeared to like monsters. The vegetarian / eats human flesh thing was an obstacle, but true love's path never ran smoothly. With a nudge in the right direction, there could be romance in the office after all. But that was for another time. Right now, they had tonight to get through. "What are your forces doing about security for the ritual tonight?"

Rahl launched into very detailed plans that almost put Ben to sleep. But he was confident that there would be no distractions from vampire groupies this year.

"I appreciate that you're taking this seriously," Ben said when Rahl was finished.

“My will is to serve.” Rahl thumped his chest in emphasis.

When it was time to head through the woods to the wishing well, Sykes had the horse and carriage out front waiting for Ben. Had it been snowing, Ben would have taken the snowmobile or the town’s four-wheel drive truck. But since it was a mild night, he decided to give the tourists a thrill with the old-world pageantry.

His security team had cleared the path and cordoned it off with ropes, so the way was all clear until he reached the Fairy Circle, where the wishing well had been created. Ben was happy to note that Sykes had all the ritual supplies out on a makeshift altar. It would make things go quicker. Stepping out of his carriage, Ben glanced around at the crowd. He didn’t notice any overt vampire groupies or, on the other side of that coin, any vampire hunters. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of his gargoyle sentries do a fly-by. For the most part, Ben could count on his security team to weed out the undesirables. The tourists started their pilgrimage at the crack of dawn, so there was plenty of time to ferret out the troublemakers.

Usually.

Ben pushed his cape behind him so that it fluttered in the cool night air. He allowed a photo op where he looked nobly up at the full moon.

“Supplicants to the great wishing well, I bid you welcome to our bucolic town of Hope.” He paused for a smattering of applause. Looking out into the crowd, Ben noted a few people were shivering in their winter gear, even though the weather was mild for December first. Tourists. He hid a sneer.

“We gather here today at the start of the Yuletide season to celebrate and give thanks to the dark and the light Fae who have gifted us this well.” Ben allowed his gaze to wander over the crowd as he began to intone the sacred

words of the complicated ritual. He caught a few people hiding yawns, and he sympathized. He truly did. Taking out his ceremonial saber, he cupped the bottom of a champagne bottle in his other hand. It was a 1990 Louis Roederer Cristal Brut. What a waste of a seven-thousand-dollar vintage. Sliding the saber against the neck of the bottle, he popped the cork off with a practiced flourish.

Frothy bubbles of sticky liquid cascaded over the well, and he heard faint giggles at the bottom of it. Sneaking a peek downwards, he didn't see either of the two Fae who had created the well. He hadn't really expected to. They faded from existence shortly after completing it, and Ben had always believed that creating the well had used up all of their powers to manifest in this world, which was a shame. He missed his old friends.

“And with that, let us raise a toast to the powers that be and honor them by partaking in a sip of Hope's nectar.”

Sykes hurried over with a bottle of their locally brewed mead. Unfortunately, Ben didn't get a kickback from Sy's Fine Liquor and Beer for the plug.

While the crowd around him drained their glasses, Ben took a chug from the remaining champagne in the bottle.

I wish for a mate to spend eternity with, he thought, as he always did. It had never worked before, but this was also part of the ritual.

A flash of brightness lit up the clearing. The crowd in front of him gasped. Then, something hit him hard across the back of the knees, and he pitched forward into the well.

This was new, he thought as he plunged into the darkness below and hit the water with a tremendous splash.



CHAPTER THREE

Selena

Selena landed hard on her shoulder as the gate spat her into the mortal realm. She had a moment to acknowledge that something had cushioned her landing before realizing she wasn't alone. She heard a loud splash and cursing coming from the bottom of the well.

"Master! Master! Are you all right?" A short human with long, black hair hanging in his face galloped to where she was standing and peered over the edge.

"Oh no," Selena moaned. What did she do? Pulling herself up, she got knocked back a few steps as a wet creature launched out of the well and landed at her side.

"To arms!" Artegenos cried and leaped from her belt into her hand. Before Selena could stop the sword, her arm swung of its own volition.

It hit a hard, short, blunt blade with enough force that her whole arm shook from the impact.

"Who sent you to kill me?" A vampire snarled at her. His eyes were glowing red, and his fangs were on full display. He would have cut an impressive figure if he hadn't been soaked and dripping before her.

Selena took a deep breath. "I come in peace."

"Ha," the short human said. "A likely story."

She became aware of a crowd of humans who were panicking. Some ran. Some cried. Some stood stock still in abject terror.

“I mean it.” Selena forced Artegenos down to her side. “The gate’s magic sent me into this realm with too much force. I wasn’t aiming for you. I was just traveling here from Fairy.”

His deeply set eyes, adorned with the shade of an intense amethyst, narrowed, and she shivered at his calculating look. Even doused in water, he exuded an ethereal beauty that danced on the edge of danger and seduction.

“Ha,” the short human said again. “A likely story.”

“Hush, Sykes,” the vampire said in a voice that reminded Selena of liquid chocolate, rich and full of potential enjoyment. The velvety timbre sent a shiver down her spine. It held a melody that echoed with hints of hidden pain and distant adventures. There was something in him that called to her at the deepest level. For a moment, they just stared at each other, assessing a potential enemy.... Or lover?

“But Master...”

The human’s complaint broke the seductive spell that had momentarily enthralled her. What was wrong with her? She usually wasn’t so scattered by a pretty face.

The vampire turned to glare at him, and the man named Sykes cowered. “Clean up this mess,” the vampire said to him and turned his back on Selena to address the crowd. “Behold, a visitor from the Faelands.” He gestured to her.

She suddenly wished she wasn’t wearing travel-stained clothes and had taken the time to make a better impression.

“Uh... greetings,” she said, and then was nearly blinded by flashes of light as a bunch of cell phone cameras were pointed in her direction.

“Which one of you fanboys wished for Galadriel?” the vampire asked, scowling into the crowd.

“Are we under attack?” Artegenos snarled, fighting her for control of her sword arm.

“Stand down,” Selena muttered.

When no one answered him about the Galadriel crack, the vampire said, “Well, that concludes tonight’s opening ceremony. May your wishes be granted, and all your dreams come true.” And then, under his breath, he muttered, “Thank Vlad, that’s over with.”

Selena felt a snap of Fae magic and moved towards the well again. The vampire grabbed hold of her upper arm.

Artegenos twitched. “Who dares?”

“I am Ben Whitlock. I am the mayor of this town. You’re coming with me until I can verify your identity.”

Selena wanted to make her request of the wishing well, but she knew that she needed to make amends for her humiliating entrance into this realm. A few hours with the leader of the town wouldn’t kill her.

“Very well, Master Mayor. I apologize for my clumsiness.” It was her curse acting up again. Selena knew it. But she didn’t want to frighten the humans who were lining up to drink from the well and make their wish.

“Call me Ben. And I did not get your name or the name of your sword.”

Selena blinked in surprise. Not many beings could sense Artegenos. “I am Lady Selena Moss of the Dawnstar Tribe. And I carry Artegenos, the sword of my ancestors.”

He inclined his head and guided her to a horse-drawn carriage. “Please come with me to my office, my ladies. I apologize in advance for the wet trip.” He gestured down at himself ruefully as she climbed into the carriage.

“I could hardly complain as I’m the reason you are soaked.”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure of that,” he said and rapped the roof of the carriage twice with his cane.

The horses lurched forward, and they trundled down a wooded path.

“What do you mean?” she asked. Was her curse not so obvious here?

“The well works in mysterious ways. What brings you to this world?”

“I am a pilgrim to your wishing well.”

“I’m afraid you have wasted your trip,” he said, folding his hands over the top of his cane.

A sharp stab of hurt thundered in her chest. “No, you’re wrong. I am worthy.”

Ben looked confused. “I never said that you weren’t.”

“Then why do you think the well won’t grant my wish?”

His face reflected sadness in the dim moonlight, but even with the limited light, Selena could see that he was a handsome man. He had a proud nose and aristocratic features. His jet-black hair was slicked close to his skull, but it was his amethyst eyes that caught her attention. They were soulful, a poet’s eyes. Selena wondered if he was hexing her with his gaze because she felt bewitched.

“No,” Artegenos said. “The vampire’s mind games wouldn’t work on you. You just think he’d be an enjoyable bed partner.”

Selena truly hoped that the mayor couldn't hear Artegenos' telepathic thoughts to her. Fortunately, he didn't seem to react to Artegenos' statement.

"It's because the well has long since used up all its useful magic."

"That can't be," Selena said. "Fae magic is endless. There was a crowd of people lining up to request their heart's desire." She patted her pockets until she came up with a map. "I even have documentation that it exists. If the magic were truly gone, it would have vanished from the parchment."

Frowning, Ben looked over at where she pointed at the map. "I didn't say it was gone entirely. All I can tell you is there has been a lot of disappointment over the years."

"But there must have been some wishes granted. Otherwise, you wouldn't have had anyone tonight lining up for their shot at their heart's desire."

"Sometimes, I think the results are mere coincidences and dumb luck," he said glumly.

"I don't believe in coincidences," Selena said. "And I've seen firsthand how powerful luck—or the lack of it is. If you think luck has been in play, then there is magic in that well, after all." She grew excited just thinking about it. Craning her neck to get a final glimpse of the well as they turned towards the cheerfully lit town, she wondered how soon she could get back to the well and try for her wish.

"If you want to try your luck..."

Selena cringed. She most certainly did not want to tempt her luck.

Ben continued, oblivious. "I would wait until Monday morning after the tourists have gone home. There will be less of a line, and you will have a modicum of privacy to drink from the well."

She hadn't planned on staying that long, but Selena supposed she could camp in the forest and forage for food to replenish her supplies for the next leg of her journey. Whether returning to Fae triumphant or heading on to the next artifact, she would need to stock up.

"Can I take you to the local inn?" he asked. "You may freshen up before we take care of confirming the validity of your passage into the mortal realms."

Embarrassment flooded her. She didn't have any money on her. "No. Let's get this over with." The sooner she could verify her identity, the sooner she could scope out a camping site. Even though doing it in the dark wasn't ideal, it was a mild night, and she would stay close to the town's lights to discourage predators from disturbing her rest.

The coach pulled up in front of a brick building that was being decorated for the winter holidays by a few gnomes. Ben exited the coach first and opened the door for her. He offered her his hand to help her step down. As she took it, a spark of energy tingled up her arm. Glancing at him in surprise, Selena saw the shock mirrored in his eyes.

Was this a strange type of static electricity? Then, movement caught her attention. Three shadowy figures appeared out of the darkness and aimed arrows at them.

"Get down," Selena said, tugging on Ben's hand so he was pulled behind her.

"Die fiend!" one of the bowmen said from the shadows.

An arrow thunked into the carriage door where Ben had been standing just moments before. Another sailed wide past them, and Arteenos batted the third away.

“For the Dawnstar,” she shouted, charging the three bowmen as they each struggled to knock another arrow.

One looked at her charging towards him, brandishing the glowing sword, and dropped his bow, running off into the darkness. Selena knew she could track him later if need be. The man in the middle was shaking so hard he couldn't bring the arrow back up in time.

Swinging Artegenos, she sliced through the bow, the arrow, and the top of the man's hands. He howled and staggered back. Turning to the last man, she stopped as Ben was behind him, fangs buried deep into the man's throat.

Selena and Ben locked gazes. She wondered if there would be a blood frenzy. But after a few long seconds, Ben lifted his head. The man slumped to the ground in a dead faint. He was alive but unconscious.

“Don't kill me,” the other man said, holding his bleeding hand.

Ben flicked a glance at the blood but then stared at the man. Selena watched the bowman's face go slack as he turned his full attention to Ben.

“Who sent you to kill me?” Ben asked.

“Ave-Aver-Avery,” the man stuttered.

“Who is that?” Ben looked confused.

The man pointed to the body at Ben's feet.

Ben kicked it. “This peon?”

The bowman nodded.

“Why?”

“He said we would each get a thousand dollars if we helped him shoot you full of these arrows.”

Ben walked over and picked up an arrow. He dropped it immediately and recoiled.

“What is it?” Selena asked.

“The shaft is made of hawthorn, and the arrowhead is doused in holy water.”

“Would that have killed you?”

Ben nodded. “If they had managed to hit my heart or if there were several arrows in me.”

“Why did Avery want to kill you?” she asked.

“Good question. Answer her,” Ben ordered.

“The money,” the man said.

“I thought you said that Avery was paying you,” Selena said, looking from the body on the ground to the bowman who swayed on his feet. “He’s losing a lot of blood,” she said to Ben.

Ben shrugged. “Where was Avery getting the money?”

“A witch was paying him. She wants you dead.”

“Why?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What was this witch’s name?”

“I don’t know.”

Ben sighed. “Listen to me very carefully. You will never hunt another vampire again.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You will spend the rest of your life being kind, generous, and making amends to anyone you have harmed in the past.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s a nice touch,” Selena murmured.

“You will go to Adelaide’s bakery in the town center and purchase a dozen of her mayoral cronuts.”

“What?” Selena did a double take.

“And then you will leave the town of Hope and never return.”

“Okay.”

The man moved off in the direction of the still bustling town square.

“What was that all about?” Selena asked.

“I’m not sure, but I’ll find out.” Ben watched the man until he was out of sight, and then he turned back to her. “Having seen you in battle, I can confirm you are a Fae warrior of the Dawnstar tribe. You’ve shown me the map of Fae artifacts, so you have the right to travel through the gates, albeit at an unsafe speed.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” she said, but it probably was.

“It’s just occurred to me that I haven’t properly thanked you for saving my life just now.” He bowed.

“It was the least I could do after almost drowning you,” Selena said. And it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that her curse had drawn the three hunters that had attacked them.

“Allow me to put you up in the town’s best hotel for the weekend.”

Selena didn’t dare hope that her luck was changing. This sounded too good to be true. “That’s awfully kind of you.” And it would beat the hell out

of sleeping on the ground again.

“It’s settled then.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. “Tell the concierge at the Grantmore to give you the mayor’s suite. It comes with a butler and a complimentary midnight buffet.”

She hadn’t even gotten to make her wish. Could it be that just by being in proximity of the well, the power of her curse had faded? Still, Selena couldn’t afford to let her guard down.

“It has been a long and arduous journey,” she said. “Your hospitality is most appreciated.”

“Once you get settled in, I’d like to discuss an opportunity with you.”

“What kind of opportunity?” She knew there had to be a catch.

“Why don’t I join you for the midnight buffet, and we can speak then?”

Selena would sit with an army of unwashed trolls if it meant a hot meal and a warm bed. Besides, it would be nice to speak with someone who wasn’t waiting for something bad to happen to them.

“Very well,” she said. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Just follow the sidewalk until you reach the town green. You’ll see the Grantmore on the corner right next to the apothecary.”

“Do you mind if I take these?” She bent down to pick up the bow that the unconscious man had dropped.

“What do you plan on doing with the arrows?” Ben asked warily.

“I’ll wash off the holy water, but if I need to hunt game, these will come in handy.”

He chuckled. “I assure you, while the buffet is not Michelin-rated, you will not need to supply your own meat.”

“For when I move on,” she said with a small smile. Selena didn’t want him to know just how lacking in funds or equipment she was. The less he knew about her banishment and curse, the better.

“Help yourself.” Ben gestured grandly.

Selena took all the arrows and the man’s bow, then patted his pockets down for anything else of use. She found a Buck knife that had seen better days, but Artegenos was thrilled that she wouldn’t have to be used as a flint or steel to start a fire anymore. “I’ll make sure that these can’t be used against you.”

“I appreciate that. Take the bills in his wallet, too. It’s rare that someone carries cash.”

Selena wasn’t sure how much twenty-seven dollars would buy in this town, but Ben was right. Every little bit helped. It had been a few decades since she was in the human lands, and she was a little rusty on how society worked these days.

“What do they use to purchase things, if not with cash?”

“Credit cards. Those plastic things. But you’d bring unwanted attention to yourself if you used his.”

“Thank you for the heads up,” she said. The last thing she wanted to do was cause trouble.

“As I said, I think we could be of great service to each other.”

Selena experienced the familiar tingle of excitement that she got whenever she was about to embark on a new exploration or at the start of a battle. It had been a while since she had felt such a positive response. She was afraid she was just imagining things.

“What are you going to do with Av-Aver-Avery?” she asked.

“I’m going to question him about the witch.”

“And then send him out for cronuts?”

Ben shook his head. “He’ll have other uses.”

Selena had a pretty good idea of what uses the unconscious man might have to a vampire, but she decided she didn’t really want to know the details.

“Until later,” she said. Selena could feel his gaze on her as she headed toward the hotel.

Even though Hope was a small town, Selena was having a hard time getting used to being in a place where there were buildings instead of movable structures. Her people were nomads, and even the sturdiest of their buildings were created to break down fast if they had to move to better hunting grounds or to escape from a better-armed foe looking to steal their goods and kidnap a husband or bride.

But as she walked down the bustling streets, Selena liked the permanence of it all. There were shops of all kinds selling goods that she had never seen before.

“Look out!”

Selena turned and saw a car careening out of control down the street. It zigged and zagged as if the steering was completely gone. It was headed right for her. Selena’s instincts kicked in, and she jumped to the side, narrowly avoiding the car as it smashed into a nearby storefront. People screamed and ran in all directions, but Selena stood frozen momentarily, staring at the wreckage.

“Are you all right, Miss?” a werewolf guard asked, pausing to touch her arm while two others loped towards the crashed car.

“Yeah,” she said, still dazed by the adrenaline rush.

“You’re lucky you moved when you did.”

Lucky she moved, or unlucky she was targeted?

“What happened here?” A larger werewolf demanded, appearing on the scene in a burst of supernatural speed. He wore a badge on his massive chest that said Captain on it.

The other two werewolves, who had gone ahead, were helping a human woman out of the car, who appeared shaken but unharmed. Selena watched as the woman clung to one of the werewolves, thanking them for saving her life.

“She said the car suddenly stopped steering properly.”

“Was it hexed?” the werewolf captain asked.

Or cursed? Selena worried to herself.

“We’ve got a witch investigator coming in to take a look,” the werewolf said.

That was her cue to leave.

“Who are you?” the werewolf captain asked.

“Me?” Selena said, hoping she appeared harmless even though she had a sword hanging precariously from her belt. “I’m a pilgrim. I’m looking to sip from the well.”

The werewolf grunted. “Stay out of trouble. And for your safety, keep to the sidewalk.”

As she walked down the sidewalk, Selena couldn't help but feel out of place. The people around her were dressed in modern clothes, carrying bags of groceries, and chatting on cell phones. She had seen such devices before, but they were relatively new to her.

The Grantmore Hotel was just ahead, and it was a good thing, too. The longer she stayed out in the town, the more Selena felt like an outsider. Her clothes were worn and tattered, and she carried herself like a warrior, not a citizen. She passed a group of teenage girls who glanced at her with disdain before turning their noses up and walking away. Selena sighed, feeling the weight of centuries of isolation weighing on her shoulders.



CHAPTER FOUR



B^{en}

Ben was so distracted by the thoughts of the gorgeous Fae warrior he almost failed to stop Rahl from falling on his sword. As it was, the ghoul had managed to pierce his chest cavity and spill a foul pool of smelly viscera on Ben's freshly cleaned carpets.

"I don't accept your resignation or your sacrifice," Ben said, not so gently hauling Rahl to his feet. "But perhaps you could take on some undercover work for me. As a chance to redeem yourself."

Rahl's head perked up at that. "Anything, Master."

"Find out everything you can about this witch. Her name is Izina Broome, or at least that's what she goes by in her little hamlet town of Serenity, just before you get to the Massachusetts border."

Avery had been a font of information once he had come to, and Ben had hexed him into answering all of his questions. Unfortunately, Avery was a foot soldier and not a general in this particular battle.

"I'm not sure why she's bankrolling a bunch of vampire hunters or if she's got ties with Humanity First. But I need you to find out."

"Who will stay here and protect you?" Rahl asked.

Ben bit back a tart response that it certainly wasn't going to be him or his troop of ghouls, that was for sure.

"The werewolves and the gargoyles, of course," Sykes said, piping up from the corner. Ben knew his Renfield was sorely displeased with Rahl for letting the vampire hunters get so close to him. While he would have liked to have thought it was because of genuine concern, it was probably because

Sykes didn't want to start over with another vampire master on his quest to become immortal.

"No," Ben corrected him. "I need them for town defense. I'm going to hire a bodyguard."

"From where?" Sykes said. "All the employment agencies are booked solid through to the new year." Sykes had just returned from putting the other vampire hunter, the one who was now happily munching on a cronut, on a non-stop bus ride to Quebec. The vampire hunter would probably return to his normal self just as he was trying to cross the border without a passport. The border patrol should keep him busy long enough for Ben to get to the bottom of things. But just in case, Ben had also confiscated his cell phone.

"Roll up this carpet and have it dry cleaned," Ben said, making sure none of the ghoul's guts soiled his shoes. "I'll handle the hiring."

"You're going to use a mercenary, aren't you?" Gertrude said, clutching her hands to her chest.

"Mercenaries can't be trusted, boss," Rahl said, using his superior strength to move Ben's desk and other furniture so Sykes could roll up the rug.

"They can be bought for the highest bidder," Gertrude said.

"Then I'll have to make sure that I'm the highest bidder. Now, out of my office. All of you. I have a few things to do before my midnight meeting."

"What midnight meeting?" Gertrude frowned. "You don't have anyone on the schedule."

"I do now." He made shooing motions with his hands, and Gertrude didn't have a choice but to leave when Sykes and Rahl each took up an end of the rolled-up rug and marched out the door with it.

Using a flow of power, Ben closed the door and locked it. He was too agitated to sit down and work, though. Pacing along the windows of his office, he focused his gaze on the lights of the Grantmore Hotel.

He had wished for a soulmate, and Selena Moss had appeared at the exact moment. Could it be that the wishing well had finally deemed to acknowledge that he was worthy of his heart's desire? Ben hadn't remembered feeling this way in centuries—giddy, eager, and, dare he say... nervous?

Serene and captivating, Selena Moss was a testament to the grace and power that dwelled within her elven bloodline. He had been equally impressed at the swift precision with which she dealt with the bowman but also at the captivating allure of her soft green eyes. Ben didn't want to get his hopes up. He had barely spoken to her, yet he had appreciated the zing of connection between them when he first looked at her and then again when he helped her out of the carriage.

A long time ago, Ben had been a poet. But the ugliness of the centuries had eroded that part of him down to a cynical shell. And yet the thought of her flowing, white-gold hair cascading down her shoulders and entwined with delicate silver threads that had shimmered in the moonlight made his fingers itch for a quill so he could compose odes to her beauty.

He would start by offering her a job as his bodyguard. For the weekend, for the season, whatever she was willing to give. If she got her wish from the well on Monday and left, then Ben would have his answer. She wasn't his soulmate. She was just a pretty elf he wanted to bed.

But if she didn't get her wish, having a job here would convince her to stay in town for the Yuletide season so she could try again. That would give

him time to see if his old Fae friends had finally come through for him and delivered him a soulmate to share eternity with.

Forcing himself to complete the work that had piled up while he was at that ridiculous ceremony, Ben was sure that the clocks were all broken. It had taken forever to get to eleven thirty at night, but now that it was here, he sprinted out of his office like a bird out of a cage.

“I just need you to sign...” Gertrude said, but he didn’t stop.

He switched to mist for more speed as he dashed out of the town hall and down the street to the Grantmore. That was the only thing that saved his life when the attack came. The water balloons of holy water passed through his gaseous form and splattered harmlessly on the brick wall of Adelaide’s bakery.

Circling back, he saw three witches ready an elemental spell. Dark clouds pooled overhead, and lightning crashed too close for comfort. The smart move would be to get to cover and call in his guards.

But if he did, he might miss this opportunity to capture one.

He materialized behind the first witch and cut off her incantation with a slice of his claws across her neck. While she clasped at her throat, he moved on behind the next witch. Sinking his teeth into her exposed shoulder, he drank hard and fast. The third witch clobbered him with her broom, knocking him away from her sister.

But it was too late. With the witch’s blood on his tongue, he was able to command the one he had bitten. “Cast the spell.”

“No!” the broom-wielding witch cried, holding up her hand as the lightning bolt crashed down on her. She flashed brightly and then faded to grey ash.

The other witch gurgled, clamping down on her throat wound that her magic was too slow to heal. She scrambled for cover as bolt after bolt of lightning chased her. It leaped from an iron post to a metal sign, unable to ground into its target. The casting witch that he bit shook and babbled until her eyes rolled up in her head, and she sank to the ground unconscious. With a final boom, the lightning hit a transformer, and all of the lights in the town were extinguished. One witch dead. One witch captured. One witch escaped. Not great, but it could have been worse.

“Master,” Rahl cried.

“After that witch,” he ordered before Rahl could consider falling on his sword again. It was a good thing Rahl obeyed immediately because this time, Ben might have let him do it.



SELENA

Name-dropping the mayor was like getting a golden key to the city. Selena was escorted to a plush penthouse suite complete with all the modern luxuries that she hadn't even heard of before tonight. After grilling the butler for a good twenty minutes about what every little gadget did, Selena figured out how to get the fireplace roaring and drew a bath in the Jacuzzi tub. Before she relaxed in the warm, bubbly water, she took a blistering hot shower and scrubbed every inch of dirt off her body. Selena paid particular attention to combing through her thick hair, using the special creams and gels that the butler had suggested she use to get the matted clumps in order.

Finally, with a plate of cheese, crackers, and fruit, Selena sank up to her neck in the warm, fragrant water. Maybe she'd even go home tomorrow, for surely the curse had been broken. She was clean, well-fed, and comfortable.

And then, the power went out.

The pulsating roar of the water jetting out of the little holes in the tub fizzled to a stop. The soft music playing in the background ended on an ear-screeching note. The room was plunged into total darkness.

“Shit,” she said and considered sliding completely under the water. Instead, she sat there hoping this was a fluke and the power would flicker back on momentarily. But the water rapidly cooled off while her eyes had adjusted to the darkness. Selena was careful when she got out of the tub. She didn’t want to slip and fall. Padding over to where she left the white fluffy robe, she put it on and went to the window to stare out over the town.

The whole town was pitch black.

“Way to go, Selena,” she said, her voice sounding loud in the darkness. The butler had taken her only set of clothes to be laundered. He had assured her that they would be dry by the time midnight rolled around. But if the power was out, she would have to meet the mayor wearing a towel. She had been looking forward to the buffet dinner, too.

At least the comfortable bed was still there. At least, she hoped so. With her luck, it might have collapsed into kindling for some bizarre reason. If the town was in a mild crisis situation, Ben probably wasn’t going to make their meeting. Selena was surprised at how disappointed she was by that. Too long on the road alone, she thought, rubbing her forehead. Ditching the robe, she eased into the bed and pulled the covers around her. There were worse things than getting a good night's sleep. Even if her curse still played havoc with her life, at least she wasn’t outside on the cold, hard ground.

Selena slipped into the Dreamlands as if she had taken a gate to get there. She recognized the wishing well from when she had nearly crashed into it earlier this evening. But she knew she wasn’t in Hope, and this wasn’t the

real well. Sitting on top of the well was a sunsidhe, one of the ancient Fae goddesses.

She looked like a human version of a unicorn. Her golden eyes sparkled with inner light, and her waist-length hair was a cascade of fiery orange and red that danced with a life of its own. She wore a gown made of autumn leaves that rustled gently in the breeze. Swinging her long legs, the sunsidhe smiled brightly at Selena as she approached the well.

“So you’re here. Finally,” the sunsidhe said.

Feeling the power emanating from the sunsidhe, Selena fell to her knees. Perhaps this sunsidhe could truly help her break the curse.

“Oh great, Fae goddess, please grant me my heart’s desire.”

“In due time,” the sunsidhe said.

Pushing down a stab of annoyance, Selena forced politeness in her tone. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you have a way to go before you get your heart’s desire.”

“I’ll do anything to get rid of this curse,” Selena said. “Anything. Do you think I’ll be back with my family before the Winter Solstice?”

“It’s possible,” the sunsidhe said.

“Just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it,” Selena said desperately.

The sunsidhe tilted her head, studying Selena with an intensity that was like the sun's rays. "Yes, I can sense the heavy burden you carry, dear child. It is a difficult path you walk, but know that even the darkest nights are followed by the dawn."

Oh, how she hated the cryptic crap that the ancient ones spoke. "How can I break my curse?"

The sunsidhe floated closer, her leafy gown rustling softly as she reached out to touch Selena's cheek. "You have a brave and determined spirit, dear one. I can give you guidance, but the journey to break your curse will require great strength and sacrifice."

"Whatever it takes," Selena said. "I'm ready to face whatever trials come my way. Just please, let me know what you want me to do."

"Very well," the sunsidhe replied, her voice warm and soothing like a cup of spiced cider. "Listen closely, for the path before you is treacherous. You need to spend time away from the Faelands. You need to experience more of what the universe can offer you. You knew that a long time ago, didn't you?"

Did she?

Selena shook her head as confusing thoughts danced just out of her grasp.

"You were an explorer once. Before you became a warrior," the sunsidhe said kindly.

"I was a child. Playing childish games with maps I found in dusty chests. They were packed away for good reason. I never found any treasure."

"Didn't you?" the sunsidhe echoed.

Did she?

"When you find what you've been missing all your life, the well will grant you your heart's desire."

"So I am not yet worthy?" Selena asked, pain stabbing her deep in her heart.

"Aren't you?"

Wasn't she?

As the sunsidhe's words trailed off, a strange emptiness settled over Selena.

"Thank you," Selena murmured, disappointment etching across her features as she bowed her head. "I suppose I thought there would be... more."

"Sometimes, dear one, the fruits of your labor may take time to blossom." The sunsidhe began to fade.

"Wait," Selena called.

She paused.

"Give me something. Anything to go on. What must I do?"

"Be yourself."

Then the sunsidhe faded away, along with the Dreamlands, and Selena woke up, still in the big comfy bed. Why couldn't anyone speak plainly in prophecy and dreams? Just once, she'd like the mystic creature to say, "Bring me three dozen eggs and a fat pheasant, and then dig under that tree over there. The treasure you seek will be yours."

Well, there would be no more sleeping now. Tossing back the covers, Selena wrestled the bathrobe back on and tucked Arteenos into the fluffy sash.

"You must get me a scabbard worthy of my craftsmanship," it said.

"It's on the agenda for tomorrow." But somehow, she didn't think she'd be able to buy one for the twenty-seven dollars she looted off Avery. She pulled on her boots and slipped her room key into the robe's pockets. Because the elevator wasn't working, Selena took the stairs down to the ground floor. The magical clock in the lobby said it was just past one in the morning. It seemed later than that.

There were a few ghouls and zombies in the lobby. They wore the hotel's uniform, but it didn't stop them from looking over at her accusingly. She didn't think they would attack a guest, but Artegenos hummed in battle readiness, just in case. The humans were probably in bed since the hotel bar had closed, and it looked like this was a small town where everything ended promptly at nine p.m. sharp.

She pushed the hotel's revolving door and stepped out into the street. Selena supposed she should feel self-conscious, wearing only a robe. But it was clean and comfortable and covered her adequately. And she had seen witches and warlocks wear something similar. She did hope that she wouldn't see any other elves while she was dressed like this. If it got back to her family, they might worry about her.

The streets were empty except for a few werewolves who darted in and out of the shadows. One sidled up to her and sniffed her.

"I beg your pardon," Selena said, her hand on the top of Artegenos.

"Just making sure you weren't part of the coven that attacked the mayor." He stood up on two legs, and she could see he wore a cape with the town's logo on it.

"The mayor was attacked by three bowmen. They weren't witches." Selena was kicking herself for not going after the bowman who ran.

"That was the first attack," the werewolf said. "This last one was how we lost power. Three witches were trying to harness lightning to fry the mayor."

"Two attacks in one night? Is he all right?" Selena asked.

"I'm fine."

Out of the shadows, Ben appeared. His dark, tousled hair fell in waves, framing his captivating face and lending him an air of wildness. Selena's

heart skipped a beat.

“I’m happy to hear that,” she said.

“Your excellency,” the werewolf said, bowing. Then he slipped back into the shadows.

“I was just coming to see you. I apologize for my tardiness.” He cocked his head at her. “Why are you in a robe?”

Selena flushed and ran a hand down the soft fabric. “My clothes were being washed.”

“Why don’t you come back home with me? I have a generator, and I’m sure there are some clean items you can put on while we wait for the power grid to come up.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude,” she said, but then her stomach growled, and she wondered if it were possible to die from embarrassment.

“I promised you dinner, too. Please, I need to discuss this opportunity with you more than ever.”

It wasn’t as if she had anything else to do. And she did want to spend more time with the enigmatic mayor if only to grill him about the sunsidhe she saw by the well in the Dreamlands.



CHAPTER FIVE



B^{*en*}

It gave him a tremendous amount of pleasure to see Selena in his home. Normally, he'd have Sykes bring his guest to one of the rooms upstairs, but he was happy for a chance to show off his mansion to Selena. The generator had kicked in, and there was a roaring fire in the fireplace. He might have to thank the witch who had survived and was now chained in his magically null dungeon in the basement for giving him this opportunity.

“If you would follow me up the grand staircase, I'll show you to your room, where you can help yourself to anything in the armoire.”

Selena put her hand on the solid oak banister and gracefully followed him up the stairs. “You have a beautiful home.”

“It's been in the family for centuries.” He led her to the bedroom that had been reserved for his sister Anne's family. Alas, her line had died out earlier this year, but the rooms had been empty since the 1980s. Sykes still cleaned it and maintained them, but it hit Ben like a gut punch when he opened the door and saw the decorations his great-great grandniece had loved.

“Duran Duran,” Selena said. “I went to one of their concerts the last time I was in the mortal realms.”

Ben squinted at the poster of very pretty men and nodded. “That was my grandniece's favorite band. Sarah has sadly moved on to the next plane of existence, but her memory still lingers. She would have been more than happy to have lent you her things. Please take your time. I'll meet you back downstairs when you're ready, and we can have the dinner I promised.”

He shut the door behind him and bellowed for Sykes when he was out of earshot of the upstairs rooms. “Sykes! I need you!”

Sykes met him on the ground floor, skidding to a halt before he ran into the wall. “Master, are we under attack?”

“No, but I need a quick dinner prepared. Can you have Tess grill some chicken while you make a fresh salad with your homemade vinaigrette? And if we have any asparagus, can you throw that on the grill as well?” Tess was his chatelaine. Even though she was a goblin, she was a powerful hearth witch.

“Master, it is the dead of winter.”

“Will that be a problem?” Ben asked icily. Sykes knew the pantry was bespelled to give him whatever ingredients he asked for. And if he had to dig out the grill from the back of the storage shed, at least it wasn’t snowing.

“Of course not,” Sykes babbled.

“And have Tess put a speed spell on the cooker. We’re hungry now.”

“Your will will be done.” Sykes hurried off into the kitchen.

Ben went downstairs into the wine cellar. He thought he might have an elven vintage that would pair well with chicken.

“You’re doomed, you know,” the witch croaked from the stone bench where she sat with Avery in a six-foot by six-foot cell. Ben had hexed her name out of her when they brought her back for questioning. Lettie Broome was Izina’s second cousin and was trying to make a name for herself by killing him before Izina could. He wasn’t sure what the heck he did to piss Izina off, and Lettie either didn’t know or was geased not to speak of it.

“Imagine what will happen to you if your cronies manage to kill me,” Ben said, unconcerned. “You’ll slowly rot in here. Although I suppose the lack of water would kill you faster than that. Of course, if you agree to a geas and help me destroy your cousin, you can be free tonight.”

“I will never stop hunting your kind,” Avery snarled.

“Yes, yes, I know. Death to all vampires. You’re very boring. And I wasn’t talking to you. Your only use is as a blood donor at the moment.”

“I will be rescued,” Avery said. “I only hope I’ll be the one to drive the stake through your heart.”

“I’m more afraid of Izina than I am of you,” Lettie said to Ben. She jerked her thumb at Avery. “He’s got legions of cannon fodder to throw at you. With the vampire hunters and Izina’s resources, it’s just a matter of time before you’re dead and we’re rescued.”

Her confidence soured his mood, but he didn’t let her see how her words affected him. “We’ll see. I hope you enjoy spending Yule and Christmas in a dungeon.”

“Ho ho ho,” Lettie said dryly, crossing her arms over her chest.

Ben’s mood didn’t improve when he saw that Sykes had put out what appeared to be a Thanksgiving feast. There was a roasted turkey breast, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, and a soupy green bean casserole. He opened his mouth to berate his Renfield, but Selena showed up in the kitchen, and the look of utter joy on her face transfixed him.

“All my favorites,” she said. “I haven’t had a meal like this since I last visited.”

She wore blue jeans with leg warmers and a slouchy, fuzzy pink sweater. While his grandniece had looked like an exotic bird, Selena looked

comfortable and at home. It hit Ben hard that Selena fit in so well—like she belonged here.

He gave Sykes a side-eyed glare to let him know that while he was off the hook, Ben wasn't pleased his orders had been disobeyed. But at least the wine would pair well with the turkey.

“Come, let's sit and eat.” Ben held the chair out for her while Sykes hovered nervously. “At least tell me that there's an apple pie in the oven,” Ben said to him.

“Pumpkin, actually.”

Ben shot a glance at Selena, whose face lit up. He stifled a sigh. “Make sure there is a lot of fresh whipped cream.”

“Absolutely, Master.” Sykes bowed low and scurried back into the kitchen.

Tess came out carrying a gravy boat. This didn't bode well. The goblin hardly ever left her kitchen. She was small but wiry, with olive-green skin and wild, unkempt hair that matched the hue of fresh moss. Tess was dressed in a chef's jacket that had seen better days and a chef's toque that was no longer white—couldn't even be described in the same universe as white—and it sagged in the middle.

She placed the gravy boat next to Selena's plate and assessed her with a crafty eye.

Oh, here we go, Ben thought. He wasn't sure how to stop this disaster train, but he knew better than to annoy Tess. Not unless he wanted burnt toast and runny eggs until she decided to forgive him.

“It's nice to have company to feed,” Tess said, casting a jaundiced eye at Ben. “We missed out on serving Thanksgiving dinner, so it's our pleasure to

have it now. Better late than never.”

So that was what this was all about. He had been too preoccupied for the harvest holidays this year. He had said that his staff could celebrate without him. Ben thought they had.

“Thanksgiving is one of my favorite mortal holidays,” Selena said.

“Wait until you see what we do for Yule,” Tess said. Seeming satisfied with what she saw, she trundled back to the kitchen.

“Please help yourself,” Ben said, passing the mashed potatoes to her after giving himself a generous lump.

She filled up her plate in an impressive build of a little bit of everything and poured gravy over the lot. He didn’t appreciate food as much as he did when he was mortal, but he had to admit, sitting here with her made him realize that he had missed the coziness of a hearty autumn meal.

She closed her eyes in bliss at her first taste of Tess’ buttery mashed potatoes. “This is amazing. My mother makes it just like this, only we had a lot of roasted garlic.”

“That would be less than ideal in this case,” Ben said.

Her eyes flew open. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to offend.”

“None taken.” His fork cut through the moist turkey effortlessly. He understood. He couldn’t remember what garlic tasted like, but he remembered that when he had been human, he had liked it.

“What do you usually have for the Christmas meal?”

He winced slightly. “We celebrate Yule. Some of the Christmas trappings are painful to vampires.”

Selena placed down her fork. “I seem to be saying all the wrong things.”

“But for the right reasons,” he assured her. “We’re getting to know each other. It’s common to misstep at first. I have nothing against Christmas or the holiday. In fact, we celebrate all denominations in Hope. There are plenty of winter holiday traditions to enjoy. We actually wind up taking a little bit from all of them.”

“I like that idea. You get the best of all of the holidays.”

“We make our own rules in Hope. It suits us.”

“But not others,” Selena said. “Is that why you’ve been targeted?”

Ben toyed with his fork, considering the question. “There have always been vampire hunters who are willing to test their mettle against me. I make an easy target because I do not hide what I am. However, this time around, they’ve joined forces with a witch named Izina Broome. I’m not sure what I’ve done to cross her, but she’s the bigger threat. She’s the reason why the town will be out of power until we can get the grid back up. Her minions’ lightning strikes took out both our magical and mundane supports.”

“I hope I’m not the cause of that,” Selena said, picking up her fork and stirring through her mashed potatoes.

“How could you be? You’ve just come into the mortal lands from Fairy.”

She savored her meal for a few bits, obviously distracted about something. Ben let her work it out and poured them both more wine.

“I need to tell you something. And you may want to kick me out of your house after I tell you this.”

“I doubt that it will come to that. Please, feel free to tell me anything.” Ben couldn’t imagine what she thought would anger him enough to revoke his hospitality.

“The reason why I’m here in Hope is because I’ve been cursed. Everywhere I go, bad luck seems to hurt everyone around me. I was banished from my tribe because of it.”

“That’s awful,” Ben said. “They should have rallied around you, not shunned you.”

Blinking back tears, Selena shook her head. “No, I was a danger to them. They did the right thing. But I’m on a quest to be cured of the curse. I’m going to ask the wishing well for my heart’s desire.”

“Is that to return to your tribe?” Ben’s heart sank. There was no way she could be his soulmate if she were going to leave him. The universe wasn’t that cruel. Or was it? The Fae had a nasty sense of humor sometimes.

“It’s to have the curse removed. I can’t return to my family and friends until that happens.”

Ben nodded. “What happens if the wishing well doesn’t grant you that heart’s desire but grants you a different wish, or if it doesn’t work at all?”

“I’m not going to give up,” she said. “I’ve got several other artifacts that the Fae have left around the mortal world to visit and see if they can help.”

“The wishing well sometimes takes more than one visit to work,” Ben said. “You don’t want to leave too soon.” It wasn’t quite a fib. Very rarely did someone wish to be rich and then get hit by a pile of money seconds later.

“How long do you think it could take?” she asked, frowning.

Forever. “You should know within a few weeks,” his conscience made him say.

“That was longer than I had considered,” Selena said. “I’ll have to find some temporary work and a place in the forest to camp.”

“Actually,” Ben said. “I have an alternative suggestion. It’s one of the reasons I wanted to speak with you tonight. I was impressed with how you handled yourself this evening. You took care of Avery and his louts very quickly.”

“I let one get away,” she said apologetically. “And you took care of Avery yourself.”

“Be that as it may. I’m hoping to solve this problem with Izina Broome before Yule. I could use a bodyguard to keep me safe during that time. I would provide you with room and board. You could stay here.” Ben added casually, hoping she couldn’t sense how much he wanted her with him. But if she wanted to go back to the Grantmore, he’d pay for it. “And a decent salary.”

“That’s very generous of you,” Selena said.

“It’s worth it to me to have someone with your skills to keep me safe against a band of irate witches and pesky vampire hunters. I do have my own staff, of course. The town itself is guarded by gargoyles and werewolves. I have a small group of ghouls who are in charge of security at the office and official events. You would be my personal guard, though. We would be spending a great deal of time together.” A great deal, if he had anything to say about it.

Selena considered his words as she continued to demolish her plate. “Do you eat like this every night?”

“We could,” Tess called from the kitchen.

So much for privacy.

Selena gave him a small smile. “And I could stay in the Duran Duran room?”

“Yes,” Ben said. It looked like she was considering it.

“I imagine going up against a coven would be dangerous.”

“Not to a warrior of the Dawnstar tribe,” he said.

Her smile faded, and he could have kicked himself. “Former warrior.”

“For now,” he said, hoping to make her feel better.

“I would still need to make the pilgrimage to the wishing well.”

“Naturally,” he agreed.

“I did have a dream tonight, or maybe it was a vision. A sunsidhe appeared in my dream and said she would grant me my wish.”

His heart sank. “Can you describe the sunsidhe?”

“She looked like a human unicorn.”

Candace.

“How did she seem? Was she with a moonsidhe?” He wondered if Roderick was still with her.

“She was alone. She seemed whimsical and mysterious.”

“That was Candace, all right,” he muttered.

“You know her?”

Ben nodded. “Candace Juniper. She and a moonsidhe named Roderick Stone created the well. If she said the well would grant your wish, you’ll be out of here soon.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Selena frowned.

Hope flickered like a butterfly inside him, and he hated that he still had hope after all these years. Ben should have been used to disappointment and banished it out of existence by now.

“She said I needed to spend time away from the Faelands.”

Thank you, Candace.

Ben kept his expression neutral. “Staying here would allow you to do that.”

“And she said that when I find what I’ve been missing all my life, the well will grant me my heart’s desire.”

“What have you been missing all your life?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know, and she wouldn’t say.”

“How very much like a Fae goddess.”

“I know, right?” Selena’s mouth twisted in annoyance.

“Then it seems we can help each other out. I can provide you with a place to stay and a job while you look for what you need to find. And you can help me with my little witch problem.” Ben was cautiously optimistic.

“I’m hesitant to accept the position,” she said reluctantly.

Panic like he had never known gripped him. “Is there anything I can do to sweeten the pot? The salary is quite generous. I was thinking of five thousand dollars a week.”

Selena dropped the roll that she had been about to take a bite out of.

“That is very generous.”

“I could open up a line of credit for you in my name for any business expenses you might need.” Ben knew he sounded desperate, but he couldn’t help himself.

“It’s not the money,” she said. “It’s my curse. I’m afraid that just by being near you, I could help your enemies.”

“You didn’t help them tonight when you were protecting me.”

“That’s true.”

“And nothing bad has happened while we’ve been talking.”

Selena winced. “I wish you wouldn’t tempt fate by saying things like that.”

Ben didn’t believe in fate. He also didn’t believe in curses, even though he knew some witches could cast strange incantations. “It’s possible that if the well doesn’t grant your wish, that there might be a cure for your curse in Izina Broome’s spell books.”

That appeared to have made the decision for her.

“Perhaps that’s what I need to find. A witch spell to cure me would be what I’ve been missing all my life.”

Or it could be a soulmate. He wasn’t sure how to ask the question if there was someone special waiting in the Faelands for her. A rare twang of jealousy reared in him, and he fought to keep the scowl off his face at the thought of her with another man. If she wasn’t involved with someone, it was possible she could fall in love with him. And even if she wasn’t the answer to his wish, they could still have a good time. He didn’t think he was alone in feeling this strange attraction.

“I’m grateful for the opportunity,” she said.

“It is I who am grateful.” Ben wondered if he would make a fool out of himself, believing in the wishing well yet again. He comforted himself that at least he’d be well protected and in the company of a beautiful woman for a little while.



CHAPTER SIX



Selena

Since Ben slept during the day, Selena had to readjust her own sleep patterns. But although she slept in this Saturday, she couldn't rest anymore and was out of bed by noon.

"Aren't you going to have lunch?" Tess said. She was waiting at the bottom of the stairs for her, holding a tray with what looked like a leftover turkey sandwich on it. How long had she been standing there?

"Thank you," Selena said, following her into the dining area. A formal place setting was laid out for her. "You don't have to go to all this trouble for me," Selena started to say and then saw the affronted expression in the goblin's eyes. "Unless you want to," Selena finished softly.

Tess plunked the sandwich down in front of her. The turkey sandwich had a layer of cranberry sauce, gravy, and stuffing. Selena ate it like she hadn't had a meal in months. It was the best sandwich she'd ever had. In her tribe, they foraged for what they ate and cooked efficiently with an eye for making the food feed a large number of people. An individual sandwich was a luxury, and to have someone serve it to you was only something the elderly or infirm indulged in.

"Thank you," she mumbled, a little appalled at how quickly she had scarfed that down.

But Tess looked gratified. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. Would you like beef stew for dinner tonight?"

Selena refrained from saying *if it's not too much trouble* and nodded instead. Beef was also in short supply in the Faelands. They ate venison or

bison because those were the animals that tended to overpopulate the areas if they weren't kept in check.

Tess beamed. "I'll pack you a snack box to take with you for your outing today."

Selena wasn't even sure where she was going, but it didn't hurt to have snacks. "I was thinking of perhaps hiking up to the wishing well."

Tess shuddered. "Not on a Saturday. You'll never get close to it, and the people are terrible on the weekend."

"Okay," Selena said. Ben had mentioned to wait until Monday. It was just she wanted to make sure that Candace knew what wish Selena had in mind. She knew from experience that the Fae tended to be very literal and needed things specifically spelled out for them. Even though she had asked the sunsidhe for a way to break her curse, she wasn't sure if she had made it clear that was her heart's desire. She didn't want to receive a fine new scabbard for Artegenos instead of being cured of her bad luck.

After being handed a backpack of food that would have fed her for a week, Selena wrapped her scarf snugly around her neck and stepped out into the frosty morning air of the small town of Hope. Snowflakes danced around her, settling gently on the ground and creating a soft blanket that hushed the sounds of life around her. She stopped to admire the quaint charm of the place. It wasn't the Faelands, but it felt like a close community.

As she walked down the main street, her breath misting in the cold air, she passed by several shops with their warm, welcoming lights beckoning her inside. It looked like they had restored the town's power while she slept. She decided to stop in at the local bakery, drawn by the delicious scent of freshly baked bread wafting from its doors.

"Good morning. I'm Adelaide," the plump, rosy-cheeked baker said from behind the counter. "What can I get for you today?"

"Hello," Selena replied, her eyes drifting over the array of mouthwatering treats displayed before her. "I'm new in town, just getting to know the place. Everything smells wonderful. I just had a big lunch, but I'm tempted to try that maple doughnut."

"Thank you, dear," Adelaide beamed. "I've been baking since I was a little girl, and I put my heart and soul into every treat I make. Here you go. The first one is free." Adelaide reached under the counter and handed her the doughnut with a waxed paper.

"Oh, I couldn't. Please let me pay you." She had money from Avery if she didn't want to dip into Ben's line of credit.

"Nonsense, you'll be back. My doughnuts are addicting."

"Thank you," Selena said, taking the doughnut. It smelled divine, and the first bite melted immediately on her tongue into a sweet layer of goodness. She nodded in approval at Adelaide. "Wonderful."

"We take pride in our craft here in Hope, whether it's baking or protecting our wishing well." There was a vague warning in Adelaide's tone. Selena figured that was probably because she was openly carrying a sword around town.

"Do people try to attack the well?" Selena asked.

"The well, the town, the townspeople."

"That's awful." She had thought that the attacks from last night were a fluke. Ben hadn't mentioned that there had been other occurrences. A nagging thought that had been bothering her was that Ben had been attacked

twice since she had come to town. If it turned out her curse was making her a danger to him, Selena would have to leave.

Adelaide shook her head. “There’s always some intolerant idiot who wants to cause pain and destruction. Sometimes, it’s because they hate the magic of the well. They say we’re devil worshipers. Other times, it’s that we’re consorting with beasts. Then, they want to round up all the shapeshifters and get them to leave the area. Lately, they’ve taken offense that our mayor is a vampire.”

“And they don’t like that because?” Selena had a hard time trying to follow the logic of hatred that these intruders harbored on the peaceful-looking town.

“They think he’s going to seduce their daughters or kill their livestock.” Adelaide cocked her head. “Or maybe it’s the other way around. But Mayor Ben isn’t like that. He doesn’t drink from the unwilling.”

Selena knew otherwise, but she supposed Avery had it coming. After all, he did try to kill Ben.

“How do you protect the townspeople from the newcomers who want to do you harm?”

“I poison the doughnuts.”

Selena stopped chewing, her eyes wide.

“I’m kidding,” Adelaide said.

“I would have told you if I had detected poison,” Artegenos said.

“Tasty poison.” Selena finished her doughnut and licked her fingers clean.

"Seriously, though, we have werewolf guards patrolling the streets at night."

Nodding, Selena said, "I've met one."

"And gargoyle sentries do fly-bys during the day, but the mayor keeps us safe too."

"In what way?"

"He's a powerful vampire. He can hex a mob into putting down their torches and pitchforks and buy doughnuts instead. He has a good staff of workers that keep the town running."

And Selena was going to be one of them for a short time.

"Have you made a wish from the well?" Selena asked.

"Almost all of us in Hope have. We're either descendants of the people who had their wishes granted, or we asked the well for our heart's desires, and they were granted. A long time ago, I wished for a successful business." Adelaide waved her hand. "And you can see it has come true."

"You were worthy," Selena said. "Did you have to prove that to the well, or did it know right away?"

"It was touch and go that first year. I baked from sun up to sun down. The hard work paid off."

Selena wondered if it was the well's magic or just Adelaide herself that made her so successful.

"Have you seen a lot of miracles happen?"

"Not as many as I'd like. I've seen a grown man in a wheelchair get up and walk again. I've seen a terminally ill person wish for death and then pass peacefully in the bed and breakfast the next morning. One person even found

a rare postage stamp in a book he purchased at the bookstore, and he was able to purchase a Maclaren automobile with it.”

“And the other wishes?” Selena asked.

“I don’t get to see any of the quiet wishes or the more private ones. But a lot of people leave here happy.”

“What about the wishes that don’t come true?”

“The mayor helps a little out with that as well. Some people forget there was even a town named Hope. Others think they got their wish and leave here happy, even if they couldn’t remember what their wish was.”

“There must be some people who remember being hexed and perhaps have a grudge against the mayor?” Selena wondered if that was why the witch was attacking him.

“I haven’t heard of it happening, but I suppose anything is possible. The townspeople try not to burden the mayor if they don’t have to. He takes on a lot for us. We’ve learned to rely on each other. We’re all a little different from the normal, even us humans. For example, Isaac, the cemetery caretaker, is a bit of an odd one, but his heart’s in the right place.”

“What’s he like?”

“He’s been here for as long as I can remember,” Adelaide continued. “He’s always been something of a loner, but we all adore him. He’s got a soft spot for animals, you know. Sometimes, he even brings them back to life if they’ve passed on too soon, just so they can have a second chance.”

“Really?” Selena murmured, her interest deepening. “Do you think the wishing well granted him that ability?”

"Who can say?" Adelaide shrugged, smiling kindly at Selena. "Now, dear, why don't you try one of these apple turnovers? They're my specialty."

"Thank you," Selena said, accepting the flaky pastry with gratitude. This time, she handed Adelaide a five-dollar bill to pay for it. As she took a bite, the sweet, warm filling melted in her mouth, making her sigh with contentment.

"Delicious," she praised, her eyes meeting Adelaide's. "You truly are an artist."

"Thank you, dear," Adelaide beamed. "And welcome to Hope. I'm sure the wishing well will grant you your heart's desire."

Selena hoped so, but she was definitely going to visit the bakery again to fatten up to prepare for the long winter just in case she had to move on.

As she continued her exploration of the town, she stumbled upon a small shop that caught her eye. The sign above the door read "Hope's Armory" in delicate lettering. Intrigued, she pushed open the door and was met with the faint scent of leather and oil. Inside, she found an array of weapons and armor, from swords to bows to shields—everything a warrior could need. Selena was about to put a serious dent in the mayor's line of credit.

"Finally," Artegenos said. "You will not leave here without procuring me a scabbard."

Selena knew better than to argue.

"Welcome." A burly man greeted her as she came through the door. His voice was warm and inviting. "I'm Orin. I'm the blacksmith here in Hope. Looking for anything in particular?"

"Yes," Selena replied, her eyes scanning the selection. "I need a scabbard for my sword."

"Ah, let's see what we have." Orin led her to a rack displaying various scabbards, each crafted with intricate designs. Selena carefully examined them, searching for one that would suit Artegenos. She finally settled on a sleek, black leather scabbard adorned with silver filigree.

"No," Artegenos vetoed.

She bit back a sigh. "Well, you choose then." She thought at the sword.

"I need to be free to take a better look."

"People tend to get the wrong idea when I draw you just to peruse the goods."

"So, explain it to them."

Yeah, because that always went over well. But she needed to get this errand done, or Artegenos would drive her batty, so she risked being thought of as a nutjob who talked to their sword. "I'm Selena. I've taken a temporary job with Mayor Whitlock."

Orin straightened up from where he had been stacking iron billets near the forge. He smiled eagerly. "I heard about the attacks. Is there something special that you're looking for? I can see that you do not need a sword."

"About that." Selena took a deep breath. It was better to say this quickly, like ripping off a bandage. "She's a sentient sword and wants to pick out her own scabbard, but I need to draw her to let her look at the choices." She paused to see how her words went over.

Orin looked skeptical, but he stepped back and placed his hand on the large hammer he wore on his belt. "Go ahead."

Artegenos leapt into her hand. Orin blinked in surprise and took another step back.

“No. No. No. Maybe. That has possibilities,” the sword intoned as she moved it across the wall of goods. “There. That one.”

“This one?” Selena touched a forest green scabbard with a delicate trace of silver vines.

“Behind that one.”

Selena reached in and removed the scabbard hanging behind the green one. This one was crafted from fine, chestnut-brown leather, its texture smooth and supple to the touch. It was rugged but elegant. The mouth of the scabbard was adorned with a simple yet sturdy metal throat fitting forged from polished steel, featuring intricate scrollwork that spoke of timeless craftsmanship. As she examined the scabbard's surface, she noticed a series of discreetly embossed patterns of intertwining vines and leaves. The details were expertly etched, adding an understated touch of artistry to the scabbard's overall design.

She was never going to be able to afford it. Even with the mayor's line of credit. But why was this work of art hidden?

“That's not one of my best,” Orin said. “You'd be better off with the first one that you chose.”

“No,” Artegenos said simply. “I do not want that one. This is the one.”

Selena turned it over in her hand. It was exquisite. She'd almost think it was elven-made. “How much for this?”

“One hundred dollars,” he said.

“I'll give you fifty,” Selena replied.

“Do not haggle with the man. This is the one I want,” Artegenos huffed.

“Yes, but he just admitted it was inferior. You can’t accept the first price,” she thought back to the sword.

Orin cleared his throat. “I have something to admit. That one wasn’t made by me. It was made by my apprentice, Nia. Nia is still learning her craft.”

“Is Nia here?” Selena asked.

“Yes, but her scabbard isn’t fit for one of the mayor’s workers.”

“Why not?” Selena asked.

“As I said, she is only an apprentice.”

“I’d like to meet her.”

“Of course. Nia!” Orin roared over his shoulder.

A few seconds later, a young woman appeared from behind. She was dirty and sweaty. She carried a piece of leather in one hand and an awl in the other. “What do you need, Master Orin?”

On closer inspection, Selena noticed that the girl was half-elven.

“Customer wants to talk to you.”

Nia turned to look at her. Her sea-foam green eyes grew wide. She dropped the leather and ran.

“Nia! What’s gotten into you?” Orin said, slack-jawed. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure why she ran away from you.”

“It’s all right. I’d still like to buy her scabbard. Of course, I’d like to adjust my bid down to twenty-five dollars.”

“Yes, of course. Naturally.”

“Can you put it on the mayor’s line of credit?”

Orin nodded. "Please don't mention Nia's poor behavior to him."

"I won't," Selena said. And because she felt bad about negotiating the price down so low, she also bought a new leather belt to hang the scabbard on.

"Ah," Artegenos sighed as Selena sheathed it. A profound sense of harmony resonated within her. The scabbard was more than what it appeared, and Orin hadn't known the treasure he had. She was worried about why Nia was so afraid of her, though. But that was a mystery to solve for another day. She also stocked up on arrows for her bow and purchased a multi-tool so she wouldn't have to use Artegenos as a flint or steel again. Then, after feeling really bad about spending a boatload of the mayor's money, she decided that she should get to work and earn her salary.

"When Nia feels comfortable talking with me," Selena said. "I will be staying at the mayor's house. If you can send her over, I'm sure the mayor will offer her his protection if, for some reason, she's afraid of me."

"She'll be there," Orin said grimly. "I'll make sure of it."

That didn't sound ominous at all.

Selena spent the rest of the day walking around town and observing the tourists and how they interacted with the townspeople. She didn't detect any threats, but she did overhear some grumblings at how long the line was to the wishing well.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Selena hurried back to the manor house, eager to see Ben again. As she entered the lavish foyer, she caught sight of two figures standing near the grand staircase. She recognized Sykes but didn't know who the stern-looking woman was.

"Cutting it close," Sykes said. "You've returned just in time. Master Ben will be rising shortly."

"Good. And you are?" Selena dropped her hand to Artegenos, who was startled awake from the light snooze she had been in ever since being put in the scabbard.

The woman shot her a disapproving look, her lips pursed tightly. "I am Mayor Ben's administrative assistant, Gertrude St. James," she said icily. "I think your being here is unnecessary. Master Ben has managed well enough for centuries without a bodyguard."

Selena reminded herself to stay polite, even if she wanted to tell the officious little snot to jump in a lake. "I understand that, Gertrude. But now that I am here, I feel it is my duty to do what I can to protect him and the town."

"Your concern is touching," Sykes chimed in, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "But as Gertrude said, we have managed the challenges of working in this town for years. You are here because the Master finds you intriguing."

"That will pass," Gertrude said. "I've seen it before."

"I could give her a nasty scar," Artegenos mused.

Selena was more distracted by the thought that Ben found her intriguing. If it were true, the feeling was mutual. She just wished his minions weren't so hostile to her.

"I get that you're feeling threatened by my presence."

They both reared back with sharp gasps.

"I'm not here to usurp your authority. I'm here to protect Ben from Izina Broome and the vampire hunters. Once that's finished and I have my wish

from the well granted, I'll be on my way. Until then, it's in your best interest to remember that your Master wants me here. If you're loyal servants like I think you are, you'll respect that."

"Never mind," Artegenos said with a yawn. "Your cut was more deadly."

"Very well," Gertrude sniffed, clearly unhappy with Selena. "But remember your place."

"Right back at you," Selena said.

Sykes wisely remained silent.

As they finished speaking, the sound of a door creaking open echoed through the manor. Ben emerged from his coffin room, a weary smile gracing his pale features. "Good evening, everyone," he greeted them.

She wondered how much he had heard.

"Master Ben," Sykes and Gertrude both bowed in unison.

"Selena," he said. "How was your day?"

"Uneventful, and yet I have a few questions."

"I'd be more than happy to speak to you about them. Let's walk to my office."

"Master Ben, we need to discuss the upcoming Winter Festival first," Gertrude said hurriedly. She practically leaped in between Selena and Ben.

"Is that so?" Ben raised an eyebrow, amusement flickering in his eyes as he glanced at Selena. "I'm sure that you and Sykes can work out the details. It's the same damned thing every year. Parade, sidewalk sales, midway games, and the crowning of the Winter Prince and Princess. Did I miss anything?"

Gertrude consulted her tablet. "No," she said quietly. "That's about it."

“Then I’ll leave you two to it,” Ben said and gestured for Selena to move towards the door.

“Security needs to be tighter,” Sykes said.

“That’s Rahl’s area.”

“He’s not back yet from your errand,” Gertrude said.

“Well, next time he checks in, you can speak to him about the Winter Festival. And once he gets back, make a point to spend some time with him and get those details taken care of.”

Gertrude blanched. “Alone?”

“What about your personal safety?” Sykes said, following them as Gertrude stood stock still in the foyer with a hand on her heart.

“That’s Selena’s job now.”

“Are you sure she can be trusted?”

"Sykes, Gertrude," Ben said firmly, clearly losing patience. "Selena is here to help, just as you both are. Now, if you don't mind, we're in the middle of something important."

"Very well," Sykes huffed, shooting Selena a venomous glare before turning on his heel and stalking out of the room, Gertrude following closely behind.

"Sorry about them," Ben apologized once they were alone. "They can be a bit overprotective."

"It's all right," Selena reassured him, grateful for his support. "I understand where they're coming from. In any case, I won't let their jealousy distract me from the task at hand."

"Thank you, Selena," Ben said softly, his gaze warm and appreciative as they walked to the town hall.



CHAPTER SEVEN

B^{en}

The cold December air whipped around them as they walked to his office in the town hall. He, of course, didn't feel the chill, but he wondered if Selena needed a heavier coat or if her cloak was enchanted. Her green eyes were alert and focused as she scanned the streets ahead of them. The small town of Hope seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for the first major snowfall, which could arrive any moment. Twinkling colored lights adorned the shops while wreaths and garlands hung proudly on doors, signaling that the holiday season had arrived.

"You mentioned you had a few questions for me?"

Selena's brow furrowed in thought as they continued walking. "I had a thought about why Izina Broome could be targeting you. Perhaps it's because she or someone she loved didn't get their wish granted by the well."

Ben considered it. "It's possible. I don't remember everyone I've had to handle."

"Or it could be because someone that you used your vampire powers to compel them to forget wants vengeance and has hired Izina's coven or the vampire hunters to take you out."

"Could be," Ben mused, his voice tinged with uncertainty. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it than just a failed wish.

"Has anyone ever held a grudge like that before?" Selena asked. "Grudges can be powerful, especially when fueled by magic and unfulfilled desires."

As they approached the town hall, the scent of gingerbread and mulled cider wafted through the air, momentarily distracting Ben from his darker

thoughts. The festive atmosphere was a stark contrast to Izina's sinister machinations to assassinate him.

Upon entering his office, Ben lit the fireplace with a snap of his fingers. The flickering flames cast a cozy orange glow across the room, highlighting the festive decorations strewn about. He gestured for Selena to sit on one of the plush chairs facing the crackling fire.

"Gertrude," he called out, pressing a small button on his antique wooden desk. "Could you please send up some supper for us? Something warm and comforting would be perfect."

"Gertrude?" Selena asked. "Isn't she back at your mansion?"

"Of course, Mayor," Gertrude's voice replied through the intercom.

"Magic." Ben twinkled his fingers. "Actually, we just have a really good Wi-Fi connection."

He sat behind his desk and powered up his computer. "Do you think we should take the fight to Serenity and confront Izina?"

"Not yet," Selena said. "We need more information. I hate to dangle you out like bait..."

"But if we can capture another minion, it would be helpful." He nodded in satisfaction. "I appreciate that you don't treat me like I'm unable to defend myself. I have one of Izina's coven in my dungeon, and Rahl is tracking another witch who escaped after the attack the other night."

She blinked at him. "Dungeon?"

"It's more of a jail cell," he said hurriedly, not wanting her to see him as a monster. "In the basement of my house."

"I see." She tilted her head at him.

“You’re more than welcome to question her and Avery, but they haven’t been very forthcoming. Lettie is more terrified of her cousin Izina than she is of me, and Avery is a zealot. I don’t think you’ll get a lot out of them.”

“We could set them free and follow them back to Izina’s stronghold and gather information that way.”

Ben nodded. “I’m in talks with some of the forest creatures to see if they can spy for us. Unfortunately, no one wants to get on the bad side of the witches.”

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation, and Gertrude entered with a tray laden with steaming bowls of soup, fresh bread, and mugs of hot cider. The aroma of cinnamon and cloves filled the room as she set the tray down on a small table in front of the fireplace.

"Thank you, Gertrude," Ben said, noticing that she wouldn't even look at Selena.

“Is that going to be a problem?” Selena asked when Gertrude closed the door behind her, just barely below a slam.

“I hope not for very much longer.” At her alarmed look, Ben clarified. “She is enamored with the idea of having a supernatural lover. My head of security, Rahl, has shown interest in her. I’m trying to gently guide them together.”

Selena nearly choked on her soup. “I hadn’t pictured you as a matchmaker.”

He gave what he hoped was a careless shrug. “My dark exterior hides a soft heart.”

“Does it?” she asked, smiling shyly at him.

“No, but it sounded good, didn’t it?”

“It did.” She broke off a piece of bread and buttered it. “I have a confession to make. I spent a lot of your money today at Orin’s shop.”

He waved his hand. “I have enough money to outfit an army. I need you well equipped.”

“Something odd happened today. Do you know his apprentice, Nia?”

Ben had a vague impression of a grubby girl who was always working hard. “Not well.”

“She’s got elven blood in her, and she made this.” Selena showed him the scabbard where her magical sword was secured.

“She’s got talent.”

“Untrained talent. There’s magic in it, but wild magic. I would need to speak to her to know more, but she ran away from me. Orin said he would send her to me under your protection, but I can’t shake the idea that she’s gone for good.”

Ben held up a finger. “I can help with that.” He pressed another button on the intercom. “Wyatt, can you come in here, please?”

Almost immediately, the door burst open. Ben noted that Selena half rose out of her chair but apparently recognized the werewolf and sank back down again.

“How may I serve?” Wyatt asked.

“I need you to get a scent from Orin. His apprentice, Nia, may have left town, and we need to speak with her. Track her and bring her back to me.”

“Gently,” Selena interjected. “She may be afraid. Assure her that she will be under the mayor’s protection, and no one will harm her.”

Wyatt glanced at Ben for confirmation and then nodded. “It will be done.” The werewolf took off as fast as he arrived.

“Thank you,” Selena said.

“If only our problems with Izina could be handled like that.”

“Couldn’t they?” she asked. “Assign a werewolf to your two prisoners and have them followed.”

“I’d hate to lighten the town’s defenses, but at least I wouldn’t have to worry about their loyalty. They are bound to me. However, if they are captured, they know a lot about me and the town.”

“I think it’s worth the risk,” Selena said. “I can fill in with the town’s defenses if needed, and if we have to rescue them from the coven, we can use the other werewolves to track them.”

“If they are captured, we’ll need to take the fight to Izina.”

Selena nodded.

Ben liked that idea. “Let’s put that plan into effect once Rahl reports back with his findings.”



SELENA

After a bureaucratic weekend, where Selena thought she would grow cross-eyed with boredom, Monday finally arrived. While Ben slept in his coffin, Selena made the pilgrimage to the wishing well. There was a small line of tourists waiting for their turn to make their wish, their faces alight with anticipation and, in some cases, dread.

As she waited, Selena scanned the crowd, trying to sense if anyone was considering violence or if they could lean that way if they didn’t get their wish.

As she observed the crowd, most people were genuinely excited or nervous about making their wishes. However, one man caught her attention. He stood apart from the others, his face contorted with anger and frustration. Selena noticed the dark bags under his eyes and the clenched fists hidden in his pockets.

Intrigued, Selena approached him discreetly, curious about what could be troubling him so much. She gracefully maneuvered through the crowd until she stood beside him, maintaining a friendly smile.

"Hello there," she greeted him warmly, "Is everything all right? You seem upset."

The man glanced at her with suspicion and hesitated before responding. "This is my fourth time here. I've been asking for money," he admitted, his voice tinged with vulnerability. "I want to provide a better life for my family. Give my children the opportunities I never had, but every time I wish for it, nothing changes. It's like the well is mocking me, and I can't bear the thought of returning home empty-handed again."

Selena could sense the man's desperation, and a shiver ran down her spine. "Don't give up hope just yet. Sometimes, wishes take longer to come true than we expect. Maybe try wishing for something else? Something more specific, perhaps?"

The man shook his head, a defeated look in his eyes. "I've tried everything. A better job, a new home. Nothing seems to work."

Maybe he wasn't worthy. Maybe because she was standing next to him, his luck would be even worse now.

"Next!" called the attendant, making her jump guiltily.

"It's your turn," the man said, glaring at her.

“You can go ahead of me,” she said. It was the least she could do if he had been contaminated by her bad luck.

The man grunted and stormed up to the well. He raised the bucket from the depths of the well and then brought out a special ladle that they sold in town. He dipped the ladle into the water and took a sip. Then he reached into his pocket and tossed a gold coin down into the depths. “I need that to come back to me ten thousand-fold.”

Selena held her breath. A loud rumbling started from the bottom of the well, and then a geyser of gold-colored coins vomited up from the bottom like a volcano. Selena gaped in horror as mounds upon mounds of Sacagawea dollars pelted the poor man until he was knocked to the ground and battered by them.

No one dared approach the small fortune of coins that half buried the unconscious man.

“Well, that’s new,” The werewolf captain of the town’s police force said, coming up to stand next to her. She had found out from Ben that his name was Simon.

“Is it?”

“It seems like his wish was granted, with a vengeance.”

Selena wondered if that was her fault. “We should check and see if he’s okay.”

Simon spoke a guttural order in a language she didn’t understand into the microphone unit he had attached to his ear. Two ghouls moved in carrying a stretcher. They loaded the man and his golden coins onto it, snapping at a few eager tourists who tried to snatch the dollars from the ground.

“I believe you were next,” Simon said, indicating with his hand that she should start the line over again.

“I guess I am.” Selena stepped up to the well, feeling the weight of her curse on her shoulders. She lowered the bucket into the well, and when it was full, she pulled it back up. With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and whispered, “I know we kind of spoke in the dreamlands unless, of course, I imagined it all. I just wanted to come here and make my request in person.” Cupping her palm, she scooped up some water from the bucket and took a sip. Switching to Elvish, she said louder, “Please, ancient powers that be, help me break this curse that has haunted me for so long. Grant me guidance on how to make my wish come true so I may live a life unburdened by this cruel fate.” Selena opened her eyes. “And to be clear, my heart’s desire is that I’d like to no longer be unlucky and cause other people bad fortune.”

She waited a few more seconds. “Hello?”

She had expected to feel the immediate effects of her wish as if a great weight would be lifted from her shoulders, replaced by the warmth and light of newfound connections. Or at least a confirmation that she had been heard. Instead, she found herself staring into the depths of the wishing well, waiting for something—anything—to change.

“Hey lady, there’s a line here,” a man said.

“You will wait your turn,” Simon growled.

“It’s all right,” Selena said dejectedly. “I’m done.” But as she turned away, a faint tinkling of bells caught her attention.

“When you find what you’ve been missing all your life, the well will grant you your heart’s desire.” The voice belonged to the sunsidhe, Candace Juniper. And it came from all around Selena.

“Did you hear that?” She asked Simon.

“Hear what?”

“Nothing.” Selena moved aside as the impatient man who was next in line sank to his knees in front of the well. He didn’t bother to lower the bucket. He tipped it to his mouth and took a drink.

“I want a gorgeous woman who will obey my every command.”

There was a grumbling roar from the depth of the well.

“Does this happen often?” Selena asked.

“Often enough, you’d think there would be a social media page dedicated to things not to wish for,” Simon said.

Floating up from the well on a fluffy cloud was a golden retriever puppy with a pink bow around its neck. It drifted over the wall and settled down at the man’s feet.

“What’s this? I said woman, not female.”

There was a crack of thunder and a deep voice that was definitely not Candace’s said, “You said woman, but you thought bitch.”

“Intent is everything,” Simon said solemnly.

The man scooped up the puppy and stomped away from the well, muttering about bullshit.

“Do you think the puppy will be all right?” Selena asked.

“If she is in danger, the well will see to her protection.” And then a bird pooped on Simon’s head.

Selena took a sidestep away from him. “I should be going.”

As she walked back to the town square, she racked her brain, trying to figure out how she could find what she had been missing all her life. Her clues were to spend time away from the Faelands. Check. Experience more of what the universe could offer her. Okay. And something that required great strength and sacrifice. That remained to be seen. What she did know was that she wasn't ready to move on to the next artifact just yet. Not when there was potential here in Hope. And the possibility of spending more time with Ben.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Selena

The moon hung low in the winter sky, casting a silvery glow over the town while Selena escorted Ben as he did his nightly rounds around town. She was nervous about being out so openly, but they weren't run over by a malfunctioning car, and there weren't any vampire hunters coming out of the alleyways to chuck holy water balloons at them. Squinting up into the sky, she could see the gargoyle guards flying over the town, and every now and then, they passed a werewolf foot patrol on the streets.

“Everyone seems to be decorating for the Winter Festival,” Ben grumbled. “Even though it’s still three weeks away.”

“You don’t seem excited about it.”

Ben shrugged. “It’s the same thing every year. But that’s the thing with traditions, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Selena said, trying to force a lightness into her tone that she didn’t feel.

Ben stopped and faced her. “I’m sorry. Did I bring up a painful memory?”

“Not painful. Not anymore. Our tribe has Yule traditions. I wasn’t good in the kitchen. I liked eating cookies more than baking them. I was a menace with a broom, so I wasn’t allowed to clean the yurts we lived in. So, I would lead the group to gather mistletoe from the forest to add to our tribe’s collection. I did that for most of my life until the curse made it more of a chore than a tradition.”

“What happened?”

Selena blew out a sigh. "One year, I led the raiding party over a bear trap. We had to fight our way out of the trap and then again from the rangers who had been poaching on our lands. Another year, the crop of mistletoe we collected suddenly turned into poison ivy and covered all of us in a terrible itchy rash."

Ben winced.

"But the last straw for me and my tribe was around this time last year. Last year, as I tried to help prepare for the festival, everything that could go wrong did. I tripped and knocked over the hearth decorations, breaking several cherished ornaments. Then, as I tried to light the candles, I accidentally set my hair on fire, which caused a panic. And when we finally gathered to exchange gifts, I somehow managed to ruin every single one, from a simple doll to a handcrafted wooden toy."

Ben's eyes widened in sympathy.

"That wasn't the worst of it," Selena continued with a heavy sigh. "To top it all off, I accidentally spilled a pot of hot soup all over our tribe's revered storyteller, Elder Nessa. She had been sharing our ancient Yule tales, and my mishap injured her and ruined a precious scroll. That was the moment my tribe decided that my curse of bad luck had gone too far, and they couldn't bear the misfortune I brought upon our most sacred traditions any longer. They started the long banishment process, and here I am."

Ben placed a comforting hand on Selena's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Selena."

She half expected his hand to break out in hives or catch on fire. But when it didn't, she let herself relax under it.

"Hopefully, once I find what I've been missing all my life, the well will grant my heart's desire, and I'll finally get rid of this curse."

“I sincerely hope that happens for you,” Ben said, but he appeared to be melancholy.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked as they circled back towards the town hall.

“About all the paperwork I have to do,” he said glumly.

“We could put that off for a bit and have some hot cocoa,” she suggested.

“Add in a peppermint stick, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

They ducked into The Gingerbread House, a cozy café that had just opened for the night. As they sat down, Selena gazed at the warm, flickering candles on the tables and the garlands of pine and holly that adorned the walls. The sweet, spicy smell of cinnamon and cloves mingled with the rich aroma of chocolate and cream. A sudden pang of restlessness distracted her, but she pushed it aside, determined to enjoy the moment.

A young waitress, a pale, freckled girl with short, dark hair and bright green eyes, greeted them with a wide smile. "Hi, Mayor Ben and friend. My name is Jinx. What can I get you?"

"Two hot cocoas with peppermint sticks, please," Selena requested.

Jinx nodded and scribbled down their order on her notepad. As she turned to the counter, Selena caught a glimpse of a strange symbol tattooed on the back of her neck. It was a twisted knot of vines and thorns with a small, glowing gem in the center.

Selena couldn't help but stare at the symbol, wondering what it meant. Jinx turned around and caught Selena's gaze, causing her to quickly look away.

"Is everything okay?" Ben asked, noticing Selena's sudden discomfort.

"I'm fine," Selena replied, but her mind was still fixated on the symbol. She had seen it somewhere before. But the memory was elusive like she had seen it in a dream or as a very young girl.

Their hot cocoas arrived, and they sipped the warm, comforting drink in silence for a few moments. Selena smiled as Ben's eyes lit up at the sight of the steaming mugs. They settled down at a small table in the corner, and Selena warmed her hands around the mug. The scent of chocolate and peppermint wafted up to her nose, and she sighed contentedly.

"This is perfect," she murmured and took a sip.

Ben hummed in agreement, his eyes closing as he savored the taste. "You know, Selena," he said after a moment, "I don't think you're cursed."

Selena looked up in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, maybe all those things that happened to your tribe were coincidences. Maybe you just had a string of bad luck."

Selena frowned, unsure of what to say. She had always believed in the curse, that it was her fault that everything went wrong. But Ben's words made her think.

"That's a lot of coincidences. Everything I touch seems to go wrong, or break, or fall apart. Just the other day, I was almost hit by a car."

"Almost being the key word."

Selena chewed her peppermint stick thoughtfully, considering Ben's words. Maybe he was right. Maybe it wasn't her fault that everything went wrong. Maybe it was just a string of bad luck. But even so, she couldn't help but feel like there was something more to it. Something deeper that she couldn't quite put her finger on. But even if it was just a coincidence, it didn't change the fact that she had been banished from her tribe. And if it wasn't

just a coincidence, it didn't change the fact that she would be better off alone to avoid causing harm to anyone else.

"I don't know," she said finally. "It's hard to shake the feeling that it's my fault."

Ben reached across the table and took her hand. "Maybe it's time to let go of that feeling. Maybe it's time to start fresh, to start anew."

Selena looked at him, her heart aching. It would be so easy to give in, to let go of the guilt and the shame that had plagued her for so long. But it wasn't that simple. She noticed the way Ben's eyes lingered on her. It wasn't the usual friendly gaze she was accustomed to. It was something more heated. She flushed under his stare and pulled her hand away, suddenly feeling exposed and vulnerable. "I don't think it's that easy, Ben. I can't just forget about everything that's happened. And my tribe certainly won't."

"I'm not saying to forget about it," he said, his voice low and intense. "But maybe it's time to forgive yourself. Maybe your tribe doesn't deserve you."

Selena's heart raced as she looked at him, unsure what to say. Something in his eyes made her feel like she was the only person in the world. She was drawn to him despite the warnings she gave herself to hold back her emotions.

"My whole family is there. My tribe needs me."

"Of course," he said softly. "I'm sorry for saying that."

"Don't be," she said. "I can see how it looks from an outsider—that they tossed me away like garbage. But that's just how things are done in the Faelands."

"I understand, but please consider this: It's not how we do things here in Hope."

She nodded. She had already seen that for herself. She looked around the café to take her mind off these warm and strange feelings he evoked inside her. The garlands of pine and holly were adorned with little red bows, and a beautiful wreath hung on the door. A small Christmas tree was set up in the corner, twinkling with colorful lights and shiny ornaments. Kente fabric table runners were on every table. Colorful dreidels were set in large glass jars on the coffee bar. Pinecones were scattered on every surface, and large banners of a stag and a blazing sun hung by the bathrooms. There were other religious and holiday decorations around that she didn't recognize, as well. But it was the symbol on Jinx's neck that continued to nag at her. She couldn't shake the feeling that she had seen it before and that it was important somehow.

“You certainly represent all cultures in celebrating the winter holidays,” Selena said.

“It's what the Winter Festival is all about,” he said. “Hope is about inclusion for everyone.”

A thought hit her. “I imagine that's why the vampire hunters are targeting the town. The vampire hunters want a human mayor and to drive the supernaturals out. I just can't figure out why Izina would be helping them or why they're helping her with whatever she has planned for the town if she manages to get rid of you.”

“Hopefully, my werewolves can get us that information.”

“Any word?”

Ben shook his head grimly. “Rahl hasn't reported in either. I'll give them a few more days before I call them back to Hope.”

“I hope they're all right.”

“They're tough.” But Ben looked worried.

"Excuse me," Selena said when Jinx came back to the table to check if they needed refills. "What's the story behind your tattoo?"

The waitress's eyes widened, and she looked down at her neck, touching the symbol with a frown. "It's personal," she said hesitantly.

"I've seen it before," Selena pressed. "Are you Fae?"

The girl shook her head. "No, I'm not. Who are you?"

"I'm Selena. It's nice to meet you."

"Selena is my new bodyguard," Ben said, sounding like he was boasting. Jinx's face blanched.

"Where would I have seen that tattoo before?" Selena wished the girl would turn around so she could get a better look at it.

"I'm not really sure," Jinx said. "Do you have tattoos?"

"No."

"Why do you ask?" Jinx said, slowly starting to back away from their table.

"I think it might be important," Selena replied. "But I don't know why."

Jinx's complexion grew even paler. "Will there be anything else, or can I get you the check?"

Before Selena could ask any more questions, Ben interrupted.

"I hate to cut this short, but I just remembered something I need to take care of. Do you mind if we get going?"

"Oh, no. Not at all." Selena did feel a twinge of disappointment. She had been enjoying their conversation. When she looked up again, Jinx was gone.



CHAPTER NINE



B^{en}

Ben concentrated on the bond between him and his wolves. He sensed Wyatt skulking about in the forest, hunting the blacksmith's apprentice, Nia. Wyatt had her scent. It was only a matter of time before he brought her back. He wondered why she had been so spooked at seeing Selena in town. He could only hope that whatever it was wouldn't bring pain to Selena.

He watched her out of the corner of his eye while he pretended to do paperwork. She was diligent, standing at his office window looking out into the night. He could tell that her making the rounds of the town hall ruffled Gertrude's feathers a bit, but maybe that was a good thing. If Selena annoyed her enough, perhaps Gertrude's silly crush on him would fade when it was apparent that he and Selena were intimate.

Of course, that might take some time—time he didn't have as the days counted down to the Winter Festival and then Yule. If the wishing well didn't grant Selena her wish to be curse free, she would move on.

His eyes lingered on the way her tight leather pants clung to her backside as she left his office to do her rounds of the building.

A few moments later, there was a terrible crash outside and then loud Elvish cursing. Selena had knocked over the suit of armor that had been standing in the foyer of the town hall. Luckily, the armor was animated and was putting itself back together.

"Sorry," she called up as he peered over the spiral staircase.

"As long as you're all right, it's fine," he said.

He could sense Gertrude's annoyance and felt a little guilty that it gave him a pang of glee.

"Master," she started to say.

"Mayor," he corrected.

"Sir, I need you to decide on the Winter Prince and Princess. Here are the candidates." She handed him a thick file folder.

"Can't I get this electronically?" he asked, reluctantly taking it from her.

Gertrude shook her head. "I'm sorry. Some of the beings' photographs won't scan."

He flipped through them half-heartedly. "Who do you think should be crowned?"

She blushed a deep crimson. "That's not for me to say."

It was then he saw that she had put her information in the file. He returned to his desk, hoping Rahl had decided to enter the competition. He hadn't, but someone had put Ben down as the Winter Prince.

Ben glared out his door. It wasn't a big stretch to think who did that.

Selena came in, looking flustered. "I'm not a klutz. It's the curse."

Suddenly, he knew who would be the Winter Prince and Princess.

"Why are you smiling like that?" she asked suspiciously.

"Close the door," he said.

Gertrude nearly broke her neck, craning to see what was going on before she was shut out. Selena closed the door and turned back to Ben. He got up from his desk and came around to her side, looking down at her with a serious expression.

"Selena, I've made a decision about the Winter Prince and Princess. I think you should be the Princess," he said.

Her eyes widened with surprise. "Me? Why?"

"Because I am going to be the Winter Prince this year," he explained.

"Is this an ego thing, or are you going to be bait to draw Izina out?"

"Perhaps a little of both. But I also think you would look lovely in the traditional blue robes."

"I'm flattered, Ben. But I'm new to the town. I don't want to cause any hurt feelings."

He pushed aside the nagging guilt at the thought of Gertrude's reactions.

"I was thinking about traditions and how I've become jaded and soured on some of Hope's holiday activities. I used to love them."

"What happened?"

He grimaced. "Life or, in some cases, death. My family is long gone. So are my friends. That's the disadvantage of being undead. Even the ones I changed into vampires are compelled to leave. We don't do well living in groups."

"It sounds lonely."

"It is," he said. "We visit each other, but the holidays can be a little discouraging. Everyone has their own plans. Everyone is busy. It's easy to let one year pass into the other, and the next thing you know, it's been decades." He reached down and held her hand. "I know you're far away from your family too. Let's make this year different and special. I want you there by my side, celebrating in Hope."

Selena squeezed his hand. "I'm afraid my curse will ruin the festival. If I'm on a sleigh, the blades would break, or the horse would go lame. If I'm up on stage, the microphone will go out, or it'll snow so hard the ceremony will be canceled."

"Then we'll postpone it. Be my princess, Selena."

For a moment, Ben thought she would agree. But she took her hand away. "I'm sorry. I can't." Ben's heart sank as Selena's words registered in his mind. He had been so sure that she would agree, that she would be willing to take a chance and embrace the holiday spirit with him. But the look on her face told him that she was hesitant, that something was holding her back.

"Why not?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"It's just...I don't know if I'm ready for that kind of attention," Selena said, looking down at her hands. "Being a princess means being in the spotlight, and I'm not used to that."

Ben was disappointed. He had been looking forward to having Selena by his side, to showing her off to the town and proving to everyone that she was more than just a cursed outsider. But he couldn't force her to do something she wasn't comfortable with.

"I understand," he said, trying to hide his disappointment. "It was just an idea."

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Selena went to answer it and found Gertrude standing outside, looking flustered.

"Master," she said, her eyes darting nervously between him and Selena. "We have a problem. The Winter Festival decorations are missing."

"What do you mean they're missing?" Ben asked.

Gertrude wrung her hands. "I don't know, sir. They were here yesterday, but this morning, they were gone. I've searched everywhere, but I can't find them."

Ben closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It seemed like everything was going wrong this season.

"Okay, we need to figure out what's going on," he said, trying to stay calm. "It's probably a kid's prank or some goblin mischief. Gertrude, check the cameras and see what you can find."

"They've been erased."

That was more concerning than the missing decorations.

"Who had access to them?" Selena asked.

"Just Rahl and Simon," Gertrude said.

"Rahl?" Ben thought, trying to contact his security chief through the bond they shared.

But there was no response. Rahl was either sleeping, or something more sinister had happened to him. He *always* responded to Ben's call. Something was definitely wrong. Ben sent out a compulsion for the ghoul to abandon following the witch and return immediately to Hope.

"Gertrude, I need you to stay here and wait for Rahl," Ben said. "He hopefully will be here shortly. Selena and I are going to check in with Simon."

"Be careful, Master."

"Mayor," Ben corrected absently.

"I hope I didn't cause this," Selena muttered as they left the building.

"Unless your curse can wipe cameras and hide decorations, I think you're in the clear."

Selena nodded, but Ben could tell that she was still worried.

As they walked towards the police station, Ben couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. It was too quiet, too still. Normally, there would be a flurry of activity at this time of night, people rushing around shopping before the shops closed. But now, there was nothing but an eerie silence that hung over the town.

When they arrived at the police station, the wolves told them Simon had called in sick.

"We'll pay him a visit at his home," Ben said, guiding Selena back out to the street. "I don't like these coincidences. It's not like Rahl to not respond to a summons, and Simon is never sick."

"Do you think it's related to the missing decorations?"

"It's possible. But we won't know until we find them and get some answers."

They reached Simon's house, and Ben knocked on the door. There was no answer, so he tried again, louder this time. Still no response.

"Maybe he's asleep?" Selena suggested.

He tried to use his vampire strength to force the door open, but it wouldn't budge.

"Simon? It's Ben. Open up!"

Still, there was no response.

"Something's wrong," Selena said, gripping Arteenos tightly.

"I know. Stay here," Ben said before disappearing in a blur of motion.

He used his vampire speed to circle the building, looking for any signs of entry.

"What? Wait for me, damn it."

Ben noticed a window on the second floor that was slightly ajar. With a quick burst of strength, he lifted himself up and climbed inside.

The room was dark and silent, and the air was thick with a sense of foreboding. Ben's senses were heightened, and he could feel the presence of something dangerous nearby.

He began to make his way through the house, calling out to Simon as he went. But there was still no response.

As he descended the stairs, he heard a faint rustling sound coming from the living room. He moved towards the source of the noise, and that's when he saw the witch.

She was sitting in a chair by the fireplace, a wicked grin on her face.

"Well, well, well. Look who decided to come and visit," she said, her voice dripping with malice.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Simon?" Ben demanded.

"Simon is gone, and he won't be coming back. Not now. Not ever."

Ben's stomach dropped. He knew what that meant, but he had to be sure.

"Izina Broome, I presume," he said, lunging at her, teeth bared.

But before he reached her, the witch flicked her wrist, and an invisible force slammed into him, pinning him to the spot.

"Now, now. You're not going anywhere," she said with a sneer.

Selena burst into the room, Artegenos at the ready. "Let him go!" she shouted.

The witch merely laughed. "Ah, the cursed one. How delightful. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"What do you want?" Selena demanded.

Izina's smile widened, revealing pointed teeth. "I want what any good witch wants. Power, control, and revenge."

"Revenge for what?" Ben snarled, struggling against the invisible force.

"For what you did to my cousin," she hissed. "You thought you could mind wipe her and get away with it? You thought wrong."

"Who is your cousin?" Selena asked. "Lettie?"

She scoffed. "No, not her. She's just a power-hungry fool."

"What's your cousin's name?" This was almost as bad as dealing with the sunsidhe and her riddles. How hard was it to say, "My cousin's name is Wendy Witch, and she's pissed that she didn't get a powerful spell book?" Or whatever witches wished for these days.

"He knows." She sneered.

Selena rolled her eyes.

"Actually, I mind wipe a lot of people," Ben said. "I could reverse the hex if you stop your little vendetta against me."

Izina cocked her head at him.

"You have one week to fix this. After that, I'm coming for you and your whole town. And I'll use her curse to do it."

"What do you know about my curse?" Selena asked, lunging at Izina.

Izina turned into a crow and flew out of reach of Selena's swing.

Ben growled, his fangs elongating. "You're not going to get away with this."

"Oh, but I already have," she said, circling up to the open window in her crow form.

Selena gave chase, but her foot crunched through the stairs, and she sprawled out flat.

Izina flew out the window into the night. After a few moments, Selena freed herself and rushed to the window. The invisible force disappeared.

"Damn it," Selena spat, slapping the windowsill before turning her anger on him. "Don't you ever do that again. How can I protect you if you don't let me go through doors and windows first?"

"You're right," he said, holding up his hands in surrender. "I'm not used to having a bodyguard. I was worried about Simon. I never thought Izina would be in here waiting for us."

"She could have killed you," Selena said, approaching him fast. She grabbed a handful of his shirt and hauled him to her.

Ben was caught between anger and arousal. Her eyes were conflicted, so he said, "She wanted to talk. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been here waiting."

Breathing heavily, Selena thought about that for a moment. She smoothed down his shirt. Ben liked the feel of her hand on his chest. "Yeah, you're right. You were stupid for going in there first, but you're right. She didn't attack us. She must really want her cousin to go back to normal. You seriously don't remember who she was?"

"Gertrude should have records on all the supplicants. We can start there."

Selena realized they were standing very close to each other. Before she could take a step back, Ben slid his arm around her and pressed her closer. He could hear her heart racing, feel her breath on his skin. "I like that you were worried about me."

Before Selena could respond, he leaned in and captured her lips in a searing kiss.

Selena froze for a moment, but then her lips parted, and she kissed him back with a fierce passion. She melted against him, her body responding to his touch. She wrapped her arms around his neck. They kissed hungrily.

Her hands tangled in his hair, pulling him closer.

She was sweetness and fire, roaring life back into his dull existence.

Ben's hands roamed over her body, cupping her curves and pulling her even tighter against him. She moaned into his mouth, and his cock jerked, aching to be freed from his suddenly tight pants.

His fingers lingered on her neck and then trailed down to her shoulder. Her skin was so soft beneath his touch.

Their tongues tangled. His fangs scraped against her lip, and she gasped, pulling away.

"Sorry," he said.

"No. It's okay." She smiled. "Just caught me off guard."

"We should find Izina's cousin," he said reluctantly. The last thing he wanted was to get caught with his pants down if Izina decided to come back.

"Yeah." They kissed once more, quickly, before Selena stepped back and ran a finger over her swollen lips. "But don't think this is over," she said.

Ben couldn't stop the grin on his face if he tried.



CHAPTER TEN



Selena

Selena stared up at the ceiling, unable to sleep. Sunlight streamed through the curtains of her cozy bedroom, decorated with Duran Duran posters that were oddly comforting in this strange place. Worry gnawed at her gut about Izina Broome's threat to attack the town. She had to find a way to stop her before innocent people got hurt.

With a sigh, she dragged herself out of bed and began to pace. Her thoughts drifted to the impulsive kiss she had shared with Ben. What did it mean? Where could it possibly lead when she planned to leave town as soon as she dealt with Izina? Selena knew she couldn't stay in Hope forever, no matter how alluring the town and Ben were. She had a quest to complete, Fae artifacts to find, and a cure for her curse of misfortune to uncover. Hope was not her home.

Yet being here, accepted despite her curse in a way she never was in the Faelands, had awakened a yearning in her. The memory of Ben's lips on hers made her shiver, but she pushed the sensations away. They had enough to deal with trying to protect the town. She should pretend the kiss had never happened.

Selena's pacing was interrupted by a voice emanating from the ornate scabbard resting on her bed.

"You're going to wear a hole in the carpet if you keep that up," Artegenos chided.

Selena sighed, sitting down beside the sword. "I can't help it. There's too much going on and not enough answers."

"You'll unravel the threads soon enough," Artegenos said. "We always do."

Selena traced her fingers over the intricate scrollwork on the scabbard.

"It has protective runes carved into the leather, though I don't recognize the exact magic. Powerful but subtle and crafted by skilled hands," the sword remarked. "Those with mixed blood don't often have these gifts. Nia would have been well sought after in any tribe."

"I wonder why she ran off when she saw me?"

"I sensed she was afraid."

"I wouldn't hurt her."

"You were carrying an impressive ancestral blade," Artegenos said proudly.

Selena smiled, but it dropped when her gaze fell on the small sprig of mistletoe resting in a vase by the window. Just looking at its white berries stirred bittersweet memories of her clan and her childhood before the curse. The magic within it would keep it fresh and alive until it was planted. If she couldn't bring it home, she could still hope it would sprout roots and thrive in its new home. Kind of like her.

Except it was too early to think about things like that.

"I hope Wyatt finds her soon," Selena said. "I know what it's like to be driven from my home. I never wanted to make anyone feel like that."

"Not everything is your fault," Artegenos droned. "You should get some sleep."

She should. Being a vampire's bodyguard was playing hell with her circadian rhythms. And yet her mind wouldn't stop whirling. "I should go

look through Gertrude's records for any Broome's on the list."

"Sykes is overseeing that project. You don't want to step on his toes. He's already feeling threatened by you."

"Right." She let out a long sigh.

"Delegation is a good trait in a leader," Artegenos said. "At least your vampire mayor puts us up in style."

Selena smiled wryly. "Beats sleeping in the dirt. And he's not my vampire."

"Isn't he?"

"This curse makes relationships...difficult." She paused, staring out the window. "Still, the people here accepted me so fast. In the Faelands I was shunned, but here..."

"Here, you could have a home if you can't find a way to get rid of your curse," Artegenos finished gently.

"Maybe," Selena nodded, throat tightening. She thought of Ben, his kindness and humor. A pang of longing went through her.

Artegenos read her mind. "Ben's a good man. You could have a life here."

"Until my curse hurts someone, and I'm banished again. I don't know if I can face that again."

"It's not like you to be such a coward," Artegenos admonished.

That stung. "It's not like you to be such a nag," Selena countered lamely.

Artegenos chuckled. "Perhaps. But I only want what's best for you."

"I know. And I appreciate it." Selena sighed heavily. "I wish I could just be normal."

“Normal is overrated,” Artegenos said firmly. “You have a unique destiny ahead of you. Embrace it.”

Selena nodded, but the weight of her curse was heavy on her shoulders. “I’ll try.”

“You should be sleeping.”

“You’re right.”

“I always am,” Artegenos said with a hint of smugness.

Selena rolled her eyes.

“Go back to bed. You don’t want to be distracted tonight while guarding Ben.”

“I’m too distracted to sleep,” she admitted.

“Settle your mind,” Artegenos urged.

“That waitress, Jinx. Her tattoo bothers me.”

“Or ignore me entirely.”

“Where have I seen it before?”

The sword hummed. “It must have been long ago if you can’t remember.”

“Where would I have seen it?”

“You used to explore all over the Faelands. Perhaps it was something in a book, or perhaps it was a tattoo on someone you met.”

“A book,” Selena said thoughtfully. “If I could get a picture of the tattoo, I could research it.”

“Something else to delegate to Sykes? I dare say a computer search would be faster.” The sword pulsed with light. “Speaking of fast, that kiss with Ben...”

Selena huffed. "One kiss means nothing." Though her traitorous thoughts lingered on the warmth of his embrace. She shook herself. "I need to do something. I'm too worked up to sleep."

Getting dressed, Selena slid the sword into the scabbard and wrapped the belt around her waist. When she went downstairs, the aroma of sizzling sausage and maple syrup wafted from the kitchen, but she turned away. Selena left the mansion, guilt gnawing at her as the scents of Tess's cooking faded behind. She knew the hearth goblin took pride in preparing breakfast for the household each morning. Missing the meal was poor thanks for Tess's efforts, but Selena's restless mood had driven her out.

She walked down the tree-lined streets, her boots crunching on frosted grass. The town square opened up ahead, its quaint storefronts and lampposts decorated for the season. Selena passed the clocktower in the square, its carillon chiming the hour. Despite the early winter chill, pilgrims were already on the path towards the wishing well. She made her way down the quiet streets of Hope, the chill air helping clear her restless mind. Despite the early hour, the town began to stir with the promise of a new day. She nodded to Adelaide, hauling trays of fresh cinnamon rolls, and inhaled her cafe's rich aroma of coffee. She was beginning to regret skipping breakfast.

A bitter wind gusted, and Selena hurried on. The Gingerbread House beckoned, its cheery façade and glowing windows a warm respite from the cold. Selena stepped inside, comforted by the familiar scents of sugar and spice. If Jinx was working, she could get a better look at that tattoo now.

"Morning, hon." A waitress with a name tag that said Amy greeted her when she walked in. "What can I get ya?"

Selena chose a table by the window and settled in. "Hot cocoa, please."

As the waitress busied herself behind the counter, Selena scanned the room. She had hoped to find Jinx and get a closer look at that tattoo. But she was nowhere to be seen. When Amy brought over her hot chocolate, Selena asked, "Is Jinx working today by any chance?"

Amy shook her head. "No, she only works nights. Can I get you anything else?"

"Not right now."

Selena accepted the steaming mug from the waitress with a murmured thanks, cupping it in both hands to warm her chilled fingers.

At least the hot cocoa would offer a brief respite from her circling thoughts. She took a sip, letting the rich sweetness melt over her tongue. For now, she could allow herself this small comfort, a quiet moment of peace amidst the gathering storm.

Amy lingered nearby, wiping down the already spotless counter. "Quiet morning," she commented.

Selena nodded, distracted by that damned tattoo. "How well do you know Jinx?" Selena asked.

Amy paused her wiping, looking up in surprise. "She's a sweet girl but keeps to herself mostly. She hasn't been in town long."

Selena leaned forward, intrigued. This was new information. "How long exactly?"

Amy tilted her head, pondering. "Few months, maybe? She showed up around late summer looking for work. I was happy to hire her. We're very busy."

"Did she wish on the well?" Selena asked.

“Probably. We all do.”

“Was she upset that she didn’t get her wish?”

Amy shook her head. “No. She seems happy enough here.”

Selena deflated. Well, there goes that idea that she could be Izina’s cousin.

"That tattoo Jinx has— do you happen to know what it means?"

Amy raised her eyebrows. "Can't say I do. Is she in some kind of trouble with the mayor?"

“Oh no. No. Not at all. I’m just trying to figure out where I’ve seen her tattoo before.” It nagged at her, some buried memory itching to get out. She would have to get a better look at it soon. Something just told her it was important that she identify what it was.

"Jinx doesn't talk about herself much. But she's a hard worker and makes a mean apple pie."

Selena sat back, disappointed but thoughtful. Jinx was even more of a mystery now.

“You could ask her yourself. She’s working tonight.”

“Does Ben like apple pie?” Why did she ask that?

Amy brightened. “He sure does, and I don’t think he’s had the chance to try Jinx’s.”

“We’ll be back,” Selena said. Tonight, she would get a better look at the tattoo.

For now, Selena let the cocoa soothe her restless spirit. She had more things to think about, but the warmth spreading through her reminded her that she needed to go back to the mansion and get some rest.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



B^{en}

The town hall's ancient clock chimed seven o'clock. He hadn't heard anything from his werewolf sentries that he sent out to follow Avery and Lottie. Not to mention that Simon's body hadn't turned up. Ben was hoping that meant he was still alive.

"Sometimes, no news is good news," Selena said, but he could see the worry in her eyes.

"I would have felt it if the sentries had been destroyed." He rubbed the center of his chest. Each death would have been like a stab wound. "At least I know they're still alive."

Rahl had returned just before sunset but didn't have any new information either. Rahl had tracked the witch to a running stream and then lost her scent.

To make matters worse, there weren't any "Broomes" in Gertrude's records. They were trying to contact all the witches in the files, but they didn't know how far back to go. The lack of information was frustrating, and they were running out of time.

Gertrude knocked and then poked her head in. "You have supplicants, Master."

"I'm not your..." Ben sighed. It was pointless. "Give me five minutes, and then send them in one at a time."

She curtsied before shutting the door again.

"She's got it bad for you," Selena said.

“What can I say? I’m irresistible.” He looked up at her hoping that she would agree, but she was frowning at the door. They hadn’t talked about the kiss from the other night and hadn’t had time to continue where they left off either.

“Who are these supplicants?” Selena asked.

“They’re tourists who are here to complain about not getting their wish last week.”

“There might be a guy with a puppy out there,” she said.

“A puppy?” Ben asked. That was odd. Most people liked puppies.

“He wanted a woman to be subservient to him. The well gave him a female dog. It wasn’t Candace. This voice was masculine and dark.” She shivered.

“Ah, that was Roderick Stone. Moonsidhe. He created the well with Candace. You’re fortunate to have experienced his particular sense of humor.” Ben again wondered how his old friends were and why they hadn’t appeared to him.

The door to his office banged open.

"Mr. Mayor, this is an outrage." The first supplicant was a heavysset man with a neckbeard. He held out a ceramic bowl. It was filled with a green goo.

“What is it?” Selena asked.

"I wished for endless ice cream, but my bowl keeps refilling with ... with this!"

“It looks like ice cream,” Ben said.

“It’s green,” Selena said, peering into the bowl.

"It’s broccoli flavored.”

Of course, it was.

“I wanted chocolate.”

“Did you ask for chocolate?” Ben asked.

“Well, no. But it’s obvious.”

“Technically, the well granted your wish,” Selena said. “And broccoli is very healthy.”

Ben appreciated that she was trying to be helpful.

“I don’t like broccoli,” the man said. “It makes me fart.”

Ben wasn’t sure what to do with that information.

“Let me get this straight. Your true heart’s desire was an endless bowl of ice cream?” Selena asked.

“Duh,” the man said.

That was enough of that. “The well granted your wish. Next,” Ben called out.

“But...”

“Look at me,” Ben said.

The man went stock still. He swayed slightly.

“You have some regret that you didn’t specify a flavor of ice cream. However, you realize that people are starving all around the world and that you are very fortunate to have this food.”

“He is?” Selena muttered.

Ben shot her an exasperated look.

“Sorry.”

He turned back to the ice cream man. “You will leave the town of Hope and never return.”

“I will leave the town of Hope and never return,” the man said, backing away.

“But before you leave, you will stop by Adelaide’s bakery and buy a dozen mayoral cronuts.”

The man’s face brightened, and then it changed to worry. “Are they broccoli flavored?”

“No,” Ben said.

The man sighed happily and left the office.

“That was unexpected,” Selena said.

“Just wait.”

“I’ve got an idea,” she said. “When we’re done here, we should check with Adelaide. Maybe she remembers someone who could be Izina’s cousin.”

“That’s a great idea. Why don’t you go and track down that lead?”

“I’m not leaving you alone. I’m your bodyguard.”

“This is going to be tedious, though. There’s no sense in wasting both of our time. Besides, we need answers.”

“Send Gertrude, then. I’m not leaving you.”

Ben admired her dedication to duty. He hoped it was more than that, though. “Very well.” He toggled the intercom, “Gertrude, can you come in here please?”

Gertrude was through the door in a flash. “Yes, Master?”

“Go down to Adelaide’s and question her about any witches she remembers in town who were angry at not getting their wish granted. Bring your list and give me some names.”

“It will be done.” She bowed, then curtsied before running out the door.

“You’d think she’d get the message that you’re just not interested,” Selena said irritably.

He wondered if she was jealous. “I’m hoping Rahl will take her mind off of me.” Ben motioned in the next supplicant.

A frazzled woman stepped forward, clutching her phone. “I wished for the perfect sunset.”

“That was your heart’s desire?” Selena was almost slack-jawed.

The young woman showed them the image on the phone. It was a lovely sunset—a blaze of orange and red lighting up a cloudy blue sky. The picture, though, was obscured slightly by a flock of seagulls.

“What’s wrong with the sunset?” Selena asked.

“The birds,” the woman said, shaking with outrage.

“Sometimes, nature has its own ideas,” Ben said gently. “Your sunset looks perfect.”

“What’s the point of a perfect sunset if I can’t upload it to my Insta or Snapchat?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Selena said, her exasperation showing. “Just enjoy it.”

The young woman scoffed. “That’s not going to get me likes or ad revenue.”

“Why didn’t you just wish for that?”

Ben could have told Selena that it was futile to reason with some of them, but it was best if she found that out by herself.

The young woman drew back, affronted. “That’s cheating.”

It was time to step in. And maybe get a little payback. He probably wouldn’t even need to hex her. “If you truly want a compelling photo, you need to get to Serenity.”

“Serenity?” The woman narrowed her gaze on him.

“Massachusetts. The next state over. But you have to hurry if you want to be the first to capture the most famous witch, Izina Broome.”

“Never heard of her,” the woman said dismissively.

“Not yet,” Ben said. “But she’s preparing to go live with her world debut.”

“What’s she debuting?” The skepticism was strong in this one.

“Her makeup line,” Ben said.

The woman was out of his office almost before he was finished speaking.

“Should have put a tracking device on her,” Selena grumbled.

“On it.” He gave the mental command to Rahl. Rahl would slip one into her purse.

“That’s a little more hopeful,” Selena said. “If that woman can lead us to Izina, we can see about getting our werewolves back.”

Ben liked that she called them “our” werewolves.

“I can’t believe these people, though,” Selena said. “Ice cream? A perfect sunset? How can they be worthy enough to get their wishes granted?”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“Did you ever ask the well for anything?”

“Every year.”

“What was it for?”

Ben was saved from answering by the unending stream of disgruntled tourists. A lot of people were threatening to sue for fraud after not becoming rich, famous, thin, or popular. He took away their memories of Hope and the desire to ever return, which is what he did to all the complainers. Even if they did find out who Izina’s cousin was, they would have to go to her—that is, if they could even find her.

At least the tourists left with some tasty baked goods.

“I’d like to go back to The Gingerbread House tonight,” Selena said.

“Their hot cocoa is something special.”

“I was hoping to try their apple pie.”

“You had me at Gingerbread House,” he said.

“And I want to take a better look at Jinx’s tattoo. You don’t remember hexing her, do you?”

“No,” Ben said. But they had to put their discussion on hold when more disgruntled pilgrims filed in.

A few of them had more unique problems if not legitimate complaints. A teen who wanted to be able to dunk a basketball grew three feet, and now his clothes wouldn’t fit him. An elderly woman who wanted to hear better could now hear squirrels mating outside her window. And a honeymooning couple wished for a romantic getaway but were confused on what to do with the unicorn butt plug and the exotic oils.

Ben gave the teen a voucher for two outfits at one of Hope's clothing stores. He gave the elderly woman earplugs. And he sent the honeymooners to Dulcinea's Delights for private instruction with the local succubus.

When the last of the petitioners left, Selena was slumped in a chair behind his desk. Ben could relate. He was nursing a heck of a headache.

"I thought you said the well's magic had dried up?" she said.

"It appears this season, Candace and Roderick are back with a vengeance."

"I can only hope this is the experience Candace wanted me to have outside of Fae." Selena shook her head. "Those were silly wishes, though. What do you do when you get complaints about the more serious ones?"

"Drink a lot once it's over."

She snorted. "Seriously?"

"One time, a young girl came in here in tears because she wished her dead mother to come back to her."

"Her mother might have been on another journey," Selena said, all amusement leaving her face.

"Tell that to a sixteen-year-old who just wants to talk with her mother again. She had run away from her family because they wouldn't take her to the well."

"What did you do?"

"We called her family. Her father and stepmother were here in a matter of hours. In the meantime, Adelaide took her under her wing. The girl also spent time talking with Isaac, who takes care of the town's graveyard. I'm not sure

what was said, but she ran into her father and stepmother's arms when she saw them."

"Isaac's a necromancer, isn't he?" Selena asked.

"A very low-powered one, but yes. He asked the well to bring back all the pets he had lost."

"The well granted him the power to bring back the dead?"

"Limited and only animals. I imagine he demonstrated what would happen if her mother had been brought back to life."

Selena shuddered.

Ben got up from his desk and pulled out two shot glasses, filling each with whiskey. "I normally don't do this, but it can help settle you after an especially tough night."

They tapped the glasses together before Ben took a sip of his while she gulped hers down quickly. "That wasn't as strong as I thought it would be."

"Good whisky isn't. Sorry I don't have any elven wine. I need to get some more."

She stood up and put her glass on the table. "No need. I can't afford to dull my senses right now. What did you ask the wishing well for?"

He should have known she wouldn't give up until she got her answer. He liked feeling the warmth of her body as she stood close to him. "I have money and power, and I don't want fame. Maybe I asked for an ever-flowing whisky glass?"

Taking the glass from his hand, she drank his last swallow and then looked inside. "Doesn't seem like that was the wish. Did you wish not to become a vampire?"

“No,” he said. “I like what I am. I wasn’t turned against my will. It is hard, though, to watch loved ones grow old or leave. You build a family, and then one day, they’re all gone.” He hadn’t meant to sound so melancholy.

“In Fairy, I was always an outsider due to my bad luck. My tribe never let me forget it. Even when I tried to help, my bad luck would cause chaos.” She sighed. “I just need the curse to be gone already.”

“Change takes time, Selena,” Ben said softly, his gaze never leaving her face. “And even though your wish may not have been granted immediately, that doesn't mean it won't come true.”

“Did your wish come true?”

“Not yet.” Ben couldn’t resist cupping her cheek, smiling when she leaned into his touch.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been touched with tenderness,” she said.

“That’s a crime.” He lightly rubbed his thumb over her lips.

She was content to let him touch her, and his fingers were shaking to experience more of her softness.

“Selena,” Ben whispered. Cradling the curve of her jaw, he gently caressed her as he tilted her face up towards his.

“Ben,” she responded softly.

He dipped his head down to brush her lips in a feather-light kiss. The kiss was tender, sweet, like the taste of sugar plums on a frosty winter's eve. The zing of connection thrilled through him again.

Ben pulled back and looked into her eyes, searching for any sign of hesitation. He saw none, only desire burning in her gaze. Without another word, he kissed her again. She responded eagerly, her hands tangling in his

hair as she deepened the kiss. Ben's hands roamed over her body, caressing every inch of her as he explored her mouth with his tongue.

Ben forgot about everything else. It was just the two of them, lost in the heat of the moment. But eventually, they pulled back, gasping for air.

"Is this going where I think it's going?"

She smiled back at him a little shyly. "Yeah."

"Excellent." Ben pulled her close into his embrace, feeling the warmth of her body against his. She smelled of lavender and vanilla, a scent that was unmistakably her. He leaned in to inhale deeply, relishing in the sweet fragrance.

"I want to make you feel good," he whispered, his lips hovering over her earlobe. "Let me take away all your worries."

She let out a soft sigh, her eyes fluttering closed as he trailed kisses down her neck. He traced his fingers down her spine, feeling the curve of her waist. She shivered at his touch, and he burned for her.

Their moment of bliss was abruptly shattered by the door to the office flying open.

Selena turned, shielding his body with hers. Her sword was drawn and vibrating with power. But it was only Rahl. Ben was going to kill him.

"We're under attack! Witches and vampire hunters have descended upon Hope," Rahl gasped out. And now that he was listening for it, Ben could hear the sounds of battle outside.

"She was supposed to have given us a week," Selena raged. "It's barely been twenty-four hours."

Without the werewolves, they were vulnerable.

"Protect the town," Ben ordered. "But remember, we need prisoners."

"Stay behind me," Selena said, following Rahl out the door.

Not likely, but he would stick close to her. The people who dared attack his town and the beautiful moment he had just shared with Selena were going to pay dearly.



CHAPTER TWELVE



Selena

They burst through the town hall doors and into the chaos before them. Witches on broomsticks hovered above, casting spells that rained destruction onto the streets while they dodged the gargoyles' sharp teeth and talons. Vampire hunters charged through the fray, their sharp stakes brandished. Some of the tips must have also been brushed with silver because the werewolves were wounded by them. The tourists screamed and scrambled for safety, fear etched on their faces. But the townspeople were rallying their own defenses.

"Guard your stores," Ben yelled to them over the cacophony. "We'll draw them away as best we can."

Focusing her senses, Selena allowed the connection with Arteenos to deepen. She could sense the sword's eagerness for battle, its desire to protect the people of Hope. In perfect harmony, Selena darted forward, gracefully dodging an incoming fireball before leaping into the air and striking down an attacking witch with a decisive slash.

"Watch out," Ben called, taking out a vampire hunter that had been sneaking up behind her with a swift kick.

"You watch out. In fact, you should go inside and barricade yourself in your office."

"Never," he snarled.

As the battle raged on, Selena's movements became a fluid dance, each strike landing with precision and grace. She fought back-to-back with Ben,

their shoulder blades brushing. Artegenos warned her if a vampire hunter got too close to him on her blind side.

But then, Selena's bad luck kicked in. The vampire hunters fired a volley of arrows into the crowd. It was impossible to deflect them all. She tackled Ben to the ground and heard his ankle snap like a dry tinder.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “Stay down.”

“Sykes!” Ben roared as she sprang back up.

“Get the mayor to safety,” Selena ordered Rahl and Sykes, who were fighting their way toward them. She planted herself in front of Ben, acting as a shield.

She saw a gargoyle miss a veering witch. The witch cast a ball of energy out of her outstretched hand. There was no way to dodge it without leaving Ben vulnerable, so she stood her ground. It would hurt, but it shouldn’t kill her.

But at the last moment, the spell unbelievably veered off course, striking a nearby werewolf guard instead. He howled in pain, collapsing to the ground as the witch cursed and peeled off for another strafing run. Two gargoyles appeared on the witch’s tail, shredding the back of her broom with their talons. She spiraled as she went down and hit the ground like an arrow thunking into a target.

Sykes and Rahl finally got close. They hiked Ben up and dragged him to a nearby storefront. She spared them a quick glance. Sykes was feeding his master blood from his wrist. The hard stone of guilt and worry in her gut lessened. The blood would heal him. Rahl would keep Sykes and Ben safe until it did.

"Take out the vampire hunters," Artegenos urged in her thoughts.
"They're the lethal threat to Ben."

Selena gritted her teeth and continued the fight alongside the werewolves. But as she deflected a stake, it ricocheted off her blade and struck a human ally, leaving him writhing on the ground. She winced, cursing her luck under her breath.

"Man down!" she yelled out, hoping there was a healer that could treat him. At least he didn't turn to ash like Ben would have if the stake hit him. When this was all over, they had to discuss better battle tactics.

Selena swung Artegenos high to cut at the broom of a low-flying witch, but the sword inadvertently sliced through a support rope, causing a heavy banner to fall onto a group of unsuspecting vampire hunters. They crumpled beneath the weight, temporarily incapacitated.

Not all her luck was bad.

The gargoyles chased off the rest of the witches. The werewolf guards disarmed the hunters of their silver-tipped stakes. And just like that, the battle was over. Ben stormed over to her, his expression thunderous.

"Are you all right?" Selena asked, panting from exhaustion as she surveyed the battle-scarred town square.

"Thanks to you," he replied.

She did a double take. Selena thought he would be mad about the ankle.

"Secure our vampire hunters in the jail," he shouted orders to the werewolves. "Take any witches to my house. I have spell protection in my dungeon... basement... prison in my basement." Ben sighed. "It's a dungeon."

“I understand the necessity,” Selena said, putting a hand on his shoulder to ease his distress. A charged moment flashed through both of them. He leaned in. Her eyes fluttered closed.

“Help!”

Breaking apart guiltily, Selena looked over the aftermath of the battle, trying to see who had called out. She saw Gertrude lying on the ground, a stray arrow protruding from her stomach. The sight made Selena's heart drop to her stomach. She couldn't help but wonder if her curse of bad luck had played a part in the unfortunate situation.

“Oh no,” she said.

Ben followed her gaze.

"Gertrude," Ben called out, rushing to her side. His eyes were filled with concern as he knelt beside her.

“Give me your blood,” Gertrude whispered. “It’s over for me.”

"Are you going to turn her?" Selena asked tentatively, guilt weighing heavily on her chest. It was hard for her not to blame herself for the chaos that had unfolded throughout the town, and her curse worsened. Although logically, she knew that chaos reigned king during a battle, curse or not. But she had suggested that Gertrude go to Adelaide's. If she hadn't, Gertrude would have been safe inside the town hall when all this started.

Ben examined the wound, his brow furrowed in concentration. "No," he replied, trying to sound reassuring. "But we need to get her to a healer."

"Leave that to me," Rahl said, stepping forward.

“Uh,” Selena wasn't sure about giving a seriously wounded human to a man-eater, but the ghoul's usual stoic demeanor crumbled as he looked at

Gertrude. His face softened with affection. Without hesitation, Rahl gently scooped Gertrude up in his arms, mindful of her injury.

“No, I’m dying. Make me immortal,” Gertrude pleaded, her hand reaching out to Ben.

“Take her to Felicity,” Ben instructed. “She should be able to stop the bleeding and pour a few healing potions in her.”

“Got it,” Rahl said, nodding solemnly. As he carried Gertrude away, Selena noticed how tenderly he held her. She couldn’t remember the last time someone had held her like that.

As she watched Rahl hurry to find the healer, Selena knew she was responsible for the pain and suffering that had befallen Hope. She wondered if she should move on because she was only putting everyone at risk with her cursed presence.

“Friends and neighbors of Hope,” Ben said as a crowd began to gather in the town square. His voice was strong and confident. Selena could see the worried looks on the tourists’ faces fade.

“Is he hexing them?” she thought to Arteenos.

“No, that’s just his natural charisma,” the sword replied.

Selena would have felt better if he had been hexing them. It would explain why she was reacting to him so deeply. She wanted to continue the kiss they had started. The fire of battle still raged in her veins, and it was quickly turning to lust. It was a little embarrassing to experience a wave of desire while the town was still recovering from the attack.

“Today, we face danger and adversity. But thanks to our brave defenders, our town remains safe.” Ben’s words wove a tapestry of hope and resilience. He praised the werewolves, the gargoyles and even Selena's courage and

skill. The people listened intently, their eyes shining with admiration for all of them.

It made Selena feel a little uncomfortable. She didn't deserve this praise. Ben had gotten hurt and some of the attackers got away. Even now she wanted to demand that he go back inside where it was safe.

"This violence will not stand," Ben declared, "Selena and I will work together to take the battle to our enemies. We will double our patrols to protect our beloved town and all of its guests. We are one family, one community, and we shall not be defeated."

The crowd erupted into applause, their voices filling the town hall with a triumphant chorus. Selena experienced a surge of pride and purpose, yet another thing that she hadn't felt in a long time.

"Come with me," Ben whispered into her ear as the applause continued. "I believe we have unfinished business."

Shivers ran up her spine, and anticipation started tingling through her. She followed him back into the town hall. He locked his office door behind him.

"We should be undisturbed for a few hours while the town puts itself back together."

Without another word, Ben pulled Selena into his arms and kissed her deeply. She melted into him, her body responding to his touch. Their tongues danced together, exploring each other's mouths with abandon.

Selena was on fire as desire coursed through her veins. Ben's hands roamed over her body, tugging at her clothes and pulling her closer to him. She was unable to resist him.

"I need you," he whispered to her, his lips brushing her neck and his fangs grazing over the sensitive spot.

"I need you now." Selena wrenched open his shirt, her hands running over his hard chest and ripped stomach. The callouses on his hands scraped her skin as he pulled her tunic up over her head.

He stepped back briefly to unbutton his pants. She fumbled with hers, not caring when Artegenos hit the floor with a clang.

"Don't mind me," the sword said.

And she didn't.

He kissed a trail of burning kisses down her neck and to her breasts. He sucked on her beaded nipples, making her wriggle with delight. Her hands ran through his hair, tugging at it in primal passion.

"I need you inside me," she gasped, her hands pulling at his pants.

He chuckled huskily, "There will be plenty of time for that later."

Before she could answer, he had dropped to his knees and pulled her leg over his shoulder. Then he buried his face in her mound. Her body bucked as he sucked the juices from her folds and thrust his tongue deep inside. She shivered as he licked and sucked her sensitive pleasure points.

Her hands went to his head, holding his face against her. She could feel her body tensing as he brought her close to the edge.

"That's it," she cried, her hands fisting in his hair.

Selena was on the verge of exploding, but he kept her at the edge, never pushing her over.

"Please..." she gasped. "I need..."

He pulled his head up from her wetness, "You need this."

He ran his tongue over her clit, flicking it rapidly. His warm breath set her body ablaze, every nerve ending on fire. She twisted and squirmed as the pleasure built within her body.

"Do you want to come?" he asked her, his voice gruff and husky.

She nodded. "Gods, yes."

He plunged his tongue into her, his arm across her hips to hold her to him. He sucked her clit into his mouth, sending her over the edge. She screamed as the orgasm tore through her body like a tsunami. Her body shook violently as the pleasure rippled through her. She gripped his hair as she came down from her high. He was grinning when she finally opened her eyes.

Selena reached down to help him stand up. He kissed her again, the taste of her pleasure still on his lips. His mouth sealed to hers as his fingers probed between her legs. He found her clit and began to stroke her, starting the tremors of pleasure up all over again. Selena rode his fingers as he rubbed her hard.

"Just like that." Her body tensed in anticipation.

He pinched her clit between his fingers, sending jolts of pleasure through her. She lost control, her orgasm washing over her like a tidal wave. He held her to him, his fingers stilling her bucking hips. She could feel the muscles in his chest and arms ripple against her as he held her tightly. They stood still, her body quivering in pleasure.

"I need you..." she breathed, still trembling.

Ben yanked his pants off, his cock hard and standing at attention. Selena wasted no time. She sank to her knees and wrapped her hand around him. Taking him in her mouth, she sucked on him. He groaned as she swirled her tongue around him, and his hand fisted in her hair. She sucked on him

hungrily, loving the way his cock throbbed in her mouth and the way his body shuddered.

Ben's body tensed, and she knew he was close to coming. She quickened her pace, stroking him at the base with her hands. She bobbed her head up and down over him, her tongue flicking over the sensitive underside of his cock. She pulled away for a moment to spit into her palm and stroke him. She ran her tongue over the tip of him, sucking on it as she pumped him up and down.

“Fuck, you’re incredible,” he gritted out.

“I want you so much.”

She pulled back and bobbed her head over him again.

He arched his hips, thrusting his cock into her mouth. She relaxed her throat and took him as deep as he would go.

"I'm going to come."

Selena pulled away from him, her lips shiny and stretched wide. His cock throbbed between them. She stroked him with one hand and cupped his balls with the other.

She steadied her hand and started to pump him again. She swirled her tongue around the tip, teasing him.

He groaned loudly as he came. Ben pulled her up from the floor, kissing her deeply. She could taste his come on her lips as she kissed him. He walked her towards the nearest wall and encouraged her to wrap her legs around his waist.

"Put me inside you," he growled.

She steadied his cock and pushed it into her wet passage. She gasped as he sank into her tight heat. He thrust into her deeply, burying himself inside her. She cried out as he filled her, stretching her tight hole. He gripped her ass as he pounded into her, sending her closer and closer to the edge.

"Oh yes," she moaned, "Oh yes, fuck me." She rode him hard, her head spinning.

His muscles went rigid. He buried himself deep inside her, and she felt him explode, his hot seed jetting into her. She came at the same time, her body shuddering as the orgasm spread from her center through her limbs.

They stood there, breathless for a moment.

"I think... my heart actually skipped a beat," she said.

"I think mine did, too," he rasped. "And my heart doesn't beat."

"I just need a minute."

"I don't think I can wait that long," he said, and he began to thrust again.

Every thrust sent a shockwave of pleasure through her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her arms around his shoulders, and held on as he took her. It was a primal, passionate coupling, both of them lost in their pleasure.

He thrust his tongue into her mouth, matching the rhythm of his cock.

He swelled inside her, growing even harder if that was possible. He slowed his thrusts, drawing them out, and she moaned, frustrated. "No, don't stop, don't stop."

"Hang on," he said.

He walked with her still wrapped around him to the desk and laid her on top of it. She held him close, their bodies slick with sweat as they moved

gently together. Her head was spinning, her body tingling. He pounded into her, pulling her hips off the desk with each thrust.

"Harder... Fuck me harder," she begged.

He pounded into her, his hips slamming against hers. Each thrust sent more pleasure through her. Her breath came in short, shallow gasps, and she gripped him tight, nails digging into his flesh.

"That's right, Selena. Come for me one more time."

An ecstatic spasm ran through her, starting in her core and spreading to her very fingertips. He thrust into her again and again as her orgasm broke over her. She heard his groan of pleasure, deep and guttural, as he thrust into her again. He growled and plunged harder, his body shuddering and shaking with hers. Then, he collapsed on top of her, his own body trembling.

"I think you might have killed me if I weren't already dead," Ben said, kissing her sweetly.

Selena could barely speak. She clung to him, still reeling from the highs of their passionate lovemaking.

"I wish we could stay like this forever," she said, feeling safe from her curse and his attackers. But it was starting to get chilly in the office, and she was getting a pain in her side from the angle she was at on the desk.

"It's only a matter of time before Sykes or Rahl seek me out."

As they got dressed, Selena spared a thought for Gertrude. "Do you think Gertrude will be all right at the healers?"

"I think so. Rahl will be there to make sure she doesn't need for anything."

"He really has a thing for her, doesn't he?"

“I only hope she doesn’t break his heart.”

Selena had the same hope for herself. She was falling for Ben—and hard.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN



B^{en}

Ben traced his fingers along Selena's bare shoulder, watching the slow rise and fall of her breath as she slept. His alarm silently flashed from his bedside table. They had come back to the mansion and made love again and again. His chest tightened—every fiber of his being railed against leaving her side. But the sun's unrelenting approach brooked no delay.

Reluctantly, he pressed a kiss to her temple. "Selena," he murmured. "It's almost sunrise."

She stirred, eyelashes fluttering open to meet his gaze. Even with her hair mussed and a purpling bruise across her cheek from the battle, she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. His unbeating heart ached with the knowledge that he'd have to leave her soon.

"Crap," she protested sleepily, snuggling closer.

He chuckled. "I would not leave you if I had the choice." Ben sat up, the silk sheet pooling around his waist. Selena watched him, propped up on one elbow. Her green eyes were shadowed with sadness.

"I'm worried about Izina," she said.

"Me too." He touched her face, thumb grazing the bruise. "But we both need rest before tonight." The battle had taken its toll, leaving them battered and exhausted. At least the town was safe for now.

Selena nodded.

Ben stood, finding his clothes scattered among hers. They dressed quickly. The sun would soon crest the horizon.

“I wish we had more time to plan. We should have been doing that instead of...” Selena broke off and blushed.

“I wouldn’t change a moment. There will be time enough to plan on the four-hour car ride to Serenity.”

She shook her head. “Timing is going to be a key factor. We need to leave to come back here by one a.m. at the latest. Otherwise, we must find a safe place to keep you from the sun.”

“You’ll have all day to plan, and we’ll have most of the night to get our people back and stop Izina once and for all. It will be plenty of time.”

"Unless my curse kicks in and we get a flat tire or something."

He chuckled. “It will work out. I’ve been taking care of myself for centuries.”

"Izina's magic won't be easy to overcome," she said. "She must have traps all over her place."

"We'll be ready." Ben's voice was firm. "I need you and Rahl to study the information we have gathered about the town of Serenity and her compound." Casting a glance at the clock, he decided he had a few more minutes. He unrolled a map on the bed.

“Still no word from the werewolves?" she asked.

Ben shook his head. "Nothing. I fear the worst. Here is where we last heard from them. I suspect Izina holds them somewhere in this area." He traced a circle in the western woods.

Selena studied the map, then met his gaze. "I'll spend the day interrogating the prisoners we have here. Someone must know something."

"Thank you." Ben squeezed her shoulder, allowing his hand to linger. "I regret I cannot question the prisoners with you. But we will save our people tonight, together."

Selena covered his hand with hers. "Together," she agreed softly.

They stood in silence for a moment, the unspoken words pulsing between them. Then Selena stepped back, breaking the spell.

"I should get ready for the day," she said briskly. Yet her cheeks were flushed. "There's a lot to do."

"Be careful." Ben followed her to the door. After she left him, he opened the secret door in his room and climbed the stairs down to his private lair. Sykes would secure the door until tonight, when he was ready to rise.

As he sank into the velvet lining of his coffin and the sun's rays crept across the sky, his thoughts drifted to Selena. He pictured her beautiful face, full of strength and passion, as she had looked at him last night. His undead heart ached to be with her. As death's slumber claimed him, Ben silently vowed to defeat Izina and hopefully find a way to break Selena's curse so she would stay with him forever. His last conscious thought was of Selena's arms around him, her head nestled against his silent heart.



SELENA'S HEART WAS heavy as she descended the stone steps to the basement jail. Ben was sleeping peacefully in his coffin, guarded by his Sykes. She could put aside her worry for him while she tried to get information from their prisoners.

The basement was cool and musty, lit by flickering torches. Two cells lined the far wall, reinforced with iron and magic to contain supernatural prisoners. In the first cell, two female witches glared at Selena sullenly. They

wore tattered black robes, their stringy hair partially obscuring their wrinkled faces.

"Well, well," one croaked. "The vampire's whore comes to gloat."

Selena ignored the crone's jibe. "I've come for information about Izina."

"We'll tell you nothing," the second witch rasped.

"I think you will," said a deep voice behind Selena. Rahl loomed out of the shadows. At over seven feet tall, his hulking frame and jagged teeth intimidated even the most hardened supernaturals. The witches paled. Rahl grasped the bars, baring his fangs. "Talk, or I snack on witch fingers."

The crones shuddered.

"All right, we'll talk!" one surrendered.

That didn't take long at all.

Haltingly, they revealed that Izina's stronghold was an old asylum outside Serenity, protected by wards and wraiths. The werewolf guards were captive there, charmed into thinking that Izina was their boss, not Ben. Izina herself was a formidable witch, but she was mortal. If she wouldn't willingly release the werewolves from their delusions, the magic spell would be broken if she died.

"Her weakness is her pride," the witch confessed. "She believes no one can best her."

Selena committed their words to memory. This vital intelligence would aid the coming battle.

"Who is her cousin? The one that came to Hope and was unhappy with the outcome of drinking from the well."

"Cousin?" one of the witches said, frowning.

“Well, there’s Lettie.”

“Not her,” Selena said.

“Jezebel.”

“Esme,” another counted on her fingers.

“Tabitha.”

“And Hildie.”

“Four cousins. That’s it? Are you sure? What are their last names?”

Selena nodded at Rahl, who scribbled down the names that the prisoners rattled off. “Do you know what they would have wished for?”

“What every witch wishes for,” one said.

“Power,” another answered.

“Did any of these cousins come back to the coven with a weird power or memory loss?” Selena asked.

The crones looked at each other and shook their heads. “Not that we’re aware.”

“Do you know if any of them came to Hope?”

None of them knew.

“Why did you attack our town?” she asked.

“Izina told us to.”

“She was supposed to have given us a week to fix her cousin’s issue with the town. But she wouldn’t even tell us her cousin’s name or what was wrong with her.” Selena was trying not to let her frustration show. “Did she give you a reason why she wanted to attack the town today?”

“She said you’d be unprepared.”

Rahl grunted.

They had been complacent, thinking Izina would have kept her word. It had been sloppy. They wouldn't be caught unawares again.

“What was your goal here?”

“Kill the mayor. Take you prisoner.”

“Me?” Selena said. “Why me?”

“Because of your curse,” one witch said at the same time another one hushed her.

“What about my curse?” Selena said, remembering that Izina had threatened to use it against the town.

When they didn't say anything, she nodded at Rahl. “Happy feasting.”

“Wait,” one cried. “Izina is fascinated with curses.”

“She casts curses?” Selena wondered if Izina had been behind her curse.

“We all can cast curses,” another witch said, affronted.

“What can you tell me about a curse that makes you unlucky?” Selena asked.

When they balked, Rahl just menaced them again, and they spilled their guts—not literally, although Rahl threatened to do just that whenever they paused to take a breath. It wasn't much more than she already knew having experienced the curse for several decades.

“Is there a cure?”

“There's always a cure,” a witch said.

“But I don't know of one.”

None of them did.

Selena tended to believe them because Rahl had them well cowed. Maybe Izina would know the way to break her curse. She'd ask her when she saw her tomorrow.

When she had gotten all the information that she could out of the witches, Selena turned to leave. A torch unexpectedly detached from the wall, crashing down inches from her. Selena jumped back, heart pounding as she just missed being burned. Her curse? Or just a loose holder? Sometimes it was hard to tell.

Her next stop was the jail in town where the vampire hunters were being kept while they waited for trial. Selena emerged from the dungeon's stairwell into the mansion's grand foyer. Her footsteps echoed on the marble floors as she made her way to the front door.

Outside, the morning activities should have been in full swing, but the streets of Hope lay silent and empty. Rahl followed her outside. He glared at the town, his massive arms crossed over his barrel chest. His craggy face was etched in grim lines.

"How is Gertrude?" Selena asked.

Rahl's yellow eyes flashed with anger. "She will live. But it will be weeks before she regains her strength."

"I'm glad the healer was able to help."

"Come," Rahl rumbled. "I will take you to question the hunters." Vengeance colored his tone.

They walked in silence through the quiet streets. The police station stood on a corner, brick and ivy-covered. Inside, an officer jumped to attention at the sight of Rahl.

"The cells," Rahl growled. The werewolf hastily unlocked a thick wooden door.

The hunters' shouts and curses echoed up the stone staircase. Selena steeled herself and descended into the gloom.

Five men occupied separate cells along one wall. They sprang to their feet, gripping the bars and yelling.

"Murderer!" one spat. "We saw what you did to our brothers."

"You came into our town to do violence," Selena said. "You found more than you bargained for. You deserve whatever you get. If you have any desire for leniency, now would be the time to tell me everything you know about Izina Broome."

"We would die before betraying our mistress," another one said.

She took a deep breath, gazing steadily at the hunters. "It does not have to end in more death."

"We have rights," another hunter said.

"Let me tell you about your rights," Rahl snarled. "You have the right to be drained of all your blood come sundown. Then you have the right to have your bloodless husk of a body used to feed my ghoulish warriors."

"You can't do that," another stammered.

"We can and we will. You will be farmed for useful parts, and there won't be enough of you left to bury."

Selena had wanted to go with the carrot instead of the stick, but she was willing to let Rahl be the bad cop to her good cop. She hated using Rahl as a scare tactic, but he didn't seem to mind. In fact, he was eager to make the

vampire hunters a snack. She hoped they didn't call her bluff because she was suddenly sure that Rahl hadn't been bluffing.

"How many vampire hunters does Izina have at her disposal?" Selena asked.

"We are legion."

Of course, they were. "How many does she have guarding her asylum?"

"None," one of them scoffed. "We are not guards. We are her attack force."

"How many do you have left to attack the town again?"

"Legions," the same hunter said, only this time he didn't sound so sure of himself.

"What was the plan here today?" she asked.

"Kill the mayor. Subdue the town until Izina arrived."

"Now, what's the plan? Since you failed so epically."

The hunters exchanged glances, unsure of how to answer. Selena could see the fear in their eyes. They knew their situation was dire. Witches like Izina didn't take well to failure. Selena hoped they would be more cooperative now.

"If you don't talk, I'll leave you to Rahl," Selena threatened. The hunters' faces paled. "You have until the count of three," she continued. "One..."

"Okay, okay," one of them interrupted. "Izina said if we killed the mayor, she would put a human in charge of Hope and the wishing well."

"Did she mention a curse?" Selena asked.

"She said this whole town was cursed. And we were the cure."

That was complete bullshit. “What about me? Did she mention me?”

“We were supposed to take you back to her alive.”

“Why?”

“Because you could be used as a weapon.”

“How?”

“She didn’t say.”

It had to do with her curse. Could Izina weaponize the curse? Did that mean she had been the one to curse her? Selena didn’t remember her at all. The vampire hunters didn’t have any more information for her.

Rahl followed her back up to the mansion where Tess was waiting for her. She had a large sandwich stuffed with meats and cheeses. Selena shouldn’t be thinking about food at a time like this, but she knew the first rule of preparing for battle was to be well-fed and well-rested.

“I’m going to take a break for lunch,” she told Rahl.

Tess beamed at her, and Selena expected Rahl to balk, but he merely nodded and said that he was going to check on Gertrude.

A few moments later, Orin, the blacksmith, entered the dining room. Behind him was a slight figure cloaked in grey, who was being escorted in by Wyatt.

“You found her,” Selena half rose from the table.

Wyatt waved her to keep seated. “I’m only sorry I wasn’t here to defend the town.” He glared at Nia, who was staring at her feet.

“We found her hiding in a cave by the wishing well,” Orin said.

Nia's hood twitched as she glanced between Selena and Orin. He gave the girl a reassuring pat on the shoulder before departing.

“You can let her go,” Selena said to Wyatt.

“If you run,” he warned, “I’ll only catch you.”

Nia nodded. She stared at Selena as if she was scanning for something. Selena still had Arteenos, but the girl didn’t seem to be afraid of the sword.

“Please,” Selena said. “Have a seat. You must be hungry.” But before Selena could share her sandwich, Tess had brought out another one.

Nia eyed it hungrily.

"You have nothing to fear from us. You are under Mayor Ben’s protection here."

That seemed to decide things for her. Nia dug into the sandwich and devoured it in several quick bites.

“Why did you run from me?” Selena asked.

“Because I’m cursed,” Nia said with her mouth full of food.

“What?” Selena almost choked on her sandwich.

“But don’t worry. You don’t have the mistletoe on you anymore. I can’t hurt it.”

Selena’s head was going to pop off. “What are you talking about?”

“I have a black thumb. Plants wither and die if they spend any time in my presence. I think that’s how your werewolf found me so easy.” Nia snorted in disgust. “They just had to follow the path of dying grass and shriveled bushes.”

“It is winter,” Selena said, trying to make her feel better.

“Anyway, I can sense plants. And I sensed that your mistletoe was pretty special. So I wanted to get out of town until you left.”

“That was nice of you.”

Nia shrugged and kept eating.

“How did you come to be cursed?”

“Witch.”

“Which witch?”

“Which witch is which?” Nia shrugged again. “My father was a warlock, and my mother was a dancer. We traveled with her tribe, and I learned my leatherworking from an elder in Fairy. One time, we were performing for a band of witches.”

“In Fairy,” Selena interrupted.

“Yeah, they were on a quest or something,” she said. “Anyway, one of the witches wanted to fool around with my father. My mother slapped her, and things got ugly. No one died, but the witches left in a huff. The next day, all the crops in our garden withered. When I went to get seeds from the elder, all his plants died too.” Nia let out a shaky sigh. “And then they...”

“Banished you,” Selena finished, her gut tightening in sympathy.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. I was banished too.”

“You were?” Nia looked up at her.

“I was cursed with bad luck, but I don’t remember ever encountering a witch.”

“Is that why you came to Hope?” Nia asked. “To wish for your curse to go away.”

Selena nodded.

“It doesn’t work.”

“The well didn’t grant your wish to cure your curse?” Selena asked.

“And it wasn’t because I’m not worthy. The unicorn lady said so.”

Candace.

“Why couldn’t she cure you?”

“Because she said that wasn’t my heart’s desire. Isn’t that a crock of shit?” Nia snorted and reached for another sandwich from the tray Tess had just brought out.

“So, what was your heart’s desire?” Selena asked.

“They didn’t say. I didn’t have anywhere else to go, and since there aren’t any gardens in town, I applied to be Orin’s apprentice.”

“How long ago was this?”

Nia squinted into the distance. “I don’t know. Five or six years.”

“Does your family know what happened to you?”

“Yeah. They visit when they can.”

“Even though you were banished?”

“My father slips my mother away for little trips, and they come to Hope to visit. No one has caught them yet.”

Selena could only wonder if her parents and sister would risk everything to visit her if her curse couldn’t be broken.

Nia finished her sandwich and wiped her hands on her pants. "So what's your plan now? Are you going to keep trying to break your curse?"

"Of course I am. I can't live like this forever."

Nia smirked. "Well, good luck with that. I hope it's your heart's desire."

“What else could it be?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same question. I hope you get an answer because I never did. I’m content with my life here, though. Orin pays me well, and I get to work with leather every day. It’s not so bad.”

Selena looked at Nia, feeling a pang of envy. She wished she could be content with her life and not be so consumed by breaking her curse. But she couldn’t help it. It was all she could think about. She needed to find a way to break the curse, no matter what it took.

“We love your scabbard,” she said, showing Nia that she wore it proudly.

“It’ll protect you.”

Selena blinked up at her. “What do you mean?”

“I put a repulsion spell on it. It’s not foolproof and doesn’t work every time, but some spells will bounce off and redirect if they’re cast at you.”

Selena slowly nodded. “I experienced that when the town was attacked. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s what I do.” Nia rose from the seat. “Am I free to go?”

“You were never a prisoner,” Selena said.

“I am sorry I wasn’t here for the fight with the witches. I wouldn’t have minded beaming a few with my slingshot and iron pellets.”

“We might be able to use you tonight,” Selena said. “We’re going to go to Serenity and take the fight to them. From what our prisoners tell me, Izina Broome is fascinated by curses.”

“Would she know a cure?”

It was Selena’s turn to shrug. “I plan to ask her that.”

Nia nibbled on her lip. “How long are we going to be gone? Orin is already pissed I left him with a boatload of work.”

“We’re leaving at sunset, and we have to be back at sunrise.”

“That’s cutting it awfully close.”

“That’s why we could use all the help we get.”

Nia considered it and then nodded. “I’m in. Like I said, I’ve got a score to settle with witches.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



B^{en}

In the past, when Ben rose from his coffin on the eve of battle, he was filled with excitement and eagerness to begin. But tonight, his responsibilities bore a heavy weight on his heart.

“Rahl, you and Wyatt will remain here.”

He cut off their protests with a sharp slice of his hand. “Wyatt, I need you to take over Simon’s position as Chief of Police until we rescue him. We still have an entire town filled with scared tourists who are guaranteed to start trouble at the wishing well if we leave them to their own devices.”

“Got it,” Wyatt said grudgingly.

“Rahl, you need to be the acting mayor. With Gertrude still recovering and Sykes with me, you’re the only one who can keep this town running. Both of you will need to work it out so the gargoyles are doubled up on all shifts. I’m entrusting you to protect Hope while I’m gone.

“Very well.” Rahl executed a deep bow.

Sykes was busy loading his coffin into the souped-up hearse. It had a V-8 engine and all-terrain tires. Combined with bulletproof glass and paint, the car was the ultimate getaway vehicle. If Ben had to jump into his coffin to get out of the sun, Sykes knew how to drive the hearse hell-bent for leather to get him safely back home.

Ben was surprised to see a few volunteers from the townspeople eager to join the raid on Izina’s asylum in Serenity. They had pinpointed an exact location from the social influencer who had complained about the sunset picture. Had it only been yesterday? He shook his head, clearing his thoughts,

and addressed the volunteers. “Let me make this clear. This isn't a joy ride. This is a rescue mission. We're not there to kill but to capture.”

The five volunteers nodded in agreement.

“Good. We're going to be outnumbered, outgunned, and out-magic-ed. But we have a plan. The witches won't be expecting us, and we'll catch them off guard. Are you ready?”

The volunteers nodded again.

“Then let's go.”

They all piled into their separate cars. There were off-road-style Jeeps and pickup trucks. Ben and Selena got into the back seat of the hearse. Sykes climbed into the driver's seat, and they sped off towards Serenity.

Reaching over, Ben covered Selena's hand with his own. She jumped in surprise.

“Sorry,” she said. “I was a million miles away. I have my watch set to remind us when we're three hours from sunrise. We should get you back in the car for the drive home.”

Ben shook his head. “I'll go up to the line.” Before she could interrupt him, he talked over her as she shook her head no. “As long as I'm back in the hearse in the coffin, it doesn't matter what time we leave.”

“Unless, of course, we're being chased by witches on broomsticks who want to crash our car so they can smash open your coffin. Look, you hired me as your bodyguard. Let me do my job.”

Ben bit back a sigh. “Fine. But our main objective is to free our people first. Once they're no longer in Izina's control, then we confront her.”

“I wish we had found her cousin.”

“Why?” Ben said. “It was a distraction at best. She wants control of Hope and was using it as an excuse.”

“Still, I want anyone who looks at this fight to know that we tried everything.”

“She attacked us. More than once,” Ben pointed out, trying not to get exasperated.

“And I’m not excusing that. But the best battle victory is when you avoid bloodshed. I have a feeling things are going to get ugly.”

“We’ll try our best not to go overboard, but Izina must be stopped.”

Selena nodded. “Just don’t kill her until we get a chance to question her about the curses.”

“It will not be my first choice, but I will protect what is mine.” Ben hoped Selena knew that he was referring to her as well as his people.

She nodded absently and resumed looking out the window. He could almost see the planning going on in her brain.

“I’m in good hands,” he said.

“Unless my curse acts up and your coffin has holes in it.”

Ben glanced back at the coffin in the rear warily. “Try not to give Fate any bright ideas.”

As they approached Serenity, the group grew quiet, preparing for the fight ahead. Ben felt the familiar adrenaline rush that came with battle, but this time he was hyper-focused on Selena.

"If things go bad," he began.

"Don't say things like that," she said harshly.

"I just want you to know that you always have a home in Hope. You can stay in the mayor's mansion as long as you like."

"We're going to be fine," she said, squeezing his hand.

They parked the cars a safe distance away.

"Sykes, stay with the hearse and get ready to leave at a moment's notice."

"Yes, Master," he said and took out a large sniper rifle.

As he balanced it on the hearse's hood, the rest of the team gathered around. Ben could feel the anticipation of the group. He could see it in their eyes, sense it in their movements. They were all ready for the fight, ready to take down the witches who had caused so much chaos and pain.

"Jinx," Selena said, greeting the waitress from The Gingerbread House. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

She and Nia stood side-by-side.

"I want to help."

"Glad to have you."

The group headed into the woods to sneak around the asylum's main gates. As they crept closer, Ben was aware of the forest shrinking back from them. No, not them.

From Nia.

Tugging on Serena's sleeve, he whispered, "I think something's off with her."

"She's cursed, too," Selena said. "She has a black thumb. A witch did it."

"Interesting," Ben said.

As the team approached the side of the asylum, the path was overrun by sharp, thorny plants that surrounded the area like a hedge.

"I got this," Nia said, pushing to the front.

She touched the vines, and within a minute, they curled up brown and desiccated. The team pushed through the foliage slowly in a single file line. Up ahead, the crumbling walls of the old asylum loomed, backlit by the moon's pale glow.

Selena shivered, stepping closer to Ben. "This place gives me the creeps," she whispered.

Ben nodded, his eyes scanning the dilapidated buildings. Shattered windows yawned like mouths, the glass teeth jagged and sharp. Ivy crawled up the weathered brick walls, which were stained with mildew and neglect. The very air was heavier here, weighed down by the asylum's history of pain and madness.

"We have to be careful," Ben murmured back. "No telling what nasty surprises Izina has waiting for us."

"At least she can't ambush us if we're expecting it," Selena said.

Ben managed a weak smile. "Let's hope so."

Drawing her blade, Selena led the way between two crumbling pillars that marked the entrance to this side of the compound. Jinx followed close behind, magic crackling at her fingertips. Ben hadn't known she was a witch. He tried to ignore the goosebumps prickling his skin as they passed beneath the ominous archway, moving deeper into the shadowy ruins. Somewhere within this haunted place, Izina was waiting for them. Ben only hoped that they'd find her before she found them.

They crept through a courtyard overgrown with weeds that wilted under Nia's feet—the gravel path now merely a suggestion beneath the underbrush. Selena's eyes darted to each sagging door and boarded-up window, alert for any sign of movement. But the asylum was eerily still, not even the wind daring to stir.

Ben paused, raising a hand to halt their progress. He tilted his head as if listening. Then his eyes widened.

"Down!" he shouted.

Selena dropped into a crouch without hesitation. An instant later, a bolt of crimson magic sizzled through the space where her head had been. It splintered against the brick wall in a shower of sparks.

"Wards," Ben growled, pulling Selena behind the crumbling remains of a fountain. More spells ricocheted through the courtyard, forcing their group to take cover.

"Izina's traps. They know we're here now."

Ben risked a glance over the fountain's rim. A shimmering barrier now encircled the main building, glowing malevolently. "Can you break through?" he asked Jinx.

Jinx's jaw tightened. "Not without getting fried. We'll have to find another way."

His gaze landed on a cellar door half-buried in ivy. "There. Come on!"

Staying low, they scrambled for the entrance. Ben wrenched the rusted door open, and they plunged into the musty darkness below. The energy barrage sizzled harmlessly above them as the door slammed shut.

Now, in the asylum's underbelly, they found themselves in a crumbling brick tunnel. Jinx conjured a light, revealing dirt floors and exposed pipes. The air was dank and heavy with the scent of mold.

Ben's flashlight beam danced over the grime-slicked walls as they crept forward. The old bricks were stained with dark splatters that looked disturbingly like blood.

Selena's jaw clenched, and she looked grim.

A heavy iron door blocked their path. Exchanging a nod with Selena, Ben carefully turned the handle. The hinges screeched in protest as the door swung inward. Beyond lay what appeared to be an old medical ward.

Moonlight filtered through barred windows near the ceiling, casting the room in an eerie glow. Rows of metal-framed beds lined the walls, still dressed in filthy sheets yellowed with age. Strange figures lay motionless beneath the moth-eaten blankets.

Selena tensed, ready to charge in with her sword. Jinx lifted her palms, ready to summon her magic. Whatever lay in those beds, dead or alive, was unlikely to be friendly. Nia and the others caught up with them in the large room.

Sensing something familiar, Ben stepped closer. His breath caught. The figures weren't human but wolves—huge, shaggy beasts with fur matted and dull. Heavy chains bound their necks and paws to the beds. Their sides barely stirred with the slow rhythm of drugged sleep.

"We found them," Selena whispered.

Ben's expression darkened. "It seems too easy."

Selena nodded.

"I can try to call them out of the trance. Be ready. They may attack us if I can't break Izina's control over them."

"Watch the doors," Selena ordered the other members of the group, pointing to the three exits from this room.

Jinx lifted her hands, prepared to cast a counter-spell. With a deep breath, Ben placed his palms on Simon's temples. He was grateful that his police chief had been captured instead of killed. He met a fierce resistance coating Simon's mind. Gritting his teeth, Ben pushed back. The wolf twitched, a low whine escaping its throat.

"That's it," Ben coaxed. "Come back to us."

The mental barrier flared, then shattered. Simon's eyes cleared, focusing on Ben with sudden, startled awareness. He began to growl, straining against the chains.

"Simon, it's us," Selena said.

Confusion crossed his features.

"Keep talking to him," Ben said.

He quickly went between the chained werewolves, repeating the process. It was easier to break them free this time. The wolves stirred, confusion turning to anger as they realized their imprisonment.

"Be still. We're here to help you," Nia said.

One large gray wolf, Parker, snapped at her outstretched hand before recognition dawned in its eyes.

"You broke her spell," Parker rasped in a guttural voice.

Ben nodded. "Izina won't hold you any longer."

The wolf tested its chains again before bowing its head. "Thank you, Master. I'm sorry we failed you."

"You didn't fail me. Why are you chained down here instead of patrolling the grounds? I would have thought she would try to use you against us."

"She's saving us for something big. What, I don't know."

Ben's sharp senses detected a change in the air instantly. It was a subtle shift, but he heard the faint sound of running feet.

"They're coming," he said tersely. "We have to move."

"Nia, get the wolves back to the cars," Selena said.

"We want to fight," Parker said.

"Not when you're still weakened. She could control you again. I don't want to have to fight through you."

Parker grudgingly nodded.

Ben looked around. "Where's Jinx?"



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Selena

“Who?” Nia asked.

Selena whirled around. “What do you mean, who? Jinx from The Gingerbread House. You rode in together. She’s a witch.”

Nia made a face. “I hate witches. I wouldn’t ride in the car with them.”

“You remember where the cars are, right?” Ben cut in quickly.

“Of course,” Nia scoffed.

“Take the wolves with you. And be careful.”

Nia nodded, and the wolves loped after her as she dashed back outside.

“You all remember Jinx, right?” Selena asked.

The other three members of their group looked at her blankly. Selena didn’t like this at all. “Did she cast a spell?” she wondered aloud.

“I think she went through the far door,” Artegenos said. “I didn’t see her leave, but there are traces of her aura in that area.”

Selena repeated what Artegenos said.

“Let’s follow,” Ben said and hurried through that door.

“Let me go first,” she gritted out.

Sticking close, their group crept deeper into the asylum, wary of attack. One of their party’s shields deflected the first volley of spells, giving them all just enough time to dive behind a crumbling wall. Selena peered around the edge, counting a dozen guards approaching fast.

“Kill them,” the guard in the lead ordered.

"Ben and I will take the six on the left. The rest of you get the ones on the right," Selena murmured. At her nod, they broke cover, unleashing their powers and charging in with their weapons in a coordinated assault.

Ben moved in a blur, his claws striking true again and again. Selena sliced through the guards, dropping them before they could retaliate. In moments, the threat was neutralized. So much for keeping them alive. But they had murder on their minds, and Selena wasn't going to take any chances with Ben's life.

"Let's keep moving," Ben said. His eyes gleamed with predatory focus. Selena was grateful for his steadfast presence at her side.

Izina herself met them at the next juncture. Magic crackled at her fingertips. Her pale face was twisted in a scowl, crimson eyes flashing with rage.

"You dare invade my sanctuary?" she hissed, gesturing sharply. A dozen wraiths materialized, shrieking as they swirled around her.

"How do you like it?" Selena asked.

"I'm going to enjoy making you my minion," she sneered.

Ben stepped forward. "This doesn't have to end in bloodshed. Agree to pay recompense for your destruction of property and to the werewolves, and we will leave in peace."

No, we won't, Selena thought.

And Izina wasn't having any of it anyway.

"We need her alive," Selena ordered. For the sake of her and Nia's curse, they needed to see what Izina knew.

"I will never help you," Izina said. "Werewolves to me!"

There was a tense moment when Selena wondered if they would hear the sound of baying wolves.

“You think you are so clever,” Izina sneered when nothing answered her call.

“Last chance,” Ben said.

Selena loved that he was trying to avoid bloodshed, but the wraiths were slowly circling around them. “Don’t let them touch you,” Selena warned everyone.

Izina threw back her head and cackled. “Foolish and weak.” With a guttural cry, she unleashed a torrent of dark magic. Their guy barely raised his shield in time, the force driving him back a step. Selena supported him by keeping the wraiths away from the rest of the group, swinging Arteenos in broad swipes.

Ben lunged for Izina, but she had a protection barrier up.

“Now, cousin,” Jinx said, coming out of a hidden door. She was holding a gnarled pine staff. “That’s no way to treat your guests.”

“Cousin?” Selena barked out.

“Be free,” Jinx whispered, and the wraiths faded into nothing.

“Get her,” Selena cried, pointing to Izina.

“No, Esme. What are you doing?” Izina asked, her protection barrier still holding up.

“I was trying to live a peaceful life, but you couldn’t handle that.”

They battered at Izina’s magical barrier as she was distracted by Jinx or Esme, as Izina called her.

“You never returned from Hope. I could barely remember you. Even now, it’s hard to concentrate.”

“My heart’s desire was to be free of you and hidden from danger. The well granted my wish.” Jinx touched the tattoo on her neck.

Suddenly, Selena remembered where she had seen the mark. It had been etched on the side of the wishing well. She was an idiot. She had almost convinced herself she had seen it as a child and that it had been a key to reversing her curse.

“No, you wanted power,” Izina said. “Like I do. You went to scope out the well to find out how to control it.”

Jinx/Esme shook her head. “That’s what I told you so you would let me go. You were supposed to forget all about me.”

“And I would have too if my minions hadn’t caught sight of you. But when I looked for you in Hope, you were gone.”

“I was hidden,” Jinx/Esme said sadly. “And you should have forgotten all about me.”

“I almost did,” Izina confessed. “Come and help me defeat these creatures, and I’ll forget your rebellious nonsense once we control the well.”

“You should have taken Mayor Ben up on his offer,” Jinx said sadly. She whirled her staff.

“What are you doing?” Izina cried out.

The spell erupted from Jinx’s staff, a brilliant ray of sunlight. Ben flinched back, too close to the glare. Selena caught him as he nearly staggered to the ground. The ray hit Izina's barrier like an arrow. Izina raged as her barrier melted away.

Selena seized the opportunity and held her sword to Izina's neck.
“Surrender,” Selena commanded.

"It's over," Ben said softly.

“Not yet, it’s not,” Izina said grimly and opened up her clenched fist.
The ray of sunlight bloomed in her hand.

“No,” Selena cried, slicing Izina’s head off in one blow.

But it was too late. The bolt of sunlight flew out of her hand and hit Ben directly in the chest. He glowed for a moment and then sank into a pile of ashes on the cold concrete floor.

“No!” Selena dropped to her knees, trying to scoop up Ben’s remains, but they sifted through her fingers and faded away.

Her curse. Selena was responsible for this happening. It was bad luck that she hadn’t figured out Jinx/Esme’s tattoo before this battle. It was bad luck that Jinx’s staff chose a sunlight spell. It was bad luck that Izina had grabbed a piece of it and was able to cast it at Ben before she died.

Selena wept. “No. I’m so sorry. Ben, please.”

“What is your heart’s desire?”

At first, Selena thought she had imagined it. But then she looked up. Time had stopped. Jinx looked shocked and sorrowful. Her hand was outstretched as if she would take back the spell. The other three members of their team were frozen in various battle poses as they fought the vampire hunters who had rushed into the room during Jinx / Esme’s talk with Izina.

Standing before her was Candace, looking like an elven unicorn who got its fashion sense from cotton candy. And next to her, at home in the dank

shadows, was a dark presence. When the moonlight hit him, she saw that he was a moonsidhe. This must be the Roderick that Ben had mentioned.

“Help him,” Selena begged. “Bring him back.”

“Is that your heart’s desire?” Candace cocked her head.

“Yes,” Selena sobbed.

Candace floated a goblet through the air to her. “Drink from me and receive your heart’s desire.”

Selena gulped it down.

Nothing happened.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“Hope,” Candace said before she and Roderick faded out, and the world returned to chaos.

Selena wasn’t sure if that was where they had sent Ben or if it had been a command. Either way, they had to take care of the other vampire hunters before they could go home.

Home.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN



B^{en}

The moment Ben opened his eyes, a kaleidoscope of emotions assaulted him. Shock surged like electricity through his veins as he realized he was face down in icy grass. Disbelief swirled in his gut, making it churn with unease. He remembered the searing pain as Izina Broome's sunlight spell consumed him, the certainty that his existence was about to be snuffed out like a candle.

Yet here he was, alive and unharmed, laying feet from the magical wishing well that served as the heart of his beloved town. How could this be?

He couldn't dwell on it for long, though. The sky above was tinged with the faintest blush of pink, signaling the approach of dawn. A vampire caught under the sun's merciless rays would meet the same fate he had narrowly escaped earlier. His mansion, his sanctuary, was still some distance away, and he needed to reach its protective confines before the sun's first light crested the horizon.

He forced himself into mist form and flew down the cobblestone path toward home.

The cold air burned Ben's lungs as he weaved through the narrow alleys of Hope, his breath forming frosty plumes against the predawn sky. His mist form propelled him forward with supernatural speed, yet his thoughts raced even faster.

"Selena," his mind whispered her name, a balm over the panic threatening to consume him. He could only imagine what she was facing in Serenity, alone and outnumbered by Izina's forces. As much as he wanted to be there

by her side, he knew that if the sun found him first, he'd be nothing but a memory.

A group of ghouls who had been lingering near the town bakery watched as Ben sifted past, their confusion evident in their wide eyes and dropped jaws. They had expected him to return triumphantly with Selena, not flying through the streets like a man possessed. But now wasn't the time for explanations; the relentless march of time and the imminent sunrise left no room for pleasantries.

"Please be safe, Selena," he prayed silently, his worry for her safety eclipsing his own predicament momentarily. His heart ached to think of her in harm's way, and he vowed to do whatever it took to protect her once they were reunited.

The world around him blurred into a patchwork of color and shadow, his singular focus on reaching his mansion driving him forward like a demon at his heels. The first hints of morning light crept over the horizon, each moment bringing the sun closer to casting its deadly rays upon him. He could feel the pressure mounting, his heart pounding with the urgency of his need to reach safety.

Closing his eyes for just a heartbeat, Ben reached out with his mind and connected with his werewolves. The sensation was like stepping into a warm embrace, their loyalty and devotion wrapping around him like a protective cloak. They were his, and he was theirs, bound together by the ancient bonds of master and servant.

"Report," he commanded, feeling the sudden attentiveness of his werewolves through their mental link.

"Master, we are still finishing up the fight here," one of them replied, the images of battle flashing through his mind in a blur of blood and fur. "We will return soon."

"Good," Ben said, his voice firm despite his relief at hearing their reassuring words.

"Tell me what happened." His thoughts were racing as fast as his mist form flowed through the town.

"Selena has executed Izina Broome," one of the werewolves replied, their relief palpable. "We are routing the rest of the vampire hunters."

"Thank the stars," Ben breathed, his confusion momentarily eclipsed by gratitude. "I thought I was finished when Izina's sunlight spell hit me."

"As did we," another werewolf chimed in. "We are overjoyed to know you are alive and well."

"Alive, yes, but why?" Ben wondered, his thoughts swirling like the pre-dawn mist. "I shouldn't be here; I shouldn't be back in Hope."

He wished he could speak directly to Selena, to hear her voice and confirm her safety for himself. But for now, he had to settle for relaying his message through the werewolves.

"Tell Selena I am alive and eager to see her," he instructed. "And return to Hope as soon as possible."

"Understood," the werewolves confirmed, their determination echoing through the mental bond.

The first rays of sunlight threatened to break free from the horizon as Ben finally reached his mansion, panting and out of breath. The looming estate stood empty, a silent sentinel in the pre-dawn glow. Worry gnawed at him.

He knew that being in his coffin unguarded could invite disaster, but there was no other choice.

He hurried inside, feeling the air grow colder as he crossed the threshold. The scent of old wood and centuries of memories filled his nostrils as he rushed through the familiar halls to his coffin. A symphony of creaks and groans accompanied his footsteps as if the house itself were protesting its master's hasty return.

"Guard the mansion," Ben demanded, reaching out mentally to the few gargoyles and werewolves still stationed in Hope. "Ensure that none disturb my rest."

Their assent echoed through his mind, a chorus of loyalty and resolve. He cast one last glance at the darkened corners of his home before slipping into his coffin. The velvet lining embraced him like a lover as he pulled the heavy lid shut with a resounding thud, sealing himself away from the imminent sunlight.

As the rays of dawn crept closer, Ben lay in the darkness, his heart pounding with both relief and anxiety. The chill of his coffin seeped into him, a stark reminder of the vulnerability he faced in his current state. But even as his mind raced with questions and uncertainties, Ben felt a flicker of hope—the knowledge that when he next awoke, Selena would be by his side, and they could face whatever challenges awaited them together. He allowed himself to think about their reunion and remember their lovemaking from the previous night. The darkness of his coffin was less oppressive, replaced by a sense of eagerness for the future. Slowly, the fatigue of his mad dash settled over him, wrapping him in a blanket of exhaustion.

"Tomorrow," he murmured the word—a promise and a prayer.

"Tomorrow, we begin anew."

And with that thought, Ben allowed himself to succumb to the day's rest, dreaming of Selena and their life together in the town they both called home: Hope.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Selena

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm glow on Ben's bedroom. Selena sat on his bed, her fingers tracing the soft, velvety sheets as she stared at his coffin, the dark wood barely visible in the dim light. Her thoughts were a maelstrom of emotion. She knew she had to leave Hope because of her curse, but she loved Ben with all her heart. The weight of her decision pressed on her like a heavy stone.

As the last rays of sunlight vanished, the coffin lid creaked open. Ben slowly emerged, blinking against the darkness. When he saw Selena, his eyes softened with love and relief. She couldn't help herself—she rushed over to him and threw her arms around his neck, pressing her lips to his. Relief flooded through her—he was all right.

Their kiss was passionate and profound, an expression of their connection that went beyond words. As they pulled away, Selena could not tear her gaze from Ben's. His hands moved to cup her face, thumbs brushing her cheeks gently. The warmth of his touch sent shivers down her spine.

"I'm so glad to see you," Ben murmured, his voice a sweet caress.

"I was so worried about you," she whispered back, her heart pounding. At that moment, any lingering doubts she had about her feelings for him evaporated. She wanted him, needed him more than anything.

Her hands slipped beneath the waistband of his pants, feeling the firm muscles of his hips. At the same time, his fingers traced delicate patterns along her thigh, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

"So beautiful." Ben's voice was rough with need. His lips found hers again, this time with even more fervor than before. Their tongues danced, teasing and tasting, as their hands continued to explore each other's bodies. The sensation was like a rich, decadent dessert that she couldn't help but indulge in.

"I need you." Every nerve ending was alive with an ache that only Ben could soothe.

"You have me," Ben replied. They quickly shed their clothing, their bare skin brushing together like the softest silk.

In the heat of passion, Selena felt a bittersweet pang in her chest. She wanted to memorize every detail of this moment, knowing it would be one of her last cherished memories in Hope. But for now, the taste of Ben's kisses washed away all thoughts of goodbyes and curses.

With a hunger neither of them could deny, they came together again, their mouths meeting in a series of rough, urgent kisses. Their bodies pressed close, hands roaming greedily, seeking out the places that brought them the most pleasure.

Selena's breath hitched as Ben's fingers closed lightly around her breast, and she arched her back slightly to press herself against his touch.

"Yes," she moaned softly. A thrill ran through her as his lips found hers again, leaving her tingling with anticipation.

"Selena, I love you," Ben whispered in her ear as he lowered her to the bed. He trailed kisses down her throat, the warmth of his touch making her shudder with delight.

"I love you too." It hurt. It hurt so much, but she had to let him know that his feelings weren't unrequited.

Selena reached up, her fingers tangling in Ben's hair as she pulled him closer. He groaned into her mouth, his hands exploring the smooth skin of her back. They moved in a seamless dance, their bodies acting on pure instinct as they lost themselves in each other. His lips moved lower, leaving a fiery trail down her neck, her collarbone, and across her chest. She arched her back as he grazed his teeth down the curve of her breast.

The sensation made her shiver. As he sucked her nipple into his mouth, Selena couldn't stop herself from crying out. Her hands dug into the sheets beneath her. Pleasure surged through her as he kissed, licked, and suckled her, his searching tongue leaving a trail of fire in its wake. As they moved, their bodies created a symphony of sounds—breathy sighs, low moans, and whispered words of love.

Ben's lips moved to her other breast, his tongue teasing her nipple until it hardened beneath his touch. She could barely think straight, but she needed to feel him inside her. Ben pulled back, and her eyes flew open, a cry of protest escaping her lips. Before she could object, he moved on top of her. Trembling with eagerness, she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into a kiss.

As his mouth found hers, she arched her back, wordlessly begging him to take her. His tongue glided against hers. His hands moved to her hips, his fingers curling against her skin as he set a steady rhythm.

Her head spinning with pleasure, Selena broke the kiss and gasped. "Ben, oh, Ben," she gasped, her voice breathy with pleasure. With every thrust, he moved deeper and deeper into her, the pressure building within her until it was almost unbearable.

Moving quickly, Ben shifted his weight to one arm so he could reach down between them. His fingers slid between her thighs, and with a few deft caresses, Selena's world shattered, and she cried out in pleasure.

All that mattered was the taste of Ben's lips, the warmth of his hands, the steady rhythm of his heart against her chest. It was as if time itself had stopped, leaving only their love for one another to fill the void.

But even as passion consumed them, Selena's thoughts couldn't help but drift back to the decision she had made. The knowledge that she would have to leave Hope—and Ben—behind tore at her heart. She wanted nothing more than to stay with him, to be free from the curse that haunted her. But she knew that wasn't possible. For now, she would lose herself in their love, savoring every moment they had together before she had to say goodbye.

Eventually, their passionate encounter gave way to gentle caresses and tender words. Wrapped in each other's arms, they lay side by side, the fading sunlight casting long shadows across the room.

"Ben," Selena began, her voice heavy with emotion. "I have to tell you something."

"Of course," he said, his fingers tracing circles on her arm. His eyes, filled with love and warmth, met hers.

"Izina is gone. She won't hurt you or Hope anymore." Selena's chest tightened as she continued, recalling the horrifying image of Ben turned to ash. "I watched her cast that sunlight spell on you... I thought I had lost you."

A tear rolled down her cheek, and Ben caught it with his thumb, brushing it gently away. "I'm here, Selena," he reassured her, his voice soft but steady. "I don't know how, but I'm alive and well."

Selena took a shaky breath, her body still humming from their intimate connection. She needed to tell Ben about Candace and Roderick, but the words were heavy in her chest. Her fingers played with the edge of the soft blanket beneath them, drawing comfort from its warmth.

"Ben, there's more." Her voice was barely a whisper, as if speaking louder would shatter the fragile peace they'd found in each other's arms. "Candace and Roderick appeared to me."

His brow furrowed, concern etching itself into his handsome features. "What did they want?"

"They offered me my heart's desire." Selena closed her eyes, the memory of that moment so bittersweet. "But I couldn't wish away my curse, not when your life was on the line. So, I wished for you to live instead."

A stunned silence filled the room, their mingled breaths the only sound as Ben processed her revelation. His hand reached out, cupping her cheek tenderly. "You chose to save me over breaking your curse? Selena..."

"Your life means everything to me, Ben." Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, the weight of her decision settling heavily on her heart.

"Selena, I can't believe you sacrificed so much for me." He pressed his lips to hers, the kiss filled with gratitude and love. "I love you. You're my wish come true."

Warmth bloomed in her chest at his declaration, her love for him threatening to consume her whole. But she knew what it meant to stay in Hope, cursed as she was. A future together was impossible, yet Ben's next words left her breathless.

"Marry me, Selena. Stay with me here, in Hope."

The desire to accept his proposal seeped into her bones, but the reality of her curse loomed over them like a specter. She looked into Ben's eyes, filled with hope and love, and her heart broke for what could have been.

Heartache swelled in Selena's chest, and she shook her head gently. "I can't, Ben. While I still bear this curse, everyone I love is at risk. I won't put you or the town of Hope in danger."

Her gaze drifted to the window, where the sun dipped below the horizon, casting soft orange hues across the room. The fading light mirrored the waning hope within her.

"Instead, I've decided to leave Hope." She looked back into Ben's eyes, searching for understanding. "I must find the next Fae artifact. Maybe this time, I can use it to break my curse."

Ben's expression shifted, his jaw set with determination. "I don't care if you're cursed, Selena. I want you to stay with me."

Her heart ached as she traced the contours of his face, committing every detail to memory. But she knew the truth—tragedy would follow if she remained by his side.

"Ben, I—" A lump formed in her throat, making it difficult to speak. "I want nothing more than to stay with you. But I can't let my curse bring harm to those I love."

He reached out, his fingers intertwining with hers, the warmth of his touch a bittersweet reminder of their connection. "We can face this together, Selena. You don't have to do this alone."

Tears stung her eyes as she squeezed his hand. His unwavering support only made her decision more painful. Yet, she had to protect him, even if it meant leaving him behind.

"Please understand," she implored, her voice barely a whisper. "If I stay, I'll only bring despair to you and the people of Hope."

Silence hung between them for a moment, heavy with the weight of their unspoken fears.

"Selena..." Ben's voice cracked with emotion. "I love you. But I won't stand in the way of your quest to break this curse."

Her heart shattered, yet she forced a small smile, grateful for his understanding. She knew that their love, much like the setting sun, would soon become a distant memory—but it was a sacrifice she had to make.



SELENA GLANCED DOWN at the small, fragile mistletoe seedling she had brought with her from Fairy. The green leaves shimmered in the moonlight that filtered through the bedroom window.

"Ben," she began, her voice tremulous, "I want to ask you something." She held the seedling out to him as if offering her own heart. "Please, plant this mistletoe in Hope. Let it grow and become a symbol of our love and my promise to return once I've broken my curse."

His eyes locked onto the delicate plant, then met hers with a mixture of sadness and determination. Slowly, he nodded, cradling the mistletoe in his hands as though it were precious beyond measure. "I'll do it, Selena. I'll take care of it for both of us."

A bittersweet smile graced her lips, but the ache in her chest only deepened. They shared a tender look before Selena gathered her belongings for the journey ahead. As she folded her clothes and tucked them into her worn backpack, the scent of freshly baked gingerbread and hot cocoa wafted through the window, taunting her with the life she was leaving behind.

Each item she packed was like another piece of her heart being torn away from Ben, from Hope, from the happiness they had shared. With every carefully chosen possession, the weight of her decision bore down on her soul.

"Are you sure about this?" Ben asked. He looked at her with those deep amethyst eyes, full of love and concern, and it took everything in her not to break down.

"More than anything, I wish I could stay," she admitted, her voice barely audible. "But I have to do this."

Ben reached out, his fingers brushing her cheek tenderly. Though his touch warmed her skin, it couldn't dispel the chill settling into her bones. "I believe in you, Selena. And I'll wait for you, no matter how long it takes."

"Thank you," she whispered, her heart swelling with love even as it ached with the pain of their impending separation.

Ben cradled the delicate seedling. "I'll nurture it, and by the time you return, it will be an emblem of our enduring love."



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



B^{en}

The town of Hope, with all its twinkling lights and festive decorations, was the epitome of holiday cheer. Ben stood near the magical wishing well, clutching a sprig of mistletoe in his trembling hand. He knew that planting it in the ground would symbolize that Selena was planting roots in the town.

Taking a deep breath, Ben knelt down and carefully pushed the mistletoe into the frozen soil beside the well. The coldness nipped at his fingertips as he tenderly patted the earth around it. He closed his eyes and whispered his heartfelt wish.

"Please," he begged, his voice cracking with emotion. "I just want Selena's curse to be broken so she can be at peace."

As he made his wish, Ben's thoughts were a whirlwind of emotions—love, longing, doubt, and hope—all swirling together like the snowflakes dancing around him. He remembered the warmth of Selena's smile, the sweetness of her laughter, and the gentle touch of her hand on his arm whenever they were together. She had brought so much joy and light into his life, and he couldn't bear the thought of losing her to the cruel fate that had befallen her.

The air crackled with an unseen energy, disrupting the peaceful silence of the night. Ben blinked in disbelief as two ethereal figures materialized before him. Their radiant glow illuminated the darkness, casting a warm golden light on the snow-covered ground. The elegant woman, Candace, had hair that

moved like water, while the regal man, Roderick, bore eyes that sparkled like stars in the night sky.

“Where have you two been?” He sank back on his heels.

"Ben," Candace's melodious voice echoed through the cold air, "your wish for Selena's curse to be cured has been granted."

"Your actions and the selfless acts of love you and Selena have displayed are indeed powerful enough," Roderick added, his deep voice resonating with a sense of finality.

Ben couldn't believe what he was hearing. He stood there, mouth agape, as he tried to process the surreal encounter. His heart raced, adrenaline pumping through his veins. Yet, amidst the shock, he felt the first flicker of hope that they might finally be free from the shadow of Selena's curse.

"Is it... really true?" Ben stammered, his voice shaking as much as his body. His eyes darted between the two fae gods, desperately seeking confirmation for what seemed too good to be real.

Candace nodded, her gaze sympathetic yet firm. "Yes, Ben, your love for Selena has proven to be a force stronger than any curse. Your devotion to each other has changed your destinies."

"Then..." Ben exhaled slowly, trying to calm his racing thoughts. "She will return to me? She'll be free?"

Roderick's lips curved upward into a reassuring smile. "Yes, she will be free of her curse, and she will return to you."

"Thank you," Ben whispered, feeling the weight of a thousand burdens lifting from his shoulders. Gratitude swelled within his chest as he looked upon his old friends who had finally granted his deepest wish.

He stood up and was about to walk over to hug Candace and shake Roderick's hand when a flash of light blinded him. Something hard hit the back of his knees, and he tumbled into the well.

Not again.

This time, when he splashed into the cold water, he wasn't alone. He kicked to the surface to find that Selena was right there next to him.

"This isn't the gate I wanted," she sputtered, treading water.

"No," he said. "But this is the gate you needed."

Before she could protest, he grabbed her into his arms and flew them straight up and out of the well.

As they emerged, the stars above glittered like a million tiny promises, each one a testament to the enduring power of their love.

"Ben, I can't believe it," she said, her voice trembling with emotion. "My curse...it's gone. I can feel it. And I want to stay here, in Hope, with you."

"Are you sure?" Ben asked, searching her face for any hint of doubt. He wanted nothing more than for her to be happy, whether that meant remaining in Hope or returning to her Fae heritage.

"Absolutely," Selena replied, her smile radiant as a thousand suns. "This is my home now. You are my home."

Touched by her words, Ben pulled her closer, wrapping his arms tightly around her as they continued to fly above the town. Their breath mingled in the crisp winter air, forming a delicate dance of frosty tendrils, symbolizing their unbreakable connection.

"Then let's go home, Selena," Ben whispered into her ear, his voice filled with love and promise. Together, they flew toward their future, their hearts

beating as one, a harmonious rhythm that would guide them through whatever challenges lay ahead. And as the first light of dawn painted the sky in hues of pink and gold, they knew that they had found something far greater than magic—they had found each other.



SELENA

Selena strolled through the town of Hope, her senses alive with the sights, sounds, and smells of a community rebuilding itself after the recent witch attacks. The sun shone brightly overhead, but its warmth did little to fend off the chill of the approaching winter season. She knew Ben was resting in his coffin at home, and she couldn't help but feel the tiniest pang of guilt for enjoying the daylight without him.

The people of Hope bustled about, preparing for the annual winter festival. Their resilience and determination filled Selena's heart with admiration. She watched through the window as Adelaide skillfully crafted special holiday treats—intricately iced gingerbread houses that looked like they belonged in a fairy tale and sweet peppermint candies that sparkled like tiny jewels.

"Good morning, Selena," Nia said. She and Orin were hard at work outside Hope's armory, crafting leather sleigh bells and fireplace instruments. The rhythmic sound of their hammers striking metal echoed through the crisp air, mingling with the laughter of children playing nearby. "We're so glad you came back."

"Thank you, Nia," Selena replied with a genuine smile, warmed by the knowledge that she had found acceptance among these people. "I'm happy to be here."

As she continued her walk, Selena decided to stop by The Gingerbread Coffee and Hot Chocolate House, where Jinx greeted her with a broad grin. "Selena, it's been too long since I've seen you in here. What can I get for you?"

"Hot chocolate, please," Selena said, taking a seat at one of the cozy tables. The aroma of cinnamon and nutmeg wafted through the air, making her nostalgic for the holidays she'd spent with her family in the Faelands.

"Coming right up," Jinx replied, her eyes twinkling with excitement. "I'm so glad you're sticking around, Selena. This town just wouldn't be the same without you."

"Thank you, Jinx," Selena said, touched by the sentiment. "It feels like home here."

As she sipped her hot chocolate, Selena marveled at how seamlessly she had become a part of this community. The people of Hope had shown her kindness and understanding that she hadn't experienced in a very long time. For the first time in her life, Selena truly felt like she belonged somewhere—and she couldn't imagine leaving it behind.

Selena's thoughts drifted to her family in the Faelands as she sipped her hot chocolate. She couldn't help but compare the warmth and acceptance she'd found in Hope with the coldness she had experienced among her own tribe. Though she didn't want to leave Ben, she knew her family would want to hear the good news of her broken curse and upcoming wedding.

"Jinx," Selena began hesitantly, "I've been thinking... I don't want to go through the gates into the Faelands and leave Ben, but I need my family to know about our wedding."

Jinx looked thoughtful for a moment before offering, "I could go to the Faelands and deliver the message for you. It's the least I can do to make up for casting that sunlight spell at Izina and almost hurting Ben."

"Would you, really?" Selena asked, touched by the offer. "That would mean so much to me."

"Of course," Jinx replied with a warm smile. "I'll just need something to show them – maybe a letter?"

"Great idea," Selena said, ordering another hot chocolate as she gathered parchment and ink. She spent the next hour carefully composing heartfelt letters to her family, expressing her love and happiness while also reassuring them of her safety.



CHAPTER NINETEEN



B^{en}

As night fell over the town of Hope, Ben sat at his desk in the town hall, grappling with the demands of both wedding planning and keeping the town running smoothly. Yule was fast approaching, and with Gertrude still recovering from her wounds, Ben relied more and more on Rahl, his trusted security guard.

"Rahl," Ben called out, "could you bring me the latest budget report? I need to make sure we have enough funds allocated for the Yule festival."

"Of course, sir," Rahl grumbled, shuffling through a stack of papers with his large, clawed hands. Though he was trying his best, Ben couldn't help but chuckle at the sight of the massive ghoul attempting to navigate the delicate world of bureaucracy.

"Here it is, sir," Rahl said proudly, slamming the paper onto the desk with such force that Ben almost jumped out of his seat.

"Thank you," Ben managed to suppress a laugh as he carefully smoothed out the crumpled document. "Now, would you be so kind as to fetch Mrs. Maplethorpe? She requested a meeting regarding the Yule decorations."

"Right away, sir." Rahl stomped off with determination. Moments later, the door flew open, and Rahl ushered in a flustered-looking Mrs. Maplethorpe, a petite woman who appeared even smaller next to the towering ghoul.

"Mrs. Maplethorpe, please, have a seat," Ben offered, gesturing to a chair in front of his desk. As she settled into the chair, she cast a wary glance at Rahl, who stood stiffly beside her, practically radiating an aura of fierceness.

"Um, thank you, Mayor Ben," she stammered, her gaze darting between Ben and Rahl. "I just wanted to discuss the Yule decorations for the town square. I was thinking we could use more garlands and maybe some twinkling lights?"

"Sounds lovely," Ben agreed, nodding. "Rahl, would you be so kind as to make a note of that?"

"Of course, sir!" Rahl barked, his voice booming through the room, causing Mrs. Maplethorpe to flinch. He scribbled down her suggestions with surprising precision, albeit in a handwriting style reminiscent of ancient runes.

"Thank you both," Mrs. Maplethorpe said, gathering her things and practically sprinting out of the room, clearly unnerved by her encounter with Rahl.

As if on cue, Sykes burst into the room, looking frazzled. "Sir, I'm afraid we have a problem. The supplier for the Yule feast has sent us the wrong order, and now we're short on several key ingredients."

"Deep breaths, Sykes," Ben replied calmly, rising from his seat. "We'll sort this out together. We still have time to find another supplier or make substitutions."

"Thank you, sir," Sykes sighed with relief, Ben's reassuring presence bringing him comfort.

Selena entered the room, her eyes sweeping over the organized chaos that enveloped Ben's office. Sykes was frantically flipping through a stack of papers when Selena approached him. "Sykes," she said gently, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Tell me what you need help with. I'm here."

"Ah, thank you," he replied, visibly relieved. "We're still waiting on confirmation for the Yule festival's ice sculptures, and we've had some issues with the wishing well."

"Let's tackle the ice sculptures first," Selena suggested, grabbing the phone and dialing the number for the ice carver. After a short conversation filled with assurances, Selena hung up the phone with a triumphant smile. "The ice carver will be here tomorrow morning."

"Perfect." Sykes breathed a sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, Ben was attempting to appease the disgruntled tourists who approached him, complaining about ungranted wishes from the wishing well. "I assure you, sir, the wishing well is not a scam. Sometimes, it just takes a little more time for your wish to come true," Ben explained patiently.

"More time?" the tourist scoffed. "I wished for my wife to stop snoring, and she still sounds like a freight train!"

"Perhaps the well believes it's a trait that makes her unique and endearing," Selena chimed in, offering a warm smile. The man couldn't help but chuckle at her remark, his anger dissipating as he considered the possibility.

"Alright, alright," he conceded. "Maybe there's some truth to that." He left with a lighter heart, grumbling good-naturedly about his wife's nocturnal symphony.

A second tourist approached, a woman clutching a small, worn teddy bear. "I wished for my childhood toy to be restored," she lamented, holding up the bear as evidence of the well's failure.

"Ah," Selena said thoughtfully, examining the toy. "You know, sometimes the most valuable things in life are those that show their age and

wear. It's proof that they've been truly loved."

The woman blinked, then smiled softly. "I suppose you're right," she murmured, cradling the bear fondly. "Thank you."

"Of course," Selena replied warmly, watching as the woman rejoined her family, newfound appreciation for her treasured possession shining in her eyes.

As the office began to quiet down, Ben turned to Selena, his eyes filled with warmth and gratitude. "Thank you for your help today, love," he whispered, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead.

"Anything for you and for this town," she responded, her cheeks flushed with happiness.

Hand in hand, they left the bustling office behind, walking through the snow-dusted streets of Hope, illuminated by a canopy of twinkling fairy lights. Together, they made their way back to the mayor's mansion, each step bringing them closer to their shared future—one filled with love, laughter, and endless possibilities.



CHAPTER TWENTY



*S*elena

Selena stood at the entrance to the outdoor altar, her heart racing with excitement as she took in the magical sight before her. Her family had traveled all the way from the Faelands to celebrate this special day with her, and it filled her with immeasurable joy. They were here not only to witness her marriage but also to rejoice in the breaking of her curse. She was grateful for their presence, as well as for the love that surrounded her.

The Yule wedding venue appeared as if lifted straight from a dream, with the soft glow of twinkling fairy lights illuminating the ancient oak trees. The branches stretched out like protective arms, cradling the scene beneath them. Winter flowers adorned the space, their petals shimmering in hues of amethyst and sapphire, filling the air with a delicate fragrance. Mistletoe decorations hung from above, casting a spell of love and enchantment upon all who gathered there.

Her eyes scanned the crowd, resting on the familiar faces of her Fae kin. Their radiant smiles spoke volumes, expressing how thrilled they were for Selena. This was a momentous occasion, one that marked the beginning of a new chapter in her life. Warmth spread through her chest as she thought about the journey she had taken to reach this point.

As she stepped forward, her gown swaying gently with each step, she could feel the love that enveloped her from all corners of the enchanted grove. It was clear that she was not alone in her happiness; every person present shared her joy and excitement.

At the altar, Ben stood tall and sturdy like a grand oak tree. Selena's heart swelled with love at the sight of him. She stepped closer, her train trailing behind her in perfect harmony with the soft rustle of fallen leaves.

"Selena," Ben began, his voice warm and reassuring. "From the moment we met, I knew our paths were meant to intertwine."

A shiver of anticipation raced down Selena's spine as she gazed into his eyes, pools of liquid warmth that melted her fears away. Her fingers trembled ever so slightly when she lifted them to touch his cheek.

"Ben," she whispered, her words soft and sincere. "Our love has blossomed, nourishing and sustaining us through every challenge fate placed in our path."

Their hands joined, fingers twined in a tender embrace, as they exchanged their vows. Each promise was a pledge of hope, binding them together for eternity.

"Selena," he said, slipping a delicate gold band onto her finger, "I offer my heart to you."

Her breath caught in her throat as the ring encircled her finger, its weight a testament to the sacred bond they now shared. She picked up the matching band forged from the same golden metal.

"Ben," she murmured, placing the ring on his finger, "my love for you is our lives forever entwined."

His fingers brushed hers, leaving a trail of warmth as they closed around the symbol of their commitment. Their gazes locked, brimming with love and understanding, and Selena felt whole.

"Today, we seal our love with these rings," Ben said softly, "a promise of a future rich in laughter, joy, and endless devotion."

"Forever and always," Selena replied, her heart swelling. She knew, without a doubt, that they were destined for a lifetime of happiness.

The air around the crowd gathered beside the altar was thick with anticipation. Selena smiled at her family, who looked on proudly. She was curse-free and accepted, but as much as she loved them, the Faelands were no longer her home.

"By the power vested in me," the officiant declared, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." He smiled warmly as he continued, "Ben and Selena, please prepare for your crowning moment."

The couple turned to face each other, and for a heartbeat, time paused. Selena's pulse raced as she took in the sight of Ben, his eyes brimming with love and devotion. The thought of becoming the Winter Princess alongside him filled her with excitement.

A hush fell over the crowd as two young children approached the couple, carrying elegant crowns fashioned from silver and adorned with ice-blue crystals. They were the embodiment of the season, the sparkle of snowflakes caught in moonlight.

"Ben and Selena," the officiant intoned, "as you accept these crowns, may they signify not only your new roles as Winter Prince and Princess but also the unbreakable bond that binds your hearts together." He paused for a moment, allowing the weight of his words to sink in.

With trembling hands, Selena lifted the crown meant for Ben and carefully placed it upon his head. The crystals shimmered, whispering promises of love and prosperity. "My Winter Prince," she murmured, pride swelling within her.

In turn, Ben gently set the crown atop her head. "My Winter Princess," he whispered, his voice filled with reverence.

The once hushed crowd now erupted in cheers and applause, their happiness filling the air. Selena's family beamed at her from the front row, their pride evident as they celebrated.

"May your love endure through every season," the officiant said, his eyes twinkling, "and may your union bring blessings to you and all those who share in your happiness."

As Ben took Selena's hand, the warmth of their shared connection surged between them. They were ready to face whatever the future might hold, secure in the knowledge that they would do so together, hand in hand, as Winter Prince and Princess.

The Yule Festival unfolded before Selena and Ben, symbolizing love, hope, and the promise of a bright future together. As they descended from the altar, hand in hand, the townspeople parted to make way for them.

As the newly crowned Winter Prince and Princess, Selena and Ben led the procession into the heart of the festival. The town square transformed into a lively scene of dancing, feasting, and music, each detail meticulously crafted to reflect the season's joy and warmth.

Couples swayed to the melodic strumming of a harp, their footsteps delicate and measured. Children skipped between stalls, laughter bubbling forth. And above it all, the festival was filled with comforting warmth.

"Let's dance, my Winter Princess," Ben suggested, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Of course, my Winter Prince," Selena agreed, following him into the throng of dancers.

As they moved to the rhythm of the music, Selena marveled at the beauty of it all. She could feel the town's energy pulsing around her, each person contributing their unique flavor to the celebration.

As the night wore on, Selena and Ben savored every moment of happiness that the Yule Festival had to offer. Together, they danced beneath the stars, reveling in the love and admiration of their friends and family.



"GERTRUDE," RAHL SAID as he walked up to where she stood alone. Concern etched into his terrible, fearsome features. "You seem troubled."

She couldn't hide the weight of her broken heart. It was evident that she had been nursing her sorrows, perhaps indulging in one too many cups of mulled wine.

Gertrude tried to smile, but it waned quickly. "I'm fine," she lied, not meeting Rahl's gaze.

"I've known you longer than anyone else here." Rahl shook his head gently. "You don't have to pretend with me."

Sighing, Gertrude finally met his eyes. "It's just hard to watch them, Rahl. They seem so connected, and I can't help but feel left out."

"Sometimes we need a new perspective," Rahl guided Gertrude toward a mistletoe-laden archway. He gestured above them. "See that? It's mistletoe."

"Rahl, what are you—" Gertrude began, but her words were cut off by a gentle, unexpected kiss. It was sincere and tender.

"Now, you are not left out," Rahl said as they broke apart.

"I guess not," Gertrude breathed, touching her lips in wonder.

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2. Sucker Punch – Peter Strong and Brynn Davis
3. Peek-a-Boo – Xavier Storm and Ari Cardonne
4. Fast Track – Dean Racer and Keeley Arnold
5. Charmed & Dangerous – Rick Charming and Evie Danger
6. Element of Surprise – Chris and Jem
7. Fire & Ice – West and Yaz Frost
8. Bright Future – Erik and Vera Seer
9. In & Out – Zane and Fallyn
10. Super Charged – Gray Spark and Hanna Charge

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR longer works, check out these paranormal romance titles:

The Emerging Queens Series

Courts and Queens and Sexy Dragons with Wings!

When the cult of humanity sacrificed a dragon Queen to break the treaty, they crippled the breeding process. A female hasn't been hatched or shape-shifted in over a thousand years. With the dragons looking extinction in the

face, the dragon studs are desperate for females. Only five Queens remain, each more corrupt and sinister than the last.

And then the curse is broken...

1. The Queen's Wings
2. The Queen's Plight
3. The Queen's Flight
4. The Queen's Dance

If contemporary romance is more your style, check out these full-length sexy novels:

The Three Sisters Ranch Series

The Three Sisters Ranch in Last Stand, Texas, is about a family who is trying to save their heritage while falling in love along the way. Rugged, alpha male cowboys meet their matches with powerful and sexy women who are willing to meet them head-on to get what they want.

1. USA Today Bestseller: The Cowboy's Daughter
2. The Cowboy's Hunt
3. The Cowboy's Heart
4. A Cowboy for April
5. A Cowboy for June
6. A Cowboy for Merry

The Club Inferno Series

Club Inferno—Where passion is always in fashion! Style and seduction collide as the world's best-dressed men and women shed their clothing . . . and their inhibitions. Ready for the sexiest getaway of your life?

1. USA Today Bestseller: Heat
2. Longing
3. Fever
4. Passion
5. Desire

The Sentinels of Babylon Series

Motorcycle Club Romance—Pure, unadulterated, sexy times with hard-as-nails alpha males and the women who dare to tame them.

1. Necessary Evil
2. Sentinel's Kiss
3. Warden's Woman
4. Ryder's Reckoning

The Hawaii Heat Series

Romantic Comedy—Sex on the beach has never been so much fun! USA Today bestselling author Jamie K. Schmidt kicks off a series set in paradise with an irresistible tale of second chances, secret identities—and a connection that's too sweet to miss.

1. USA Today Bestseller: Life's a Beach
2. Beach Happens
3. Beach My Life
4. Beauty and the Beach

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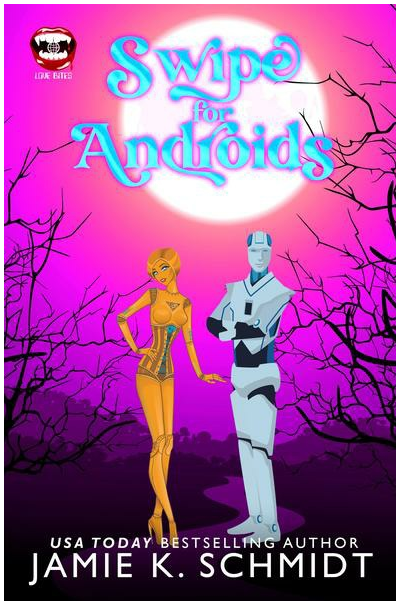
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Did you love *A Mistletoe Wish*? Then you should read [Swipe for Androids](#) by Jamie K. Schmidt!



From USA Today bestselling author Jamie K. Schmidt comes a brand new paranormal romantic comedy about androids learning to love.

Research librarian and newly sentient android Rose Stratton can solve any puzzle the denizens of Whynot throw at her. However, a new problem has been tickling her circuits. Every time she sees a happy couple, she goes into system overdrive. With the threat of being reprogrammed looming, it's time to do what she does best—research—before she totally melts down. Time for a visit to the local Love Bites dating agency.

Android cop Zack Silverberg's program is to protect and serve. Not feel. Emotions shouldn't compute, which is why he needs to stop craving a family to go home to like his brothers in blue. But when Love Bites matches him to his ideal mate, he can't help but wonder if it's within his grasp, illogical as it seems. He doesn't understand dating, though. Picnics seem pointless when

androids don't eat. Walks on the beach just clog up the gears. But when Rose breaks out the book on *positions*, their research turns a different corner and everything changes.

Together, they could find true love—if they can solve the mystery of human interaction before they're sent back for a factory reboot.

Read more at [Jamie K. Schmidt's site](#).

Also by Jamie K. Schmidt

Billionaires Behaving Badly

[Hard Cover](#)

Christmas Sweeties

[The Candy Cane Cowboy](#)

[The Gingerbread Cowboy](#)

Hawaii Heat

[Life's A Beach](#)

[Beach Happens](#)

[Beach My Life](#)

[Beauty and the Beach](#)

Kennedy Family Christmas

[A Casual and Chaotic Christmas Collection](#)

[A Second Chance Christmas](#)

Kinky Classics

[Domme Quixote](#)

Love Bites

[Swipe for Androids](#)

Sons of Babylon

[Sentinel's Kiss](#)

[Ryder's Reckoning](#)

[Necessary Evil: Sons of Babylon MC Romance Book1 \(S.O.B.\)](#)

Super Short Super Hero Instalove Romantasy

The Gemini Conflict

The Club Inferno Series

[Desire](#) (Coming Soon)

The Emerging Queens

[The Queen's Choice](#) (Coming Soon)

The Truth & Lies Series

[Truth Kills](#)

[Truth Reveals](#)

Wishing for Love

A Mistletoe Wish (Coming Soon)

Standalone

[Flash Magic](#)

[Naked Truth](#)

[Shifter's Price](#)

[Maiden Voyage](#)

[The Graveyard Shift](#)

[Extra Whip](#)

[Warden's Woman](#)

Sweet Alchemy: An Explosive Paranormal Romance Collection

[A Casual Christmas](#)

[A Chaotic Christmas](#)

[A Not So Casual Christmas](#)

[Losing It](#)

Dead Man Stalking

[Love Bytes](#) (Coming Soon)

Watch for more at [Jamie K. Schmidt's site](#).



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamie K. Schmidt is a three-time USA Today Bestseller for her steamy romances *Life's A Beach*, *Heat*, and *The Cowboy's Daughter*. Jamie's books have been called, "hot and sexy, with just the right amount of emotional punch," and "turbo-paced, gritty, highly sexual thrill rides." As a #1 Amazon and Barnes and Noble best seller and a 2018 Romance Writers of America Rita® finalist in erotica, Jamie writes daily, drinks lots of tea, and sneaks away to play video games whenever she makes her deadlines. Along with her husband who lets her stick magnetic signs on his car about her books and her fifteen-year-old son who wants to be her cover model, Jamie lives in Connecticut with her two cats who hate each other and a dog who just wants to be cuddled up on a blanket.

Read more at [Jamie K. Schmidt's site](#).