

LINDSEY DEVIN



BOUNTY  
CLAIMED

SOLSTICE HUNTRESS II

# **BOUNTY CLAIMED**

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## SOLSTICE HUNTRESS: BOOK 2

LINDSEY DEVIN

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“All right, Oscar,” I said. “Are you ready for this?”

Oscar curled his tail around his feet and tilted his head to the side, blinking his big yellow eyes at me. He was perched on the kitchen counter, which I usually didn’t allow, but I understood his need for a better vantage point for this important inaugural experience.

I positioned my tiny porcelain coffee cup beneath the spout of the portafilter, locked into the single grouphead on the gleaming, but already fingerprint-smudged, espresso machine. It was a lot more complicated than I’d expected, but I was determined to learn how to use it correctly, since it was the only real splurge purchase I’d made in about six years. After the hellish contract that was the Sandra Wheels case, I thought I deserved to use a tiny sliver of my fat paycheck to treat myself. Plus, I’d convinced myself that this would save me money in the long run, what with my fixation on fancy coffees.

“Here we go,” I said, and pushed the button on the machine.

The machine lit up. It whirred and began to steam as it worked. I stepped back, awed by the marvels of technology. Then it began to spit boiling hot water from the edges of the grouphead as watery espresso burst at high speed from the portafilter, splashing more into the grate of the machine than in the cup.

“Ah, shit!” I squeaked and slammed the power switch on the machine, and it wheezed back into lifelessness. The espresso that had made it into the cup looked more like slightly muddied water than coffee. I grimaced.

Oscar chirped, then hopped off the kitchen counter and strolled away, tail

swishing. He could seriously be so judgmental.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I said. “Maybe this’ll be easier to operate once I’ve had a cup of coffee.”

I broke out my faithful old percolator and set it up. As it gurgled and brewed, a familiar sound, I flipped open my journal and skimmed the notes I’d made a few nights before.

I didn’t have a ton of information. All I had was what was in the (often uninformed and incorrect) news: string of gruesome murders in the bar district, suspect at large. Corbin had included the compelling little detail about the suspect: he’d skipped bail. And he’d been bailed out of a *Fae* prison. And my (current? Former?) employer, Todd of Get Out Of Jail Bail Bonds, had been the one to write the bond in the first place. Corbin knew I wasn’t working with Todd, not after how he’d tried to sell me out as an unregistered Fae. When he’d asked for my help, I knew it was serious—if he didn’t want to tackle this on his own, either of his own volition or the court’s, it wasn’t going to be easy.

I tried to focus on that part—the logistics. Not the little twist of excitement when I’d heard his voice over the phone.

That wasn’t exactly standard operating procedure, even in Warwick, which was full to the brim of supernaturals. Humans weren’t allowed to get involved in the inner workings of Fae at all, and especially not their justice system. How the hell had Todd been approved to write the bond? How the hell had he found out about it in the first place? I had a lot of questions for him—but nothing that I *really* needed to know to start chipping away at this case. It was more my own curiosity burning. I couldn’t help but still feel so painfully betrayed by him.

After everything we’d been through together, he’d gone behind my back to *investigate* me. I’d thought that we had a good working relationship—hell, I *trusted* him. Sometimes, I’d even imagined a reality where I told him about my Fae heritage. Just so I didn’t have to hide it. But he’d turned out just to be another human I couldn’t trust. Even though I was half-human, and lived as a human, full humans were the ones who always broke my trust. How could I work for someone like that?

So I couldn’t work *directly* for Todd—but I could still take his bounty money. That part I felt fine about.

Since the skip had broken out of a Fae prison, Corbin was assigned to the case, and he’d come to me for assistance. It’d been a few months since the

Wheels case, and while part of me knew it'd be wisest to keep my distance, getting back into the world of supernaturals called to me. I'd been spending my time either with Gram, or at Candy's, or at the local dive with Carla. Which was fine. But it wasn't as easy as it used to be.

I'd gotten used to using my power—and used to being with someone who understood it. Someone like Corbin, who also lived pulled between two worlds. With each passing day, living and hiding Earthside was becoming less and less bearable. Even as I tried to push it down, I found myself wondering what it would be like to not have to hide at all.

I was a lot better at tracking rogue supernaturals than I was at making espresso, at least.

The coffee finished brewing, and I had a quick cup or three. From his perch on the back of the couch, Oscar peered at me inquisitively.

"I'm in a hurry," I said, glancing at my phone. "I'll make espresso tomorrow."

Oscar meowed.

"It's not accepting defeat," I said. "It's knowing my limits."

He meowed again.

"I'll show you," I muttered. "Tomorrow."

Oscar curled up for his first nap of the day. Lucky asshole. I, in contrast, had to get dressed for a work meeting with Corbin. This was our initial briefing—where he was going to give me all the information he had about the case—but I wasn't going to take any chances. If I'd learned anything working the Wheels case with him, it was that bad shit followed him around like a stench. With the two of us together, it seemed like half the residents of Warwick wanted a piece.

I got dressed, nothing flashy, then took my time putting on my jewelry. Donning the rings and bracelet that held and channeled my power was always oddly comfortable, like shrugging on a heavy but beloved leather jacket. It made me feel protected, capable, badass. I channeled a bit of my power into the metal, just to feel it hum pleasantly against my skin.

I slid open the top drawer to my dresser where I stashed my weapons the way normal people stashed socks. I sucked my teeth thoughtfully as I surveyed the two latest additions to my arsenal. First was the knife: six inches, thin, with a gorgeously carved wooden hilt inlaid with opals. Second was even newer: a handgun.

Okay, so maybe the espresso machine was my *second* big splurge.



I wasn't a huge fan of handguns—mostly because they were loud, and that drew attention. Usually when I was in a bad situation, more attention was the last thing I needed. But I had to be a lot more careful with when and how I used my magic now. People were starting to get nosy. I wasn't going to get caught with my ass out again. It wasn't anything crazy. It was just a small handgun, surprisingly heavy, its dark hilt smooth when I held it carefully. But it hummed with new energy, not dissimilar to the knife.

I'd had Mala modify the gun, imbuing it with a sharp edge of magic to make it effective against demon and UnSeelie targets. She'd promised me it would work, but I wouldn't really be confident in it until I had a chance to try it out. And I doubted Corbin would let me shoot him in the leg to see if the magic made it hurt extra bad. ... Actually, maybe he would, if I promised to heal him afterward.

I shook my head rapidly. I was not using my magic on Corbin. Even if it was a slightly compelling idea. Both the test and the chance to shoot him. Just a little.

I left the gun in the drawer and took my knife instead, tucking it carefully into my boot. Always good to be prepared, but I also wasn't looking to shoot anyone outside Manny's.

In my previous gigs as a bounty hunter, I relied a *lot* on my magic to sniff around and solve cases. It was just an intrinsic part of how I worked—the easy way I sensed magic, the hunches I got, the connections I had in the bar district and elsewhere. My magic was always tingling under the surface of my skin, ready to leap out and assist. I'd always known I had to be extra careful with how I used my magic, but I'd relied on it. It was like my sense of smell. Just another way I noticed things.

But now, after the Wheels case, all that had to change. I had to change my strategy. I had to keep my magic carefully packed away, especially since this case was going to involve more Fae. I couldn't risk anyone else knowing I was an unregistered half-Seelie. And not just a Seelie—a Solstice nymph. The last one.

It was bad enough that Corbin knew. I was only alive because he'd agreed to keep his mouth shut. At least I had something to hold over his head, too. His own hybridism—UnSeelie and Shax demon—was almost as interesting as my own. His blood wouldn't be nearly as delicious as mine, though. So really, I had it worse.

I sighed and tied my fiery red hair back into a messy ponytail. I was due

to meet Corbin at Manny's for lunch, but before I could handle him, I needed Gram to help get my head on straight.

I hurried out of my apartment and threw a wave to Bob, who was too absorbed in lighting his pipe to complain about whatever noise Oscar had made last night. In the bright light of mid-morning, I swung my leg over my motorcycle, which still hummed faintly with the magic I'd imbued it with at the scene of the Wheels capture. I'd only meant for it to hang on to my magic signature so Corbin would be able to find me—which had worked—but honestly, it seemed like it was making the bike go a little faster, too. So no complaints from me.

The ride to Gram's house cleared my head. I pulled up outside her bungalow, and she was already on the porch with an extra cup of coffee in hand. I hadn't told her I was coming, but due to her slight clairvoyance, she always had a sense of when I was going to arrive.

"Hey, Tempie," Gram said warmly. She was already dressed for the day, swimming in overalls and her gray hair loose to her shoulders. "Coffee?"

I pulled off my helmet. "Yes, please." I ascended the stairs to the porch and sat down with her in the big, comfortable porch chairs. The coffee smelled amazing—way better than the percolator coffee I'd had earlier—and I sighed with pleasure as I took a sip.

"So," Gram said. "You're suited up."

Right. I wasn't in my usual vacation wear of sweatpants and flannels. "I picked up another contract," I said.

"You're working with Todd?" Gram asked curiously. "Did he explain himself?"

"Well," I said, and rubbed the back of my neck. "Not exactly."

"Tempie," Gram said dangerously.

I smiled, trying to appease her, but it definitely looked more like a grimace. And Gram was not convinced. About a week after the Wheels case had closed, I'd told her about what had happened in the storm cellar—about how Corbin knew what I was, and in turn, I had his secrets as well. That had *not* appeased Gram, and she'd nearly torn my head off with the scolding. I'd deserved it, but it still wasn't a pleasant experience. I was a little bit terrified that this would be something similar.

"Tempie," she repeated. "What did you do?"

"So, I'm not working *with Todd*," I said. "But I did get word that he put a bounty out on a skip. But this case is interesting because he was somehow

allowed to bail out a suspect who was being held in a Fae prison.”

“I don’t like where this is going,” Gram said.

“He offered to put me on it and refused,” I said. “I’m still not working with him.”

“But…” Gram prompted.

“But someone else got in touch asking me to take the contract,” I said.

“You’re kidding me,” Gram said.

“I know,” I said. “Listen, there’s a huge bounty, and I’ve been between contracts for long enough. I’m getting bored. Working with Corbin will give me access to the Fae side of the investigation—it’s a good gig.”

She shook her head in resigned exasperation. “I can’t believe you’re working with him again. After everything that happened.”

“I know,” I said. “But I promise—I’ll be careful.”

“I know you will,” Gram said. “It’s *him* I don’t trust. Even if you’re careful, he still *knows* what you are. He could use that as leverage. Manipulate you.”

“He won’t do that,” I said automatically. Then immediately wished I could snatch the words out of the air and swallow them back down.

Gram raised her eyebrows. “You sound pretty sure about that.”

I scrubbed my hand over my forehead. “Well, of course I’m not sure,” I admitted. “But—I think I have a pretty good sense of risk assessment.”

“I completely disagree,” Gram said, not unkindly.

“He hasn’t outed me yet,” I said, “and he’s the one who asked me to work on this case with him. He needs me to solve this.”

“But do you need him?” she asked.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “Unless you want me to out myself by going into Faerie to do the investigation.”

“Right,” she said. “He can travel there.”

“Plus,” I said, “he’s in the Fae Court. He’ll be able to get information I wouldn’t have access to.”

She shook her head again. “Is the paycheck really worth the risk, though?”

It wasn’t just the paycheck, though. It was the case itself—my own itchy curiosity and boredom. And it was the chance to work with Corbin again. I was supposed to be the hunter who worked alone. What was it about Corbin that made me even more interested in this case?

“I can’t just not work ever again,” I said. “I can make some new

connections with this case. Maybe even in Faerie. Start getting work without involving Todd at all.”

Gram sighed. “There’s no talking you out of anything.”

“I can blame the woman who raised me for my stubbornness.” I grinned at her and raised my coffee cup in a cheers.

She didn’t cheers me back. Gram was also where I got my pettiness. “Well, if you’re going to put your life in this UnSeelie man’s hands--”

“—that is *not* what I am doing--”

“Then I think I should get to meet him.” Gram sipped her coffee and stared over the rim of the mug at me, eyebrows raised.

“What?” I asked. “What do you mean, *meet him*?”

“Bring him around here,” she said. “For a coffee. Or a beer, if that works better. But I want to get a read on this guy myself.”

“Gram, that is absolutely not within the professional boundaries of my job,” I said.

“You set your own boundaries, love,” Gram said. “Now bring him over. Just let me know when. I’m only going to worry about you incessantly until I get a read on his energy myself.”

“Low blow,” I muttered. Pulling the incessant worrying card was a good way to make sure I felt terribly guilty, and she knew it. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good,” Gram said. Her expression eased and she reached over and patted my knee. “I just want to make sure you’re safe. You know that, right?”

“I know,” I said. “You *could* just trust me.”

“I did,” Gram said, “and now an UnSeelie knows what you are.”

“Ouch.” She had a point, though. “This case won’t be anything like the last one,” I promised, even though there was no way for me to know that. “We’ll wrap it up quickly, and I’ll have another fat paycheck to get us through next year.”

“I don’t care about the paycheck,” Gram said for the millionth time. “Just be careful.”

She gave me a warm hug, then sent me on my way. As I revved my bike and pulled out onto the street, I tried to imagine Corbin walking up the stairs to my grandmother’s bungalow to meet her. I could hardly get the image to form properly in my mind. It was just too insane.

There was really no reason for this.

Part of me felt like bringing someone back to meet Gram was bad luck. Not because of her—because of me. If I brought Corbin to meet Gram, that

meant he was a serious part of my life. Which he wasn't. But if he was, that meant things could change. Go wrong. My job was easier if I had as few attachments as possible. My *life* was easier that way.

The last man I'd brought to meet Gram—the only man--was Tucker. He'd ended up dead and buried. I shoved down the sharp twist my pain in my chest at the memory. The worst part of it all was that Gram had liked him. What if she liked Corbin, too? Somehow, that felt like it'd be worse than her thinking he was dangerous. I didn't want her to suffer again.

I sighed and pushed the worries from my mind as I rode toward downtown Warwick. I'd deal with that later—assuming Corbin and I didn't end up at each other's throats over this meal.

“Hey there, Tempie,” Dotty said brightly, waving from behind the counter at Manny’s. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please,” I said with a nod. Manny’s was bustling during the lunch rush, but Corbin had already staked out my preferred booth in the back corner. Good memory. If he’d noticed me walk into the diner, either by sound or by aura, he didn’t acknowledge it. His head was bowed down over the file he was reviewing, so his blond hair—now a little longer and shaggier than I remembered—fell into his eyes. He had his own coffee in front of him, untouched, and the menus were on my side.

It was so *normal*. For a brief moment, my heart clenched. In a different reality, maybe this was what my life looked like—a regular partnership. Not something inherently dangerous. Not something we had to hide.

I shoved that thought aside and took the coffee Dotty slid across the counter. As I approached the booth, Corbin finally looked up, and the corners of his lips quirked up. “I was starting to think you weren’t going to show up.”

“I’m a woman of my word,” I said primly, turning my nose up for emphasis.

“Not the first description I’d use,” Corbin said.

I huffed and slid into the booth across from him. He still had that irritating little smirk on his face, and I had the sudden crazy urge to grip the front of his shirt, haul him across the table, and kiss it right off his face.

The worst part was, I had a feeling he’d probably like that just as much as I did. Our last kiss, in the hospital, had showed up in my memory a lot more often than I was willing to admit. And other kisses—and sometimes more—

showed up in my dreams, too. He was haunting me. I wished I could blame him.

I sipped my coffee. “Good to see you, too.”

“Gotta say,” Corbin said, “I’m glad you agreed to link up with me on this one.”

The earnestness in his voice surprised me. I blinked, stunned, as he flipped open the manila folder with the case documents inside and started to spread them out on the table. He didn’t just need my help—he liked working with me, too. Maybe we’d both been working alone for too long and were desperate to cling to the first kindred soul we found. That was probably true, but I still couldn’t help but wonder. What would it be like if we *actually* gave this strange thing between us a shot? Would we still work together? Or would it crash and burn like all my relationships seemed to do?

There was no point in wondering, though. This was a work arrangement, and nothing more. I’d made that very clear to Gram, and I intended to keep it that way. No matter how much the curiosity itched at me, it wasn’t worth the risk. It couldn’t be. If things went south between Corbin and me, he knew too much about my Fae heritage. If he wanted to ruin my life, all he had to do was out me to the supernatural police. That’d put Gram in the line of fire, too. I couldn’t take that risk—not with my job as precarious as it was. And honestly, after what had happened with my last relationship, I wasn’t too keen on risking my heart, either. I’d played with fire enough.

“Well, you caught me at the right time,” I said. “I’m so bored I’m starting to teach myself how to make espresso.”

“I’m pretty sure they say ‘pull’ espresso,” Corbin said.

“Oh, so you know a lot about it? You spend a couple years as a barista?”

“Well,” Corbin said, “if you think *you’ve* been bored, try living a thousand years.”

I cleared my throat. “Right.”

It was easy to forget that about him with how easily he moved through the world, and how well he fit in. It was easy to think there was a lot more different about us than the same.

“I doubt your ancient barista skills could figure out this fancy machine I bought. It’s basically a rocket ship in my kitchen.” I took a sip of my coffee. Honestly, Dotty’s coffee was the best I’d had—maybe I should’ve bought a fifty-year-old diner coffee machine. “So, are you going to tell me why Todd had this bounty in the first place? How the hell did the skip get bailed out of a

Fae prison? I've never even heard of something like that being allowed."

"That's one of many complicating factors in this case," Corbin said. "The skip's a high-ranking member of the UnSeelie Court."

"What?" I set my coffee down so hard it almost sloshed out of the mug and onto the case files. "A royal?"

"Yeah," Corbin said with a cringe. "Name's Ralnor Venlen. It hasn't been a pleasant situation for the court to deal with, I'll tell you that much. He has a lot of history with the court, and it's not reflecting well on their reputation, as I'm sure you've guessed. The queen allowed a bail to be set as a show of faith that he was framed for the murders. Everyone in Faerie knew that was bullshit, so of course no one paid it. Todd was the only one stupid enough to post the bail, thinking he'd get a huge return and then a nice new connection in Faerie."

"And of course skip runs immediately," I said. "Classic. Todd will seriously never learn."

"The queen, of course, is pissed that he ran," Corbin said. "And she's directing a lot of that anger at Todd."

"Great."

"Isn't it?" Corbin rubbed his temples. "If I have to sit through one more closed-door court session about this, I'm going to blow my brains out."

"So what'd he'd do?" I asked. "What got him locked up in a Fae prison to begin with?"

Corbin reached for the photos on the table, turned face-down.

"Hey, hon," Dotty said as she sidled up. "Getting some lunch today?"

Corbin slapped his palm down onto the photos. Dotty was unfazed.

"Yeah," I said. "Um, just a cheeseburger and fries today, please."

"Anything for you?" she smiled sweetly at Corbin.

"No, no, I'm just having coffee," Corbin said, grimacing.

"Sure thing. I'll have it right up." She ambled off back toward the counter.

"Bad call," Corbin said. "You're about to regret ordering meat."

"Gross," I said. "And don't doubt my capacity to eat a cheeseburger while reviewing case files. That's pretty much all I do in this booth."

"If you say so," Corbin said. He flipped over the photos and slid them across the table to me.

Yeah. He might've been onto something. They were pretty gruesome. These weren't just murders—these were *slaughters*. Dismemberments. This



was beyond ritualistic.

“Well,” I said, wide-eyed as I flipped through the photos, “at least there isn’t a lot of blood.”

Corbin snorted a laugh.

There wasn’t a lot of blood because the corpses had been cleaned. In the first one, the victim’s chest cavity was split wide open, but cleared of viscera—the white ribs gleamed like porcelain. The head was detached and rid of its teeth. Fingers and toes were cut off and missing. It was a similar sight for the other photos in the stack: heads detached, bodies drained, limbs cut off and placed in odd places around the room. Some were cleaner than others—like sometimes the killer was in a hurry, and other times he took his time to make the bodies just as pristine and beautiful as he wanted. It was unnerving.

“Are these Fae victims?” I asked as I examined the photos.

“None,” Corbin said. “All humans.”

“Jesus,” I muttered.

“I warned you.”

“It’s pretty intense,” I admitted, “but that’s not going to deter me from my cheeseburger.”

In truth, my stomach was churning a little from the photos, but now eating the cheeseburger was a point of pride.

“You’re serious,” Corbin said, looking mildly disgusted.

“Look, I’ve seen a lot of crime scenes.” I flipped to the last photo. “The draining and cleaning is admittedly really fucking weird. What happened here? Why the difference?” The last photo had a lot more blood—spread out in a pool under the body, with the chest cavity cut open, but the head still attached. “Did he get interrupted?”

“Exactly,” Corbin said. “It’s the only reason the Fae police were able to get their hands on him. The wife of the victim came home right in the middle of the murder.”

“Yikes. Hell of a way to come home.”

“Here’s your cheeseburger, hon,” Dotty said. I nearly chucked the photos back at Corbin’s face in my haste to turn them over so she didn’t see them. She set the plate down. “Need anything else?” she asked.

“Looks amazing,” I said. “Thanks.”

Corbin raised his eyebrows questioningly at me. In a weird way, he reminded me of Oscar.

“Yes,” I said, “I still want it.”

And I was right—the smell of the burger had effectively returned my stomach to its usual ravenous state, and I took a huge bite.

“So,” Corbin continued after a beat, “turns out this victim was a human husband to a Seelie wife.”

“Hot,” I said.

“She was able to trap Venlen in a trance spell. I’m not sure how—he’s a *lot* more powerful than her, but maybe being caught mid-murder? Or maybe the murder drains his power somehow? I’m not sure. But she was able to keep him contained long enough for the supernatural police to arrive.”

“So tell me about the victims,” I asked. “Any common factors?”

“Money,” Corbin said immediately. “They were all rich. All socialites, donors, people like that. People who have wide circles and a lot of influence.”

“So you’re saying this is a very public case.”

“Exactly,” Corbin said. “An UnSeelie—especially a member of the UnSeelie Court—murdering influential humans isn’t exactly a great thing for Fae-human relations.”

“I would imagine not.” I poked at my fries as I turned the details of the case over in my mind. “So why me?” I asked. “What do you need from my end? Is this just a way to get a political leg up, to show humans and Fae working together?”

“I wish it was that simple,” Corbin said. “I need to get this case solved fast. The queen’s already on my ass about it.”

“What do you mean, on your ass?” I didn’t like the sound of that. I really didn’t need the Queen of the UnSeelie Court to be on *my* ass, too. I could work with Corbin, but if he was navigating some less-than-friendly waters with the court, that would throw a wrench into things.

“She wants this done quickly,” Corbin said. “Sorted out.”

“And if it’s not?” I asked.

“I haven’t gotten that far,” Corbin said. “But it probably wouldn’t be good for me.”

I leaned my elbows onto the table and peered seriously at him. “Be real with me for a second.”

“...Okay.”

“How intensely, exactly, is the queen on your ass?”

Corbin blinked. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

I sighed. “Like, is the court going to be checking up on you? Following

you around? Being generally nosy and irritating? In your business?”

“Ah,” Corbin said. “I see. I doubt it.”

“Details, please.”

“This looks bad for her,” Corbin said. “And the court at large. They want it to *go away*. They have enough damage control to do in Faerie—they can’t afford to waste resources staying on my ass. But that’s also why I’ve been tasked to do it. I’m effective, and if something happens to me in the process, it wouldn’t be a huge loss to the court.”

“Well, that’s a vote of confidence,” I said.

He shrugged. “It’s reality. I’m used to it.”

“Has it been a thousand years of this?”

He shot me a severe look. “Now who’s being nosy and irritating?”

I lifted my hand in surrender. “Point taken. So we’re on our own for this.”

“Yes. Operating mostly covertly, as it were.”

“Sounds great to me.” I took another bite of my fries. “That’s the way I prefer it, anyway. So, what’s the deal with the widow? Is she talking to people?”

Corbin shuffled through the case files. “She’s done some interviews with the human and the supernatural police, but you know how their questioning usually goes.”

“They don’t know how to ask the right questions.” I sighed. “Think she’d talk to us? I need to get a read on the space where they caught him.”

“Worth a shot,” Corbin said. “If she says no, we can just break in later.”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” I said with a grin, and went back to my cheeseburger. Even with the gruesomeness of the case, and the risks of working with Corbin and potentially the UnSeelie Court, I couldn’t shake the inherent anticipation that came with having a case. After a long few months of bumming around Warwick killing time, I was finally about to have some fun.

Vee and Craig Spencer lived outside Warwick, across the bridge and in York City proper. They lived north of the city, in the suburbs, where the houses were big and expensive-looking, with wide manicured lawns and hired help both outside and in.

Corbin stepped out of the driver's side sports car—he hadn't let me drive despite my whining about having to leave my bike at Manny's—and sneered minutely at the fine facade of the mansion.

"Of course they live in a place like this," he said.

"I would too, if I had that kind of money," I said as I slammed the passenger side door a little too hard. "Don't act so jealous."

"I'm not jealous," Corbin said jealously.

Even with the sun still high in the sky, my skin began to crawl as we approached the mansion up the long, unnecessarily winding driveway. "Ugh," I said, rubbing at my upper arms. "Do you feel that?"

Corbin shifted his attention to the grounds. "No. I'm not getting anything."

"Well, it feels bad," I said. "This place is fucked up."

"I really missed your incisive insight," Corbin said.

I, for one, was grateful I'd brought my knife with me. Something seriously bad had happened here—that much I knew from the case file—and it felt like there was still a lot of that badness left behind.

I was about to crawl out of my skin by the time we completed the arduous trek to the porch, complete with lion statues and decorative columns. Corbin rapped on the immense front door.

The woman who answered was obviously Seelie, and obviously registered, and obviously very proud of it. She glowed with unfiltered Seelie power, like a faint light emanating from her pale skin, and her fine white hair fell in waves to her shoulders. Despite the slinky silk dress she was wearing—maybe a nightgown?—her feet were bare on the floor. She wasn't very powerful, though, despite her fine looks. She was remarkable Earthside, but in Faerie, she'd likely be pretty low-ranking.

"Can I help you?" she asked melodically. "More ambulance chasers?"

"Certainly not. I'm Corbin Frost." Corbin released some of the control he kept on his own power, and his UnSeelie power suddenly radiated from him, sharp like ozone and blending nicely with the gentle feeling of the widow's.

"Ah," she said. "But this *is* about the case."

"I'm with the court," Corbin said. "Are you Mrs. Spencer? We'd like to ask you a few questions, if you'd deign to give us your time."

"Who's this?" She slid her gaze to me disinterestedly. Well, that was good—it meant I was keeping my own power locked away despite the assault on my senses from the residue from Ralnor's half-finished ritual, or whatever the fuck it was.

"My liaison," Corbin said easily. "For working with the Earthside police forces."

"Hm," the widow said. "Those forces really can be a pain, can't they?"

"Absolutely," Corbin said.

She sighed. "Fine. I'll answer a few questions. But my time is limited." She waved us into the front room. "And please, call me Vee."

Inside the house, the energy was even worse. How the hell was Vee *living* in a place like this? How the hell did neither she nor Corbin seem to be affected? The front room was lovely, with a vast staircase and high ceilings, but the dark energy seemed to emanate up from the floors like tendrils, wrapping around my ankles and making my feet heavy on the floor.

Corbin was asking her the general details of what had happened, enough to get her to open up without too much prying—it wasn't anything we didn't have the case files. I could hardly make sense of the words they were saying, overwhelmed as I was with the atrocious energy.

"It happened in here," Vee said, drifting toward a closed door.

"Mind if we take a look?" Corbin asked.

"A few minutes is fine," Vee said. "I don't like to go in there, so please do what you need to do quickly."

Corbin glanced at me, and his expression fell.

Vee ambled toward the kitchen. Corbin guided me toward the parlor door with his hand on my shoulder. The touch was grounding and helped me shake some of the cobwebs from my head.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, and shook off the touch. “Vibes are *rancid*.”

“Well, it’s probably going to be worse in there,” he said. He wrinkled his nose and his sharp ozone-aura spiked with irritation. “I can feel it, too.”

I slid open the pocket doors. Dark energy rushed out of the room like a wave, nearly bowling me over. It was slimy over my skin, nauseating, making my head briefly fuzz with static. I nearly stumbled backward a step, stomach turning like I’d rolled the dice with some Manny’s leftovers and lost.

The worst of it passed, and I was still standing. That was really all I could hope for.

“Hell’s bells,” Corbin muttered. “This is heavy.”

“Yeah, imagine how I feel,” I grumbled. “Come on.”

I steeled myself and stepped over the threshold into the slimy atmosphere of the room. Corbin followed at my heels.

“Doors,” I said, and he dutifully slid the pocket doors closed.

The parlor was clear of any physical residue of the crime—and most other things, too. The furniture was covered, and the hardwoods had been professionally cleaned to gleaming. It looked like someone was either on the verge of moving in or out, it was so spotless. And yet I really didn’t want to be in this room for long.

Yes, I needed to be a lot more conservative with my magic. Conservative and careful. But Vee, although Seelie, was not very powerful if she wasn’t reacting at all to the energy in this room. And I didn’t have to hide from Corbin anymore—admittedly convenient. So I knelt down and flattened my palm on the hardwood floor, exhaled, and with a huge amount of disgust and trepidation, opened my senses to the magic in the room.

It wasn’t exactly *using* my magic—but it did require that I lessen my grip on it so I could better read the residue in the room. In the past, this was how I handled pretty much every crime scene I came across. It was the most efficient way to get a sense of what the hell I was dealing with, and since it was a passive use of my magic, there wasn’t a huge chance someone would pick up on what I was doing.

But the stakes were higher now. I had to keep my wits about me.

I pressed my hand more solidly against the hardwood. The residue lingering there, slimy in the atmosphere, seemed to give under my hand as if spongy. I cringed. What the fuck was this? It seemed to move as if attempting squirm futilely back into life, like a worm writhing in its last moments on a hot sidewalk. It was UnSeelie magic, that much I could feel, but something else, too. Something that made the usually sharp, dark UnSeelie magic feel dense, thick, brutal.

I'd felt UnSeelie magic blended with demonic magic. I could identify that now. I could even identify UnSeelie magic used by a human, pumped up by dust. This wasn't either of those things. This felt old. Old and powerful. Potent. Hard to kill. Never had a residue felt so tenacious, like the magic wanted to exist on its own.

What the hell was Ralnor trying to do?

I pulled my hand away. The magic tugged at me, like it wanted to keep my hand close and feed off my energy. I grimaced and shook it off, then levered to my feet and wiped my hand on my jeans like I could shake off the feeling.

"Let's go," I muttered, and hurried out of the room.

"We're done here," Corbin called.

Vee drifted out of the kitchen. "Did you get what you came for?" she asked.

Corbin nodded. "We've gained some good insight for the investigation. Thank you for your cooperation."

She nodded. "Of course. I just... I just want all this to be over."

I'd thought Vee was suspiciously incurious or high out of her mind when we first met her, but I now realized it was the numbing weight of grief that kept her disinterested. It took a lot for a Seelie to choose to live Earthside—and she'd done that for her husband. Even with him gone, she was still living here, like a shade in the home they'd shared together.

Suddenly my heart ached for her, even if she was being kind of an asshole to me by ignoring me. And it made me fucking pissed. I was curious about this case—and I wanted to bring this asshole to justice, too. It was hard enough to live in a world where you didn't belong. And now Ralnor had taken the one person that Vee had left it all behind for.

"We're working to make that happen," Corbin said seriously. "Thank you."

After a brief exchange of pleasantries, we left the mansion. Questions

turned over and over in my mind. What was that weird slimy magic? How was the residue still so strong but so unnoticeable to others? Where was the source—and what was the ritual trying to accomplish?

“I can see the gears in your brain turning,” Corbin said once we were in the safe privacy of his car. “What are you thinking? What did you pick up in that room?”

I rubbed my temples. “That’s the most frustrating part—I don’t know what it was. It wasn’t just UnSeelie magic.”

“Yeah, I got that, too,” Corbin said. “But you couldn’t determine what else it was?”

“Nope,” I said. “Never felt anything like it. But it was powerful. Really powerful. There was still some life in the residue, like it was trying to fight back.”

Corbin balked. “Seriously? After all this time?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I could feel it pulling at me.”

“Huh,” Corbin said thoughtfully, like he was spinning out possibilities in his mind, too, and coming up just as empty as I was.

“With that kind of power,” I said, “there’s got to be a serious motive. He’s obviously not just doing this for shits and giggles.”

“Mutilating bodies past the point of recognition isn’t your idea of a good time?”

“If it was, I definitely wouldn’t tell you,” I quipped half-heartedly. “There wasn’t anything in there to give me a good lead. Nothing that suggests motive, or what kind of magic he was using.” I leaned heavily back against the passenger seat. “I need to see the bodies. We’re not going to be able to get an idea of what kind of ritual he’s trying to pull off until we can see them—and motive is going to help us track this guy down. Are the bodies in SP custody?”

Corbin shook his head. “They’re in Faerie.”

“What? Why? The murders happened Earthside, so why—”

“Queen put her foot down,” Corbin said. “It doesn’t happen often, the court interfering with the investigation here. But generally when they do, the court is pretty quick to cow.”

“Mm,” I said in understanding. It made sense—human and Fae relations were tenuous at best in York City. If the court wanted the bodies, they were getting the bodies, even in a high-profile case like this. It wasn’t worth risking upsetting the delicate balance we had here. “Evidence for the Fae



trial?”

He nodded. “Exactly. Whatever Ralnor was trying to do—I’m sure the queen is trying to erase that evidence.”

“Destroy the bodies?” I asked.

“Not until after the case,” Corbin said.

“Well, that’s good, I guess,” I said with a grimace. “So what are they doing with the bodies? Just keeping them iced down?”

“I’d assume so. Fae preservation methods are good.”

Gross. Couldn’t say I’d had a lot of experience with that particular field, and I was happy to keep it that way. “Fat lot of good that does us.”

“Even if the healers do figure out what Ralnor was attempting,” Corbin said, “the court won’t let that information out. They’re in damage control mode. Which means erasing.”

“Well, if we can’t look at the bodies,” I said, “we’ll have to figure out where to go from here. I’ve got nothing from the residue other than a bad mood. I can ask Mala if she has any resources that might help parse, but that’s not exactly her field—”

“Or we can go look at the bodies.” Corbin shot me a smirk as he drove toward my apartment.

“What?” I straightened up. “You can get to them?”

“We’d have to go to Faerie,” Corbin said. He raised his eyebrows at me. “But if we get in, I could get us access.”

“You’re joking,” I said. “*Me?* Going to *Faerie?*”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Corbin said.

I smacked him on the arm. “Don’t be an asshole.”

He huffed and rubbed his shoulder dramatically. “What? You don’t think we can handle it?”

I said nothing. He pulled up to my apartment building and parked out front, left the engine idling. I crossed my arms over my chest and stared out the windshield as I turned the idea over in my mind. Checking out the bodies would, without a doubt, be the quickest way to get an idea of what Ralnor was attempting to do, and thus, where he might be hiding in order to pull it off. Without the bodies, we’d be on a wild goose chase, and who knew how long it’d take to get any leads.

I thought of Vee alone in that big house, drifting through its empty rooms, caught between the home she’d made Earthside and her Fae heritage. It was hard enough to straddle those worlds. And Ralnor had just made it infinitely

harder for her—in a strange, almost defensive way, that fucking pissed me off.

Plus, with the court on Corbin's back, and my paycheck hanging in the balance after a few months of squat, we needed to get this done fast.

So there were a handful of reasons as to why it was expedient for me to go to Faerie and examine the bodies. Good reasons, from the investigation standpoint.

And big part of me—a huge, irresponsible, childish, petulant, hungry part—wanted to go.

Not for the investigation. Not for Corbin. For *me*.

I'd spent so long hiding who I was, cowed to the extremely real fear that if I were discovered, I'd be killed immediately. Yet—I *had* been discovered, by an UnSeelie enforcer no less, and now I was sitting in his sports car deciding if I wanted to take him up on the most insane fucking offer I'd ever heard.

Me. Going to Faerie.

It was the worst idea. The stupidest idea. It went against all the promises I made to Gram, and to myself, about staying safe while working with Corbin.

And yet.

“What do you think?” Corbin asked. “I mean, I can go without you.”

The Fae had taken so much from me: my family, my home—hell, my chance to live freely. How could I even know who I really was, if I never had a chance to explore the part of me that was my mother? The Fae part? The *nymph* part? Why should I have to be cut off from it forever?

Corbin was a member of the court. I'd have an escort. Protection.

There was a possibility—a small, stupid, risk-filled possibility—that this could work.

That sliver of possibility was like the crack in the dam I'd built holding back my curiosity. Now that curiosity flooded me, swept me along in its waves, and all I could think about was what it might be like to cross through into that forbidden place. The forbidden place where half of me *belonged*.

“You are *not* going to Faerie without me,” I said, a little too late, brandishing my pointer finger at him accusingly. “You need me to look at the bodies anyway.”

“Admittedly your insight would likely help,” Corbin said.

“I'm not going in unarmed,” I said.

“Of course.”

“And we need to figure out a cover story.”

“Obviously.”

“No one can know about—well, you know.”

“Certainly.” At this point he was grinning.

I exhaled hard. “Let me go see Mala first,” I said. “And I’ll think about it.”

Corbin nodded, still grinning, his blue eyes flecked with gold, and his aura tingling my senses with his anticipation. We both knew I was in, even if I wasn’t admitting it.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow,” he said.

“We’ll see,” I answered with an eyeroll as I hopped out of the car. I needed a break from him, and a chance to speak to Mala in private.

Inside my apartment, I decided to leave Oscar out of the loop—sure, he was just a cat, but he could be seriously judgmental when he wanted to be—and pulled my masking necklace from my top drawer.

I clasped it around my neck and shivered as the now-familiar sensation of the disguise fell over me, soft but noticeable, like I’d just been covered by a sheet from above. Mala had made this mask for me. It was sturdier than the one-use-only ones we’d first used, and it dampened my Seelie powers enough for me to move freely about the Den without being noticed. It didn’t change my appearance, either, other than darkening my fiery red hair to something closer to auburn, to not stand out quite as much. Plus, it meant I could enter the Den without having to drink my horrible cocktail of herbs and drugs that dampened my power and left me with a hangover suitable to kill a man twice my size.

Satisfied with the disguise, I headed back out of my apartment to my bike. Something like this mask worked in the Den, but if I wanted to survive in Faerie, I’d need something a hell of a lot stronger. But if anyone could do it, Mala could.

I gunned my bike and headed to Candy’s, to the phone booth in the back that would take me under the river and into the Den.

**B**ells jingled softly as I pushed open the door to Mala's shop. The energy in her store was so different from the rest of the Den. The Den crawled with supers of all kinds: vampires, troll, sprites, Seelie, UnSeelie, demons—you name it, the Den had it. The mix of energies was thick enough to taste, and even though I was protected by the mask, it still made my skin crawl to be so surrounded. None of that energy broke through Mala's wards, though. Her shop glowed with warmth and calm, and as soon as I closed the door behind me, I finally felt like I could take a breath.

Mala leaned over the counter by the register, her brow furrowed, muttering ceaselessly to herself as she shifted her attention from the pile of papers in front of her to the calculator at her side, and back again. Her enormous glasses were down at the tip of her nose, and she pushed them up with frustration as she peered closer at the papers. With her curly, silvery hair pushed back in under a visor, she looked like a cross between a grandmother and a bookie.

"One sec," she muttered, waving a hand dismissively toward me as she scratched a few more notes on the paper. I bit back a smile, waiting patiently as she worked out whatever logistical snag was irritating her today. Then, after a moment, she looked up, and the scowl her face quickly transformed into a smile.

"Oh, Tempie!" she said. "Thank God it's you and not another pissed-off sprite—there's been a bad batch of enchanted moonpies going around, and I keep telling them if they eat them, they're going to risk getting sick, and they keep eating them—"

“I bet that’s what happened to my landlord,” I said. “He was laid up for a week.”

“Magical food poisoning is no joke,” Mala said. “What are you doing down in the Den?”

“Got something to commission from you,” I said. “A custom piece.”

“Well, hon, that’s what I do best.” She straightened up. “What did you have in mind?”

“I need to go to into Faerie,” I said, and then braced for the backlash.

Mala widened her eyes. Tilted her head. Then she crossed her arms over her chest. “Did I mishear you?” she asked. “Or did you just say you want to go to Faerie?”

“I don’t want to,” I said. “I need to. For the case I’m working on.”

“You need to,” Mala repeated. “And don’t tell me...”

“Yeah,” I said. “I need to be in the UnSeelie domain.”

“Good Lord.” Mala rubbed her palm over her forehead. “Tempie, you know you can’t do that.”

“Listen.” I leaned closer to the counter. “I know it sounds crazy, but I need to get access to some evidence in Faerie for this case. I’ll have Corbin with me, so he’ll cover me. As long as I can get something to dampen my power enough, no one will even give me a second glance.”

“You’re underestimating exactly how strong your power is,” Mala said. “You’re going to be like a bonfire in the middle of a dark forest. I don’t even know if it’s possible to dampen it enough to fly under the radar around high-ranking UnSeelie.”

“I’m committed to this case now,” I said. “And I don’t have any other good leads. I just need to get in, get a look at this evidence, and then we’ll get out. Simple as that.”

“It’s never that simple,” Mala said with a shake of her head. “You sound just like your mother.”

I sighed. I wished I knew my mother well enough to know if that was true, but I knew so little about her as a person. For as long as I could remember, I’d been defined by her death. She was killed for what she was—a Solstice nymph—and that truth hung over me like a shadow. Her death always lingered in my mind as a possibility of what could happen to me, too.

“If I don’t catch this skip, he’s going to keep hurting people,” I said. “I don’t have time to poke around looking for leads. This is the lead I have, and I’m gonna follow it.”

“Fine,” Mala said, throwing her hands up in surrender. “Fine. But I’m only going to work with you on this because I know if I don’t, you’ll figure out another way.”

I grinned and couldn’t help but ask, “Would my mom do that, too?”

“Obviously, yes,” Mala said. “And I’m the only one with skill enough to get you even close to the kind of protection you’ll need. But this isn’t a good idea.”

“It’s the only idea I’ve got,” I said.

“Whatever I make for you, it’s not going to be as nice as your jewelry,” she said, nodding at the bracelet and rings on my hand. “It’ll be bigger, for one, because it’ll need to store more power. And it won’t be a channel, like rings.” She hummed thoughtfully, then turned and pulled a book off the shelf and began to thumb through it. “It can’t be a channel because that door goes both ways. Power in and out. This would have to be a block of some mind—not just a way to conceal your aura more intensely, but a way to keep your power contained.” She flipped through more rapidly. “Hmm. And of course, it’ll have to be strong enough to work, but not strong enough to get noticed...”

Mala kept muttering to herself as she thumbed back and forth through the book. Her attention was no longer on me at all. She’d gone from Attempt To Convince Tempie Otherwise mode into Oh Nice A Cool Project mode, and I could see the gears in her brain spinning as she started concocting a way to make this ward a reality. As I waited for her brainstorming session to end, I peered curiously around her shop, at the crystals, books, potions, herbs, weapons, and taxidermized curiosities that peppered the shelves. Impossible to know what was enchanted and what had just caught her attention at a flea market.

Behind me, the bells on the door jingled again. I had my gaze on a small mouse skeleton posed in a tiny jar, and even though I couldn’t see whoever had walked in, I could *feel* him. The aura swept into the warmth of the shop like a cold wind carrying wildfire smoke. The scent burned my nose and raised goosebumps on my arms. I straightened up slowly, nonchalantly, and tried to pull my magic even tighter into my core. Whoever this was, I didn’t want him to sense anything odd about me whatsoever.

“Can I help you?” Mala asked, not unkindly.

“Hm.” The man’s voice was low and rich. “Just looking.”

That did exactly nothing to help my goosebumps subside. I risked a

glance over my shoulder.

He was staring at me. His eyes were rich, dark green, like jewels, and his dark hair was cropped close to his skull, which gave him an almost dragonesque appearance with his sharp cheekbones and straight nose. He was impeccably dressed, in a dark suit without a speck of dirt on it, like he was either coming or going to some kind of very important funeral. I narrowed my eyes at him and turned back to the shelf, poked at the mouse jar as if I'd been considering it.

"I'll be in touch about the order," I said to Mala. "Thanks."

Before she could respond, I turned away from the shelf and hurried out the door. Something about that man set my teeth on edge. Something about him was off—he wasn't from around here. Not from Warwick, not from the Den. The suit was too clean. The gaze was too sharp. And now his aura, sharp and smoky, still lingered in my nose. Every instinct inside me was screaming to *move move move*, get far, far away. And my instincts were usually right.

Even as I moved through the crowd, carelessly brushing shoulders with vampires and trolls, his aura remained sharp at my senses. The goosebumps wouldn't go down. The hair at my nape stood up, like there was an unfamiliar sharp green gaze pinned there. I didn't dare look back, though—the only thing that would make this worse would be letting *him* know that *I* knew that he was following me. I just had to get out of here. At least Earthside, I'd have a better chance of defending myself.

I picked up my pace, as best as I could without looking too suspicious. The phone booth tucked into the alley was like a lighthouse in the distance. I just had to make it there. Another block. Half a block. Around a slow-moving troll, and then—exhale.

I whirled around, back to the phone booth, ready to step across its threshold and/or beat this guy's ass.

But there was no one there.

The alley was empty. Just the familiar noise of the patrons of the Den on the main street passing by.

I rubbed my nape where it still prickled. I still itched with the sensation, still had his aura lingering in my nose, but was I just imagining it? Had he not followed me at all?

Whoever he was, I wanted him far away from me. I hurried into the phone booth and took the elevator back up, and I didn't exhale until I was

back in the familiar haze of Candy's with the terrible music playing on the jukebox.

Jesus. I needed a beer.



“Are we on for tomorrow?” Corbin asked as soon as he answered the phone.

“No,” I said. I threw Bob a wave as I shouldered the door to my apartment open. He didn’t even notice my changed hair—classic. Once the door was closed, I took the mask off and sighed as my power rushed through me again, unchecked again. Honestly, the feeling wasn’t dissimilar to taking my bra off after a long, irritating day.

“So I’m going alone?”

“Hell, no,” I said. “I just need a few more days. This may shock you, but I wasn’t able to just waltz into Mala’s and buy equipment that could conceal me from UnSeelie within their own realm.”

“The Den is always such a disappointment,” he sighed.

“The point is,” I said, “Mala’s working on putting something together for me that should do the trick. Shouldn’t take too long.”

“Good,” Corbin said. “Custom work. Wise not to half-ass this.”

“Yeah, no shit,” I said.

“The court isn’t exactly at its most stable right now,” Corbin said. “Ralnor’s behavior has left a bit of a power vacuum within the court, and people are vying to fill the space he left behind.”

“Turmoil,” I said. “Great.”

“That’s putting it lightly,” Corbin said. “I... Should be forthcoming.”

“That’s new,” I said. I plopped down on the couch and kicked my feet up on the coffee table. Oscar immediately crawled into my lap, purring. “And ominous. Forthcoming about what?”

“Obviously, if you were discovered in Faerie, that would be... Less than ideal.”

“Right,” I said. “I’d be drained immediately. Gram has beaten that into my brain pretty intensely.”

My blood wasn’t just intoxicating—to an UnSeelie, it was a power boost. A crazy one. A kind of power boost you couldn’t find in this realm, or any other realm. Not anymore.

Corbin sucked his teeth. “Well,” he said, “that’s a possibility. But there are other possibilities, too. If someone is vying for more influence in the court, you’d be a powerful bargaining chip.”

“That doesn’t sound too good,” I said, cringing.

“It’s not,” Corbin said. “I doubt you’d be killed. I think it’s much more likely you’d end up as someone’s prized possession.”

I’d imagined if I was discovered in Faerie, I’d just—die. Which was obviously not ideal. But Corbin was spinning out some fates I hadn’t taken the time to consider.

“Awesome,” I said. My stomach turned. “That makes me really excited for this case.”

“That’s why we’ll have to go in with you acting as *my* possession,” Corbin said. “I’m not particularly well-liked in the court, but I’m respected enough that no one would want to piss me off just to get access to a human with a smidgen of Fae heritage.”

Right, I’d have to pass as having a little bit, in order to pass safely into Faerie. “Why does this feel familiar?”

“Do you have a better idea?” he asked.

“Of course not,” I said. “I’m only hoping to make it out of there alive.”

“We’ll be fine,” Corbin said. “As long as whatever Mala is putting together is up to snuff.”

“It will be,” I said. “Mala knows what she’s doing. I’m not going to just sit around for these few days either—we should tie up the loose ends Earthside.”

“Right,” Corbin said. “Check out the other crime scenes.”

“I doubt there will be as much as there was at the last one. Ralnor seems like the kind of guy to clean up after himself. But it’s worth taking a look.” I scratched behind Oscar’s ears and ran my hand down his spine. I’d also need to boost his life, and then make sure Bob was around to watch him. Who knew how long I’d be in Faerie. “I can look into the phone records, too.”

“You think Ralnor was using a phone?” Corbin said, half-amused.

“Why, because he’s UnSeelie? You’re literally using a phone right now.”

“...Touché.”

“Again,” I said, “just covering the bases. If there was something suspicious on the phone lines, or the police scanner, something that might help with a lead, Stan will know.”

“Ah, remind me to take you to the candy place in Faerie, too. You can stock up.”

“This isn’t a vacation,” I said, shaking my head. Even though that wasn’t the worst idea—the more Nectar Vectors I could buy, the easier it’d be to work with Stan in the future.

“It’s a work trip,” Corbin said. “You can write the candy off on your taxes.”

“You’ve got a solution for everything, don’t you?” I rolled my eyes at Oscar, as if he could hear this conversation. “All right, I’ll call you after I figure out next steps.”

I was about to hang up, but then Corbin cleared his throat. “Tempie.”

I paused. “What?”

“Well.” He hesitated, and the silence dragged between us.

“What is it?” I pressed. “More bad news about Faerie? Just tell me, I’d rather be prepared for whatever is waiting for me there.”

“It’s not bad news,” he huffed. “It’s just...”

I was about to give up and (very maturely) hang up on him, so I could start doing our actual job instead of just talking about it, when Corbin finally spoke.

“I keep thinking about that night in the hospital,” he said. “Don’t you?”

My heart swooped down to my feet. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting from Corbin, but it wasn’t *that*. I thought we had implicitly decided to maintain our working relationship by not acknowledging the (admittedly extremely hot) kisses we’d shared. Especially not that last one, when I was laid up in the hospital. When we’d come to the agreement that we wouldn’t reveal each other’s life-ruining secrets: he knew I was a Solstice nymph, and I knew he was a *lot* more Shax demon than he let on. After we’d agreed on that, for some insane reason, I’d decided to seal it with a kiss.

Couldn’t explain it, even now. Maybe it was the near-death experience in the storm cellar. Maybe it was the realization that Corbin wasn’t going to give me up, or drain me himself. Maybe it was that inexplicable draw I still

felt toward him, always pulling me closer to him when I knew the wise thing would be to stay far, far away.

“Even when I was in Faerie, I was thinking about it,” Corbin continued in a low voice that made my blood run hot in my veins. “There’s something there, isn’t there?”

For once in my life, I couldn’t find anything snarky to say. Because there *was*. That kiss in the hospital room hadn’t been driven by adrenaline or pure lust. It was something different. It was softer. Sweeter. But still hot and promising. Like the start of something we both wanted to continue.

I burned with desire. Even with just his voice on the phone, I could almost feel his ozone aura, the intensity of his gaze when his irises went amber. Really, it felt like my own body was betraying me. I’d had a handful of kisses and handful more near-death experiences with Corbin. If I wanted to work this job, I needed to keep our relationship professional. For my safety—and for my sanity.

Even if I, too, had been thinking about that kiss.

“I think we have more important things to worry about right now,” I managed to say, with my voice only quivering a little bit.

“Right,” Corbin said.

I cringed. I hadn’t denied it.

And I knew he was thinking the same thing.

“I’ll keep you updated,” I said. “About the case. Later.”

In a rush, I hung up the phone and then tossed it onto the couch like it was growing hot in my hand.

“The audacity of that guy,” I muttered to Oscar, who purred and knocked his head against my hand insistently. I acquiesced, petting over his ears. “Thinking he can just bring that up in the middle of a case. One that could very easily get us both killed, might I add.”

On the couch, my phone began to vibrate insistently again. Corbin really couldn’t take a hint. Actually, he could, he just refused to. I grabbed my phone without looking at the screen and answered it.

“Listen, Corbin--”

“Corbin?” Todd asked on the other line. “Were you expecting him?”

I squeezed my phone so hard it was in serious danger of cracking as I suppressed a loud, irritated curse. Todd was the last person I wanted to talk to, especially right now, but hanging up on him would be a little too obvious. Fuck.

“I’m glad you’re working with him again,” Todd said. “I don’t know if anyone else would’ve been able to close the Wheels case. And I need this current case closed as fast as possible.”

“It’s always as fast as possible with you,” I huffed. “You don’t need to remind me. And, by the way, I’m not working *for* you on this one.”

“Right, right,” Todd said, and I could hear the dismissive hand wave in his voice. “I don’t care who is technically working for whom as long as this case gets sorted out. Come into the office so I can give you the information about the case.”

“I’m not sorting this out for *you*,” I said again. “This is just a favor to Corbin. Give *him* the files.”

“You’re better with the casework than he is,” Todd said, like this was obvious. I tried to ignore the flush of pride that instilled in me. Even if I was pissed at Todd, I still wanted his recognition. Those were some daddy issues I’d unpack later. “He doesn’t have your intuition. Just come in and pick them up, will you?”

“Fine,” I said. “Only because Corbin’s unreliable. Otherwise I’d send him to get them for me. And I’ll be armed. You know I can’t trust you anymore.”

“Tempie, can we talk about this?” Todd asked.

“No,” I said sharply. “I don’t care about whatever reasoning you have. Our relationship is over.”

He sighed, and just like the handwave, I could pretty much hear him pinching the bridge of his nose. “Just come get the files.”

“Fine,” I said. “Make sure there’s coffee on.”

I hung up and tossed the phone aside again, now in an even worse mood than I was before. I leaned back heavily against the couch, enough to jostle Oscar. He mewled in irritation, then hopped down and wandered into the kitchen.

“You think you’re in a bad mood?” I asked him. “Imagine how I feel.”

From the kitchen, Oscar meowed without much sympathy.

Might as well get this shit over with. Maybe Todd’s case file would have some details that Corbin’s didn’t. Any information would be better than none—anything to get a little more ahead on this trip to Faerie. I would need all the preparation I could get.

“All right, I’m going,” I said to Oscar. “Let’s hope he took my demands for coffee seriously.”

“Tempie!” Carla said brightly as I descending the stairs. “It’s good to see you! Come here, I just picked these up.” She flung open the box of donuts on her desk and turned them to face me.

She still knew the way to my heart, that much was for sure. Before I could have a second thought, I was in front of the box and pulling a chocolate-iced donut with sprinkles from the offerings. *And* there was coffee on. Todd was a dickhead for sure, but Carla really knew how to run an office. I got myself a small Styrofoam cup of coffee as I inhaled half my donut.

“It’s been two months,” Carla said. “I was starting to think you weren’t going to show up here ever again.”

I sighed. “Well, that was kind of the plan.”

She lowered her voice. “You know I didn’t have anything to do with that, right?”

I sipped my coffee. I liked Carla, but I hadn’t contacted her over these two months—because even though we were friendly, Todd was still her boss.

“If I had known,” she whispered, “you know I would’ve told you, right?”

That surprised me. “Really?” I asked, just as quietly.

She nodded. “Something’s got him freaked, still,” she murmured. “He’s barely been telling me anything. I tried to dig up some information for you, but came up blank.”

“Thanks, Carla,” I said, surprised by the surge of affection for her. I’d really imagined the worst of her—when maybe she could, one day, be counted as a friend. “Really. Thanks.”

“Just don’t be a stranger, okay?” she said.

“So what’s been going on around here?” I asked.

“Nothing crazy,” Carla said. “Jace has been picking up most of the bounties. So I’ve had to deal with him.” She rolled her eyes. “And you know how he can be.”

“Unfortunately,” I said. Jace was a real asshole—but if he was able to handle the contracts, that meant there wasn’t anything too crazy going on. So I hadn’t missed much.

“What are you dropping by for?” Carla asked. “Can’t be to pick up a new contract.”

“Absolutely not,” I said. “I need--”

The front door to the office rattled open again. “Hi, hi, hi,” a familiar voice trilled sweetly down the stairs. “Sorry I’m late!”

Laura picked her way slowly down the stairs, favoring one leg heavily with her hand firm on the banister. Her dark hair was in a thick braid over her shoulder, and she’d traded out her loose, waifish dresses for slacks and an oversized sweater. It almost looked professional. I blinked.

“Laura,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“Tempie!” she squealed in surprise, and her half-banshee voice made the light fixtures flicker with her excitement. “Hi! Oh my gosh!”

I blinked and reeled back a little. Her power was always a little bit out of control. “What happened to your foot?” I asked, gesturing down where she was heavily favoring her left leg.

Laura tugged at the hem of her slacks, just enough to reveal the brace around her ankle. “I’m fine,” she said. “Just some trouble with a john.”

I started. “What kind of trouble?” I’d helped Laura get out of a bad trafficking situation before—and if she was getting mixed up with guys taking advantage of her again, I had a few days to kick some asses before I went to Faerie. I was still oddly protective of Laura.

“It’s nothing, seriously,” Laura said, smiling placidly at me. “He pushed me down a couple stairs and I landed on my foot wrong.”

“Jesus,” I said. “That’s not nothing. Who was it? I’ll break his arms.”

“He’s out of the picture now,” Carla said.

“Did *you* kill him?” I asked Carla, impressed.

“No, no,” Carla said, waving her hand. “I mean Laura’s not seeing guys like that anymore.”

“That’s right,” Laura chirped. “I’m working here now. Part-time.”

“You’re working here,” I repeated.

“Helping with the filing,” Carla said. “Lord knows we were backed up as hell.”

“So I’m still seeing a few clients,” Laura said, “but no one who hasn’t already been vetted. I’m done getting pushed around by guys like that.”

“Damn straight,” Carla said.

I glanced between them, then nodded, impressed. “That’s good,” I said, nodding. “For both of you. Good.”

Laura beamed. She did seem happier—a little more alert and awake than she had drifting around the back room of Candy’s.

“Carla.” The door to Todd’s office opened. “The lights flickered, is Laura-- ah.”

“Hi, Todd,” I said as he appeared in the doorway. I crossed my arms over my chest. “Here for that pickup.”

“This way,” he said, and waved me into his office. I wasn’t exactly keen to follow him in, but as I’d promised, I’d shown up with my jewelry on and a knife in my boot. Carla shot me a look, eyebrows raised, but I just shook my head and followed him in.

I closed the door behind us and leaned my back against it. Todd’s office was just as disheveled as ever: files spilling out of cabinets, a dozen abandoned coffee cups on his desk, three jackets over the back of his chair. And the man himself looked just as bad. The bags under his eyes were so deep he almost look like he’d been punched in the face. It was tragic enough to almost make me feel worried about him. Almost.

He rooted around in the stacks of folders on his desk, muttering to himself. When he finally found the manila folder he was looking for, he straightened them up.

What had I expected? That he’d prostrate himself in front of me and apologize for lying to me? For putting my safety at risk, trying to figure out my heritage? Betraying me after all the work we’d done together?

I wasn’t that naive. But maybe a part of me hoped for it, even if I wasn’t expecting it. Of course, he did nothing of the sort. He just handed the folder over. “This is the information we have on the case.”

I flipped through the folder briskly.

There wasn’t a damn thing in there I hadn’t already seen in Corbin’s files. Same pictures, same police reports. Nothing new. What the hell was this about? Was this all just a ruse to get me here for some reason? I snapped the folder closed. “Todd, seriously--”



“This, too,” he said, pulling another folder from his desk.

I tugged it from his hands. Inside, there was a small notebook and a key in a plastic bag. “What’s this?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” Todd said. “These were the skip’s personal effects when he was first picked up by the supernatural police before he was transferred into Fae custody. Slipped through the cracks.”

“I bet you had nothing to do with that,” I said.

Todd just smirked. “It pays to have connections sometimes.”

“Yeah, I bet it does,” I muttered. I thumbed carefully through the small, thin notebook. It was full of writing, but all of it in Fae language—I’d have to get Corbin to translate for me. The key was small, plain, attached to a plastic ring with the number thirteen on it. It didn’t look Fae at all—it looked like something you’d get at a bus station if you rented a locker. “What’s this go to?”

“Don’t know,” Todd said. “It’s unlabeled. That’s why I’m passing it off to you.”

“All right,” I said. I dropped the key and the notebook back into the folder. “Good intel.”

He raised his eyebrows like he was expecting something. A thank you, probably. If he thought that he was going to get a thank you from me, he was fucking delusional. He should’ve been thanking me for showing up at all. I threw him a sloppy, joking salute, and then shouldered the door to his office open.

I grabbed another donut from the box and waved the folders demonstratively in hand.

“Got what you needed?” Carla asked.

“Yup,” I said around my mouthful of pastry. “Laura, make sure that one doesn’t get into too much trouble, okay?”

“Can do,” Laura trilled from where she was already picking gleefully through a massive stack of files.

I hurried out of the office and back to my bike. For as irritating as it was to have to deal with Todd—I had something tangible to do while waiting to get to Faerie. I had a lead. A shitty lead, but an Earthside lead, at least.

I rode back to my apartment as quickly as I could get away with and hurried inside, stomping around much to Oscar’s sleepy-eyed annoyance. I left the case file on the kitchen island and turned my attention to the thin notebook and the key, sliding them both carefully out of the folder and onto

the surface of my kitchen island.

Very carefully, I lowered my defenses on my magic, opening my senses to whatever residue might be on the notebook, or lingering within its pages. I expected something sticky and nasty like whatever had been left at the crime scene, but as I thumbed through it again, fruitlessly searching for any familiar words or phrases, no magic picked at my senses. Either it was just a regular-ass notebook, or this guy was really fucking good at concealing his magic when he wanted to.

I set the notebook aside. Corbin would have to be the one to pick through that. I picked up the key next, turning it over in my palm, seeking out similar traces of magic. Again, nothing. Just a regular key, with a regular plastic keychain, with the number thirteen on it. No other identifying marks—no business name or anything that might guide me to where it was from.

“Guess we’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way,” I said with a sigh. I fixed myself a cup of coffee with the percolator—I still hadn’t had the fortitude to figure out my fancy new machine.

With my coffee in my favorite old mug, I sank back down onto the couch and booted up my laptop. Oscar curled up on the open cushion next to me. He was used to this routine, and knew I’d be much too fidgety tapping away at my keyboard to get any quality lap time.

The Wheels case had given me a big enough paycheck that I could’ve upgraded my apartment if I’d really wanted to. Maybe could’ve moved into something bigger, closer to downtown, with real hardwood floors instead of laminate, and a water heater that didn’t break like clockwork every other month. But there was something about this place that felt like home to me. In my line of work, it wasn’t easy to feel safe. And I felt safe here. I wasn’t ready to give that up, not for hardwoods, or natural light, or non-leaking plumbing.

“Damn,” I muttered as I pulled up the York City map. “There are more bus depots around than I thought.”

I turned the key over in my hand again like it might reveal its source if I looked at it hard enough. It had to go to some kind of depot locker, though—I knew those keys when I saw them. Before I got on my feet as a bounty hunter, I spent more than my fair share of nights passed out on bus station benches between cities, and I’d stashed my fair share of materials in their surprisingly secure lockers. It was a good place to hide things, especially if you were moving between realms and didn’t have a reliable home base.

Depot employees didn't give a shit about what you stored there as long as you paid the locker rent. And it was the last place the supernatural police would look, since supers didn't usually use human public transport. It was a genius move, even if I was loath to admit it.

I noted all five of the depots on my map of the city, spread out on my coffee table. The depots dotted the city in both Warwick and York City proper, just enough that it'd take me the rest of the day to check them all. If I did that, and still didn't find any matches, I'd head to the airport a few hours south of the city. The lockers at the airport were a little nicer than the bus lockers—if Ralnor was too elitist to slum it at the bus depots, it might be a feasible option, too.

“Plan made,” I noted to Oscar, who didn't wake up. I geared up to get back on my bike and start my hunt.

God, it felt good to have a lead.

“Heading out again?” Bob asked, leaning back in his chair as I locked up my apartment behind me.

“Yessir,” I said. “Couple errands to run.”

“Well, make sure you get back before it’s too late,” Bob said. “That damn cat of yours starts whining and keeps me up.”

“I know, I know, I fed him this time,” I said. “But I won’t be out too late.”

“You always say that!” Bob said gruffly. He knocked a cigarette out from his pack and clenched it between his teeth. “Also, tell your creep of the month to quit idling outside of the building. It’s bad for the air quality.”

I glanced over the balcony railing. Yep, said blond-headed creep was leaning against his sports car, smiling demurely up toward me with his thumbs hooked into the pockets of his jeans. Effortlessly sexy. I tried not to roll my eyes and failed.

“Sorry about him,” I said to Bob. “I’ll tell him to fuck himself.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Bob muttered, then waved me off. I shook my head fondly and made a note to get some Fae cigars in Faerie, as well. Or maybe some Fae sleeping meds.

“Going somewhere?” Corbin asked.

“Bob says your car is ruining the neighborhood air quality,” I said.

Corbin looked up at the balcony where Bob was already halfway through his cigarette, exhaling a huge cloud of smoke luxuriously with his feet kicked on the rail. “I see.”

“Just the messenger,” I said.

“Where are you headed?” he asked.

“Got a lead while we’re waiting on Faerie.” I held up the key Todd had given me.

“And you were just going to tackle this on your own?”

“What?” I asked. “Figured you were busy doing... Whatever the hell you do with your free time.” I waved a hand. “What, do you want me to keep you posted on every potential lead?”

“Uh, yes,” Corbin said, like that was obvious. “Since we’re on this case together.”

I sucked my teeth. “Well, I guess that makes sense. This part’s not going to be interesting, though.”

“Interesting?” Corbin asked with a curious furrow of his brow. “We’re not doing this for fun.”

“Yeah, no shit,” I said with a sigh. Even though I was good at my job, I still felt a weird sense of embarrassment at the idea of Corbin tagging along for the boring legwork that came with starting off cases. I didn’t know how he did things in Faerie, but the investigations I ran were often fairly unglamorous. “You can come if you want, but it’s not necessary.”

Corbin shook his head. “Where are we headed?”

I climbed into the passenger seat of his fancy sports car. I was getting a little too familiar with this interior, honestly, but it was easier to let him drive than to argue about it. I pulled out my map and unfurled it on the dash.

“Great news,” I said. “We’re going on a grand tour of the Greater York City bus stations.”

“Awesome,” Corbin said. “Lead the way.”

I caught him up on the materials Todd had given me as we drove to the first bus station.

“And you left the notebook in your apartment?” he whined. “You could be driving, and I could be translating.”

I nearly threw my hands up in the air. “I was planning on doing this part alone, remember?” I said. “You hate it when I drive your car, anyway. You would’ve been critiquing my driving instead of translating.”

Corbin hemmed and hawed, but didn’t argue with that assessment. I smirked to myself and kicked my feet up onto the dash as we drove, just to see him cringe.

“So,” I said, “we’ll check the stations today, and then tomorrow look over the notebook at Manny’s.”

“You and Manny’s,” he said. “Don’t you ever get sick of that place?”

“You’re just jealous that there are no restaurants like that in Faerie,” I said. “I bet you can’t even get a good cup of coffee in your realm.”

“You’re unbelievable,” he said. “How far away is this depot?”

I laughed. It really was way too easy to get a rise out of him.

With minimal bickering, we made it to the first depot, a ratty station on the west side of town with cracked tile floors and an exhausted-looking shifter running the ticket depot. We made our way down the dilapidated hallway to the lockers. Thirteen had no lock on it, and the key didn’t match the locks on the one that did.

“Okay,” I said. “Next.”

“Next,” Corbin agreed.

The second depot was the same. And the third, and the fourth. Under the fluorescent lights of the tiny fourth depot, the human attendee dragged a mop languidly across the floor and a family of sprites slept leaning against each other on one of the benches. I flicked the unlocked door of locker letter D, since none of these even had numbers at all.

Corbin was starting to look irritated and exhausted. “Not this one, either?”

“Nope,” I said. “What, getting bored? Unfortunately, this is what a lot of investigation work is. Dull-ass legwork. Crossing off what isn’t until you figure out what is.”

“Do I need to remind you that I’m hundreds of years older than you?”

“I thought it was thousands,” I said.

“I know how investigations work,” Corbin said. “Let’s go.”

There was nothing in the fifth bus depot, either. This one didn’t even have lockers—it wasn’t much more than a poorly lit automated ticket depot and a few benches tucked under an awning.

“Well, so much for that lead,” Corbin said. “If not a bus locker, what is the key to?”

I sighed. “I was hoping I wouldn’t have to make the trek, but it might be for one of the lockers outside the airport.”

“Let’s go, then,” Corbin said.

“Tonight?” It was already dark, and by the time we made it to the airport, it’d be swiftly approaching midnight. And then we’d have to come back. “Let’s just go in the morning.”

“No, let’s get it over with,” Corbin said. “You said it wouldn’t take much

time for Mala to finish your gear.”

I groaned. Well, that much was true. I didn’t know if we had a week or just a few days before we needed to head to Faerie—we couldn’t waste any time once it was safe for me to leave. “Still. I *do* have to sleep.”

“That’s why I’m driving,” Corbin said. “Let’s go.”

Well, it *would* be simpler to have all the locations confirmed—and it was a long drive back to my apartment anyway. Might as well just check them all off the list. Or, if we got really lucky, find something. So with a dramatic sigh, I followed Corbin to his car and climbed into the passenger seat.

It was a long drive south to the closest airport, nearly two hours from the last bus depot we’d checked. I was tired, but I couldn’t sleep in despite the hypnotic rumble of the car over the highway. I turned the case over in my mind—the case, and the way Corbin had so easily roped me into helping him. I cracked the window and let the cool air wash over me, trying to clear my head.

Corbin glanced over. “You okay?”

“Fine,” I said. “Just staying awake.”

He nodded. But still, his concern for my well-being was like a balm. I tried not to think too hard about that.

It was nearly midnight by the time we arrived at the airport. I directed Corbin around the terminals, down to the shuttle pickup station where the lockers stood in a dark, unwelcoming line under an old awning, tucked amidst the darkened rows of airport shuttles.

“This place is overdue for a remodel,” Corbin muttered as we climbed out of the car.

“Bus depots don’t seem too bad now, do they?” I was exhausted, it was late as fuck—this was a stupid idea. Should’ve insisted Corbin take me back to my apartment instead of driving all the way out here. Honestly, I was halfway to hoping this was a dead end, too, just so I could go home. “This way.”

All the lockers were closed up, as per usual—except one. At the far end of the lockers, one door hung wide open and slightly askew, as if it’d been wrenched off its hinges.

Well. That was suspicious.

I rushed forward. The locker hung open, and the lock on it had not been picked or opened, but snapped. It lay in pieces on the concrete. This was a hack job done in haste. And the locker itself was empty.

We were too late.

And then—

“Hey!” Corbin hissed. “Three-o-clock!”

Right where Corbin directed my attention, a flash of movement passed between the parked shuttles—not clear enough to make out what it was, a rustle of fabric, a person, an animal—but I took off instinctively. Adrenaline flooded me, as familiar as my power itself, as I leaped forward with renewed energy, charging after the flicker of movement. Corbin ran at my heels, keeping up with my speed easily. In the distance, I could make out the figure: silhouetted, tall, broad shoulders, inhumanly fast movement. He took a hard turn; I chewed up the yards between us and did the same, nearly skidding to the asphalt as I slid between the parked shuttles.

But when I moved to keep chasing it, the figure was gone.

This row of shuttles was parked right against the wall of the parking garage—nothing but concrete in front of me.

No magic prickled at my senses, other than Corbin’s familiar heightened aura a few paces behind me. No unfamiliar sticky residue like I’d found at the crime scene. No traces of a portal. Nothing.

Just absence.

“Feel anything?” I asked Corbin over my shoulder.

He shook his head. “Nothing. You?”

“Nope,” I said. My hands itched to touch the concrete, the asphalt, to open up my senses and see if there was anything I was missing. But I couldn’t risk it. If that was Ralnor—or someone working for him—I couldn’t risk them getting an idea of what I was. Not if I wanted to survive our little trip to Faerie. “Fuck. You think it was him?”

“I don’t know,” Corbin admitted. “Didn’t feel any magic. But—who else would be around here?” He stepped forward and peered closely at the concrete. “Doesn’t look like this was disturbed at all.”

“Fucking hell,” I muttered, then pushed my mussed hair off my forehead. The adrenaline drained from my body, leaving me exhausted and confused. “This isn’t exactly how I wanted this part of the investigation to go.”

“Yeah, join the club,” Corbin muttered. “There wasn’t anything in the locker, either?”

“Nope.” We made our way back to the lockers, and I double-checked it, just to see if I’d missed any residue.

Nothing. Just a broken lock. Just the dark, parked shuttles. Silence.



I leaned my back against the cool metal of the lockers and tipped my head up toward the sky. Corbin did the same, matching my posture. His shoulder pressed against mine. “I’m not driving back tonight,” he said.

I blinked. “Well, I’m not either, unless you want me to fall asleep at the wheel and put the car into a ditch.”

“We’re near the airport,” Corbin said. “I’m getting a hotel.”

“I’m not wasting my money on a hotel room,” I said. “Aren’t UnSeelie supposed to be able to run for ages on no sleep?”

“No point in unnecessarily weakening ourselves before we travel,” Corbin said. “And don’t be dramatic, I’ll pay for the room.”

“Rooms,” I clarified.

He rolled his eyes. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Part of me wanted to keep arguing, but he was right. The long drive back to Warwick sounded exceedingly miserable right now—and I wouldn’t be able to get much sleep, not cramped in the tiny passenger seat of his sleek sports car as the asphalt rumbled beneath us. I was irritated and exhausted. So I just followed him to the car and hoped the closest hotel wasn’t a total shithole.

The hotel was not shitty. But our luck was.

“Are you serious?” I asked, leaning heavily against the fine, dark wooden check-in counter. It was so late that the gorgeous lobby was entirely abandoned, save for the custodian slowly vacuuming the throw rugs cast artfully around the hardwood floors.

“Terribly sorry for the inconvenience,” the elfin-looking front desk girl said demurely as she tapped her nails over the keyboard. “We’re hosting the annual troll conference for security professionals this week, so we’re quite booked.”

“You think Stan will be here? Sounds like we’ve found his people.” Corbin asked me with a grin.

I groaned and pinched the bridge of my nose.

“We’ll take it,” Corbin said to the attendant. “Thanks.”

I snatched the keycard off the counter before Corbin could and stomped to the elevator. This was not how this evening—this day—hell, this *case*—was supposed to go at all. We rode the elevator up to the seventh floor in silence, then made our way down the hall to the last room.

Of course it was tiny. I just couldn’t catch a fucking break. We’d gotten the last open room in the hotel, apparently, and it was hardly big enough to house the king-sized bed. All else there was in the room was the television mounted on the wall, the closet, and the door to the equally tiny bathroom. Not even enough room for me to force Corbin to sleep on the floor.

And even with all my trepidation, that mattress did look really fucking comfortable.

Before Corbin could make any snarky comments, I hurried into the tiny ensuite bathroom. I braced my hands on the counter, avoiding my surely disastrously exhausted-looking reflection in the mirror, and turned the faucet on cold. I stuck my face under it, letting the icy-cold shock wake me up a little and bring my attention back to the forefront.

This wasn't a big deal. It was one fucking night. And it was better to just crash for a few hours, recharge, get up, drive back. This was regular investigative work.

I sighed, straightened up, and cringed at my reflection.

This would be a lot easier if he hadn't brought up that kiss.

"All right," I said quietly to myself in the mirror. "All right. Be normal. This is fine. Keep it professional."

I dried off my face and stepped back into our tiny hotel room. Corbin was seated at the foot of the bed, untying his boots. He shot me a small smirk, and the blue of his irises was already flecked with gold. The atmosphere of the room seemed to crackle with ozone as his gaze lingered on me.

"Nope," I said. "Not happening."

"What?" he said. His smirk only widened. "I didn't say anything."

"I know you've got some snarky comment in the barrel ready to go," I said. "Don't need to read your aura to know that."

Corbin just laughed and tugged his boots off. "Relax, Tempie," he said. "You'll feel better once you get a few hours of sleep."

"I'll feel better when I'm back at my apartment," I groused. "Should've just made the drive."

"What was it you said about putting my car in a ditch?"

I waved my hand dismissively, then swallowed hard as I unfastened my own boots. It wasn't just that I was going to have to try to sleep next to Corbin—an UnSeelie, who still, despite our arrangement, could drain me at any moment—but it was the simple reality that I hadn't slept in a bed with anyone other than Oscar since my last doomed relationship with Tucker. I wasn't the type to go out picking people up like Carla was. Even one-night stands required a level of trust I wasn't ready to hand out. No one was allowed into my apartment. No one was allowed into my bed. It was safer for everyone that way.

Though, if I was being honest with myself, the real danger wasn't the fact that Corbin could drain me. It was the fact that stupid kiss kept itching at my mind.

If he tried to kiss me again, I didn't know if I'd have the strength to stop him.

Corbin stood up. Even though I knew what was coming, I didn't look away. Because apparently I was a masochist. With his back to me, he gripped the neckline of his shirt at his nape, arms up and back, then tugged it over his head in one efficient movement.

I knew, logically, he was ripped, considering I'd seen him do all sorts of crazy athletic shit when we were fighting demons and all that. But that wasn't the same as seeing it—the defined muscle of his shoulders when he moved to fold his shirt, the divot of his spine, the dimples—seriously, *dimples*—at his lower back over the waistband of his jeans.

God. I was going to have to sleep in my fucking jewelry to keep my aura tamped down.

And then, of course, he turned around. I got a full eyeful of Corbin's Abercrombie-model body, pecs that would fill out a B-cup, abs you could wash your sheets on. He stretched his arms overhead, luxuriously catlike, subjecting me to the stretch of his torso and the comfortable exhale that followed.

Then he dropped his hands and went for the button on his jeans. That snapped me out of my fugue state. "Whoa!" I said. "What the hell are you doing?"

Corbin raised his eyebrows. "Getting ready for bed," he said. "You expect me to sleep in my jeans?"

"Uh, yes?" I said. "Aren't we keeping things professional?"

"Don't be such a prude," Corbin said. "We've saved each other's lives, you can handle a little leg."

"What if I don't want to?" I snapped back, petulant.

"Well, you can't always get what you want," Corbin said, and tugged his jeans down.

Thank God he was wearing underwear. Even if they were way-too-tight boxer briefs that sat way too low on his hips and hugged his ass way too perfectly.

"That's better," he said with another little smirk.

"Maybe for you," I muttered. I tugged off my hoodie, but kept my t-shirt and jeans on, then crawled onto the bed.

"Seriously?" He peeled back the comforter—as best as he could with me on top of it—and got in on his side.

“Yes, seriously,” I said. I stretched out flat on my back and stared at the ceiling. There was no way I was going to strip down in front of Corbin. Even if it would be a lot more comfortable, I didn’t want him to get any ideas. And I didn’t want to get any more tempted myself. This was already bad enough.

Corbin huffed a disbelieving, but not totally unkind, laugh. “Sleep well, then.” He rolled over so the strong plane of his back faced me, then pulled the comforter up to his shoulders. It took under two minutes for his breathing to even out.

Honestly, that was unfair. And I was honestly a little miffed—shouldn’t he be sort of perturbed by this situation, too? But here he was, passed out like a baby on his side of the bed, having not done anything more than his usual flirting.

Something swirled low in my gut. Definitely wasn’t disappointment. Not at all.

I rolled over, trying not to jostle the bed. I wasn’t entirely successful, but Corbin’s breathing didn’t change at all. Sleep didn’t come to me nearly as easily. My thoughts turned and tumbled over each other, the tangles of the case, the way the figure I’d followed had just disappeared, the key, the notebook.

A trip to Faerie.

Corbin occasionally moving restlessly in his sleep didn’t help. In sleep, the intoxicating scent of his aura was even worse—subtler, but richer. Like he was letting his guard down.

I stopped myself from thinking about what that meant, and the ways it could go wrong. I wrangled my thoughts back to the case, to preparation to cross over into Faerie. I started making myself an extensive packing list, in hopes that the dullness of the task would lull me into sleep.

I caught a few dozing, half-asleep hours, just enough to ensure I felt even worse when the sun sluiced through the window, waking me up. Corbin woke up fresh as a fucking daisy, popping out of bed and stretching languidly with a sigh.

“How’d you sleep?” he asked as he pulled his jeans on.

“Like shit,” I said from where I was still flat on my back on the bed.

“Told you that you shouldn’t have slept in jeans,” he said. “Come on, let’s get breakfast and get back to Warwick.”

“Ugh.” I wanted to push back, just because I’d woken in in a foul mood, but my stomach rumbled in betrayal. “Meet me in the lobby.”

“Don’t take too long,” he said. “I want to get back and see this notebook.”

“Quit bossing me around,” I muttered.

“And don’t fall back asleep,” he said. He tugged his shirt and boots on. “I mean it.” Then with an obnoxiously cheerful wave, he left me in the hotel room.

For a moment, I seriously considered going back to sleep just to spite him. But I, too, was itching to know what was in the notebook. As eager as I was, though, we were in a hotel. And hotels meant unlimited hot water. And really good water pressure. If Corbin thought I wasn’t going to take advantage of that before we left, he didn’t know me at all.

After my extremely luxurious and much-needed shower, I almost felt like a person again, even as I pulled yesterday’s sweaty clothes back on. I tied my wet hair up into a bun and spared one last glance for the half-mussed bed, with the subtly blended auras tugging at my attention, before I made my way downstairs to the lobby. Corbin was waiting for me, idly scrolling through his phone with one thumb hooked into the pocket of his jeans. He glanced up the moment I stepped out the elevator—were we really that attuned to each other already? I shoved that thought from my mind.

“Come on,” he said. “There’s a shitty diner up the road. That’s your favorite, right?”

“If you’re implying something about Manny’s, I’m going to kick you,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said with a grin. “Classic American diner. Is that more appropriate?”

“As long as there’s coffee. Let’s go.”

The diner was close, as promised, and blissfully uncrowded. A waitress who looked about as exhausted as I did led us to a booth, and brought coffee without asking, so she was already getting a thirty percent tip. I took a sip and sighed with relief as my brain started to whirl back to life.

“So,” Corbin said, “did sleep shake any ideas loose? Any thoughts on what might’ve been in that locker?”

“Hell,” I said, “I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“It’s strange that he’d store things Earthside.”

“If that was even him,” I said. “It could’ve been an accomplice.”

Corbin nodded. “It does make me think he’s hiding Earthside, though,” he said. “That’s what I would do if I were him, at least. Your police are a lot less effective than Fae police. Easier to hide from.” He grinned. “No

offense.”

“That’s not offensive, it’s just true,” I said. “But what would he need to stash? If the key was on his person before he was picked up, he stashed whatever it was before the murder. Why?”

We both fell silent as we turned the case over. There were a lot of questions, and hardly any answers. I was getting really fucking frustrated. We had a lot of disconnected leads, and nothing to tie them together. I needed to get my hands on some actual evidence—I needed to figure out what kind of magic Ralnor was attempting to do with this ritual. I wanted to stop fucking around—I wanted to see with my eyes, and my own magic, what the hell this guy was trying to do. It was beginning to feel like the only way I would be able to stop him.

“Uh,” the exhausted waitress said, glancing between us, “you two ready to order?”

“Right,” I said, straightening up at the prospect of food. I ordered a huge breakfast for me—waffles, eggs, sausage, the works—while Corbin stuck with coffee. Did he even eat at all? Or maybe he only ate weird UnSeelie food. I’d have to look into that later. Once I had waffles in front of me, I started to feel better.

“So,” Corbin said, when I was halfway through punishing my breakfast, “did I pass the test?”

I took a sip of my coffee and narrowed my eyes at him. “Test?” I asked. “What test?”

“You were acting last night like I was going to maul you at any moment,” Corbin said. “And I believe I behaved like a gentleman.”

“If stripping in front of me is gentlemanly, then sure,” I said. “Where are you going with this?”

“I can read your aura just the same as you can read mine.”

“No, I’m definitely better at it than you.”

“I know you feel something between us, too,” Corbin said, low. “My offer still stands. I think last night proves that I’m interested in more than just sex.” His eyes flashed amber. “Though I wouldn’t be opposed to that, either.”

“Forget it,” I said, even as that glint of amber made desire rush through me. “Putting everything” —I wagged a hand between us— “aside, we’re still *working* together. I don’t think either of us can afford to be distracted from this case.”

“This is more than a distraction,” Corbin said.

“Quit being difficult,” I said. “You know what I mean.”

If I tried anything with Corbin—trying to be *with* him, whatever that meant—that meant I wasn’t going to have all of my attention on the case. I needed to focus all my resources on work right now. As if I wasn’t wasting time trying to *stop* being attracted to Corbin daily. But that was more sustainable than trying anything more.

“And there’s the whole thing about going to Faerie.”

“That’s going to be fine,” Corbin said.

“What I mean,” I said, “is that you’re an enforcer for the court, remember that little fact?”

Corbin made a face like he’d eaten something sour. “Like I could forget.”

“The closer I am with you,” I pointed out, “the closer I am to the UnSeelie Court. And the queen. What if they find out about me? You think I’m going to risk becoming a blood whore for UnSeelie royalty? You said it yourself—the risk is a little worse than death here.”

Corbin’s eyes flashed red so briefly I wondered if I’d imagined it. But then he bared his teeth, and his UnSeelie fangs descended—just his top canines, not the full mouth of sharp teeth I’d seen in the heat of battle. But rarely had I ever seen his fangs at all, and never in public. I glanced around nervously, but none of the truckers picking at their meals seemed to notice us at all.

“Tempie.” Corbin reached across the table and took my wrist in hand. His grip was firm, fingers pressed almost possessively to my pulse point. My gaze snapped back to his; the rest of the diner seemed to melt away. “That won’t happen,” he growled.

Heat roared in my veins. I swallowed hard. I knew I needed to pull my hand away. But the press of his fingers against my pulse made it beat hard enough to make me dizzy. “You’re literally the one who said it might,” I said. Maybe I sounded a little breathless—maybe that was why the amber flashed in Corbin’s eyes again.

“I won’t let it happen,” Corbin said. His voice was steely, like he was promising it to himself as much as he was to me. “If they—if *she*—tried to do anything like that, I’d kill her first.”

My eyes widened.

“As long as you’re with me,” Corbin said, “you’re protected.”

The craziest thing was that I believed him.

When had that happened? The kiss in the hospital sprung to the forefront



of my mind again. Was that when it had shifted for real? When I finally stopped worrying that Corbin was waiting for the perfect moment to drain me and did, actually, have an interest in keeping me alive?

And why did that knowledge feel so good?

I tugged my hand out of his grasp. "I can protect myself, you know."

Corbin blinked hard. His eyes went back to their normally frosty blue, and he snapped his jaw shut. Behind his lips, he ran his tongue over his teeth, and when he spoke again, his fangs were gone. "I know that. But it'll be different in Faerie. Defending yourself won't be possible."

"I'm sure I can get a few good punches in even without my powers," I said.

The waitress reappeared, check in hand, and I snatched it from her before Corbin could. "Can I get a coffee to go?" I asked. I paid for the cheap breakfast and left a thirty percent tip.

The long drive back to Warwick was suffocating. Corbin's aura filled the car, like he wasn't even trying to keep a handle on it, and I knew there was a lot more he wanted to say. He spared me, though, and I wasn't about to continue that conversation—not when I felt like if he touched me that way again and showed his fangs again, I'd be well on my way to considering his offer seriously. Something about having an UnSeelie threatening to burn down the court for me had me a little high on power. Part of me did want to see where that path would take us. What we could do if we were together, both in the case and outside it, two rejected hybrids showing the world what we were *really* made of.

There was one thing more dangerous than a horny Temperance Fleur. A curious Temperance Fleur. That thought wasn't going to take me anywhere good. Yet I couldn't shake it.

I'd have to set it aside for now, though, if I wanted to survive this trip. Which I did. Even if sometimes my behavior made it seem otherwise. I spent the drive focused on my coffee, the radio, and my phone, in that order.

As we approached my apartment after three excruciating hours, my phone rang.

"Hey!" I answered, delightful for the call and for the simple distraction as Corbin pulled up to my apartment. "Tell me you have good news."

"Middling," Mala said. "The good news is I was able to pull together something that should, in theory, hinder your powers enough for you to fly under the radar in Faerie."

Relief coursed through me. Corbin shut the car off and I immediately climbed out, cringing as I stretched my legs. “Amazing,” I said. “Thank you. Seriously. What’s the bad news?”

“The bad news is, dear, that you’re really fuckin’ powerful.”

I balked. The curse didn’t sound right in her sweet old-lady voice. But if she knew my mom, she had to be a tough bitch herself. “Well, that’s one way to put it.”

“There’s not a spell in the world that can contain your power indefinitely,” Mala said. “At least, not one that I know of. Either you’d die, or your power would eventually eat away at the bars of whatever tried to cage it.”

“Not sure if that’s a compliment,” I said.

“It’s just a fact,” Mala said. “This power hindrance isn’t going to last forever. Have you been to Faerie before?”

“No,” I said, ignoring the small swoop of embarrassment. What kind of Fae had never been to the Realm? Even though I knew it’d been impossible for me to go, it still made me feel less-than. “Never.”

“So there’s no way to know how your power will react to crossing over.” She hummed thoughtfully. “That’s a shame.”

Corbin climbed out of the car as well. He leaned against the driver’s side door and watched me pace around the parking lot.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Will something happen?”

“Almost certainly,” Mala said. “Fae want to be in the Realm. It’s intrinsic. It’s like...” She hummed again. “It’s like keeping an alligator out of water.”

“Interesting metaphor,” I said. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you can survive just fine Earthside. Even thrive. But part of you needs the water. You’ve never had it, so you don’t know what it’ll be like. But I expect it’s going to be like a gator sliding into the river. You’ll be stronger, faster, more powerful—and more noticeable. You’ll be in your element.”

An anticipatory thrill ran through me. Until I remembered the whole point of this conversation was to *not* be noticeable. “And the spell you cooked up for me will be able to handle that?” I asked. I tried not to get too hung up on the whole gator metaphor. The thought that I’d been trundling around on short little legs on land when I should’ve been sluicing fast and deadly through water. I sighed.

“It should,” she said. “But how powerful you are will affect how long it lasts. And then there’s the whole thing about time in Faerie.”

“Right,” I said. Time worked differently in the Realm—what felt like days in Faerie was often weeks Earthside, but it wasn’t an exact science. The most we could do was assume it’d be off. “Well, those are all limitations I can work with.”

“You should be able to tell when it’s starting to break down,” Mala said, “to give you enough time to get out before it breaks completely.”

“That’s about as good as I can ask for,” I said. “Thanks for doing this for me.”

I ended the call and shoved my phone back into my pocket. “I need to get to the Den.”

“So that was Mala?” Corbin asked.

“Yup,” I said. “She’s got the goods.”

“Sounds like this isn’t a perfect solution.”

“Well, when is it ever?” I chirped. “I’ll get you that notebook.”

“I’m coming with you to the Den,” he called as I ascended the stairs.

I resisted the urge to throw my hands up in the air dramatically. “Seriously?”

“Yup,” he said. “My life’s on the line with this case, too. I might have some questions about this tech.”

Unfortunately, that was a good point. He knew more about the Realm than I did—and we were going to the UnSeelie Realm, too. He might have insight into how my powers would manifest there. “Fine,” I called. “But I’m driving.”

“Why are you driving?” he called back.

“Can you have this conversation when you’re on the same level?” Bob shouted. “I’m trying to relax here!”

“Sorry, Bob,” I said. “Listen, are you around to watch Oscar for a few days?”

“Jesus Christ,” he said. “How much are you paying me?”

“I’ll make it worth your while,” I said, and shot him a wink. “Seriously.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” he grumbled.

I knew he would do it, though—he’d probably end up letting Oscar hang out in his apartment the whole time. Bob talked a big game but he was secretly interested in stealing my cat. And when I showed up with Fae cigars, he’d be singing a different tune.

I hurried into my apartment and grabbed my necklace and the notebook off my kitchen island, then gave Oscar a fancy can of wet food in apology for being gone all night. He meowed, wound around my legs, and then went to eating.

“See you later, bud,” I said. “This is gonna be a big one.”

He was not interested.

I paused at the door before I left. A strange anxious feeling clawed into my chest. Maybe it was just the fact that I was heading to the Den again—I always got a little nervous when that was on the menu—but I heeded this feeling. It was too strong and sudden not to. So I hurried back into my bedroom and retrieved my small gun, sliding the holster on under my jacket just in case. Always better to be prepared. Nerves soothed, I left my apartment, threw a wave to Bob and hurried down the stairs.

“I need to stop by my place before we go,” Corbin said.

“It’s always something with you,” I said. “Fine, keys.” I wagged my hand.

Corbin raised his eyebrows. “No?”

Then I wagged the notebook. “Translate this while I drive.”

That got his attention. He tossed the keys over, and I slid into the driver’s seat. As much as I loved riding my bike, there was something special about getting behind the wheel of this fancy piece of work.

He gave me directions to the outskirts of Warwick as he scanned the notebook, brow furrowed as he turned the pages.

“So?” I asked. “Anything?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Seems like he was doing some kind of experiment, maybe? Or recording results? There’s nothing definitive in here—just the victims’ names, and then notations if something ‘worked’ or not.”

“It’d be too much to hope that he’d just spell out his nefarious plan in his notes, I guess.” I gunned the engine as we made our way north through downtown, to the far edge of the city.

“Yeah, no such luck,” Corbin said. “I’ll compare it with some of my other notes and see if anything pops out.”

“Other notes?” I asked. “What have you been working on?”

“What do you think I do with my time?” he asked. “Sit around with my thumb up my ass?”

“Sort of, yeah,” I said with a shrug.

“Turn here,” Corbin said. He directed me down a narrow side street at the

far north side of downtown. “And then a left here.”

“Here?” I said. “Seriously?”

“Not all of us live in squalor, Tempie,” Corbin said. He guided me behind the tall row of sleek black townhouses with fine glass windows, into a tight covered parking spot.

“You live here?” I asked as we climbed out of the car. He punched a keypad on the door in the garage and led me inside.

“Yeah,” he said as he flicked on the lights. “What, did you think I was just going back to Faerie every night?”

“Honestly, yes,” I admitted. “Why waste the money on Earthside property?”

“It’s an investment,” Corbin said primly. “So don’t break anything.”

He left me in the open-concept living room, amid the uncomfortably stiff-looking couch and the glass coffee table and the weird-looking sculptures flanking his enormous television. It looked like he hardly lived here at all. The only thing that looked used at all was a small desk by the back window, well away from any prying eyes that might walk down the sidewalk outside. There were a handful of books stacked on top of it. Old books. Books that certainly didn’t fit the fancy modern décor of this house. Familiar books.

I picked one up with some trepidation and thumbed through it. The words were all Fae. I peered at the notebook lying open on the desk, and it looked like Corbin had been translating.

He descended the stairs, adjusting a watch in his wrist. “Ah,” he said. “Of course, you immediately found those.”

“What, should I have been judging your movie collection?”

“I just got *Lethal Weapon*. I’ve never seen it.”

“What! You’ve never seen—all right, that’s a conversation for a different day.” I set the book down and tapped the cover. “This is John Smucker’s.”

“Correct,” Corbin said. “Didn’t take much convincing to get them handed over to me once the case was closed. I think there’s more to the Wheels case than the cops—both human and Fae—are willing to consider.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Seems like it was just a bad dust-fueled ritual gone wrong to me.”

“That is how it seems on the surface,” Corbin said. “Usually, I’d agree. Humans do crazy shit like that. But the fact that John had these texts in particular, and knew how to properly dose the drugs in order to enhance the spells without killing himself, makes me think that he had someone else

working with him. Someone who knew the intricacies of this kind of work.”

“Like an UnSeelie,” I said. The gears in my mind started to turn. It did make sense—why would a guy like John Smucker have these kinds of texts? Where would he even get them? The Den? His dealer? He’d need someone to guide him down this path, to put the pieces together. This wasn’t usually the kind of investigating I did. My job was simple. Find the skip and bring them back. Once that was done, the details of the case left my mind like leaves on the wind. Poof. Gone.

But maybe this one was worth reopening. It wasn’t my beat, but it made me curious. Why would an UnSeelie want to encourage John Smucker in this crazy sort of work? Was he just hoping to unleash a Shax on the city?

Or something worse?

“This isn’t something the court has me looking into,” Corbin noted. “I just have a hunch.”

I blinked up at him, surprised. “Just a side project?”

“Something like that.”

“I guess crossover cases like this don’t happen much.”

“Correct again,” Corbin said. “Losing a Realm skip Earthside is basically unheard of. But having this happen right after we dealt with another case involving Fae and humans both? I don’t like that level of coincidence.”

“If I’ve learned anything in this line of work, it’s that a coincidence is never a coincidence.” I tapped the books. “This is weird.”

He huffed a laugh. “Yeah. That’s one way of putting it.”

He glanced at his watch again and fiddled with the face. It was a fine, old-looking watch, with a leather band and plain silver detailing. Was that what we’d come all the way here for? Or had he gotten something else? His bedroom was upstairs. What did it look like? I wondered. Was it the same boring modern styling as the rest of the house, or was it a little homier? Mussed sheets and jackets spilling out of the closet? Was the ozone tinge of his aura more prevalent?

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s head out. My turn to drive.”

“Aw, come on,” I whined. “I’ll look so cool pulling up to Candy’s in your whip.”

“You’ll put my whip in the river trying to do donuts,” Corbin said. “I’m driving.”

I laughed, mood lifting as I followed him back into the garage. I didn’t need to know the intricacies of his personal life—harassing him in his car

was enough for now.

“Hey, stranger!” Laura called from the far end of the bar. She waved cheerfully at Corbin and me as we stepped into the dim, nautical-themed hellhole that was Candy’s Good Time Bar.

It was strange to be in here now, with my jewelry on and Corbin behind me, seeing the usual patrons staring morosely into their beers with fresh eyes. Now that I knew the entrance to the Den was here, I had to suspect everyone was a supernatural in some way. I’d always kept my power carefully under wraps, but I’d never considered Candy’s to be a particularly high-risk locale. How many close calls had I had in here without even realizing it? I cringed at the thought.

“What are you doing here?” I asked Laura as I approached. “I thought you had a new job.”

She shrugged, then slid elegantly off her perch on the bar. “Sure, I do. But this place is still my home away from home.”

“That’s kind of bleak,” I said.

She tittered a breezy laugh. “Plus, I’ve still got a few johns I like. Who am I to say no to a little extra cash?”

That part I could relate to. “Well, be careful,” I said. “Now that I know what you’ve got running in the back of this joint, I’m a little more nervous.”

“You underestimate me,” she said with a smile, and her eyes flashed that freaky banshee red. Goosebumps rushed down my arms. I shook my head fondly.

“Let’s get going,” Corbin said. “And get this over with.”

We made our way to the phone booth in the back. I pulled my necklace



from my pocket and slipped it on, dampening my powers enough for the Den. Before we stepped into the booth, Corbin paused and adjusted the face of his watch again. The atmosphere surrounding us suddenly crackled with energy, a massive burst of power, and then it disappeared just as quickly. Like it'd been sucked into a vacuum, leaving nothing behind. The suddenness and ferocity of the reaction gave me a slight headache.

“What was that?” I asked, blinking. There wasn't a trace of his aura remaining. None of that now-familiar ozone lingering in the air. He just seemed like—like a normal human guy. A handsome guy, but a guy nonetheless. It was kind of unnerving.

“You thought you were the only one with tricks?” Corbin asked. “I don't want to draw any unnecessary attention down there. In and out.”

“That's always the goal,” I said. “Not always how it works out.”

“Seems to be the case with you a lot,” he said as we squished into the phone booth.

I gave that an eyeroll in response and nothing else. I picked up the phone, punched the buttons in the correct order, and the portal to the Den slid open.

Beneath the river that separated Warwick from York City proper, the Den was bustling as usual. The time of day didn't matter—being underground, the Den was always dark. The low stone buildings were lit with dim orange lights, and the cobblestone streets were crowded with activity. Trolls, sprites, vampires, and more all rubbed shoulders as they moved about the street and its narrow alleys, selling, buying, scheming, gossiping.

With Corbin's watch and my necklace on, we were masked enough that no one gave us a second glance as we made our way down the main strip. Mala's shop was tucked into a corner near one of the narrower alleys, and its warm yellow string lights in the window were, as always, a beacon of sanity amid the bizarre wares of the Den.

The bell above the door jingled merrily as I hurried inside, with Corbin on my heels. Mala glanced up from behind the counter; her smile fell off her face when she saw Corbin step over the threshold.

“Both of you came to pick it up?” she asked, one eyebrow quirked as she watched Corbin.

Corbin kept his hands clasped in front of his body, careful not to touch anything in the shop. Smart man. Mala was Seelie, like me, and there was a high chance that a lot of the things in this shop could do a lot of damage to him if he knocked them off the shelf wrong.

“He’s my bodyguard,” I quipped. “Just the hired help.”

“We’re working this case together,” Corbin corrected. “I’m interested to see how this piece of tech works. Since my skin is on the line here, too.”

Mala pressed her lips together into a thin line, but said nothing. She clearly wasn’t happy about me working with Corbin, but hell, who was? Mala knew intimately the dangers Corbin posed to me—and how dangerous it would be for me to go into the UnSeelie Realm. It’d be dangerous for any Seelie to cross into that Realm, but for a Solstice nymph, it’d be even riskier. Corbin wasn’t just a risk to me—he was basically a personification of all the crazy choices I’d made that led me to this point. But she knew there wasn’t any way to talk me out of it, so here we were.

“Well,” she said, “come this way and you can take a look.”

We followed her down the narrow hallway behind the counter, into one of the small back rooms—not her scrying room, but next to it. Exactly how many rooms were back here, I wasn’t sure. It seemed like there were however many rooms she needed. She invited us both into the room and pulled a small wooden box from a shelf. Inside, nestled in a bed thick red velvet, was a plain silver cuff. It looked similar to the one I usually wore: unmarked, not too shiny. Easy to ignore.

Its power was obvious from the moment my fingers hovered over it. It felt like a vacuum, like just being near it made it attempt to suck the power from my body. A hungry piece of technology. As uncomfortable as that felt, it had to be a good thing. It meant it might actually work at keeping me hidden in the UnSeelie Realm.

“Can I wear it with my usual jewelry?” I asked.

Mala nodded. “Should be fine. It’ll overpower your other pieces without much problem. Now go ahead, try it on and let me see if there are any adjustments I need to make. Or if it tries to kill you.”

“Is that something that could actually happen?” I asked. “Like, I’ll put this on and then implode like a dying star?”

“Dramatic,” Corbin muttered.

“No, it’d just make you feel like shit,” she said. “You’ll be able to tell.”

“That doesn’t exactly make me feel better,” I said.

“Go ahead, try it!” Mala wagged her hand at me. “I need to see how it works, too.”

I cringed, then carefully lifted the cuff from the velvet-lined box. It was hefty in my hand, heavier than it looked, and freezing cold to the touch. I

snapped it over my wrist.

The sensation was... Well, it wasn't good. My power was such an intrinsic part of me, it glowed in my core warm like sunlight even when it was dampened by my usual jewelry or Mala's necklace. But the cuff didn't just hide my power. It felt like all the power inside me had been packed down, pressed into the size of a marble, and then stuffed into the freezer. Cold, and absent. I grimaced.

"So?" Mala said. "How do you feel? Any pain?"

I rubbed my forearm, right above the cuff. "No pain," I said. "It just feels... Weird. Cold, in a way."

She nodded. "Good. That means it's working. We're not just masking your magic here—we're trying to lock it away, so it's like it doesn't exist. That's the only way to effectively hide it within Faerie." She looked to Corbin. "Can you sense anything?"

Corbin looked even more uncomfortable than I did. His face was pinched into an expression of mild disgust, his arms crossed over his chest. "You smell bad," he said curtly.

"Thanks," I said sarcastically. "That's what I'm really concerned about here."

"What I mean is," Corbin said, "you smell like a human. Like there's nothing Fae about you at all."

"Good," I said.

"Maybe too good," Corbin said. "We do have to have a reasonable explanation as to why you're able to cross into the Realm."

Right. Humans couldn't survive the portals. "I won't smell like a full human in Faerie. Probably."

"That's right," Mala said. "I expect there will be a suggestion of some of your power when you're in the Realm."

"We'll just say I'm like four generations down from a Seelie," I said to Corbin. "Maybe with some shifter blood thrown in there or something."

Corbin wrinkled his nose. "I would never take a shifter as a pet. Their blood tastes rancid."

"Excellent," I said. "That'll make it less likely for any of your colleagues to try to go for me."

"Isn't my reputation bad enough?" Corbin asked incredulously. "Now you want to tell people I drink from shifters?"

I popped the cuff off and placed it back in the box. Immediately, my

power rushed back through me, warm, comforting, and familiar. I sighed with relief and snapped the box closed, then pulled out an envelope of cash. “Thanks, Mala. Really.”

She tried to wave me off and refuse the envelope, but I just shook my head and pressed it into her hands. “This is my life we’re talking about here,” I said. “Let me pay you for your work.”

“Pay me when you come back alive,” she said, and handed it back. “Then we’ll know how good my work was.”

“You keep telling me things that really don’t fill me with confidence,” I said.

“Just managing expectations,” Mala said. “Keep an eye on that cuff in the Realm. Like I said, it won’t last forever.”

I left the envelope of cash on the counter of Mala’s shop as we made our way out. Who knew how long we’d spend in Faerie, what with the difference in time passing?

And how could I be sure I’d make it out at all?

I couldn’t be sure. But with Corbin behind me, one hand barely touching my upper back as we stepped out of the shop and back onto the street, I had the strange sense that we might actually pull this off.

“Need to grab anything else from down here before we cross over?” I asked. “Maybe a nice neck pillow for portal travel?”

“Keep your voice down,” Corbin muttered.

“Relax,” I said. “We’re both masked.”

That didn’t seem to do much to settle Corbin’s nerves. If anything, he stepped a little closer to me as we started making our way back to the entrance to Candy’s. His antsy energy started making *me* antsy, until we were both glancing around the street like a pair of two totally not suspicious Den residents. Despite how freaked Corbin was acting, I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary—well, ordinary for the Den, at least, I thought to myself as I watched a sprite struggle to climb out of the dumpster he’d been diving in—and I didn’t have that awful itchy feeling of being followed I’d had last time I was down here.

“Quit looking around like that,” Corbin said. “You’re drawing attention.”

“*You’re* drawing attention,” I said. “What are you even looking for?”

“This way.” Corbin took my upper arm and guided me down one of the side alleys. “Just want to get off the main street.”

“What for?” I asked. “You’re being weird and paranoid. We were fine.”

“I know, I know,” Corbin said. “It’s just--”

“Ah-ha,” a smoky, rough voice said from somewhere overhead. “I thought I smelled something Shax.”

“That,” Corbin said through gritted teeth.

“What do you mean?” I hissed. “Weren’t you masked?”

“It only masks the Fae,” Corbin hissed back.

“Well, that’s not useful at all!” I said.

“Sorry that I don’t have access to a crazy inventor like you do who can whip up whatever I need--”

“You could’ve asked--”

A powerful *whump* interrupted our productive conversation as the owner of the rough voice dropped from the rooftop of the nearest building and landed crouched in the alley. The man—or, more accurately, creature—lifted himself up to his full height. He towered a full head over Corbin, and he was shrouded in gooey darkness, winding around him like fog. His arms were long, like a monkey’s, with clawed fingers, and his tiny red eyes burned above his huge, sharp-toothed smile.

“You know this is Malthus demon territory,” Tiny-Eyes growled. “What clan are you with? Who has allowed you to cross into Malthus territory?”

“This isn’t Malthus territory,” Corbin said with a roll of his eyes. “This is a shopping center.”

“It has been claimed by Malthus demons!” Tiny-Eyes roared. Honestly, this seemed a lot like a petulant teenage reaction. I was about to say as much when two more demons dropped from the rooftops as if summoned. They looked like Tiny-Eyes, but smaller, as if he’d tried to clone himself like a bacteria but kind of fucked up the process. One was missing an arm, and the other had a strange, fuzzy green aura about him that smelled like rotting sewage.

“Aren’t we a little old to be getting caught up in territory disputes?” Corbin sighed. “Especially at a dump like this?”

“I will not take disrespect from a Shax!” Tiny-Eyes raised his clawed fists threateningly overhead.

“Great,” I muttered. “This is just what we needed.”

Tiny-Eyes lunged at Corbin, claws out and mouth gaping, dark saliva dripping from between his sharp teeth. Corbin caught his wrists easily in hand, avoiding a gutting, but the demon drove him backward until he was pinned with his back to the brick of the alley.

Well, there were two other demons who were hungry for a fight, too, so I'd have to trust Corbin was able to handle Tiny-Eyes himself. One-Arm and Greenie both turned on me with interest—even if they didn't know what I was, I knew my aura was enticing, like a pie cooling on a windowsill. I wasn't about to use my power and make it worse, though. Plus, this was a pretty good opportunity to test my theory on some of my new weaponry.

"You know," I said as I took a step back, "this was built with Fae in mind, but I wonder if you guys would like it, too."

I pulled my gun from its holster at my side. The weight was hefty in my hand, but it felt good, easy to lift, easy to maneuver—and easy to take a single shot right at One-Arm's head. I didn't expect it'd do much damage to a demon, but it might slow them down, and that might be enough to tame these two while Corbin handled the boss.

The enchantment on the gun muffled the gunshot from a jarring whipcrack of a noise to a more muffled sound, like a bag of flour being dropped. Hopefully it wouldn't draw too much attention. The bullet buried itself right in the center of One-Arm's forehead, and I expected him to keep lurching forward hungrily toward me, but to my surprise he went straight down. Dead weight onto the pavement, which rapidly began to dissolve into ash.

"Well, how about that," I said. "Guess Fae guns work on anyone if you aim for the head. --Agh!"

Greenie, pissed off by the death of his companion, I assumed, launched himself at me like an angry cat. I went down hard, back to the pavement, the wind knocked out of me. My gun went skittering across the pavement. I gasped for breath, grimacing as Greenie's awful-smelling sewage aura pervaded my senses.

"Jeez," I muttered. "You need a shower." I drove my knee up, hard, right into his balls—did demons have balls? Apparently they did, because he roared in pain and reared back.

I tried to squirm backward to get out from under him, but he had me pinned with one clawed hand pressed painfully hard right on my sternum, forcing the breath from my lungs. His aura was dense, heavy, dripping on me like the sewage it smelled like, which made breathing even harder. So fucking gross. I cringed and went to knee him again, but his weight pinned me down. His red eyes narrowed as he leaned closer and gripped my hair with his other hand. His claws dragged over my scalp and he pulled hard. I

yelped in pain as he wrenched my head up a little bit.

“Now that’s just disrespectful,” I muttered. I wriggled my arm down, struggling under his weight. If I could just get the knife in my boot... Hopefully, before he decided to detach my head from my neck. “At least buy me dinner first.”

“Stupid human,” the demon said, slow and slurred like words did not come easily to him. Maybe being subjected to his own aura had rotted his brain. Or the aura was the smell of brain rot. His claws pressed harder into my sternum, almost enough to break the skin.

My fingers were about two inches from my boot. Just needed to stall a little more, just so I could grab it and open up his throat.

“Aw, come on,” I said. “Am I not your type?”

The hand in my hair released so suddenly I nearly concussed myself on the pavement. I snatched the knife from my boot and was just about to drag it across his throat, but there was no need.

Corbin had Greenie’s head held in his hands—his hands which had transformed. His fingers were longer, and clawed, like the claws that had been pressed into my sternum a moment before. He wasn’t teasing, though. He dug his claws into the demon’s flesh, and Greenie roared in pain as thick, sickly-green blood oozed from the wounds. He thrashed in Corbin’s hold, but Corbin held him like it was no effort at all. His Shax side was fully out, rippling with power, a dark shade surrounding his body like flames, making him looking bigger, stronger, hungrier.

He squeezed Greenie’s head tighter. Greenie howled in pain.

The howl cut off as Corbin snapped his neck. One quick, easy motion, a sharp twist of his hands and the stomach-turning crack of the bone breaking.

Corbin dropped the demon into a lifeless heap, toward the center of the alley, where Tiny-Eyes was also neatly dispatched and melting into the asphalt. Corbin was standing just a pace away from me, his breath heaving, shoulders square, his eyes glowing red so deeply the color seemed to melt into his sclerae as well. His demon reared up around him, a flickering opalescent shape dark like the night sky and shot through with rich purples, like flames, like a creature climbing out of his own body. It seemed to shift and move with each of his heaving breaths.

I scooted backward and tightened my grip on my knife. Corbin’s gaze dropped to the knife, and he bared his sharp teeth like a threat, angled to lunge forward.

“Whoa,” I said as I tucked the knife into my boot. “Just putting it away. Relax.”

He gnashed his teeth, then cast his eyes around the alley like he was still looking for someone—or something—to attack. Like the Malthus demons had been too easy for him.

Carefully, slowly, I hauled myself up to my feet. I walked toward Corbin with my palms facing him, arms by my sides, like I was approaching a spooked animal. Corbin was still gnashing his teeth, red eyes focused intensely on me like he was unsure what the hell I was doing. Honestly, I was unsure about it, too. If Corbin had ever wanted to tear my throat out with his teeth, it was most likely to happen when he was fully demoned-out like this.

But we had shit to do. And I was pretty sure he wasn’t going to tear my throat out.

Pretty sure.

“Good work, Corbin,” I said gently. “Now let’s get the beast under control, shall we?”

He hissed at me. I clucked in response. This really was like dealing with a big angry cat. All right, well, if I was going to do something stupid with demon Corbin, might as well get it over with.

“Relax,” I said. “Fighting’s done. And we gotta go.”

I reached out and against all the good judgment I had, which was admittedly not very much, cradled his jaw gently in my palm. The inky darkness of his Shax side licked at my skin, strangely cool to the touch, not fiery like I’d somewhat expected. He didn’t shake off my touch or try to attack me. His deep red gaze lingered on me almost curiously. He exhaled roughly, through his mouth, almost uncomfortably like there were too many sharp teeth in his mouth.

“Right,” Corbin said, in a low, rumbling voice. “Gotta go.”

I nodded, gently tracing my fingertips in small circles on his skin, still smooth to the touch beneath the darkness.

He exhaled again. He blinked a few times. Then, the red swirled in his eyes and disappeared, like water circling a drain, leaving the familiar amber in its wake. The inky darkness sloughed off him like water as well; it slid over my hand and off his body, onto the ground like a shed skin, and then melted in. Disappeared.

“Thanks,” he murmured. His eyes shifted to that familiar icy blue again.

“Sure,” I said.



He smiled.

Only then did I notice my hand was still on his face. I pulled away like I'd been burned and stuffed my hands in my pockets.

"Good," I said. "All right. Awesome. Didn't get mauled by a demon. I'll mark that as a win."

"Pretty low bar for a win," Corbin said.

"That's the kind of life I lead," I said. I smoothed my hands over my hair and grimaced. There wasn't any physical residue in my hair, but it still seemed like I should feel that gross oozy aura on my fingers. I needed a shower. "We should go."

Corbin cleared his throat. "Most people wouldn't approach a demon like you just did."

"In what world am I like most people?" I said. We hurried down the alley and into a side street, leaving the demon bodies to melt away in the alley—hopefully they'd be gone before any supernatural police passing by got a whiff of interest. "Plus, you're not full demon, so it's fine."

"When I'm like that, I'm pretty close."

I couldn't argue with that. I'd seen his Shax side come out enough times now to know it wasn't anything to be fucked with—and it wasn't nearly as dormant as he led people to believe.

So why hadn't it scared me?

Even when he'd looked at me with his eyes glowing red, I hadn't felt like I was in any real danger. It was still Corbin. Corbin-but-not. It was like—and this thought sent a confused little thrill of desire down my spine—it was like his Shax demon liked me. Wanted to *protect* me.

That was a good thing, logistically.

But what it meant emotionally... Well, I couldn't think about that. Not now, when we had bigger, more important things at hand. Hopefully in Faerie I wouldn't be expected to demon-whisper. And maybe we could forget this little incident ever happened.

**W**e made our plans to go to Faerie under cover of darkness. We had no way of knowing what time of day it'd be when we crossed over into the Realm, but being shrouded in darkness, at least Earthside, did make me feel better. A little bit. The fewer people that saw us near that portal, wherever it was, the better. In my bedroom, I straightened up and swept my hands down the front of my body, checking my reflection like that might make me feel more prepared for this insane endeavor. At Corbin's guidance I'd dressed plainly: dark jeans, boots, long-sleeved shirt, my hair tied back in a bun. The only remarkable thing about my appearance was my jewelry. I was wearing my regular jewelry, rings on my fingers and the bracelet around my wrist, as well as my new cuff from Mala.

The feeling of having my power packed so deeply away still wasn't pleasant, but I needed to get used to it. It wasn't unbearable, either. It was just ... Gross. Slightly uncomfortable. And a lot better than getting slaughtered by UnSeelie the moment I crossed into the Realm. I could only hope the cuff would hold up long enough for me to be able to examine the bodies of Ralnor's victims.

That was the main point of this excursion, and I had to keep it at the forefront of my mind. This wasn't about my own curiosity about Faerie—this wasn't about me wanting to know what would happen to my powers once I was in the Realm. This wasn't about me being unable to stop turning over that stupid gator metaphor in my mind, over and over. This was about the case—about Ralnor destroying lives without consequence Earthside. About him targeting people like Vee. People who already didn't fit in. He had to be

stopped, and if the police weren't going to do it, I was.

Getting my hands on the bodies was the most promising way to get an idea of what, exactly, Ralnor was trying to do with whatever ritual he was crafting. If I had a motive—and maybe a magical signature—I'd have a better shot of finding him. I'd be able to suss out what he was most likely going to do next.

Priority one: Stay alive. Two: Examine the bodies. Three: Maybe, if I was extremely lucky and extremely careful, gain a slightly better understanding of my own powers. Start to sate my ravenous curiosity. But I couldn't let that creep up the priority list, no matter how much the questions itched at my brain.

I packed the necessities in my backpack, including my gun and my knife, and then swung it onto my shoulder. "All right, Oscar. Hold the fort down, okay?"

From where he was curled on the bed, Oscar chirped at me, tail flicking disinterestedly.

"And please don't let Bob steal you," I said. "Not permanently, at least."

He chirped again and closed his eyes. I took that as affirmation.

I had all my stuff. The apartment was adequately warded. Bob was taking care of Oscar.

There was nothing left to do but go.

I was trapped between the anticipatory thrill of traveling to Faerie, and the very real consideration that I may not make it back. That this might be the last time I got a good look at my apartment, and my cat. So I set it deep within my memory. The kitchen island, the beat-up couch, the tiny television, the mussed sheets on the bed with Oscar purring away right in the center. I packaged the image carefully away so, should I end up locked up as some UnSeelie royal's blood whore, at least I'd have this memory to sustain me.

"Well, wish me luck," I said. But Oscar was already asleep.

I hurried out of my apartment, locking up and leaving the key for Bob. (Priority two-point-five: obtain Fae cigars.) Corbin's familiar black sports car was already idling in the parking lot, headlights off as he waited for me. As soon as I climbed in the car, though, he glanced at me with his teeth bared in a grimace. His eyes briefly flashed red, then back to their familiar icy blue as his gaze tracked over me.

"Jeez," I said as I bucked my seatbelt. "Not exactly a warm welcome today, huh?"

Corbin swallowed hard and tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “Sorry.”

That was not the reaction I expected. I thought he’d have some snarky comment to throw back at me—the lack of teasing somehow made me even more nervous.

“What is it?” I asked. “Something wrong? Any new horrible surprises I need to know about before we risk our lives going into Faerie?”

“No, it’s not that,” Corbin said. He turned the car on and started to drive, eyes narrowed at the road and carefully avoiding looking at me at all. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s obviously not nothing,” I said. “I’m about to put my life in your hands here. What’s up?”

He cringed. “It’s not anything risky. It’s just...” He sighed as we approached the intersection outside of my apartment. Idling at the red light, he glanced at me askance, hands still on the wheel. “I wasn’t expecting you to be wearing it.”

“Wearing what?” I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew the answer.

“The cuff,” he said. “I—I don’t like it.”

“...Okay?” I said. “What about it? You think it’s ugly?” I lifted my wrist up and dragged my forefinger over the cuff curiously. I didn’t like it either, but it was a necessity. “At least you’re not the one who has to wear it. It feels a lot worse than it looks.”

“It’s the Shax in me,” Corbin said through gritted teeth.

“What about it?” I asked.

“It—well—I’m—”

Never in my life had I seen him so uncomfortable. It was genuinely shocking. I watched him curiously, like I was watching a monkey try to use a typewriter or something.

He exhaled hard. “I don’t like it when I can’t sense your power,” he admitted.

I blinked. I was shocked nearly to silence for the second time in five minutes. “You what?”

He turned and faced me, expression steely and serious. “I didn’t realize it until you first tested the cuff,” he said. “But there’s something about your power that calms the Shax part of me down, in a way. Soothes it.”

“I’m not following,” I said. There was no way that was true. It was too weird. It was too... Intimate. It made my stomach tighten and somersault.

“I’m not sure what it is,” he said. “But it’s like the demon thinks something is wrong, when it can’t feel you. Like something is missing. I know it’s irrational, but the demon’s not rational. And it wants to have your power close.”

“Like, to eat me?” I asked.

“No,” Corbin said. “Just close.”

Our eyes met. My lips parted around an inhale—but I had nothing to say. Any response I had to this insight melted away at the complex, unnamable emotion swirling in his eyes, flecks of gold and red blending and dancing against the icy-blue background like fireworks. It was one thing for his UnSeelie nature to be attuned to my nymph’s power. That was to be expected. But his Shax side, too? And his Shax side liked it? Wanted me close—but not in to consume me?

In a protective way?

I swallowed around the sudden tightness in my throat. Corbin’s gaze tracked the motion, his eyes lingering on my lips. He dropped one hand from the steering wheel, still facing me, and leaned closer, seemingly unconsciously, like a moth drawn to a flame.

A horn blared behind us, shattering the fragile silence between us. I jumped so intensely I nearly hit the low roof of his tiny sports car. Corbin whipped around to face forward, white-knuckling the steering wheel as he hit the accelerator, revving the engine unnecessarily hard to get through the green light, which had, according to the car behind us, been green for a little too long. My face heated as my heart pounded fast in my chest.

I cleared my throat. “Well,” I said, not awkwardly at all, “at least we know the cuff works well, if it’s fooling your demon.”

“Right,” he said.

“This won’t cause any problems, will it?” I asked. “Like, with your demon? When we’re in the Realm?”

“No,” Corbin said. “I have more control on that side. I think.”

“Great,” I said with a resigned exhale. “I guess, now that I think about it...” I hooked the small clasp on the cuff and removed it. Immediately, I slumped down in the passenger seat as my power rushed through me, warm and familiar.

Something shifted in Corbin, too. The atmosphere in the car lightened, and he settled back in the driver’s seat, the tension in his shoulders visibly dissipating. His aura crackled, heightened briefly, and then settled.

“I see,” I said.

Corbin said nothing.

“I probably shouldn’t wear it in the portal,” I said. “In case it works a little too well. I don’t want to get crushed in there.”

“Right,” Corbin said. “That would kind of defeat the purpose of this entire endeavor.”

“Right,” I agreed.

A strange tension hovered between us, like on the surface it was awkward, but Corbin’s previously antsy-irritated demon was now settled. I stared out the window instead of thinking about that too closely. Only then did I realize I had no idea where the fuck Corbin was going.

“Hey,” I said, “so where the fuck are we going?”

“You don’t know where the portal to Faerie is?” he asked, shooting me a look.

“No, I try to stay out of Faerie business as much as I can, remember?” I said.

“Well, you’re doing a great job of that,” he said with a smirk.

The banter made me feel almost normal again. I rolled my eyes. “If it’s in Candy’s Good Time Bar, I’m going to throw a fit.”

He laughed. “No, it’s not in a bar. It’s behind one.”

“Of course it is.”

He drove down to the bar district, past Candy’s, following the river to the south end of the district where it melted into more warehouses than bars. He pulled into one of the more decrepit-looking warehouses, which surprised me, as it looked like the ceiling might collapse onto his fancy sports car at any moment. The inside of the warehouse was in slightly better shape, though, and to my surprise, a narrow ramp went from the entrance to a basement level. He followed it down.

“You’re shitting me,” I said. “This is not a Faerie parking garage.”

“Well, we’ve got to get around somehow,” Corbin said. He pulled his car in between a few other sleek, dark sedans. “And it’s not like we’re walking around this part of town.”

“Who’s we?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it.” He unlocked the car. “You ready for this?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

I hung back as Corbin approached the back wall of the warehouse. There wasn’t anything on the wall, just smooth, stained concrete, and puddles of

stagnant water collected on the concrete at our feet. Anxiety wound through me like vines, starting in my chest and winding through my body, making me tense and tight all over. I hiked my back a little higher on my shoulder, then double- and triple-checked that my cuff was safely in my pocket.

Corbin flattened his hand in the center of the wall. At first, nothing happened. I was about to say something snarky, mostly to ease my own nerves, when suddenly the floor beneath my feet began to rumble. As if there was something huge and bestial coming up from the core of the earth.

Corbin must've sensed my nerves. "That's normal," he said, and his voice was low and rough. He didn't turn to face me, but the dark opalescent fog-flame of his Shax side licked around his body, barely there tendrils.

"If you say so," I muttered.

Then, darkness spiraled out from his palm, though it didn't seem to be coming from his body. He was accessing the power that was already here, hidden in plain sight from prying eyes. The portal swirled as it grew, eating up the concrete as it revealed itself. It crackled and hissed with power, and looked dense, terrifying, like staring into the dark surface of a hungry lake. I'd used portals before—hell, I was sucked into a Hell pocket dimension that one time—but this was a lot more intimidating. Something about this portal felt a little more serious. Like it really could eat me alive if I wasn't ready for it.

Yet despite the nerves, anticipation still invigorated me.

If I made it through this portal, Faerie was on the other side. The place I'd never imagined I'd be able to see with my own eyes. I thought I'd die never knowing how my power might react to being there. It was, in a way, my home. Even if I couldn't truly be myself when I was there.

"Got the cuff?" he asked.

I nodded.

"All right." He stepped toward me and took my hand, intertwining our fingers.

"I'm fine," I huffed, but I didn't pull away.

"I know you are," he said with a small, knowing smile. "I don't want to get separated when we go through. I've never brought someone across who's never used the portal before."

"Separated?" I asked, eyes widening. "What do you mean separated? Like lost in the portal? Floating in the in-between space?"

"Yeah, doomed to exist in the nothingness for all eternity," he said curtly.

“What?!”

“I’m kidding,” Corbin said with a shake of his head. “You’d get spat out somewhere. I’d just rather not deal with having to track you down.”

“If I end up lost in the nothingness for all eternity, I’m going to be really upset with you,” I muttered.

I grasped his hand a little tighter—though I’d never admit that—and let him guide me into the swirling portal.

Darkness surrounded me, heavy and almost tangible against my skin. It closed up immediately, erasing any trace of the warehouse we’d walked into, swallowing the last remaining traces of Earthside light. Then, the weight of the darkness seemed to drop away, like I’d gone from being underwater to suddenly being in a great expanse of nothingness. Void.

I couldn’t see Corbin at all, I could only feel his hand on mine as I clung desperately, trying to steady my breathing as terror crawled from my chest to my throat. I couldn’t sense anything around me—I couldn’t move, like I was suspended in anti-gravity. But within the void, I felt a sense of being watched, like the true nature of the portal was being somehow hidden from me, like there were things I couldn’t see behind the cold empty darkness.

It was unnerving. I’d never felt so helpless. All I could do was focus my attention on Corbin’s grip and hope he didn’t let go.

Then, just when I was starting to fear I *would* be trapped in this terrible empty void forever, my gut lurched, like something had grabbed me from the insides and pulled down. Gravity flooded in, and suddenly I was falling through the emptiness, but it was so sudden and shocking I couldn’t even suck in a breath to scream. The darkness opened up beneath me, into a sudden blinding pool of light, forcing me to squeeze my eyes shut against the abrupt onslaught.

I fell straight through it and landed hard on a (lucky for me) softish surface.

First: I noticed the soft grass under my hands.

Second: the air so crisp and clean in my lungs, it was almost overwhelming, like pure oxygen rushing through me to sweep away the dregs of the unnerving darkness.

Third: dizziness.

Nausea turned my stomach, and I promptly lost my balance, tipping forward until my face was pressed to the grass. The *purple* grass, I noted distantly. The world seemed to spin around me as I lay there, trying to gather



my bearings, and praying that my dinner didn't come up to say hello in the meantime.

"First jump is the worst," Corbin said.

"Ugh." I slowly raised myself up to my knees as the nausea receded. "Thanks for the warning."

I tipped my face up toward the sky, closing my eyes as the sunlight washed over me, warm and sweet like a touch. I felt like a flower, turning toward it unconsciously. My eyes flickered open, and for the first time, I drank in the ethereal landscape of Faerie.

I was in a field. It was vast and open, filled with swaying pale purple grass nearly up to my waist where I knelt on my knees, dotted with bright flowers. The field was bordered by a forest, and ahead on the horizon were the square shapes of small buildings. Everything felt heightened. It was like the way I felt when I walked through the forest, like the forest was happy to see me and gleefully sharing its power with me, but magnified a hundredfold. The colors were brighter. The air was so clean and crisp. The sunlight warmer. Even the soft earth seemed to hum with power beneath me, like a welcome.

An ethereal shimmer permeated the air, and the sun shone around the immense, fluffy pale pink clouds. On the horizon, gleaming dark spires of a place rose toward the sky, reflecting the gorgeous landscape and making it seem both there and not simultaneously. It was so beautiful, and so overwhelming, I could hardly absorb it all at once.

I looked down at my hands. Faintly my skin glowed. The same power I felt in the earth was glowing inside me.

I gasped as suddenly something inside me awoke.

Power flooded me, from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes. It sang in my veins, coiled around my nerves, strength and delight enriching all of my senses. It was as if I'd been moving through the world half-asleep, and suddenly I was awake, and alive, and charging ahead after three espressos and a slap to the face.

It felt good. It felt incredible. I could do anything. I felt like I wasn't even siphoning power from the Realm, it was just flowing into me, filling me, like it'd been waiting for me to arrive. Like I was meant to be here all along. Suddenly I wanted to see Corbin, wanted to see if he saw any change in me, if he *felt* it, and then--

There he was standing in front of me. Now his aura was even more

intense on my senses, more layered: the familiar ozone, but new things, too, salt and smoke, shifting the way his Shax side did when it appeared. His eyes were fully amber, no hint of blue in sight. He leaned down, fitted his arm around my waist, and tugged me to my feet. I was still dizzy, and I couldn't help but cling to him, overwhelmed by the intensity of—of *everything*. The Realm. Him.

“Tempie,” he said, low, and his hand grasped my waist tightly. This close I could see the barest hint of red flecks in his eyes.

Then he kissed me. Sudden and hard, like it was animal instinct more than anything else. I gasped in surprise, which only deepened the kiss, so much that I could brush my tongue over the sharpened suggestion of his UnSeelie fangs. Which only made the power inside me burn more. Power—and desire.

I was so distracted by the kiss that I didn't even feel his hand slide into my pocket. I didn't notice he'd pulled the cuff out at all, not until he placed it on my wrist and snapped it closed.

The cool vacuum of the cuff's magic immediately activated. The rush of my Seelie power coursed through me again, but this time it was like it was being pulled into a whirlpool. I pushed Corbin away and staggered to my feet. I turned my back to him in a desperate attempt to get my bearings. My brain felt like it'd gone through a brutal spin cycle: first the portal, then the power—the kiss I wasn't going to think about—and now the sensation of my power whooshed into the tiny burning marble in the center of my chest, still present to me but hopefully unnoticeable to the UnSeelie I'd be interacting with.

I took a few deep, steadying breaths. The landscape was still gorgeous. The tall purple grass was soft as feathers brushing against me, and the air was crisp and refreshing contrasted by the warm sunlight. Everything smelled fresh, clean, welcoming.

But it wasn't anything like it'd been before I'd put the cuff on. I couldn't help the sour swoop of disappointment. It really was like I was a gator sinking into water for the first time, only to be wrenched back onto land where my short little legs were functional, but not nearly as effective. A taste was good, but I wanted the whole experience. I wanted to see what I could do if I really let my power run wild. I wanted it so badly my fingers itched to wrench the cuff off and snap it.

“Hey.” Corbin touched my shoulder. “You all right?”

I pushed that crazy desire aside. That wasn't why we were here. It'd get me killed! I was here to solve this case—to put an end to whatever ritual Ralnor was attempting, and to ensure he didn't upend any more lives. I wasn't going to let some murderous Fae asshole lurk around *my* city. My own issues—my curiosity, my feelings of not fitting in, that itchy sense of *not enough* that'd been growing since the Wheels case—had to wait.

Examine the bodies and get the fuck out.

I nodded, steeled myself, and turned around.

Corbin looked normal again—well, as normal as a Fae could look within the Realm. His blue eyes were flecked amber, and he seemed to glow, in a way, like he'd just gotten back from an extensively luxurious tropical vacation. His aura was still rich on my senses, but not nearly as intricate as it had been moments before.

“Yeah,” I said. “Just peachy. Never better.”

“You sure?” he asked, gaze skimming over me like he was checking for wounds.

“Definitely,” I said. “Cuff's working. As far as I can tell. Can you sense anything?”

He shook his head. “Barely anything. We'll have to say the crossover nearly killed you with that limited amount of Fae blood.”

“Well, that's not really a lie.” I was grateful he wasn't bringing up the kiss at all. Maybe he'd had the same reaction I had—animal instinct. Drawn into the kiss by the forces of the Realm, not our own volition. So it was fine and meant nothing and could be ignored. Moving on! “Is that where we're headed?” I gestured toward the town on the horizon.

“Yep,” he said. “We'll pick up some supplies, make sure no one seems to notice you, and then head to the castle.”

“The castle,” I said. “Awesome.”

“That's where all the fun happens,” Corbin said. “And where the bodies will be stored. The queen likes to keep her cards close to her chest.”

A small cold twist of fear curled in my chest. The queen. Of course I'd heard about the UnSeelie Queen, from skips and from sources at Candy's, but she'd always seemed like a ghoulish thing from my nightmares. Something I'd never have to worry about encountering in my daily life, since the queen would never deign to cross Earthside. If anyone in the Realm was going to be able to sense what I was, it was her. Or at least that's what I figured. I cringed.

“Of course she does,” I said. “I’ll let you handle her, thanks.”

“Come on,” Corbin said. He nodded in the direction of the town, and suddenly just a few paces away, the grass parted subtly of its own volition, revealing a narrow path. “Let’s go.”

How handy. I followed him down the hillside toward the town. It was a longish walk, but just being in the Realm even with my power subdued filled me with energy. I very nearly had a skip in my step as I followed Corbin. As we approached the town, Corbin slowed so we were walking shoulder to shoulder. The town was barely a town—more like a village—with hard-packed dirt roads and small stone and wood buildings. Despite the simplicity of the construction, there was something rich about the village. Like all the creatures that called this place home liked it exactly the way it was, and had invested time into keeping it that way. Everything was clean, well-maintained, and elegantly designed. But simple. So unlike the tall, ugly, dilapidated buildings that made up Warwick.

“All right,” Corbin said, low. “Stay close. Still locked down?”

“Yep,” I nodded. “If the cuff starts to weaken, I’ll know. Don’t worry.”

“I’m already worrying,” Corbin muttered.

We made our way into the town. The main street wasn’t crowded, but it wasn’t empty, either. It was mostly UnSeelie going about their daily business: laughing in taverns, haggling with vendors, carrying baskets of meat and vegetables. I was used to seeing UnSeelie in humanoid forms Earthside, and here, most were still humanoid. Ish. Generally, Fae liked to fly under the radar when Earthside.

Here, though, some with more obviously UnSeelie traits were letting it all hang out. Like the woman with immense translucent batlike wings folded against her narrow back. Or the man with arms so long and claws so big they nearly dragged the ground when they walked. And there were other creatures, not Fae, that were hanging around the Realm. Werewolves who were locked into their shifted form, for one. And a few sprites, though that wasn’t surprising—here they moved quicker, however, and with more confidence than they did Earthside.

A few UnSeelie glanced toward us as we walked down the main strip, but their gazes were mostly focused on Corbin, and they slid over me like I was about as interesting as one of the odd stray bat-cat things that crept around the alleys. Which was apparently, to them, not very interesting. Irritating, if anything. Still, I resisted the urge to step closer to Corbin as my nerves went

icy cold.

“This way.” Corbin set his hand at my lower back and guided me down a side street. It was easy—too easy—to follow his lead. Dangerously easy to let his gentle touch settle my nerves. I needed to rely on him to keep me safe while we were in the Realm, but I better not get used to it.

This was a job. A crazy job, but a job nonetheless. And I needed to be prepared to defend myself if push came to shove, even if that meant leaving Corbin to the wolves—be that the UnSeelie Court, or something worse.

Something like what had happened to Tucker.

Hybrids like me didn’t get things like partners and relationships. Corbin knew that just as well as I did, and if anything, I had a feeling this little jaunt to the Realm would only remind him of that reality. The kiss in the field had been a fluke. Of course, an UnSeelie would’ve been drawn to the release of my power. If it was anyone but Corbin, he probably would’ve drained me on the spot. I stepped away from his hand, but Corbin didn’t seem to notice.

“Here we are,” he said, and led me through a narrow doorway into what appeared to be a barn. In the corner, there was a small shop set up, with a desk and shelves of various goods, though no one was manning the desk. Other than that, the walls were lined with riding gear, and the rest of the barn was filled with stalls of whinnying horses. A lot of horses. Big ones. I was briefly grateful that my power was locked up, because the thick animal smell was bad enough without my senses being heightened.

“Hey,” Corbin called. “Isidra! Are you here?”

“Ah!” a high voice called from within barn. “Oh, I didn’t hear you come in!” A tiny woman rushed out of the barn. Only her sharp teeth and her birdlike clawed hands marked her as UnSeelie—other than that, she was unassuming, in a heavy canvas apron with hay stuck in her dark hair. She looked like a teenager, but for an UnSeelie, that didn’t mean a damn thing. Likely she was at least four times as old as I was. “Corbin! I didn’t know you were back in town.”

“Just passing through,” he said. “Came to pick up some horses.”

“Two?” she said. Her red gaze shifted over me with mild interest. “You won’t be sharing one?”

“No, the pet can ride,” he said dismissively. “You know I dislike riding enough as it is.”

“Right, right,” Isidra said. “You always were careless with your money. This way.”

Corbin grimaced, and I knew he was holding back some scathing remark. But we both knew it was best to avoid any kind of conflict we could. Isidra led us back into the barn. As I passed, the horses' ears twitched. Some whinnied, some pawed their hooves at the floors of their stalls.

"My beasts never did like you, Corbin," Isidra said. "Glad to see that hasn't changed."

"I don't need them to like me," Corbin said curtly.

But the horses' attention was on me. I kept quiet and stuck close behind Corbin as we walked.

"Two mares for you, then," Isidra said. "They'll cause you the least amount of trouble." She led us to the very back of the barn, where two black horses waited. They didn't look at me with quite as much disgust as the others had, but still their ears flicked irritably and their nostrils flared as we approached. "Hannie and Tannie. They do better as a pair, so that should make them more manageable, too. Here, let me get them tacked up for you."

"Not necessary," Corbin said. "I'll do it myself."

Isidra looked slightly taken aback but nodded. "Everything you need is right here outside the stall."

Corbin nodded. He pulled a small pouch from his pocket and handed Isidra a few coins. She widened her eyes at the amount. "Should I inform the court you're on your way?"

"Please don't." He shot her a charming smile. "I'd prefer it be a surprise. Shake things up a little around there."

Isidra didn't look like she believed that at all, but the weight of the coins in her hand was enough to keep her quiet. She nodded. "Well, I'll be up front of they give you any trouble."

"I'm sure they won't," Corbin said primly. Isidra shook her head and strode away.

I kept a little way back from the horses, but even from a distance, their beady black eyes seemed to be drilling through me. One pawed at the ground and tossed its head. For a moment, I thought it might charge me.

"Gotta say," I muttered, "these guys don't seem to like me all that much."

"These *ladies*," Corbin corrected. "Mares."

"Let's not get into the nitty-gritty of it."

"Come on," he said. "You can help me."

"If Oscar smells horses on me when I get back, he's never going to forgive me," I said.

“You should know how to do this much,” Corbin said. “If we want people to believe you’re here as my pet.”

“My good looks aren’t enough?” At Corbin’s instruction, I scooped some feed into a bucket in the stall. Hannie approached me tentatively, but the feed was enough for her to overcome her fear as she began to focus her attention on the bucket instead of me.

“Potentially,” Corbin said, “but it doesn’t make sense for me to bring you *with* me if you were just a plaything Earthside. Having a pet that can also assist makes more sense.”

“Great,” I said. “So now I get to be a toy *and* do chores.”

“If you can take care of a cat,” Corbin said, “you can take care of a horse. Here.”

I took the offered brush. “Honestly, I don’t think that’s true at all.”

We worked side by side, brushing down the horses methodically. I followed Corbin’s lead on how to do it, but as we worked, I fell into an easy, almost familiar rhythm. Hannie relaxed as I worked, her tail swishing idly as she ate. Corbin kept giving me instructions, but I found I didn’t really need them—each step felt instinctive, like I already knew how to do it, and was remembering instead of learning. Soon both Hannie and Tannie were saddled and bridled, and Hannie even let me run my hand down the side of her neck with no more than an idle flick of one ear.

“Well,” Corbin said. “She seems like she’s taken to you.”

“I have that effect on people. And animals, apparently,” I deflected.

We led the horses out of the back doors of the barn. “Think you can pick up riding just as quickly?” Corbin asked. He mounted Tannie gracefully, so smoothly it was like he was briefly weightless.

“I think I’ll be fine,” I muttered. “How different can it be from riding a motorcycle?”

I hooked one foot into the stirrup and managed to crawl my way with substantially less grace into Hannie’s saddle. To her credit, though, she waited patiently as I managed to get both legs over her strong back, settling into the leather of the saddle. Then she nickered, pawing at the dirt behind the barn like she was raring to run.

Corbin looked mildly impressed. “You don’t look nearly as out-of-place as I feared.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said. The strange thing was, though, I did feel shockingly comfortable with Hannie’s strong bestial body

beneath mine. Like we were part of the same creature, intrinsically connected. It wasn't dissimilar to the way I'd first felt when I'd dropped into the Realm. Some long-dormant part of myself was waking up. "Lead the way."

We took the horses down the narrow street behind the barn, then out of the small town and back into the vast plains of soft purple grass dotted with ancient trees. I rode Hannie with ease, correcting her pace with the smallest tugs to the bridle or heel-nudge into her flank. As Corbin and I rode side by side, I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like if we were able to stay in Faerie. Not as hybrids trying to stay out of sight, but as Fae, living openly as the people we were. What other skills did I have that I didn't know about? What would I learn about myself if I was allowed to use my power as it was meant to be, instead of having to keep it deeply concealed for my own safety?

Who would I be if I was just another Seelie, instead of the last Solstice nymph?



**W**e rode through the feathery lavender grass for a few hours, but the ride was easy. Pleasant. Different than zooming through York City on my bike, but Hannie’s rhythmic pace and the warmth of her body settled something in my mind and my nerves. The sun moved toward the horizon, revealing the pale twin moons rising side by side against the rosy sky, each peeking out from behind the dense, pale pink clouds—so gorgeous they almost seemed delectable. I wanted to sink my teeth into those clouds, or fall asleep in them. The Realm was really like something from a dream. I was beginning to understand why humans were willing to risk their lives to try to get through the portal.

We crested a hill, and the castle was finally in view.

“Holy shit,” I said. “That’s where we’re going?”

“What?” Corbin asked, throwing me a glance over his shoulder. “A little nicer than you expected?”

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this. The castle wasn’t enormous, but it was intimidatingly beautiful, due to the fact that it was fully built of dark obsidian glass, rich and reflective like a jewel. The sharp turrets rose like teeth snapping at the clouds. The gleaming castle caught the light of the twin moons, reflecting the faint glow down onto the grass surrounding it.

“I wasn’t expecting all the guns,” I admitted. Guards were stationed outside the castle—a lot of guards. Too many. What exactly was the court guarding against? Each guard was dressed in fine dark armor, shiny and scale-like, and each had a scabbard on their side and a long gun strapped to their back. My blood ran cold at the sight. If my little enchanted gun could

take down a demon with one bullet, who knew what those big-ass weapons could do.

“It’s just for show,” Corbin said, but I wasn’t convinced. Even if it was just for show, those looked like some guys that could really fuck us up if they had to. “We’re going around the back, anyway.”

“Should that make me feel better or worse?” I asked.

Corbin knocked his heels into Tannie’s flanks and rode down the hill. I clicked my tongue at Hannie and she followed at a brisk pace. We followed a narrow path into the woods themselves that grew along the edge of the valley.

“Sneaky,” I said as we guided the horses through the tall, ancient tree trunks.

“I wasn’t lying to Isidra,” Corbin said curtly. “I do want it to be a surprise. The queen doesn’t like to see the servants traipsing around the grounds if she can avoid it, hence this path.”

“She seems like a piece of work.”

“You have no idea.”

The marble of power resting in my chest seemed to ricochet around, desperate to escape. It was no match for the cuff—at least, not yet—but still the power of the Faerie forest called to me. Forests Earthside were intoxicating enough. What would it be like to be at full power in *this* forest? With how old it was, and how crisp and vibrant with energy, just the thought made me ache with the craving.

We emerged from the forest to the back side of the castle. It was still intimidating, all dark obsidian glass, but there were fewer guards here, and most were distracted and chatting with each other as they used their guns to lean on. The huge wooden doors were open, and servants hurried in and out carrying baskets of goods to a few stone storehouses built on the land behind the castle.

We dismounted the horses and walked them to a small wooden barn at the edge of the forest. An UnSeelie boy—well, again, I had no idea how old he was, but he looked like a boy to me—hurried out of the barn looking frazzled.

“Sir,” he said. “You’re back.”

“Just a brief visit,” Corbin said. “No need to pass the word along.”

“Certainly,” the boy said. He took Tannie’s reins, and then Hannie’s as well. As he did, he regarded me with curiosity, but said nothing.

I followed Corbin. As we walked, many of the servants greeted him not with excitement but not unpleasantly, either—they treated him like a coworker who just showed up late for a shift. It wasn't exactly what I expected the reaction to be to a man who was, technically, part of the court. I stuck close to him, trying not to stare too obviously as to avoid unnecessary attention. The guards glanced up as we went through the doors, but just gave Corbin a brief nod before they went back to their conversation.

Behind the immense wooden doors was not a grand reception room, like I was sort of expecting, but a chilly hallway lined with weathered coats and shoes piled on rough-hewn wooden racks. Our footsteps echoed on the stone floors and seemed to carry all the way into the high, vaulted ceilings. We passed by the doorway to a large kitchen bustling with activity; the smell of cooking meat and sizzling onions made my stomach growl. The hallway was dotted with other rooms, too: storage rooms and workshops, all with open doorways that allowed me to peer curiously inside as best I could as we moved at a brisk clip down the hall. Finally, Corbin stopped so abruptly in front of a wooden door that I nearly walked into his back.

"Quite a welcoming ceremony," I muttered.

"So far so good," Corbin said. He pulled a silver key from his pocket and slid it into the lock, then murmured an incantation under his breath. The lock clicked open, and he pushed the door open. Inside, the room had the same cold stone floors and high, vaulted ceilings, but it wasn't much smaller than my tiny studio apartment back in Warwick. There was a bed, a dresser, and a small desk. Not even a window.

"What is this place?" I asked after Corbin closed the door behind us. "Temporary quarters?"

"Permanent quarters," he said coolly. "This is where I stay when I'm at the palace."

"Seriously?" I asked. "I mean, no offense, you've seen the squalor I live in, but I was expecting something a little more... Royal."

"I'm technically part of the court, yes." Corbin dropped his bag onto the bed. "But the queen doesn't want me to get any ideas about my importance to the court."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'm mixed blood," he said. There wasn't any emotion in his voice—just a plain statement of fact. "She keeps me on as an enforcer because I'm powerful. Not for any other reason. If I wasn't so powerful, I would've been

kicked out a long time ago. Kicked out or worse.”

“Ah,” I said. I stuffed my hands into my pockets. Corbin carried himself with such power and confidence when he was Earthside, I hadn’t even imagined he could be living like this in the Realm. Like he was just released from these shitty quarters when the queen needed an attack dog. No wonder he wasn’t eager to let the court know he was back in the Realm. “Well, now it makes a lot more sense why you keep that crazy apartment in Warwick.”

He laughed, low and surprised. “You’re right, I do prefer my Earthside residence to these quarters.”

He straightened up and pushed his hair back. He looked exhausted—more tired than I’d ever seen him. Bags were beginning to appear under his eyes, and even the energy of the Realm wasn’t enough to hide the slight stiffness to his movements. Maybe keeping me out of anyone’s attention was wearing on him just as much as it was wearing on me.

“Stay here,” he said. “I’m going to get something to eat for us, and see if anyone knows anything about the bodies.”

“All right,” I said.

He blinked, then paused and watched me for a moment. “All right.”

“What?” I asked. “Expecting me to demand to come with you?”

“Well, yes,” he said. “I was prepared for the whole argument.”

“I mean...” I shrugged. “Admittedly I do want to be nosy and check out everything I can around here. But—I understand the risks here. I don’t want to put us in danger if I don’t have to. I think I can skip the dinner run.”

“Really?” he asked. “You’re not going to sneak out as soon as I leave?”

“If we were Earthside, yes,” I said. “But not here.” I placed my hand on his forearm gently. “Seriously.”

My admission that I would definitely be rebelling against his demands Earthside seemed to assuage some his nerves.

“The room’s warded,” he said. “I’m the only one who can unlock it. You’re safe here. Or—as safe as you can get in the Realm.”

I nodded. My hand was still on his arm. Even in the cool stillness of the room, something crackled between us. I couldn’t focus on that, though, or my curiosity about the castle. I had to keep my focus on the goal. Get my eyes on the bodies, get the information I needed, and get out in one piece.

The more I learned about this court, and Corbin’s place within it, the more I was beginning to think that was a tall order.

I swallowed and pulled my hand away. “Hope there’s something good for

dinner,” I said, only a little awkwardly. “Whatever they were making in the kitchen smelled good.”

“Right,” Corbin said. “Here’s hoping.” He left the room, and the lock clicked closed behind him.

In the cold stillness of the room, my exhaustion washed over me like a wave. Now that I had a moment to myself, in a relatively safe space, my body was ready to collapse from the endeavor of just *getting* to this room. I stretched out on the bed with a sigh. Without anything to distract me, all I could feel was the restless rattling of my trapped power in my chest, hungry to chew its way out and be nourished by the power of the Realm. Even worse was the ache in my muscles, my calves and my thighs and my core, all burning from the exertion of keeping myself balanced on Hannie’s back all day. Sure, it came to me naturally, but my muscles used to the bike still had to get used to it. I was hungry, too—hopefully Corbin’s excursion wouldn’t take too long. I was still half-human and couldn’t run on power alone like he could.

I had to get some rest. It’d just be a minute. I closed my eyes and was asleep before my heart beat twice.

What felt like only a few minutes later, I was awoken by a gentle knocking at the door. Like someone delicately rapping their knuckles on the wood.

I sat straight up on the bed and shifted silently, so my feet were on the floor.

The knocking increased in volume.

I swallowed. It couldn’t be Corbin—he had the key. And he would say something, like a normal person.

The person outside was now knocking extremely insistently, sharp cracks of their knuckles against the wood over and over and over.

What would a “pet” do? Was I expected to stay in here and stay silent? Or was that worse—ruder to ignore an insistent guest? Whoever it was obviously knew *someone* was in here.

It had to be better to respond. That was the way to fly under the radar—not to hide and avoid, because that was suspicious. I had to be well-behaved. Corbin had said it made more sense if I was an assistant, too. An assistant would answer the door. Wouldn’t she?

I swallowed hard and levered to my feet. The knocking was incessant and showed no signs of slowing or stopping. So I steeled myself, put on the most

neutral expression I could, and opened the door.

“Ah.” The man on the other side still had his hand raised, like he was about to start his incessant rapping again. “I thought I heard someone moving around in there.”

I said nothing, just folded my arms carefully over my chest. The man was tall, with chestnut brown hair swept off his forehead and piercing, amber-flecked blue eyes like Corbin’s. Except something about his eyes was a little more chilling. A little flatter. He smiled and it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Who are you?” he asked. “What exactly are you doing here in the castle?”

Well. That was a good question. Maybe Corbin and I should’ve figured out the nitty-gritty details of our cover story before someone showed up knocking at the door. I took a step back, frantically trying to figure out exactly how much I could tell this guy.

“Interesting,” the man said. “The silent type, I see. That doesn’t quite track for what I know--”

“Hey!” Corbin grabbed the man by the shoulder and pulled him away from the open doorway. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Relief crashed through me. Good fucking timing, I wanted to say, but I still held my tongue.

“Oh, there you are!” the man said cheerfully, as a catlike smile curled his lips. “I was just here to check up on my baby brother. I’ve been wondering what you’ve been up to for the past few weeks. Thought we could catch up.” His icy eyes cut to me sharply. “And the servants are murmuring about a human who was able to make her way through the portal. You know I have to see anomalies like that for myself.”

*Brother.* My eyes widened.

“She’s not a human,” Corbin said. He sighed, then dragged his brother over the threshold and into the room. He shut the door behind him, then stood in front of his brother partially hiding me from view. At this point, I was okay with that. I did not like the hungry smile the man kept flashing. “Are you that stupid? You think a human could survive the portal?”

“Strange things are afoot around these parts,” his brother said. “I’m not sure what to believe.” His gaze lingered on me again.

“You’re so dramatic.” Corbin pinched the bridge of his nose, then glanced at me. “Percy, this is Tara. She’s just a pet I’ve brought with me to help with the chores and keep me entertained.”

“Tara,” Percy repeated, like he was testing the feel of the name in his mouth. “And you say you’re not human?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but Corbin took a small step to the side, further shielding me from view. “She’s got Fae heritage generations back,” he said. “Just enough to make it through the portal, though the experience wasn’t exactly pleasant for her.”

“Interesting,” Percy said, nodding slowly. His gaze was still fixed on me.

Well, if he wanted interesting, I’d do the opposite. I’d seen guys like him before. “Hi,” I said, pitching my voice up an octave. I wound my hand around Corbin’s bicep and leaned to the side so I could be seen, then shot him a beaming, bimbo grin. “All the Fae here are so handsome, Corbin,” I said with a giggle. “Do you have any other brothers you can introduce me to?”

Corbin raised his eyebrows pointedly at Percy, and Percy barely suppressed his cringe. Fae groupies were pretty common, and often looked down upon. I figured Percy was the type to be so elitist, and I was right on the money.

“It’s nice to have an extra set of hands around when traveling,” Corbin said.

“I bet it is,” Percy said. “You never did have good taste.”

“What’s this about?” Corbin asked, ignoring the little dig.

Percy huffed and carefully worked his fingertips through his hair, like he was irritated but didn’t want to mess up the styling. “The queen wants to see you in the morning.”

“Ah,” Corbin said. “I was hoping to have a bit more time to settle in.”

“You know how the queen is,” Percy said. “She’s interested to hear how your duties are going Earthside. And obviously she wants to meet your pet, too.”

My blood froze in my veins. Great. Perfect. She wanted to meet me. I kept my stupid smile plastered on my face even as I felt my skin go pale with fear. I shoved both hands in my back pockets to hide the way they were shaking.

“Of course,” Corbin said. “I’ll be in attendance.”

Percy turned his cold gaze back to me and that hungry smile somehow got even hungrier. “Wonderful,” he said. “We’ll see you then.”

He swanned out of the room; Corbin shut and locked the door behind him. He stood with one hand on the handle, head bowed. He hadn’t even set

down the canvas bag on his shoulder.

All I could think about, staring at the plane of his shoulders, was how fucking fucked we were. If Mala could see me now—hell, if Gram could see me now... They'd both kill me themselves before the queen had a chance to lay eyes on me. Because if there was any Fae in this Realm that would be able to see past the cuff's powers and into the glimmer of power I still felt rocketing around my chest, it would be the queen.

And I had to meet her tomorrow.

Corbin set the bag the small desk. From within it, he withdrew a crusty loaf of bread and a block of cheese wrapped in wax paper.

"No luck on the soup they were making," he said. "Eat something. You'll feel better."

The thought of eating anything now made my stomach turn, despite how hungry I'd been moments before. The fear-induced nausea was turning my guts inside out. He was right, though—I needed calories. I tore off a hunk of bread and sat down on the edge of the bed to try to eat it. Objectively I knew it was delicious, soft and freshly baked, but it still tasted like sandpaper in my mouth. I couldn't let go of the feeling that this was my last meal before I was walked to the gallows.

Corbin sat down on the edge of the bed next to me and folded his hand over my knee. I pressed against him, then after a moment let my head drop to his shoulder.

"So," I said quietly, "a meeting with the queen, huh?" I set the bread aside. Eating definitely wasn't going to happen.

"It'll be all right," Corbin said. He traced his fingers over the shell of my ear, then tucked a strand of hair behind it. "I meant what I said. I'm not going to let anything happen to you here."

"Easier said than done," I said. "This is the queen we're talking about here. I mean... Imagine what my power could do for her."

"And she'll have to go through me to get to you," Corbin said with a sudden, cold ferocity. "She's powerful, but I am, too. It's why she keeps me around. And why she tries to keep me leashed in quarters like these."

"Yeah?" I asked. "You'd go against the queen for me?" I meant for it to sound like a joke, but it came out quiet and unsure.

Corbin was silent for a moment. I tipped my face toward his, still resting on his shoulder, and his face was close to mine. "Of course I would," he said, like it was obvious. "Of course."



I'd figured his work Earthside was just a required detour from his real life in Faerie. And that our—partnership, working relationship, friendship, whatever I called it—was just a blip on his radar. He'd lived for so long, I'd figured I was a means to an end. Or if he was interested in me, it was because of my unique nymph powers, not because it was *me*.

But now, watching the amber of his irises swallow the blue, I began to think maybe I had miscalculated. Part of me had refused to believe him, even when I could tell he was telling the truth as he saw it. Maybe it was a defense mechanism. Trusting Corbin to work with me, even protect me when necessary, meant that I had to admit to sometimes being vulnerable. It was easier to think it was all bullshit, and only rely on myself. But here, in Faerie, I *had* to trust him.

And maybe he meant it all along. I was risking my life coming here, but I'd never considered that he'd risk his life for me, too. That he'd go against the queen if he had to.

If that's what happened tomorrow, we'd both be walked to the gallows.

So what was the point of resisting?

I closed the distance between us, capturing Corbin's lips. He inhaled sharply in surprise, but then his hand flew to my waist, gripping tightly as he deepened the kiss, swiftly taking control. It was slow, hot, hungry—even with my power dampened, it felt like his aura was crackling through my veins. Like something half-formed inside me was finally becoming whole. Desire lanced through me, and suddenly the kiss wasn't enough. Probably because I was actually lucid for this one. I tangled my fingers in the fabric of his shirt and shifted closer, pressing our thighs together, more than ready to crawl into his lap and take this to the next level.

Before I could, though, Corbin broke the kiss. He slid his hand to my nape, just holding me there, and tipped his forehead against mine. I released the fierce grip I had on his shirt and rested my hands on his chest instead, trying to catch my breath. The intensity of the kiss—of the connection—had surprised me. Like it did every time.

“We need to get to the healer's quarters,” he said. “Tonight.”

So maybe he didn't have the same gallows feeling I did. Or maybe he really thought he could defeat the queen and her entire court. Strangely, that settled some of my fear. If he thought we actually had a shot of surviving this ordeal, maybe we did.

And regardless of what tomorrow brought, I came here to do a job. I'd

said I was going to figure out what the hell Ralnor was trying to do, mangling these bodies. So I nodded, then pulled away and put some distance between us. My face still felt flushed, and my body still thrummed with desire.

“You can get us there?” I asked.

He stood up and blinked a few times, and the blue in his eyes began to creep back in to overwhelm the amber. “Yes,” he said. “Got some good information from the kitchen staff.”

“Kitchen guys know everything,” I said. I took another bite of bread.

“The bodies are being held in the healer’s workshop,” he said. “We need to go tonight, before sunrise, when the healers will be back in the quarters.”

“Right,” I said. “Let me just—give me a minute.”

“Sure,” Corbin said, nodding, and I got the feeling that he could use a breather, too.

In the tiny bathroom off of his room, I splashed clear, cold water onto my face from the waiting basin. I pressed my fingers into my temples and took a few breaths, then dried off my face. All right. Work mode. I touched the cuff on my wrist to steady myself. If we got what we came for tonight, maybe we could leave before tomorrow morning. And the queen would never have to see me in person at all.

For some reason that felt like a pipe dream.

**W**e stepped quietly out of Corbin's room and into the cold halls of the palace. There was still a flurry of activity at the far end of the hall, with servants rushing in and out, and between storerooms and the kitchen. We weren't going that way, though. Corbin led me down the hall and around a corner, where it narrowed suddenly and somehow grew even colder. The ceilings were so high I could hardly see the beams at the top, and the cold air seemed to weigh on me, like I was moving through freezing cold water.

I'd thought a palace, even a weird shiny black one like this, would be lush and filled with expensive, fine things. Plush rugs, statues, portraits, things like that. If this castle was decorated at all, it wasn't here where the servants ran the show. I stuck close to Corbin's side.

At the end of the narrow hallway was another immense door, tall and wooden with a metal lock like the one on Corbin's door. He placed his hand on the wood of the door, murmured a low incantation, and pushed it open.

"Oh, come on," I muttered. "Don't tell me the workshop is down there."

"What, are you scared?" Corbin teased.

"Personally, if I needed to see a healer, I wouldn't trust any healer that worked down stairs like these."

"This isn't the workshop you go to when you're still standing," Corbin noted. "That's elsewhere."

I cringed. "Ah."

The doorway opened to the most unwelcoming staircase I'd ever seen in my life. It was steep and narrow, so we'd have to walk single-file, and the

stone walls were illuminated with small torches that cast such deep, ugly shadows, it'd actually be better if I had to stumble down in the dark. The rough stone surfaces of the stairs were eroded by years of footsteps. Whose, though, I didn't want to think.

I followed Corbin into the stairwell and the door swung closed behind us, as if of its own volition. I jumped a little and gripped the back of his shirt. "I feel like I'm in a damn haunted house," I muttered.

"That's not completely inaccurate," he said. "Come on."

The staircase wound down, down, down until my calves were aching from the descent and I felt like I was deeper than the Den. Finally, we reached the landing, and another great door, which Corbin opened with a brief incantation. He peered through suspiciously, then nodded at me and stepped through.

"Great," I whispered. It was as silent as a grave. "Another hallway."

A squeak ripped through the silence like a bullet, and I jumped again, biting back my own shriek as I pressed to Corbin's back. The offending rat darted across the hard-packed dirt floor and disappeared into a crack into the wall.

"Guess some things transcend realms, huh?" I cringed as another huge, fat rat scuttled along the edge of the wall and then disappeared into a different crack. "Can't get rid of rats even here."

"Shh," Corbin said.

Well, that made me nervous. Why did we need to be quiet? But now that he'd shushed me, I wasn't going to ask. The hallway here was wider than the one upstairs, with a low ceiling due to its depth underground, and the torches were bigger and burned with cold magical flame. It was dotted with doorways and more narrow hallways, splitting off mazelike into the darkness. If I didn't have Corbin to follow, I could definitely see myself getting turned around and lost in this place. Not the most pleasant thought. I kept close as we crept down the hallway.

We rounded a corner and the stairwell disappeared from view.

"Not much further," Corbin whispered. "It's near the center of the castle. Just deep below it."

I nodded. We picked up the pace a little, our soft footsteps audible in the chilly silence of the hallway.

Then Corbin stopped short. He straightened up, gaze flickering around, like a startled cat. I moved to ask what had caught his attention, but he shook

his head rapidly like he knew the question was right on the tip of my tongue. Then he grabbed my hand and tugged me into the closest doorway. It was shallow, and we were pressed nearly nose to nose with our shoulders to the cold wooden door.

I widened my eyes. A thousand questions clawed at my throat, but I didn't have a chance to whisper any of them, because Corbin's hand was flat over my mouth as he leaned in. "Complete silence," he whispered.

I swallowed. He dropped his hand from my mouth and pressed his fingertips to the arched stone doorframe. He murmured under his breath, an incantation so low I couldn't even make out the syllables of the language. Soft, fog-like darkness descended over us like heavy snow, first in dense flakes and then more, and more, until the darkness surrounded us and filled the doorframe. I could barely see Corbin, even though he was inches in front of me, like I was squinting into a dark blizzard. The spell crackled gently on my skin, bringing with it that familiar ozone sensation.

Down the hall, footsteps sounded. My heart shot into my throat and throbbed like a wound. The footsteps were heavy—and there were more than two sets.

They grew closer and closer, walking briskly down the tunnel. A laugh echoed through the hall, so sharp and loud it almost hurt my ears after creeping down the hallways in so much silence. Then there was conversation, in a Fae tongue I didn't understand; two voices chattering to each other and the thick sweet smell of... Fae cigar smoke?

More laughter. Then the footsteps passed. A door opened and closed, and the silence fell over us again like a shroud.

Corbin tapped his fingers to the doorframe and the darkness slid off us and sank into the dirt. "Just a patrol," he whispered. "The guards down here don't pay much attention."

"Lucky for us," I breathed. "Were they smoking?"

He risked a smirk. "Yeah, can you believe that? Slackers." The sweet smell of the smoke lingered behind them, but the hallway was empty. "We need to move," Corbin whispered. "I don't know what the patrol schedule is down here, but with the bodies in storage, I'd bet the queen has increased them."

"Awesome," I whispered. "Do *not* let me forget to pick up some Fae cigars for Bob before we go Earthside."

We moved deeper into the maze. Turn after turn, until finally we were in

front of another big, intimidating door—except this one was metal. Great. A big spooky metal door. I steeled myself. This didn't look like it would be the entrance to anything that could even remotely be described as a "healer's" facility.

Corbin reached into his pocket and pulled out another immense key. I blinked. "You already have a key?"

"Skeleton key," he whispered. "Pays being friendly with the people in the kitchen."

He slid the immense key into the lock and spoke another low incantation. The lock clicked, and Corbin shouldered the door open. The metal rumbled across the concrete floor of the workshop. He stepped across the threshold and I half-expected it to activate some sort of trap and suck him even deeper into the earth. But nothing happened, and so I followed him across, and carefully pushed the door closed.

Inside, those same cold magical torches burned, casting the room in a pale, otherworldly glow. It didn't look like anyone would be healed of anything in this room. It was freezing cold, and in the center of the room was an immense stone table that looked more like an altar than any kind of surgery table. But a surgery table it had to be, because around it were a few smaller tables, stacked with sharpened knives and ferocious-looking needles, a bone saw that was way larger than it needed to be, and a few mirrors on wheels that could be pushed around to view the poor soul on the table from multiple angles. The other tools in the room looked more like they belonged in a torture chamber than a healer's workshop.

I wrapped my arms around myself against the cold air of the room and the unrelated shivers running down my spine.

"They're over here," Corbin said. "Come on."

I gave the creepy table a wide berth and followed Corbin through another door. This room was smaller, with the same concrete floors, but the walls were lined with small square doors. Just like the morgues I was familiar with Earthside. There were six wooden tables lined up in the room, and above five of them, human shapes hovered. The bodies were covered by sheets, but were suspended about a foot above the tables, creating a ghostly, unnerving effect.

"Why the hovering?" I asked.

"Suspended in time," Corbin said. "It's more effective than keeping them cold. Completely prevents decay—they're in the same state they were when they were brought here."

Well, that was handy. “All right,” I said, shaking my arms out to dispel the nerves and the cold. “Let’s get this party started.”

I pulled the sheet off the first body and cringed. Something about the suspension was even more unnerving than handling bodies Earthside. This victim was a young woman, no older than myself, and she looked like Corbin had promised—like she’d been killed just moments before. Her blonde hair hung in a curtain toward the table, and her skin was pale in death like she’d bled heavily out. Which made sense, since her ribcage was cracked open around an immense gash that ran from her solar plexus to her navel.

She was missing half of her ribs, and her lungs were intact but slightly askance, like Ralnor had stuck his hands inside and pushed things around just for the hell of it. One of her breasts had a massive chunk missing, too, like an animal had taken a huge bite. I cringed at the thought of how that might’ve happened. Her face was left alone, except for her left eye, which had an almost artistic cross scored across it. Like Ralnor had really taken his time to ensure it came out perfect.

“That was the first victim,” Corbin noted.

I nodded, then moved to the second body. This one was a man. He had the same gash from solar plexus to navel like the woman did, but he wasn’t missing any ribs. He had extras. Foreign ribs had been lashed to his own, and the added ribs were carved with a small rune, so faintly into the bone I nearly missed it.

“Hey,” I said, waving Corbin over. “Do you know what this means?”

He stepped closer. His face was slightly pale, and he looked a little green around the gills. That made me raise my eyebrows. An UnSeelie who had lived for centuries, and he still got squeamish around murder victims? Kind of cute. He held his breath and leaned closer to the body.

“I’ve seen it before,” he said. “But I don’t know the meaning off the top of my head.”

“Well, I guess that’s better than nothing,” I muttered, then pushed him back so I could copy the rune into my notebook. I went back to examining the body. He was missing a kidney, and his fingernails—the ones that hadn’t been peeled off, I noted with another cringe—had blood and skin beneath them.

“This guy fought back,” I said. “The woman must’ve been subdued before he got to work.”

His shinbones had been removed, too, with surgical precision, if you

ignored the way it was left as a gaping wound.

“At least he tried, I guess,” Corbin said.

The other two bodies followed the similar pattern—the third victim had number two’s shinbones in him, with the same rune, and number four got a few vertebrae from three’s spine. The only one who wasn’t missing anything was the fifth victim, Craig Spencer. Ralnor had been interrupted and apprehended before he could really get down to business.

“So we’ve got the rune,” I said, “and the weird little plug-and-play thing he’s got going.”

“Right,” Corbin said. “So what do you think?”

I shrugged. “I’ve got to take a closer look.” I waggled my hand at him, where the cuff was still snug against my skin.

Corbin pressed his lips together. “I don’t know if that’s wise,” he said. “With the patrols going through here, someone could sense you.”

“I know,” I said. “But that’s why we came here, right? To figure out what the hell he was doing. A single rune isn’t a good enough lead.”

I had one of my hunches again. I knew, looking at these bodies, that this was a complicated ritual. Complicated enough to leave residue. If I had a chance to use all my senses, my magical sense, I’d be able to understand.

“You might get overwhelmed again,” Corbin said. “Like you did coming through.”

“That was different,” I scoffed. “That was the power of the Realm *and* the stress of coming through the portal.”

“You don’t like that,” Corbin said. “Like, at all.”

I shrugged. “What do you want to do instead? Leave here with a single rune and bad memories of mutilated bodies? We can’t waste the effort of getting down here.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. I could tell I was wearing him down.

“Listen,” I said, “you were able to handle me when we first showed up here. You can do it again.”

“Tempie, I don’t think--”

Before he could finish his sentence, I unclasped the cuff around my wrist. It’d just be for a moment. We were so deep underground, and we hadn’t heard anything of another distracted patrol. If there was a less-risky place in all of the Realm to reveal my magic, it was here.

And, I realized, I trusted Corbin. Not just *should* trust him or *had to* trust him, but really, *actually* trusted him. I needed to do this, and I trusted him to



make sure nothing went horribly wrong.

The marble of power in my chest exploded, rushing through me rich and molten-hot like melted gold. I sighed with relief as it flooded me, shocking my nerves back to life. It wasn't nearly as overwhelming as it had been the first time—maybe I was onto something with the portal's effect. As soon as my magic settled, opening up my senses, the magic oozing off the bodies slammed into me like a tidal wave. It was so powerful and sickening, it sent me reeling a step back. The magic felt thick and oily on my skin, and active, like it was reaching for me and trying to pull me into its depths. It oozed over me like an army of slugs.

“Ugh!” I shuddered and instinctively hit back with my own golden magic, just enough to push the darkness away.

The oozy, tar-like power retreated. I coughed and shook my head to clear it. I kept my hand raised to keep it at bay, lest it try something gross like that again, and only then did I see what it was doing to the bodies.

“Hell's bells,” I murmured.

“What?” Corbin asked. “What is it?”

The bodies suspended looked like they were trapped in an immense dark spiderweb. Strands of vibrating dark magic connected them, winding from one victim to the next, from eyes, mouth, fingertips, and every open wound. The magic was active, pulling energy from—from somewhere. From the bodies? From the Realm itself? I wasn't sure. But it was growing—of that much I was certain. Somehow, the magic was feeding on something, through the connected bodies, and growing stronger. I stepped forward, hand still raised, closer to the web. The magic didn't reach out for me this time, though. Now, it sent an oily tendril out and pushed back against me. Defensively. As if it'd learned from the way I'd blown it off earlier that it wanted nothing to do with my magic.

It was responsive. Learning and growing. How the fuck was this happening from dead bodies?

I was staring at the web, memorizing its patterns with my hand still raised, when Corbin snapped the cuff over my wrist. Immediately, my power was whirlpooled back into the tiny marble in my chest, and the strands of magic flickered out of view like something from a dream. Unsteady on my feet, I stepped back from the bodies, and Corbin steadied me with his hand on the center of my back.

“What is it?” he asked. His gaze fluttered nervously from the bodies to

me, to the door. “What did you see?”

“Why’d you stop me?” I asked. “Is someone coming?”

“You were staring at them for a long time,” he said. “Did you not realize it?”

“How long?” I asked.

“Almost ten minutes.”

“Fuck,” I muttered. I ran my hand over my forehead. I took a deep breath, then looked back at the bodies and imagined I could still see the web of dark magic running through them. “I think he’s... He’s built some kind of generator.”

“That’s impossible,” Corbin said immediately. “These people are dead.”

“Good observation,” I said. “Yeah, it should be impossible, but the magic connecting these bodies is active. It reacted to my power. And it’s siphoning power from the bodies, somehow, or the Realm, and growing more powerful.” I tapped my forefinger against my lower lip in thought. “But if it’s been doing that consistently, it should be a stronger than it is. But the power’s not going anywhere that I can tell.”

“Yes, it is,” Corbin said, his gaze darkening with realization. “It’s going to Ralnor.”

“How?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Corbin said with a shake of his head. “But that’s the only reason it would still be active. He’s creating power in this Realm and using it Earthside.”

“That’s why it reacted to me,” I said. The pieces began to click into place. “It’s connected to him. He’s using it.” I stared at the bodies as disgust crept through me. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“And with the bodies suspended like this, this could go on indefinitely,” Corbin said.

“Or as long as the runes are in place,” I said. “Something about the physical connection between the bodies—the runes, and the pieces put together—is letting this power develop like this. I don’t know if he’s pulling it from the Realm or from the bodies themselves. But it’s strong.” I took another step back.

“Really strong? Do you think we could break it?”

“I don’t think we should try,” I said. “With the way the power reacted to me just getting close, I don’t know what would happen if we interfered.”

“Ralnor would certainly realize it,” Corbin said in realization.

“He might already know we’re onto him, since the magic felt me,” I said. “But if we break it, he’ll have another chance to run.”

Corbin nodded in agreement. His brow furrowed as he watched the bodies, like he expected the shimmering spiderweb of power to suddenly emerge into view. “I don’t get it,” he murmured. “Someone should realize this is happening. If the power’s as strong as you say it is.”

“Ralnor must have put a hell of a mask on it,” I said. “Set up here, or Earthside. Or both.”

“Right,” Corbin said. “I need to ask some questions. Something feels off about this.”

“I’m guessing you mean the court won’t be chomping at the bit to share details, huh?” I asked with a sigh. “That’d be too easy.”

“The queen wants him caught,” Corbin said. “She wants all of this to go away. If anyone knows anything about the details of what this” –he gestured at the bodies-- “is, I doubt they’ll be sharing.”

“Right,” I said. “This isn’t exactly acceptable royal behavior.”

“To say the least,” Corbin muttered. “Which means we’ll have to be on our best behavior if we want to wheedle any info out of anyone.”

That meant we weren’t sneaking out of Faerie tonight. And if I thought tonight was risky, it wasn’t going to hold a candle to what we were going to have to manage tomorrow.

Once we made it back to his room, Corbin closed the heavy wooden door and clicked the lock closed. Relief crashed over me like a wave, and I sat down heavily on the edge of his bed and pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes. Now that I was safe—well, safe-ish—the exhaustion hit me. Creeping around the cold hallways beneath the palace was not my ideal way to spend an evening. But despite how tired I was, my brain wouldn't stop turning Ralnor's magic over and over. How had he done it? What did the runes mean? Having a lead was usually one of my favorite feelings, and yet this one was just spinning out a lot of questions with very few answers. I only wished I'd had more time with the bodies.

I dropped my hands to start turning over those same questions with Corbin, but his expression made the words die on my tongue.

He was standing in the center of the room, shoulders square and hands in fists at his side. His nostrils flared as he looked around the room, and his eyes were flicked with blood-red.

"What is it?" I asked. "Something wrong?" The cuff felt heavy on my skin. Was this how Corbin often felt with me? Because it really fucking sucked. Whatever he was sensing, I knew I'd be able to sense it too, if I didn't have to have my magic dampened.

"Someone was in here," he said, low.

"What?" I stood up from the bed. "What about the wards?"

"I don't know," he said, nearly a growl. "No one has ever been able to bypass my warding. It's impossible."

"Apparently not," I said. "Was it Percy?"

He shook his head. "I'd recognize his aura. I don't know who this was." He moved around the room like an anxious dog, checking under the bed and around the furniture, the seams of the doorframe and the windows, and the bathroom as well.

"What would they want?" I asked. "Has this happened before?"

As he examined the door to the small bathroom, he glanced over his shoulder and furrowed his brow at me. "Isn't it obvious?" he asked.

"Me?" I asked. "There's no reason, though. I'm just your groupie-slash-pet-slash-assistant."

"Well, word gets around fast in this palace," he said irritably. "And historically I haven't often been seen with a companion. Especially one from Earthside. We're immortal over here, remember? Little mysteries like this are a break from the monotony. People get interested."

He continued his angry sweep of the room, checking the walls, baseboards, and corners, too. All I could do was pull my feet up onto the bed and wait. When he was finished, he straightened up by the front door. His eyes blazed fully red, sudden and shocking, and the dark flame of his demon licked up and down his arms.

"I'll find out who did this," he growled. "I tolerate a lot of disrespect here, but this—this I won't fucking stand for."

He hissed and gave one final glance around the room, and then his gaze landed on me. His expression softened and then the dark flames dissipated, like he hadn't even noticed it had happened at all.

"They're just lucky I wasn't here," he said. "I'm annoyed. But there's nothing to worry about."

I nodded, in a rare moment of surprise-induced wordlessness. Corbin turned his back to me and pulled a small phone from the top drawer of his dresser (a phone? In Faerie? I'd kind of thought they all used carrier pigeons or whatever) and called the kitchen.

I'd never seen his demon flare up like that before, outside of an actual life-or-death struggle. It left me feeling nervous. And a little curious. It wasn't that I was afraid he might hurt me; those days were long past. But I realized, from that burst of anger, that maybe Faerie wasn't the home to him I'd thought it was. He wasn't just tolerating the treatment he received here. He resented it.

Maybe that resentment was like a time bomb inside him. And maybe I was the fuse. If someone tried to pull something on me, that might be the

push Corbin needed to wreak some serious havoc.

“All right,” he said, putting the phone down. “There are some leftovers from dinner tonight, so I’m having one of the servants bring some over for us. Should be a little more sustaining than the bread alone.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Does the shower in there work?”

“Of course,” Corbin said. He reached into another drawer of the dresser and pulled out one of his shirts—it was Fae-made, soft linen with a wide neck and long sleeves. “Here, if you need to change.”

I took the shirt in hand. I’d brought some clothes, of course, but for some reason the thought of wearing his clothes eased my nerves a little. Maybe it’d help his demon cool its jets, too. “Thanks.”

The bathroom was simple, rustic, but it *did* have a shower. And it was a hell of a shower, I discovered as I finally figured it out and stood under the waterfall of hot water that fell from the ceiling. Definitely enchanted. It soothed the ache in my exhausted muscles. I tipped my head forward and let the stream run over my neck and through my hair. Some of the nerves and anxiety melted away, too. Maybe what I’d needed was just a break from Corbin. He was so intense here in Faerie, constantly alert and angry and anxious. I guessed I was, too. We’d spent a lot of time together working cases, but never had to live in each other’s pockets like this. And never in the viper’s nest.

I felt better, clearer-headed, once I stepped out of the shower. In the bathroom, I dressed in a pair of my own sleep shorts and the shirt Corbin had provided, which was so big it nearly fell to mid-thigh on me. I stepped back into the bedroom, toweling my hair dry. A billow of steam followed me. The food had arrived: two bowls of soup on the small desk, smelling like whatever delights I’d smelled in the kitchen earlier.

Corbin’s gaze tracked over my body, lingering on my legs where the hem of his shirt ended. His eyes flashed amber, briefly, and I tugged at the hem like I could magically make it longer. Hell, maybe if I had access to my full power, I could. The thought soured my mood a little.

“Eat,” Corbin said, gesturing at the bowl. “It’s been too long since you’ve had a real meal.”

“I’m fine,” I said. But my stomach did betray me and growl at the rich meat-and-potatoes smell of the soup. I sat cross-legged on the bed with the bowl in hand while Corbin ate at the desk.

“Room service, huh?” I asked. It tasted incredible—the meat was so

tender it nearly melted in my mouth, elegantly spiced and just the right temperature.

“Not like we can go roaming around the palace,” Corbin said. “I called in a favor from a friend in the kitchen.”

“One who won’t talk?” I asked, half-teasingly.

Corbin sighed. “I asked if he’d heard anything weird around here but got nothing. He would’ve told me if he’d heard about someone getting into my apartment.”

“Right,” I murmured. We ate in silence, both of us wrapped up in our own thoughts. That gallows feeling returned again. “What do I need to know for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Corbin echoed with a sigh. “Well, your performance with Percy was pretty good. Just stay silent as much as you can, and if someone does talk to you, act like a bimbo.”

I huffed a laugh, surprised. “A bimbo, huh?”

“What?” Corbin asked. “Isn’t that what you were doing earlier?”

“I was going for ditz,” I said. “Or groupie.” I laughed again. “Sorry, it’s just weird hearing an UnSeelie say the word ‘bimbo.’”

“This isn’t a joke,” he said, but there was a smile playing at the corners of his lips. “This is serious.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “I’ll be extra bimbo for you tomorrow. Bimbotacular.”

“We’re doomed,” Corbin said, shaking his head.

“I’ll introduce levels of bimbo to this Realm that the Fae have never seen.” I brandished my spoon. “Just you wait.”

“Please don’t,” Corbin said. “Please just don’t speak at all.”

“It’s only because of where we are that I’m agreeing to that,” I said. “If we were Earthside--”

“I know, I know,” Corbin said. “We’ll be back on our own turf soon.”

The words shot through me like lightning. *Our turf*. When had that become true? When had he started to consider the human realm more his home than Faerie? And why did that feel so satisfying?

We finished the soup and stacked the bowls on the desk to deal with tomorrow. Having a warm, hot meal in my belly acted like a sleeping pill, and despite all the anxiety about tomorrow, I felt sleep tugging at my consciousness. That was one benefit of being a professional bounty hunter: no matter the circumstances, I could almost always sleep.

I crawled into Corbin's bed, under the cover and close to the wall. He glanced at me, almost surprised, but said nothing. I pulled the thin blanket higher onto my shoulder. There wasn't much to the mattress, but it was comfortable, and smelled clean and faintly like Corbin. I closed my eyes. Corbin changed and crawled into the bed next to me.

In the hotel, I'd felt like a nervous high schooler forced to share a bed with the guy I was crushing on. It'd felt like a bad decision waiting to happen, like a temptation made by the devil specifically for me in an attempt to derail this case.

Now, in Faerie, with the ghost of an intruder lingering in my mind and a meeting with the queen just hours away, it all seemed so juvenile. It wasn't just the reality of the dangers of being in Faerie, and it wasn't just the way I had to depend on Corbin for safety. It was something more than that.

Something about feeling my power in the Realm for the first time.

In the field, after crossing through the portal, it'd been overwhelming. But when I was examining the bodies, I'd felt... Whole. More alive. Like I was meeting myself for the first time.

Beside me, Corbin's breath evened out as he quickly fell asleep. I opened my eyes just enough to see the twin moons floating in the rich purple sky through the narrow window. We'd only get a few hours before court, and sleep tugged at the edges of mind, and yet the thoughts swirled. What would it be like—what would *I* be like—if I lived in the Realm? If I was able to let my power develop and grow unobstructed? Would it blossom into something I couldn't even imagine?

Who would I be if I was allowed to be free?

I'd never know. Hopefully I'd make it back Earthside. If everything went to plan, I'd never see these twin moons again. An ache in my stomach opened up into a pit of dark, heavy grief. I'd only just arrived and already I was mourning it. I closed my eyes tightly, rolled over, and let sleep overtake me.



With a gun to my head, I would've sworn I only slept ten minutes. But when I opened my eyes to the irritating sound of knuckles rapping on the wooden door, golden sunlight was streaming into the small room.

Corbin groaned. Only then did I notice we'd shifted closer in the night. His arm was thrown over my waist, and his body was close but not flush, so I felt every shift and every exhale. The weight of his arm was nice, grounding but not possessive, and I found myself missing it when he rolled over and sat up. He rested his elbows on his knees for a moment, the muscles in his back shifting as he exhaled, then raked one hand through his messy blond hair. Finally he hauled himself up to stand.

"Fucking hell," he grumbled, "it's too early for this." He steeled himself and then opened the door.

"Good morning," Percy trilled, entirely too ebullient for this early in the morning. "The queen's expecting you in a half hour. Here, I had the maids put this together for your pet. Where is she?" He attempted to shoulder past Corbin into the room, but Corbin stopped him with a firm hand on his chest.

"I'll take it," he said. Percy frowned, obviously frustrated, as Corbin snatched the dress he was carrying.

"I'd hope so," Percy said. "And your attire?"

"That's enough," Corbin said, and shoved Percy back off the threshold. "I said we'll be there."

"Now, Corbin, you know it's been a while since--"

Corbin shut the door in his face.

I sat up in the bed and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. "Hell of a wake-up

call,” I muttered. “What’s his deal?”

Corbin laid the dress over the back of his desk chair, then sighed. The plane of his shoulders was already tight with stress. “Percy’s the firstborn,” he said. “He’s full Fae. That makes him the rightful heir to our mother’s estate, and he will get all of it, since I’m the bastard son.”

Usually, I’d make some sort of joke or quip here, to try to lighten the mood, but something about Corbin’s practiced tone made the humor dissipate before it could even arise.

“I’m lucky to be acknowledged at all,” he said. “Since I’m the product of a Shax demon raping my mother. Had they followed the traditions of the Realm, I’d be exiled, or killed at birth.” He turned to the dresser and began rooting through the drawers. “I should be grateful Percy even calls me his brother.”

As bleak as this situation was, that spiel certainly sounded rehearsed. “Well, he seems like a dick, so I wouldn’t go that far,” I said.

Corbin glanced over his shoulder and offered me a small smile. “You’re right about that part.”

Admitting the reality of his situation had darkened his mood even further. It rolled off him stronger than his aura did. He was trying to remind himself of how “lucky” he was, when really, this was no way to live a life. My heart ached for him.

I did know one thing that was guaranteed to boost his mood a little, though—seeing me in some kind of idiotic getup. And from the rich purple silk of that dress, I could tell this was going to be a hell of a getup.

“Well,” I said as I climbed reluctantly out of bed, “let’s get this show on the road.”

He handed me the dress with a smile that was somewhere between apologetic and amused. I stepped into the bathroom to change.

“Don’t worry,” he said through the door, “I’m going to look just as ridiculous.”

“Doubt it,” I said as I shucked off his shirt and my shorts to step into the dress.

Even without a full-length mirror, I knew it looked ridiculous. It was heavy silk, falling to my ankles, with gold detailing and a fitted bodice that was already squashing my boobs hard even without being fully laced up. The sleeves were long, ending with delicate gold lace right at my wrist. It didn’t look great with my cuff, and the gold definitely clashed with my silver

bracelet and rings. I cringed at how noticeable it was. Couldn't do anything about that, though.

When I reached around the back for the zipper, my hands only found laces. Of fucking course.

I stomped out of the bathroom, flushed, holding the bodice of the dress up with one arm. "This thing has laces," I groused.

Corbin glanced up from where he was seated on the edge of the bed, fastening his cufflinks. He definitely did not look ridiculous. He was wearing high-waisted trousers with a crisp crease, shined boots, and a simple white silk shirt that made his eyes seem even bluer than they usually did. It was actually infuriating how good he looked. When did his waist get so *narrow*?

"Were you expecting a zipper?"

I stuck my tongue out at him, then turned around. "Make yourself useful."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

"Shut up."

"Just practicing." He cinched the laces in the first two eyelets, right at my lower back. I wasn't sure if I was imagining it, but I thought I could feel the warmth of his hands just a hair's breadth away from my skin. My face flushed more at the closeness, at the memory of his arm over my waist.

He worked attentively, carefully drawing the bodice closed over my bare back. He swept my hair over my shoulder at the top and cinched the last two eyelets. With one hand on my waist, he asked, "How's that?"

I cleared my throat. "Good. I can breathe, which is about as much as I can hope for."

He tied off the laces. "All set."

I turned around. He raised his eyebrows as he examined the dress. I shifted my weight on my bare feet—this was going to look even more ridiculous with my boots. I didn't know if it'd be better or worse if Percy came back with a pair of heels.

"I know it looks absurd," I said. "Don't rub it in."

He shook his head as his eyes gleamed amber. "It doesn't look absurd. It looks lovely." Then he shot me a smirk. "You really need to brush your hair, though."

"Hey!" I said, affronted. "Is it that bad?"

I grabbed my brush from my bag and rushed back into the bathroom. Once my hair was somewhat tamed and my boots tied up, we were ready to go.

“You ready for this?” Corbin asked with his hand on the doorknob.

Cold fear swept through me, renewed, like playing dress-up had made me momentarily forget exactly what we were doing. I tugged at the sleeve of the dress, hoping that the gaudy gold lace concealed the cuff enough to avoid attention. “I’d better be. Or we’re going to be late.”

We stepped into the hallway. To my shock, it was absolutely bustling with activity. Yesterday must’ve been the preparations for court, because now, it was chaos. Servants ran from storeroom to kitchen to outside, appeared from alcoves and staircases, shouted and hurried carrying baskets and boxes to and fro. I stepped out of the path of a frazzled-looking Fae maid talking rapid-fire on a phone held between her ear and shoulder as she rushed past with a huge basket of cabbages in hand, but she still took the time to shoot me a dirty look as she passed.

“Jeez,” I muttered. “I didn’t realize we were interrupting the brunch rush.”

“Court day,” Corbin explained. “It’s always like this. Come on, this way.”

We made our way through the crowd to a narrow hallway I hadn’t even noticed on the way in. It led to a staircase, thankfully not heavily trafficked (“Most of the servants use the larger staircase or the dumbwaiter,” Corbin explained) and for the first time since I’d arrived at the palace, we started up to the higher levels. Above ground.

We climbed until I was starting to sweat through the armpits of my silk dress—not a great look. I hiked the skirt up and stomped up the stairs, until we reached another heavy wooden door, but this one was ornately gilded. Corbin took a deep breath, then pushed it open.

The hallway was immense. It bustled with activity too, but without the urgency and chaos of the servants’ halls. The UnSeelie moving around this hallway moved with practice ease, like they were floating over the floor, smooth and elegant in dark uniforms carrying plates of gorgeous food and jugs of wine. The floors were the same gorgeous reflective obsidian that coated the outside of the castle, but only visible at the edges, as the rest of the floor was coated in a plush red carpet that felt soft as earth under my boots. The ceilings were high, vaulted, and shimmered with enchanted stars. Set into the walls were immense torches that gleamed with magical flame, warmer than the ones I’d seen downstairs.

Corbin took my upper arm firmly, in a show of ownership, and walked us

to the center of the hallway. The servants shot us a few dark looks, and a few even bared their sharp teeth. I shivered and stepped a little closer to Corbin, matching his stride.

To his credit, Corbin strode forward like he owned the place, shoulders square and eyes forward. He didn't even acknowledge the UnSeelie flashing their teeth at us. He was used to it. I tamped down the anger that threatened to burn away the fear.

At the end of the hallway was an immense door. I'd seen a lot of doors in this palace, and a lot of them had been big and heavy, but this was next level. It looked like the door to a great church, huge, dark, and elegantly decorated. As we approached, the two armored guards flanking the door stepped in our path, gave Corbin a disrespectful once-over, and then stepped aside. More irritation burned in my chest.

"Just stay calm," Corbin murmured. "It'll be fine."

I wasn't sure if I believed him. And honestly, I thought I caught the guard rolling his eyes. But then the two guards gripped the huge handles of the door and pushed them open.

My blood ran cold. The entire room thrummed with power, like it had a heartbeat of its own. Even with my own power tempered down to nearly nothing in my chest, the atmosphere in the room still felt like I was suddenly at the bottom of the ocean, the pressure making my head pound. I took a slow breath, regaining my equilibrium as Corbin pulled us forward.

Into the throne room.

The ceilings were even higher in here, with the same sparkling stars, and huge windows dressed in lush red curtains overlooked the gorgeous lavender plains outside. UnSeelie Court members lined the room, wearing gorgeous finery or armor, nearly a dozen on either side of the room, and all their sharp eyes were directed at us. At the far end of the room was a tall dark dais, that same shiny obsidian, with stairs leading up to the throne made of obsidian and gold. It was carved with skulls, both human and animal, with elegantly curling branches protruding from the back, so it looked like it was emerging from an enormous thorn bush.

Seated on the throne was the most gorgeous Fae I'd ever seen.

I had no idea it was possible for a face to *look* like that: perfectly symmetrical, with dark, narrow eyes and a blood-red mouth. Her dark hair fell in shiny waves over her right shoulder, and on her left, a raven perched. Its feathers were the same oil-slick black as her hair, and its beady eyes were

just as attentive as her own. Her skin was pale, but seemed to shimmer somehow, except for her hands, which were touched with black like she'd tipped her fingers into ink. She was dressed in a silvery gown that looked like she'd pulled the threads from the clouds and somehow wound it into a physical form. It almost hurt my eyes to look at her.

"Corbin," the queen said, "what is this human you've brought to my court?"

Her voice squeezed my heart like a frigid hand. All the dark power in this room was emanating from her, but her voice was light and musical, like bells. The beauty in her voice matched her appearance, and somehow that made her seem even more ominous. She looked at me like she wanted to eat me alive. The power in the room pressed at my consciousness like it was sentient itself, and curious. This kind of power didn't have any regard for those it deemed lesser. This was a hungry power. A dark power. The queen's power was the conquering type. If she knew what I was... I swallowed around the tightness in my throat.

"Just a plaything, Your Majesty," Corbin said curtly. "Called Tara. Picked up Earthside and brought here to entertain and assist."

"And how did she get through the portal?"

"Fae heritage," Corbin said. "Many generations back. Quite a challenging transition through the Portal. I admit I was curious."

"Hm," the queen said. "Step closer. I find myself curious as well."

The raven on her shoulder hopped to the throne, and then the queen stood up gracefully from her throne and descended the stairs of the dais elegantly, as if she were floating down them. The train of her silver gown flowed down the stairs like water. Corbin stopped us right near the base of the dais. He folded his hands in front of his body respectfully, and I did the same, mirroring his posture and keeping my gaze down at her feet. Like maybe if I acted demure enough, she'd decide I was just a boring little plaything and move on.

This close, her power was so near and so strong it made goosebumps rise on my arms. I kept my gaze down until the shimmery silver of her gown filled my vision; with her delicate wrists and her long, tapered fingers with their ink-dipped appearance.

"What a lovely little creature," she purred. She took my hands in her own and raised them to examine them closely. All I could do was stand there, face pale and heart racing, as she gazed at the jewelry on my right hand.

“Now, this is interesting,” she said. “Why does this little human have Seelie-made jewelry on in my court?” She traced her forefinger over the ring on my middle finger, and suddenly all five crackled with electricity, sending a painful spark up my arm. Instinctively, I hissed in pain and tried to pull away, but she grasped my wrist tightly, sending another series of cold sparks dancing over my skin. “Not just Seelie-made. Equinox Fae made.”

Her grip tightened on my wrist. I looked up. The queen’s eyes were so dark they appeared empty. Her eyes didn’t reflect light, they swallowed it. Erased it. Like a promise of what she’d do to me.

I said nothing, frozen in terror under her gaze. Not that I had a way to answer, anyway—I didn’t even know what an Equinox Fae was.

“Your Majesty, she’s just--” Corbin started.

“Hush,” the queen said sharply. She swept her hand toward Corbin like she was shooing away an irritating fly. Corbin inhaled sharply; his hands flew to his neck. The blood drained from his face as he moved his mouth like a caught fish. He couldn’t speak. She’d taken his voice with the tiniest of gestures. Like it didn’t take any power at all.

“Now,” she said, “before we were so rudely interrupted. Where did you get this?”

I swallowed. My tongue felt like it weighed a hundred pounds.

“Um,” I said, eloquently. “It’s all I have left of my family.”

“An heirloom, hm?” the queen prodded.

“They’re not worth anything,” I said. “But I like that my family used to wear them.”

“Interesting,” the queen said. She released my hand, freeing me from that awful cold-static feeling racing over my skin. I resisted the urge to wrap my arms around myself and step backward. Instead, I folded my hands behind my back and dropped my gaze again, trying to look as demure as possible. “You do seem familiar.”

“I’ve never been to the Realm before,” I said quietly. “I’m honored to be here.”

The queen hummed, like she was pondering something, but before she could say anything else, the great raven perched atop her throne let out a piercing cry that shattered the quiet stillness of the throne room. The court members murmured quietly among themselves as they glanced up at the raven.

“Ah,” the queen said. “That must be Daniel.”

A curtain behind the throne swept open, and a man dressed in a dark jacket with silver detailing stepped out. His rich green eyes landed on me like a beacon, and a demure smile tilted the corners of his lips open.

“Come down here.” The queen gestured at the man. “Come meet our guest.”

If I was scared before, now I was hopeless. This was it. It was over.

“Corbin’s brought a plaything,” the queen said as the man descended the stairs of the dais, the heels of his fine shoes clacking on the obsidian. “She’s called Tara.”

“Tara, hm?” the man said. “Lovely to meet you. I’m the queen’s aide, Daniel Rutherford.”

I nodded. Even just that took Herculean effort with the way my blood was rushing in my ears and my body was screaming at me to run like a prey animal. Because I’d seen Daniel Rutherford before. I’d seen those dark green eyes, high cheekbones, and dragon-like intensity. He was the man I’d seen in Mala’s shop—who I’d sworn had followed me all the way to the exit of the Den. His magic pulsed around him, blending with the queen’s, something lighter and brisker but just as dark.

He was going to out me. He knew I was lying. Behind my back, I tightened my hands into fists. I’d fight if I had to—even if I knew I wouldn’t have a chance.

But he said nothing. He just smiled at me, slow and purposeful, showing his white, sharp teeth.

The queen flicked her fingers again and Corbin took a dizzy step back, then cleared his throat. He regained his equilibrium and straightened up, but said nothing. He narrowed his eyes at Daniel, and Daniel just turned that scary-slash-charming smile onto Corbin, too.

“Glad to see you’re well, Corbin,” he said.

Corbin nodded. Fuck, I really should’ve told him about that day in the shop. I’d figured it was nothing—that I was just being paranoid. Should’ve known by now that when I got the heebie-jeebies like that, it almost always meant something. We had to get out of here, and *fast*, but how exactly did one blow off the UnSeelie Queen?

“You’ll be joining us for breakfast,” the queen said to Corbin with a nod. “I’d like to get to know your pet a little better before you, ah, return Earthside.”

Even I could read the teasing little smirk on her blood-red lips. She



expected Corbin to drain me dry before we had a chance to get back to Earth. Probably because human bodies were easier to dispose of in the Realm than Earthside.

“Of course,” Corbin said. “Thank you for the generous invitation.”

The queen turned on her heel and strode toward another heavy, ornately decorated door behind the dais. Daniel motioned for Corbin to follow; he took my upper arm again and guided us to follow the queen, with Daniel on our heels. What the hell did UnSeelie royalty eat for breakfast? I could only hope I wasn’t going to be included on the menu.

She led us into a small, but lush, room with vast windows dressed in that same rich red fabric and the walls lined with dark bookcases stuffed with Fae texts. In the center of the room was a sturdy, dark table, with four tall, dark chairs ready and waiting. The table was laid out with a spread that was a lot fancier than the Manny’s brunches I was used to. There was a whole pig, for one, laid out on a platter with an apple in its mouth, loaves and loaves of crusty bread, piles of fruit, and deviled eggs. Despite my fear, those eggs did make my mouth water a little.

The queen sat at the head of the table, and Daniel at the foot; Corbin drew out my seat and gestured for me to take it before he circled around the table and sat across from me.

An UnSeelie servant appeared silently from the shadows and filled the delicate porcelain mug at my seat with steaming hot coffee. Huh. That surprised me. I glanced across the table and Corbin shook his head minutely, then cut his gaze to the queen. I kept my hands folded in my lap. Sure, I wasn’t exactly the most ladylike woman in the land, but I knew the basics of etiquette.

The pig went untouched as the queen buttered a thin slice of bread and took a few fat strawberries from the bowl. She took a sip of coffee, then nodded her approval at the maid, who retreated back into the shadows like she’d never been there at all. She gazed around the table, then gave a curt nod. Apparently, that meant Daniel was allowed to start eating, and then Corbin, and then, finally, me.

Not that my stomach was going to be able to keep any of this food down, though. I took a careful sip of the coffee. It was almost offensively perfect.

“So, Tara,” the queen said, “this is your first time in the Realm?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I said. Oh, boy. She was about to grill me. I could feel it. Apparently Corbin could, too, from the way his expression dropped as

he watched me carefully.

“I assume you live in York City, where Corbin is currently working?” she asked.

Why did this feel like a meet-the-parents fiasco from hell? At the foot of the table, Daniel was watching me with just as much attention as Corbin, his green eyes gleaming as he tucked into the deviled eggs.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I repeated.

“And what is your job?” she asked.

“Um,” I said.

Corbin stared at me like he wanted to burn holes through my skull and into the wall. For a moment I could’ve sworn we had some sort of telepathic bond, because I could hear his voice in my head like he was speaking aloud: *Don’t fuck this up*. Even worse, Daniel was staring at me the same way, except his expression was a terrifying cross between amused and predatory.

“I’m a dancer,” I said.

The queen huffed and rolled her eyes. “Of course you are. Probably at one of those awful clubs full of banshees. Corbin always did have foul taste.”

Corbin said nothing, but I saw his eyes flash briefly with frustration.

“And what brings you back to the Realm, then, Corbin?” the queen continued. “And with a pet in tow?”

“Just looking into some details for my assignment, Your Majesty,” Corbin said. “It shouldn’t take long.”

“Ugh,” she said, and shivered melodramatically. “Let’s not discuss those foul things over this lovely meal. Daniel, how are preparations for next week’s festival going?”

Daniel’s gaze slid casually to the queen, and he smiled winningly. “Perfectly on track,” he said. “The feast will be served right before sundown, just after the completion of the games...”

I tuned him out as he rattled on about some event to celebrate something-or-other in the court, and the queen picked his brains for the minutiae of the details. They spoke to each other like Corbin and I weren’t even there, now that she’d apparently sated her curiosity for now. I sipped at my coffee and picked at my fruit, trying to fade into the background like the servants did so effortlessly, though that was impossible with the way Daniel’s gaze kept flickering over to me with that same creepy hungry smile on his face.

He knew I was lying. How much did he know? There was no way he hadn’t sensed at least some of my power in the Den—my mask wouldn’t be

able to beat UnSeelie senses like his.

But why did he wait? Why wasn't he telling the queen? I felt like a mouse being batted around between a bunch of cats. He was toying with me.

"Of course, Corbin won't be attending the festival," the queen was saying, "but Percy will be there, and I've asked him to open the games in full regalia, don't you think that will be lovely?"

"Absolutely," Daniel said.

The queen smiled at Corbin. "I know you're just terribly proud of your brother," she said.

"That I am," Corbin said coolly. "He certainly appreciates every chance to wear his regalia."

I pressed my lips together to hide my smile. The queen didn't seem to notice the dig. "He won't be competing, of course."

"Of course not," Corbin said, with a shake of his head.

"But he always does so well in the ceremonial openings. Don't you agree, Daniel?"

"He's quite popular among the people of the town, too." Daniel took a sip of his coffee. "It'll set a jovial tone for the remainder of the games."

Corbin really looked like he was moments from slamming Daniel's head into the surface of the table, but I was the only one who seemed to notice that. The queen and her top aide were far too used to living in their own world.

The rest of breakfast crawled by at a snail's pace, as coffees were refilled and deviled eggs eaten and the pig forever untouched like it was just a big, showoffy centerpiece. That made me feel bad for both the pig and the kitchen staff that had prepared it. The queen and Daniel chattered away about royal things that were somehow both frivolous and exhausting, and all I could do was sit there and fidget as I waited for Daniel to either decide he wanted to out me or let me free to leave this Realm like a bat out of hell.

Finally, after three cups of coffee and what felt like a million years, the queen nodded at Corbin. "You are dismissed," she said. Simple as that. No goodbye or promise to hear more about the case or whatever. Just curt dismissal like she was already sick of seeing Corbin's face—maybe she was.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Corbin said. He stood up briskly, and I did the same. As soon as we stepped away, servants swept in to clear our places at the table.

The queen's light-swallowing gaze fell to me expectantly.

What exactly did one say to the Queen of the UnSeelie after she serves them a nice meal like a particularly unnerving bed-and-breakfast hostess? Thanks for having me? It was delicious? See you around? I fumbled for words, and finally landed on “Thank you, Your Majesty,” as it seemed parroting Corbin was my best bet.

The queen nodded. Corbin took my wrist (a welcome change from all the arm-grabbing) and led me out the door. Daniel’s gaze burned into my back.

Thankfully, the throne room was empty of court members. We left in a hurry, rushing through the big hall and back down the narrow staircase, cutting around the servants until we were in the safely locked and warded tiny room of Corbin’s.

“Holy shit,” I said immediately. I wrestled with the laces at the top of the dress. “We have to go, like, right now. Like now-now.”

“What?” Corbin asked. “I mean—yes, we need to leave, but what happened? She’s disinterested in you. For now, at least.”

“That fucking guy,” I said. The laces were stuck in the eyelets. “Fucking ugly dress. Help me.”

I held my hair aside as Corbin undid the laces efficiently. “Daniel? Yeah, he’s an asshole. Pretty much everyone on the court is, I don’t know--”

“He knows who I am,” I snapped.

Corbin’s hands stilled at my lower back. “What?”

“I’ve seen him before.” I was too anxious and hurried to care about modesty right now, so with my back to Corbin, I wrestled out of the bodice of the dress then pulled on a plain long-sleeved shirt. “At Mala’s. He came into the shop when I was there. And he gave me the crazy eyes.”

I knew I looked ridiculous, standing in the center of the room in just my underwear and the shirt, but Corbin didn’t seem to notice at all. His face was pale as a ghost. “He saw you in the Den?”

“Yeah. I was masked, but he’s powerful, isn’t he?” I sat on the edge of the bed and tugged off my boots so I could get my jeans on. “He has to know something is going on.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Corbin snapped. He stuffed his belongings into his own pack with renewed urgency.

“How was I supposed to know who he was?” I shot back. “I get lots of creepy stares in the Den because there are a lot of creepy fuckers there!”

“This is bad,” Corbin said. “We need to go.”

“That’s what I’m saying.” I left the dress in a pile of silk on the floor and

swung my pack onto my shoulder. "Let's go."

I half-expected Daniel to be outside the door, but it was only the usual hustle and bustle of servants. We made our way out of the hall and into the courtyard, down to the stables where Hannie and Tannie were boarded. The same stableboy was there as we approached.

"Fetch mine, please," Corbin called. "We're in a rush."

The boy nodded and hurried into the barn. I had half a mind to follow him in myself, but Corbin's hand on my shoulder stopped me.

"Relax," Corbin said. "The only worse thing we could do right now would be look suspicious."

"Right," I said, shifting my weight from foot to foot. "Be normal. Chill. Relaxed."

He shushed me. I stared into the barn like I could make the stable boy work faster through sheer force of will.

"There you are, Corbin!"

I closed my eyes. Shit. So much for getting out of here unnoticed.

Daniel strode down the path from the castle with one arm raised. He'd changed out of his court finery into something a little more unassuming, brown slacks and a leather coat, so Corbin was the only one of us still in silks. At least he'd opened the collar a little to make it seem a bit more casual.

"Heading out already, are you?" Daniel called. "What a wonderful coincidence."

"Oh?" Corbin asked. "And you're...?"

"Going Earthside, yes," Daniel said. "Official court duty. Don't worry about it." He adjusted his jacket. "Mind if I tag along with you two?"

"Of course not," Corbin said easily, even as I opened my mouth to protest. He kept his hand tight on my shoulder. "Cecil's fetching the horses now."

Daniel hurried to the barn. "Boy!" he called inside. "Bring out Erasmo as well."

Darkly, I wondered if Daniel even knew any of the servants' names. But the stableboy called his acknowledgment.

"Wonderful," Daniel said, smiling slowly at me, showing off those sharp white teeth again. "It's always more fun to travel with friends."

Under the rich green canopy of the forest surrounding the palace, something deep in my chest began to feel warm and restless, like a bear beginning to creep its way out of hibernation. I thought it was just my natural reaction to being somewhere a little more welcoming than the palace, even if Daniel was still riding at the front of our single-file line. The trees always made me feel more like myself, and now the familiar warmth of Hannie's strong back under me did, too.

Except as we rode, the feeling grew stronger. Warm in my chest. Wriggling around. My power wasn't reacting to the trees—it was something stronger than that.

I glanced down at the cuff on my wrist. Parts of it were blackened, as if burned, in the shape of fingerprints where the queen had touched it when she grabbed me.

Oh, shit.

I smoothed my thumb over one of the dark spots and it spread slightly. Upon close inspection, the scorch marks were all shifting, just barely, growing like an infection over the metal. The more the cuff wore away, the weaker the hold around my power became.

Corbin glanced back toward me. I cringed and nodded down at the cuff; his gaze followed mine and his eyes widened. Our timeline just got a *lot* more crunched.

The pathway in the forest opened up to the lavender fields of soft grass. Beneath Corbin, Tannie tossed her head happily and pawed at the brush eagerly. Daniel gripped the reins of his own horse, an immense stallion so

black it was nearly blue, with a shiny braided mane and a flank that looked like it could shatter a skull with a kick.

“Hey, Daniel,” Corbin said with a smirk, “how fast is Erasmo these days? Think he can outrun my mare?”

Daniel scoffed. “Isn’t that a bit juvenile, even for you, Corbin?”

“Come on, then,” he said. “Tannie, hup!” He dug his heels into Tannie’s flank and urged her to a canter, then a gallop, tearing across the open field.

Daniel rolled his eyes dramatically, but as Tannie picked up speed, he couldn’t resist. He shot me a look, then shouted at Erasmo and drove his heels into his flanks as well, thundering off after Tannie.

My cuff was weakening more and more. I could feel the power beginning to leak out under the beautiful soft pink clouds of the Realm, rushing into my veins like gold. It wouldn’t be long before the cuff shattered and Daniel *really* knew what I was.

“Come on, Hannie,” I whispered. “Let’s show them what you can do.”

Honestly, I wasn’t exactly sure what Hannie could do. But she seemed to know what I meant anyway. I urged her forward with a flick of the reins and a nudge of my feet and she charged after the other two horses. Ahead, Daniel extended a hand as he rode and the portal split open effortlessly in the distance, like the sky was being unzipped. It swirled with rich, dark purple, like a sliver of Fae night amid the bright morning. My power was rattling the bars of its cage. I wondered if Hannie felt it as well—beneath me I could feel her heartbeat, her blood pumping, the rhythm of her breath. It felt like her body was an extension of my own. Like somehow the stronger my power got, the deeper our connection was.

Her hooves dug into the soft earth as she thundered forward. I gripped the reins and stood up in the stirrups, terrified but exhilarated as she galloped faster, and faster, gaining on Tannie and Erasmo with a speed that should’ve been impossible. And I shouldn’t have been able to ride her like this. But we both knew that I needed to get into that portal before Daniel did. If I was able to beat him to Earthside, maybe I could get away before my cuff gave out and he knew what I *really* was.

“Come on,” I murmured under my breath as Hannie’s pace ate up the distance. “We got this.”

Then we were beside Daniel and Corbin, matching their pace.

“Hell of a horse!” Daniel called.

I grinned and snapped the reins. Hannie went impossibly faster,

overtaking them both. Ahead of us, the portal loomed, a dark whirlpool.

“Te—Tara!” Corbin shouted from behind me. “Get back here!”

The cuff was weakening further. I couldn’t wait. Hannie seemed to know that too, and didn’t slow down. She leaped into the portal fearlessly, and the swirling darkness swallowed us both.

First: silence.

Then: the cold, unnerving sense of void. Of nothingness. This time I didn’t have Corbin’s hand on my wrist to anchor me. Hannie tossed her head beneath me, but made no sounds, as if the cool void of the portal had silenced her voice.

I looked over shoulder, expecting to see Daniel and Corbin burst into the nothingness behind me, but it was simply more void. I was nowhere. I was lost. I couldn’t navigate the void without Corbin to guide me.

On my wrist, my cuff felt newly heavy, despite its breaking down.

Either I was stuck in the void permanently, or I risked it and potentially revealed myself to Daniel. Or—if everything went right—I got Earthside safely.

Bad odds. Didn’t really have a choice, though. I patted Hannie’s neck soothingly, then took a steadying breath, and unclasped my cuff.

My power rushed through me. At this point, the molten-gold sensation was familiar, and finally didn’t knock me flat with its intensity. It was different without Corbin guiding me. I was in control. I wasn’t flooded with power that’d been trapped for my entire life. I was steadied by it.

The darkness cleared away like fog from my vision.

Hannie nickered and tossed her head with relief. She pawed at the ground, which was suddenly under her hooves instead of floaty emptiness. The space looked like the field in the Realm, complete with soft lavender grass, but there was no palace in the distance nor forest on the horizon. It was just grass, softly waving in the gentle breeze as far as I could see, but the openness wasn’t unnerving.

All around me were portals.

They floated around me, big enough for Hannie to step through, and shimmery around the edges. A few near me were places I’d been to or worked in before: there was the main downtown strip of Starling, and over there, the potholed streets of New Haven. Seemed handy, honestly, I could up my paycheck quite a bit if I could just bounce into other cities as necessary.

Other portals went to places entirely unfamiliar to me—and some of them



sent a shiver down my spine. Like one small portal that reeked of sulfur and showed dark shapes oozing back and forth interminably. And another that appeared to be deep underwater, where sirens snapped their teeth at passing fish. Yet another showed trolls and sprites locked in some kind of battle, snarling and raging as they swung weapons overhead. And those were only the ones closest to me. Portals dotted the landscape as frequently as wildflowers.

I closed my eyes and opened my senses, reaching out with my power toward the various portals. I shuffled through the auras like a deck of cards, until I felt the indescribable familiarity of home tugging at me through the other auras. Within that familiarity, too, was something else—a sharp hint of ozone.

“Let’s go,” I murmured to Hannie, then tapped my heels against her flank. She trotted around the portals, and I guided her by instinct until we were in front of the portal to Warwick.

Through the portal, I saw Corbin standing with his arms crossed, an anxious twist to his lips as he (very obviously) ignored whatever Daniel was currently prattling on about. They were in the same parking garage that we’d initially crossed over into.

Hannie pawed restlessly at the ground, eager to jump through. But I couldn’t return if Daniel was there. My cuff was basically destroyed in my pocket; if I went through without it he’d be able to sense my power immediately, and this entire fiasco would’ve been for nothing.

Corbin was right there, leaning against his sports car with his arms crossed over his chest. But we were separated by the Realms. I remembered how the Earthside portal looked: dark, swirling, opaque. Fuck. If only I could talk to him—somehow let him know that he had to get Daniel the fuck out of there. Otherwise, we’d both be stuck here for God knew how long, biding our time until Daniel gave up and left. Or worse—came back and found me in this in-between space.

Shit. I wondered if I should risk it. Just leap through and gallop by them and hope I made it out of the parking garage and out of sight before Daniel realized what was happening.

As I was in the middle of debating this insane plan with myself, Corbin turned and looked into the portal. His eyes widened minutely.

My breath caught in my throat. Was he able to see me?

How was that possible? How could he see me, but Daniel couldn’t?

He nodded at me, a small downward jerk of his chin, and then turned to Daniel. They had a brief conversation, inaudible to me. Daniel rolled his eyes, then climbed into a red sports car parked in the garage. He said one more thing out the window, with a sneer on his face, and then left.

Hannie pawed the grass again. Corbin watched the car leave, and then leaned against his car. He nodded at the portal again. I nudged Hannie's flanks, and she leaped through the portal.

Her hooves clattered onto the pavement, and she whinnied in discomfort and tossed her head.

"Relax, girl," I said, and ran a hand down her neck. "We'll be out of here in just a minute."

I sighed and closed my eyes briefly. The rich, molten sensation of my power settled down into its usual warm glow. I missed the incredible feeling of being fully powered in the Realm, but it was so fucking good to be Earthside. It felt like I'd been ceaselessly clenching my muscles for days, and finally I was able to relax. Behind me, the portal swirled closed, leaving just the plain garage wall.

I hopped off Hannie and patted her on the neck again. She nickered and flicked her ears. "What'd you do with Tannie?" I asked. "I expected to see both of those horses in the garage here, too."

Corbin shook his head faintly. Then, to my complete shock, he wrapped his arms around me and squeezed so tightly it lifted me off my feet. I exhaled a bright laugh; it was a sound of surprise and relief. Corbin's aura flooded my senses, and his arms were warm and strong around me.

He set me down and gripped my shoulder, like he wasn't ready to stop touching me. I found I didn't want him to let go. His gaze tracked over me rapidly, like he was scanning me for injuries.

"I thought you were trapped," he said. "In the Portal Realm. I didn't know what the hell to do after you jumped through with Hannie. That was so fucking reckless."

But there wasn't any real anger in his voice. If anything, he sounded slightly awed.

"I didn't know what else to do," I said. "I just knew I had to lose Daniel. Seriously, where are the horses?"

"Passed them off to a servant in the Portal Realm to take back to Isidra," Corbin explained. "Another benefit Daniel has of being in the court. I tried to find you in there, but we crossed over too quickly. I couldn't feel you."

“Feel?” I asked. “You couldn’t just wait around and look?”

“What do you mean?” Corbin asked. He tilted his head to the side. “You were in the Portal Realm for a while. What happened?”

“Uh, well, I jumped through, and it was a whole lot of nothingness, like it was the first time, but then I took off my cuff. Once I did that, it was like all the darkness just kind of dropped away. Then Hannie and I were just walking around on the Fae grass checking out all the available portals. There are a hell of a lot, I didn’t realize how many.” I shrugged. “Took a bit to find the one that led here.”

“You saw portals?” Corbin asked.

“Yeah, and you didn’t tell me there were portals that went undersea. That kind of freaked me out. I kept expecting the water to spill over.”

“You saw them. What did you see?” Corbin’s eyes flashed amber, staring shocked and curious at me.

“You’re being weird,” I said. “Why is this such a big deal?”

“No one can see the portals,” Corbin said. “There’s said to be too many. It’d be too overwhelming.”

“What?” I balked. “Then how do you use the Realm?”

“We navigate by feel,” Corbin said. “It’s a skill that’s handed down through the generations. You bring the portal you want toward you, focusing on where you want to go—generally the only portals you can use are the ones that an elder Fae has introduced you to.” He shook his head. “I was certain you’d be lost for that reason. You hadn’t used the portal into Earthside, so it should’ve been impossible for you to find it.”

I blinked. “Well. If I had known that ahead of time, I may not have been so gung-ho.”

I thought of all the portals I’d seen leading to all sorts of unknown places. Were they places not even Corbin had access to? The thought made my head spin.

“I could see you from the Portal Realm,” I said. “You and Daniel both. Could you see me?”

He shook his head. “I felt you. Your aura. I knew you were waiting for something. I nearly crossed back over myself, but I got this feeling...”

“Like I was waiting for Daniel to be gone,” I said.

He nodded. “And when I said I wasn’t sure if you’d make it though, Daniel got pissed and left.”

“That’s a relief,” I said, and ran my hand over my forehead.

The fact that Corbin could feel me through the portal made my heart do a strange little somersault. How was that possible? It had to be my own power, heightened by my time in the Realm. Maybe it'd be easier to find Ralnor now, with my knowledge of what he was doing and perhaps my powers slightly honed by Faerie. Now that I was back Earthside, even though I was exhausted, the leads spun out in my mind. I had to check in with Gram, first, and Oscar—shit. Oscar.

“Dammit,” I said. “We didn’t have time to get cigars. I promised Bob.”

“Oh, right,” Corbin said. He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small pack of Fae cigars, wrapped in lush violet fabric. “I got some off the kitchen crew. There was no reality in which we were going to have time to go *shopping*.”

I took the cigars from his waiting hand. Again, my heart did that little flip. He’d remembered them. I popped open the button on the pack, and there they were, six narrow cigars with that distinctive unique, slightly floral scent. Bob would be thrilled.

“Thanks,” I said quietly, still stunned that he’d gotten them at all.

Relief crashed over me like a wave. It was like something inside me cracked—we’d done it. We’d made it Earthside, in one piece, and we’d even blown off Daniel.

*We’d pulled it off.*

Corbin sighed and stepped back, then pushed both hands through his blond hair. “You seriously can’t pull anything like that again.”

“What?” I said, taken aback by Corbin’s sudden change in demeanor. I slipped the cigars into my pack. The rush of relief dissipated just as quickly as it had arrived. “We *survived*, Corbin—and we got good intel on what Ralnor is doing. We should be *celebrating*.”

“We survived on a hell of a lot of luck,” Corbin said. “Daniel’s still going to be looking for you. And if he finds out you made your way alone out of the Realm, and then tells the queen that... We can’t celebrate yet.”

I pressed my lips together. All I wanted was one moment to breathe. Just a single acknowledgment of our successes, instead of Corbin immediately launching into the remaining dangers. I *knew* it was still dangerous. I knew it better than anyone; I didn’t need him to remind me.

“You know what will get the queen off our backs?” I said, a little sharply. “Solving this case. I know Daniel will still be looking—you don’t have to be so condescending.”

“I’m not being condescending,” Corbin said. “It’s just the reality. We’re not out of the woods.”

“I know!” I nearly threw my hands up. “But we’re back on my turf now. If Daniel comes for me, I can handle it.”

“I don’t know if you can,” Corbin said, low. “You should’ve told me when you saw him in the shop. I never would’ve brought you to the Realm if I’d known. That was a huge oversight—a lot of unnecessary risk.”

“How was I supposed to know who he was?!” I snapped. “Listen, can you stop dwelling on what went wrong and focus on what we need to do next? You’re the one who asked me for help.”

I exhaled hard. Corbin could be so frustrating. We’d spent too much time together, that much was clear, and it was like the excess stress was making us both lash out. I needed a break.

Hannie flicked her ears irritably. She was feeding off my mood, that much was for sure. Standing here and fighting with Corbin was just going to make it worse. I hooked my foot in the stirrup and swung back onto her back.

“Tempie, come on,” Corbin said. “You can’t just ride your horse around Warwick.”

“I definitely can. Let’s take a breather and do some research on the runes.” I snapped the reins and led Hannie out of the parking garage at a brisk canter.

I was exhausted—I’d examined the bodies, risked my life having breakfast with the queen, *and* had to navigate Daniel Rutherford giving me creepy smiles all day, and *then* navigated the Portal Realm which was apparently a big deal, and Corbin was now hung up on the fact that I couldn’t read his mind.

“Tempie!” he called, but I didn’t look back. I needed a break from him. For now, he could manage this Daniel situation on his own if he was so damn fixated on it.

“Nice ride, Tempie!” Laura called, waving from the doorway of Candy’s Good Time Bar. I considered stopping at home to get my bike, but as much as I loved that piece of machinery, it felt better to still be astride Hannie’s back. Sure, it got me a few looks as we made our way at a brisk canter through Warwick, but it wasn’t that much weirder than seeing a werewolf lose track of time and shift in the middle of the street, or a couple of sprites and goblins scrapping during rush hour. Things happened. Mostly, people just got out of our way.

And it seemed like Hannie wanted to run. I could feel her excitement like it was my own: the new sights and sounds, the pavement under her hooves. Before I even realized where I was heading, I’d guided Hannie out of Warwick and onto the narrow road that led to Gram’s house. I let Hannie break into a gallop, like we had in the Realm, but this time the run was not out of desperation but out of simple pleasure. It felt good ride just to ride, to feel the wind against my face and the adrenaline of going fast, of being connected to this powerful creature beneath me. It was—and it shocked me to think this—even better than the bike, because Hannie was *alive*.

When we arrived at Gram’s, we were both sweating. Hannie huffed, nostrils flaring, tossing her head as she trotted down the driveway toward the house. It was early evening, and the sun was beginning to lower in the sky; in the tall grass around Gram’s house, the bugs began to chirp into wakefulness.

“Tempie!” Gram burst onto the porch with her eyes wide. She was wearing a flour-dusted apron—apparently I’d caught her mid-baking. “Where the hell did you find a horse? And where did you learn to ride it?”

“It’s kind of a long story.” I dismounted and took Hannie by the reins. “Any chance I can raid your fridge, first?”

“Not until we deal with the horse,” Gram said. “I just put the bread in the oven. It should be finished by the time we’re done with her.” She shook her head in disbelief. “It’s always something wild with you, Tempie.”

“Someone’s gotta keep things interesting around here,” I said.

Gram walked up to Hannie and held her hand out for inspection, before she stroked her hand gently down her nose. Hannie nickered and flicked her ears.

“She likes you,” I said.

“This isn’t an Earthside horse,” Gram said warningly.

“They’re pretty much the same, aren’t they?” I deflected.

“Well, let’s get her cleaned up,” Gram said. “Take her back to the barn. I’ll get a few things from the house.”

“The barn?” I asked. “No one’s used that barn for ages.”

“Because there haven’t been any horses on the property for ages,” she said. “Get on back there!”

The barn in the backyard wasn’t quite dilapidated, but it wasn’t in great condition, either. But there were stalls, and a spigot, and tools hanging on the wall. I hadn’t even realized all this stuff was even in this barn. I took off Hannie’s saddle and bridle carefully, and set them aside to clean later. Hannie huffed with relief and shook her head. Then I pulled a bucket from the stash of tools, filled it with cold water from the spigot, and set it in front of her. She dove in like a fish. “Thought that might be what you needed,” I hummed, and patted her on the side. Then I grimaced. She really was dirty, and sweaty, too.

Gran joined me, in old pair of overalls and with a few carrots and apples in hand. “I don’t have any real feed, but this should tide her over before we can get some,” she said. “What’s her name?”

“Hannie,” I said. “She’s going to like you even more once she sees those carrots.”

“Well, Hannie,” Gram said, “let’s get you cleaned up since my granddaughter ran you ragged.”

“She wanted to run!” I said with a laugh.

Gram walked me through the process of taking care of Hannie: washing the sweat off her coat with a big, soft sponge, then rinsing her down with the hose, and finally brushing her coat through. It was hard work, but Hannie

seemed relaxed and happy about it, especially with the apples she was eating, which made me happy to do the work, too.

“When’d you learn so much about horses?” Gram asked as she fed Hannie a carrot.

I focused on the brushing I was doing. “Recently,” I said. “It hasn’t really been a steep learning curve, though. With Hannie, it’s been easy. It’s like she can tell me what she needs.”

Gram hummed and gave me a strange look, like she knew something I didn’t know. That look was, unfortunately, familiar. Before she could pry, I asked, “But where did you learn all this stuff?”

“This house used to be a full farm,” Gram said. “I’ve got all sorts of farm skills that would surprise you.”

“Guess I never thought about this place having livestock,” I said.

It made sense though—there was enough space, and the yard used to be a paddock. When we finished cleaning Hannie up, Gram led her out into the paddock and gently thwacked her on the flank. Hannie ambled into the yard, moving around the grass with sleepy interest, munching on grass and flicking her tail happily. It’s wasn’t the royal grounds, and there wasn’t any Fae grass, but Hannie seemed happy enough.

“Come on,” Gram said. “I’ll fix you a plate and you can explain how you ended up with a Fae horse.”

Back in the familiar warmth of the kitchen, Gram had me pull the bread out of the oven while she changed out of her overalls and back into her canvas apron. She pulled a covered lasagna dish out of the fridge, then shooed me away from the cooling bread loaf and instructed me to serve myself a slice. She tapped her fingers on the thick crust of the bread, testing its doneness, as I wrangled a huge slice of lasagna onto a plate and maneuvered it into the microwave.

“All right.” Gram whipped out her biggest bread knife and began slicing the mouthwatering loaf. “Get to talking.”

“Well,” I said, bracing myself for her reaction, “Hannie’s from the UnSeelie Realm.”

“She’s *what*?” Gram whipped around.

The microwave beeped. I sat down at the kitchen table with my lasagna and took a huge bite just to stall a little bit. There really was no way to make this situation sound good, though. Gram chewed aggressively on a piece of sourdough, eyebrows raised expectantly.



“Okay,” I said, “first of all, it wasn’t my idea.”

“That doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence,” Gram said.

I walked her through the sequence of events: The skip, Corbin’s request, the strange bodies, the need to inspect in the Realm. That was bad enough. Once I got to the part about the queen, Gram looked like she was deciding if she wanted to demand details or just go ahead and throttle me. And when I told her I just leaped alone into the Portal Realm, she slammed her hand onto the counter and exhaled hard.

“And then when we landed back Earthside, I needed a break from Corbin, so I rode straight here,” I finished, a little lamely.

Gram stared at me in disbelief and no small amount of anger. I could almost see the thoughts tumbling around in her head as she struggled to decide which part of the narrative to chew me out about first. I hadn’t realized how bad it all sounded until I strung it together like that, but part of me still thought maybe she should be at least a *little* impressed that I pulled it off. She inhaled like she was about to say something, then snapped her mouth closed, shook her head, and walked out of the kitchen.

I finished my lasagna sitting alone at the kitchen table. It was better to let Gram cool off on her own, rather than chase her down and demand she unleash her anger on me. I finished eating, then packed the lasagna back into the fridge and began to clean up the kitchen. Might as well stay the night here and smooth things over with Gram in the morning if she was going to stew all night. I finished washing my dishes and set them in the drying rack, and a whinny caught my attention. Through the window over the sink, I watched Gram run her hand down Hannie’s neck as the mare chewed lazily on the grass. Gram looked like she was deep in conversation with Hannie, and she didn’t look quite as mad as she had when she stormed out of the kitchen.

I dried my hands and walked out the back door to the paddock. Hannie looked up as I approached and nickered, ears flicking like she was happy to see me.

Gram turned to face me with a heavy sigh. She crossed her arms over her chest. “You know, Tempie,” she said, “raising you, all I could think about was how important it was that I keep you safe.”

For once I held my tongue.

“After the death of your parents, I realized the extent of the danger you were in simply from existing,” she continued. “If Fae, Seelie or UnSeelie, knew you were Solstice, they’d want you to boost their own power. I did

everything in *my* power to keep your heritage a secret. And I did everything to teach you how to keep *yourself* safe, when I wasn't around to do it for you. Now you're just throwing all that away."

My heart sank. "Gram, I'm not—"

"You are," she interjected. "You're walking directly into the lion's den—hell, the lion's *mouth*, and for what? For money? For some good-looking UnSeelie guy who could kill you at any moment? What if the queen had figured out what you are, Tempie? You wouldn't be standing here with me. You'd be dead, or worse." Gram's eyes shone with unshed tears. "I don't want to watch you throw your life away for some *contract*."

Now I was nauseous, too. I knew Gram worried about me, but the reality that I upset her enough to make her cry was a new level of feeling shitty. But I hadn't realized why I was so eager to go to the Realm, either, not until I was there. I leaned against the fence behind me. The sun was below the horizon now, and the paddock was shadowed, while the sky was lit in rich purples and golds. It was so beautiful it reminded me of the twin moons of the Realm. I sighed.

"I'm not throwing my life away," I said. "And I didn't do it for Corbin, either. I just... Being what I am, and having to hide it for so long, it feels as if there's a piece of me missing."

Gram paused, hand still on Hannie's neck, and watched me thoughtfully.

"When I was in the Realm," I said, "it was like this dormant part in me just woke up. I'd never felt anything like it. It's not only that I was hiding who I was, but I was dampening it, too. Erasing it." I sighed again, recalling the already fading feeling of my power coursing unleashed through me. "I didn't know why I was so eager to go to the Realm, but I think the Fae part of me knew I needed it. I don't know what I'm going to do with that knowledge now, but I just... I needed to know what it was like to really be *complete*. Even if it was just for a moment."

"I didn't realize that," Gram murmured. "It was that different in the Realm?"

"It was," I said. "For the few moments I was able to feel my power without the cuff Mala made me. Mala compared me to an alligator."

Gram barked a surprised laugh. The sound made Hannie huff. "What? That sounds a little rude."

"She meant that Earthside, I was like a gator on land. And in Faerie, I might be like a gator in water."

“And were you?” Gram asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I could’ve really gotten used to it.”

Silence fell between us. I stared at my feet. We both knew that was impossible, and now that impossibility weighed heavily on my shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Tempie,” she said.

I exhaled hard and shoved those feelings into a box in my chest and locked them away to deal with later. Or never.

“It’s fine,” I said. “And there’s nothing going on between me and Corbin. He’s not a risk to my safety—not anymore—but I know what could happen if we got too close. It’s not happening.”

Worry flickered over Gram’s face. I could tell she didn’t quite believe me, but she wasn’t going to press. We’d had this conversation a lot, and there was no new territory to tread. I couldn’t undo what I’d done traveling to the Realm, and I couldn’t begin to explain the strange connection Corbin and I had without making Gram worry even more. I stuffed my hands into my pockets. Hannie was still nibbling on the grass, tail swooshing. As the sky darkened, I wished that I could have such a simple and pleasant existence. She had it pretty good here in Gram’s paddock.

“Well,” Gram said, “you know I don’t approve. But I can’t say I don’t understand.”

The crickets chirped in the grass, rustled gently by the breeze. As relieved as I was to be with Gram, part of me still longed for the pink twin moons of Faerie.

Gram shook her head minutely. “If this nonsense gets you killed, Temperance, I’m gonna bring you right back so I can kill you myself.”

I laughed, loud and surprised. Hannie looked up, ears flicking in irritation at the noise. “Come on, Gram,” I said. “You know I’d never do that to you.”

“You’re just scared of my wrath,” Gram said. “Let’s put Hannie up and go back inside.”

That night, curled into the big guest bed in what used to be my childhood bedroom, sleep eluded me. I couldn’t shake the guilt about the way I’d—well, for lack of a better word, I’d betrayed Gram. I’d gone against everything she’d taught me to do, and all the ways she’d taught me to protect myself. She wasn’t angry, but I could feel a new gulf between us forming and widening. But Gram was the only person to ever love me—all of me—for what I was, and I wasn’t going to hurt her any more than I already had.

Despite that, I still tossed and turned in bed. Maybe it would’ve been

easier to sleep if I'd had Corbin already passed out on the other side of the mattress. What a terrifying thought. It was only the sheer exhaustion that allowed me to drop into a fitful sleep.

The next morning, the rich smell of bacon and the crackling sound of the fryer woke me up; my feet hit the floor before my brain had even fully come online. Even after the lasagna I'd demolished last night, I was already starving again, like my body was still making up for lost time. I changed into some of my old clothes that hadn't managed to make it over to my apartment from Gram's—heavy canvas pants and a flannel—and padded into the kitchen.

The scene in the kitchen was like something from my childhood. Gram had the radio on, playing the classic rock station just loud enough to be heard over the sizzle of the bacon in the cast iron. The small kitchen table was already set, with a big bowl of fruit cut and the bread from yesterday sliced and toasted.

"All right, all right," Gram said. "You demanding beast."

The demanding beast in question was Hannie, of course, who had her nose stuck through the window over the sink and was staring demandingly at the fruit on the table. Gram grabbed a slice of apple from the counter and fed it to Hannie with one hand while she flipped the bacon with the other.

"Hope you're washing your hands between bites," I said with a laugh.

"What if I'm not?" Gram asked. "It's good for your immune system. Coffee's ready."

I poured myself a huge mug of coffee and took a moment to savor the familiar flavor and let the caffeine hit my system before Gram wrangled me into scrambling the eggs, as she always did. We fell into an easy, familiar rhythm, until breakfast was done and plated and Hannie was satisfied with all the fruit she'd been munching on and wandered back into the paddock to enjoy the sunshine.

We ate quietly for a few minutes, with just the classic rock to fill the silence. Gram, knowing me well, waited until I'd poured my second cup of coffee to breach the question.

"So," she said, "what are you going to do?"

"Well," I said, "I'm going to go to home and make sure Oscar didn't kill Bob. Then, I guess I'm continuing the search for Ralnor."

"You think that's wise?" Gram asked.

"No," I said. "But I've made it this far. And what Ralnor is doing... It's

unlike anything I've ever seen before, Gram. He's pulling power between planes. I don't want that kind of power Earthside unchecked. He's not just doing this for fun. Whatever he's planning, I want to stop it before it comes to fruition."

"What do you think that is?" Gram set her fork down and took a sip of her coffee instead, expression pinched like the conversation was wreaking havoc on her appetite.

"I don't know," I said. "But he's figured out a way to draw continuous power from already dead victims. That kind of magic can't exist unchecked. Not in my town. And what if it's not perpetual? What if he needs more victims? He'll come for more humans."

"And the supernatural police will be on it," Gram said. "It's not all on you."

"The supernatural police let go of this case once the Fae took it over," I said. "Even if Ralnor starts killing people again, no one is going to do anything about it while the Fae have jurisdiction. Everyone's too afraid of unsettling the balance between the Realms, even if it means a few humans get lost in the shuffle."

The supernatural police weren't generally concerned with human deaths, either. If they were looking for Ralnor, they were probably waiting on leadership from the Fae. As long as no more bodies turned up, there wasn't any urgency there. And the human police were even more useless, as they had to wait for the supernatural police to turn the case over to them before they could do anything.

So as long as Ralnor wasn't actively killing again, he could pretty much bide his time and work on whatever it was that he was trying to do. No one was going to do anything until it was too late.

"It kind of is all on me," I said. "Me and Corbin, at least."

Gram looked like she wanted to push back on that, but after the conversations we'd had, we both knew that wouldn't go anywhere. We went back to our breakfasts then, and I focused on demolishing my plate.

Once I was nearly done with my second cup of coffee, my phone buzzed in my pocket, shocking me with the vibration so badly I nearly jumped out of my chair. Gram just raised her eyebrows as I fished it out of my pocket and swallowed my last bite of toast before accepting the call.

"Tempie!" Carla said brightly. "Finally! I've been trying to reach you for a week!"

“A week?” I asked, eyes widening. I glanced at Gram for confirmation, and she nodded. Had it really been an entire week that I’d been away? I knew time moved differently in Faerie, but that shocked the hell out of me. I stood up and took the dregs of my coffee with me, then walked out to the porch. “Sorry, Carla, I was caught up in some business.”

“I figured as much,” she said. God bless that woman for never really wanting to get into my business. “I’m just glad you’re working again. You were holed up in that apartment for way too long.”

“I’m not working for Todd, though,” I said. “Just so we’re clear.”

“I know,” she said. “What case are you on now? The one the supernatural police have been yammering on about? The guy who skipped on a Fae bail?”

“What?” I asked. “How do you know about it?”

“Todd won’t shut up about it,” she said. “Apparently, the supernatural police are on his ass as well as the Fae. And since you’re not around, he needs somewhere to vent his frustrations, so Laura and I have been getting the bulk of it.”

“Sounds about right,” I muttered. “Yeah, that’s the case. Corbin went into Faerie to check out the bodies, and I’ve been wrapped up doing some research on the bodies.”

Which was true. I didn’t want to lie to Carla, but I didn’t exactly want her to know I had been in Faerie, either. She knew Todd had betrayed me, but she didn’t know why he had someone investigating me. If she knew about my nymph heritage, it wouldn’t be safe for me *or* her.

“Todd’s not been himself lately,” she said. “Something’s gotten into him. It’s even worse than it was before you left. He’s going off the rails.”

I pressed my lips together and said nothing.

“Do you have any idea what it is?” Carla asked. “He’s not talking to me, he’s just bitching. It’s starting to freak me out.”

Could it be related to whatever investigation he was trying to do on me? Carla must’ve thought so—she wouldn’t call me otherwise.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You should come in and talk some sense into him,” she said, but her voice sounded defeated, like she already knew what my answer was going to be. “An update on the case might soothe his nerves and make my life a lot easier.”

“You know I’m not doing that, Carla,” I said. “I’m not even the one that’s technically on this case. I’m just working it as a favor.”

“I know, I know,” she said.

“But,” I said, “we could get lunch.”

“Yeah?” Her voice brightened. “That’d be really nice, actually. I have some crazy dates to update you on.”

“The werewolf guy?” I asked.

“Him and a few of his packmates,” she said, and I could very nearly hear the smirk in her voice.

“Oh, yeah?”

“You’ll have to wait for a lunch date for details,” she said. “Call me soon, okay?”

We made tentative plans to get lunch as soon as this case was closed. I did feel bad, a little bit, for abandoning Carla like that—but what other option did I have? I sighed and ended the call. When I went back into the kitchen, Gram was nearly done with the dishes.

She nodded toward the coffeemaker. “There’s more if you need it. Work call?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Listen, about Hannie...”

Gram waved a hand. “I’ll take care of her. Not like you can keep a horse in your apartment, anyway.”

“Thanks, Gram,” I said. “Sorry about all this.”

She shook her head. “You’re so much like your mother.” She shook her head, dried her hands on the dish towel, and then pulled me into a hug. “Just promise me you’ll be careful for real this time, please?”

I nodded. “I’ll do my best,” I said.

“That’s not a promise,” Gram said. She sighed and patted my cheek. “But I guess it’ll have to do.”

“**T**here you are!” Bob shouted from the porch overhead as soon as I climbed out of the cab. “Where the hell have you been? It’s been a week!”

“And what a week it has been,” I said with a sigh. I climbed the stairs. Bob was in his chair, as per usual, with a coffee on the wood porch next to him and an open beer as well. “Seems like this has really been a lot of trouble.”

“Always is.” Bob scratched Oscar behind the ears, who was passed out on his lap with his belly exposed and his paws twitching in sleep. “This is a demanding cat. He split his time between my apartment and yours, and now there’s cat hair on all my furniture.”

“Thanks, Bob,” I said. I reached into my bag and pulled out the pouch of Fae cigars. “Here’s your payment.”

Bob groused to himself as he took it from me, muttering about how he preferred cash, until he popped the button and looked inside. Then his eyes widened.

“Yep,” I said. “Fresh from the Realm. It pays to have connections.”

“I need my lighter,” he said, and stood up so abruptly it rolled Oscar off his lap. “You just let me know whenever you need someone to watch Oscar, I’m happy to do it.”

I laughed as Bob raced inside to clip the cigars and light one. Oscar meowed loudly in irritation from the porch where he was blinking sleepily up at me after being so rudely tossed aside. I scooped him up into my arms and he meowed again, but then nudged his forehead against my face in greeting.



“Hey, bud,” I said. “Sorry it took me so long.”

I went inside my apartment and immediately face-planted onto my bed. Everything was in its place, as it should be, and there was even food in Oscar’s bowl and the air conditioning set at a reasonable seventy degrees. For all his grouching, Bob really was a good neighbor.

“Ugh,” I said. “Oscar, can you put the coffee on?”

He meowed, then hopped up onto the bed and started walking all over my back.

“Yeah,” I said, where my face was mashed into the pillows. “I missed you, too.”

As exhausted as I was, I couldn’t spend too much time lounging in my bed. I’d lost a full week in Faerie—and every minute with Ralnor on the loose was a risk. So before I could pass out, I slowly sat up, careful not to upset Oscar too much, and rubbed my eyes.

“All right,” I said. “It’s research time. We’re going to find that rune and figure this shit out.”

I changed into the most comfortable clothes I had, which was an ancient threadbare hoodie and a pair of leggings, and then ordered the biggest, greasiest pizza I could get from the local stoner-run pizza place downtown. The guy on the phone was definitely not completely sober, so I expected the pizza to arrive sometime before I passed out. Until then, though, I had to dig into the research. I put the percolator on and opened a beer, too, Bob-style, then set up my laptop on the coffee table and hunkered down on the couch. I was ready to settle in for a long night of research—a welcome break from the terror of the last few days in Faerie.

Of course, right when I got peak comfortable, someone knocked on my door. I sighed and tipped my head back against the couch. It couldn’t be the pizza. Maybe it was Bob, missing Oscar already. Maybe whoever it was would give up and leave.

Even though I had a feeling I knew who it was.

“Tempie,” Corbin said from the other side of the door. He rapped his knuckles against the wood again. “I know you’re in there, I can see the lights are on.”

“I’m working,” I said.

“Come on,” Corbin said. “This’ll only take a minute.”

I doubted that. Things never went that smoothly with Corbin. He was dangerously patient, though, and I had a feeling he was going to stand there

and be annoying until I caved. I was still irritated with him for how he'd reacted in the parking garage, but maybe chewing him out would make me feel a little bit better. So with some effort, I heaved myself back off the couch and padded over to the front door.

Standing on the (thankfully empty) porch, Corbin looked just as unfairly handsome as he always did. He had a faint, barely perceptible glow to his skin, too, like he was still benefiting from the time we'd spent in Faerie. But he looked more like himself, too, having lost the fancy court dress clothes and changed into the plain long-sleeved shirt I was used to seeing him in. And he looked a little cowed with one hand tucked into his back pocket and his amber-flecked gaze soft.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

"Well, tell me what this is about first," I said, crossing my arms over my chest just a little bit petulantly.

"It's about the case. Come on."

It wasn't just about the case. That much was obvious from the twist to his lips and the flickering of his gaze. Plus, if this was really about the case, he would've just called me. But despite my irritation, he was already here, and his ozone aura was nice and familiar, and it might help the research process to have someone else to bounce ideas off of.

"Fine," I said, and stepped out of the doorway.

"Listen." Corbin pulled the door closed behind him. "I—I owe you an apology."

That made me start. Corbin Frost, willingly apologizing to *me*? I turned around and stared at him. "All right. Let's hear it."

"I shouldn't have snapped at you," he said.

I crossed my arms over my chest, eyebrows raised expectantly.

"I'm not used to this," he continued.

"Used to what?" I asked. "Working with another person?"

"No." He paused. "I'm not used to caring."

My breath caught in my lungs.

"When you act like an idiot Earthside, I can handle that," he said. "Behaving recklessly on our turf is one thing. But when you just jumped into the portal without any guidance from the Faerie side..." He shook his head, like he couldn't even bear to finish the thought. "I thought that was it. That you'd be lost forever in the portal Realm. That everything we'd survived in

Faerie was for nothing.”

I wasn’t used to this side of Corbin, either. The annoying thing was—I got it. I understood where he was coming from. There was this strange unspoken connection between us already, and in Faerie, the risks to both of us were higher than ever. But at the same time, I couldn’t let his concern get in the way of the actual *case*. We had to have each other’s backs—without these misplaced protective instincts causing problems.

“You’re not my keeper, Corbin.”

“In Faerie, I was,” he said.

“As a ruse. Not for real.” I sighed and raked a hand through my hair. “You can disagree with my decisions, but you can’t act like you own me. I’m helping you out on this case as a *favor*, remember?”

His expression fell.

“We’re working together,” I said again. “It’s not anything more than that.”

Our eyes met. Corbin’s blue eyes flashed amber, and for a moment I half-expected them to turn red as his anger flared again. But nothing of the sort happened. He just watched me for a long moment, brows pulled together and lips slightly parted; if I didn’t know better, I’d say he was almost hurt by my statement. He straightened up and squared his shoulders, like he was about to either argue with me or drop the subject, but then a knock on the door interrupted him.

“I ordered dinner,” I said, and brushed by him to open the door again. I paid the extremely stoned teenager for the pizza, then brought the enormous box inside. “I needed this.”

Corbin shook his head in disbelief, or perhaps a little bit of fondness. “You don’t feel like you need something actually *nourishing* after our ordeal?”

“This is nourishing,” I explained. “Gram says sometimes you need to feed your soul as well as your body. Pizza feeds my soul.”

I opened the box and sighed at the glorious sight of all the grease and cheese.

“Not a single vegetable on it,” Corbin said.

“What are you, a schoolteacher?” I shooed him away from where he was peering over my shoulder. “Tomatoes are a vegetable. There’s beer in the fridge if you want one.”

“Thanks.” Corbin walked into the kitchen with the same ease that Oscar

did—the comfort of someone who knew his way around. Who belonged here. He leaned into the fridge and rooted around in my beer stash as I tried not to think about that. Instead, I focused on pulling a slice of pizza from the box without getting cheese all over my counter.

Corbin cracked his beer and settled onto the couch, then turned my laptop to squint at the screen.

“I was just getting started,” I said. “Looking into the runes.”

“All right,” he said. “Let’s dig in.”

If I were *really* petty, I would’ve kicked him out to prove a point and done the research myself. But the truth of the matter was that he had a lot of knowledge in that ancient pretty head of his, and the research would go a lot faster if I could just ask him pertinent questions instead of cracking open the old tomes I had stashed under my bed.

Well, I’d at least have to crack open one.

“You said you’d seen it before,” I said. “The rune.”

“I think so,” Corbin said. “But I can’t remember it exactly.”

“Well, that’s your job, then,” I said. Before I sat down, I pulled one of my most-used referential books from the stack at the foot of my bed. ‘The Professional’s Guide to Runes and Numerology’ was often derided as a layperson’s resource, but it really did have the most complete list of runes I’d seen. Once we narrowed it down, then I could dig out the serious tomes to do some cross-referencing. I handed it to Corbin. “Start flipping.”

“Where did you get this?” he asked, raising his eyebrows at the slick paperback cover. “A gift shop in a Den tattoo parlor?”

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to find lists of runes in one place?” I asked. “If you want to flip through pages and pages of explanation of runic stroke order instead of just seeing all of the runes in one place, I have those books, too.”

“Huh,” Corbin said. “Good point.”

“How many times do I have to remind you—this is my job?” I said teasingly. It was easy to slip back into our banter; it was part of our method now, weirdly enough.

We worked methodically through the pizza and the beer, until my eyes were fuzzy from staring at my laptop screen and my notes, and Corbin had worked through the entirety of the book of runes.

“Nothing?” I asked.

He shook his head, then nodded at the handful of runes he’d scrawled.

“I’ve got a handful that are similar, but nothing exact. Which makes me think...”

“Personal rune,” I finished for him.

“Right.” Corbin sucked his teeth. “That’s not great for us.”

An independently crafted rune was harder to break, and harder to understand. Somehow, we had to pick apart the stroke order of Ralnor’s rune to align it with existing runes—to see what disparate parts he’d combined with his own magic to siphon power from the bodies.

“What about the texts from the Wheels’ house?” I asked. “Could those have information on runecrafting?”

Corbin blinked. “Possibly. Especially if Ralnor was connected to whoever provided the books to the Wheels.”

“Maybe they were testing it,” I said. “Finding ways to get power to move between Realms.”

“Which would mean this could be a step toward something even worse,” Corbin said. “A test run.”

“He’s obviously planning something,” I said. “Why else would he be gathering all that power but not doing anything with it?”

“The Wheels’ texts are at my place,” Corbin said. “Come on, we can head there now.”

“Are you kidding?” I rubbed my forehead and squinted at the time on my laptop. “It’s nearly two in the morning. I need to sleep.”

“Oh,” Corbin said, blinking. “Right. You humans and your sleep.” He glanced around the apartment. “You know, if you wanted to get a head start tomorrow, I could crash here--”

“Nope,” I said, and levered to my feet. I didn’t want to deal with what might happen if we tried to squish into my tiny bed. I didn’t want to deal with what I knew I would want. “Go home and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Corbin looked at me for a long moment. His eyes flashed amber again, and there was a curl to his lips that looked like he was about to say something else. But then he seemed to change his mind, and just nodded and stood up.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll let you know if anything turns up in the research.”

“You should get some sleep, too,” I said.

“Won’t be able to,” he said. “Not when we’re finally getting somewhere.”

That part I did understand. If it wasn’t for the extremely human exhaustion tugging at me, I’d be doing the same thing.

“Lock the door behind you, will you?” I said, and then dragged myself into the bathroom without waiting for a response. I shucked off my clothes and turned on the shower, sending a prayer up to whatever deity would listen. The prayer worked, because I did have hot water. I turned it up as hot as it would go, and then climbed under the spray and let the water pressure beat the tension from my shoulders.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. I wanted the hot water to wash away the weight of everything that had happened over the past few days: the rush of being in Faerie, the horror of meeting the queen, the ease of doing it all with Corbin at my side.

Ever since Corbin showed up at Get Out of Jail Bail Bonds and informed me that we were working together, my life had gotten more and more complicated. Before him, I’d had a routine. Things hadn’t been too exciting, but they’d been exciting enough. I’d had a reliable job, a comfortable routine, and I’d known who I was. Temperance Fleur, bounty hunter, secretly half-Seelie but mostly human.

Corbin had upended all that by inviting me into Faerie. I felt like I was losing myself. Like I’d been living a lie all those years. I was the gator searching for the river. Sometimes I wished I’d never known about the river at all.

A thud outside the door pulled me from my reverie. I paused. Likely it was Oscar, jumping off the kitchen counter or something.

But then another thud sounded, and then a crash, like glass breaking. Heavy footsteps, too, and sounds of struggle. Shit—definitely not Oscar. I leaped out of the shower and pulled my bathrobe on briskly, leaving the water running as I felt my power racing through me, ready to leap into action, untamed and eager without my jewelry on. I steadied myself and opened the door.

Corbin and a tall figured shrouded in a dark coat and mask were wrestling in the middle of my living room. The couch was knocked askance, and the coffee table upended; in the place where the coffee table was, the stranger had Corbin pinned to the floor with his hand wrapped around his neck. Corbin didn’t look scared, though—his sharp teeth were bared as he dug his fingers hard into the meat of the stranger’s bicep, ready to throw him. The stranger had a knife in his other hand, and Corbin’s forearms were nicked and bleeding from long cuts where he’d defended himself from the knife. Atop the fridge, Oscar was hissing loudly.

“Hey!” I shouted.

I raised one hand toward the intruder, and it glowed golden, threateningly. The intruder looked up, but no features were visible through the darkness of his mask, not even his eyes. It was unnerving, like he was a shadow magicked into sentience. Gazing into that dark void where a face should be made my blood freeze in my veins, and my power still, like I was suddenly pinned in place like a butterfly. But the intruder froze, too, like we had the same effect on each other.

Corbin roared, a rumbling, demonic sound, and slammed his head forward. He smashed his forehead into the intruder’s chin, knocking him off balance. The intruder lurched backward. Suddenly, the strange frozen sensation dissipated, and I howled and let my power loose, sending a bright flash of golden light toward the intruder. He rolled away, managing to dodge it, and the bolt hit my wall instead, leaving a faint scorch mark where it dissipated. Then the shadowed figure leaped to his feet, weightless and silent, and for a moment I thought he was going to lunge at me. But instead, he turned to the window and jumped through it, shattering the glass like it was nothing. I raced to the window and peered down.

Nothing. He was gone. The night was silent, as if the intruder had melted into the shadows that he’d come from.

“Holy shit,” I said. I exhaled and reined my power back in; the glow under my skin faded. The I tugged at the hem of my bathrobe—it barely hit my knees, seriously, I needed something more comfortable—and pushed my sopping wet hair back. “What the fuck was that?”

Corbin exhaled hard. He was on his hands and knees in the center of the room, body heaving with exertion. His head hung low toward the ground, and his blond hair was wet with sweat. Tendrils of dark demonic power wound from his wrists to his shoulders, opalescent and shivering.

“Hey,” I said, lowering my voice. “You okay?”

“You’re coming with me,” he said, without lifting his head. “To my apartment.”

“Now, come on, I don’t think--”

“Tempie!” he roared, his voice somewhere between Fae and demon, tinged with that dark rumble. He looked up and his eyes were red to the sclera, his teeth elongated and too big for his mouth. “You’re coming.”

I said nothing. Arguing with Corbin when he was in demon-mode was like arguing with a drunk werewolf at Candy’s. It wasn’t going to end well

for either of us, and he might bite off my head. I pressed my lips together.

He was probably right, too. If the intruder could disappear so easily, it'd be just as easy for him to come back. "All right," I said. "Get yourself together."

Corbin snapped his teeth at me, but I knew he was just riled up from the fight. I pulled on some sweatpants and a hoodie quickly, and then carefully eased Oscar off the fridge.

"Tempie!" Bob hollered through the wall as he banged his fist on it. "What the hell is going on over there?"

"Oh, good," I said. "Bob's awake." I nuzzled Oscar's forehead against mine. "Sorry, bud, you gotta go on vacation again." He meowed, then batted at my face in annoyance. At least he kept his claws in.

I knocked on Bob's door and he answered, looking furious and almost—well, almost a little frightened.

"What the hell was that?" he snapped. "What the hell broke?"

"Just a minor break-in," I said. "Window's shattered. I'll get it fixed."

"Jesus, Tempie," he said. "Can't you tell them to break into your apartment at a reasonable time of day?"

I set Oscar down and he scurried right into Bob's apartment like he lived there. "I'll be back soon. Please don't tell the landlord."

Bob pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'll need more cigars for this."

I thanked him and hurried back into my apartment. Inside, Corbin was back to normal—or as normal as he ever got. The power snaking up and down his arms had dissipated, and but his eyes were still flecked with red within the blue. He'd righted the coffee table, at least.

"He took your phone," Corbin said. "And the laptop got smashed."

Smashed was an understatement. I didn't know how the fuck it happened, but it looked like someone had literally ripped my laptop into two pieces. "Great," I said. "Good thing I backed up my research."

"You did?"

"Of course not," I said. "Come on, let's go before he comes back."



“So who the hell was that guy?” I asked as soon as Corbin cracked two beers for us. I was leaning against the spotless granite island in Corbin’s spotless kitchen. The ride to his apartment had been tense, with Corbin still harboring a little bit of demonic power that had him hitting the accelerator of his sports car a bit too hard. Being in his own apartment, with its multiple locks and excessive warding, had cooled off his nerves enough that I thought we could have a reasonable conversation. “What happened? Put those down. Come here.”

I grabbed a dishrag from Corbin’s counter and ran it under the tap.

“What?” Corbin asked. “I’m fine.”

“You’re going to bleed all over this nice countertop.” I ran the rag over his sliced-up forearms, cleaning up the dried blood and wiping away the excess oozing from the shallow cuts. “Can I?”

Corbin said nothing, but his gaze was softer than it’d been all night. He nodded.

I smoothed my palm over his forearm. I didn’t even have to consciously unleash my power. It was like my life-bringing powers were already reaching for him, eager to heal. The light glowed, barely perceptible under my palm, and erased the cuts. Corbin watched, silent, as I did the same to his other forearm as well. Then I took the rag back in hand and wiped away the remaining blood, leaving the pale, unblemished skin clean.

“It would’ve been fine,” he murmured. “I heal fast.”

“I know you do,” I said. “No need, though.”

I kept my hand on his forearm, suddenly unwilling to let go as my

thoughts tumbled. What would've happened if Corbin hadn't been there? Would I have been able to defend myself when caught so unawares?

"Tempie."

I looked up. Corbin's eyes burned amber. His skin was warm under my hand. My heart hammered hard.

Coworkers.

What a crock of shit.

I dropped his arm and took a step back. "So what happened?" I asked again.

Corbin sighed and took a sip of his beer. I waited patiently, watching him as he turned the evening over in his mind, in the quiet, cool stillness of his gorgeous apartment.

"I left your apartment," he said, "and I was halfway to my car when I felt the same aura that I'd felt in my room in Faerie. The aura of whoever had broken the wards. I came back and your door was broken open and the intruder was inside. I don't know what he was looking for—I just attacked him. It was instinctive. But his power is no joke. He almost overpowered me."

"Was it Ralnor?" I asked. "Does he know we're looking for him?"

"I don't know," Corbin said. "I couldn't get a read on him through the mask. It was obscuring his power, too. All I know is he was trying to get to you. And I wasn't going to let that happen."

"We need to find Ralnor before something like that happens again," I said. I shook my head. "I'll go to the Den tomorrow. I need to tell Mala that Daniel was in her shop—she needs to know the court is keeping an eye on her."

"Good call," Corbin said with a nod.

"All right," I said. "I really do need to get some sleep. At least before the sun comes up." I sighed and set the beer aside, only half-finished. "Thanks for letting me stay here."

Corbin nodded again. His brow was pulled together and his expression tense, like he had more to say, but he wasn't saying a word. I really did need to sleep, too; with a sigh, I headed toward the small guest bedroom.

"Wait," Corbin said.

Standing at the door to the guest bedroom, I turned around. Corbin strode toward me with purpose, shoulders square, but his footsteps were soft on the hardwood.

“What is it?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, it’s just...” He paused, then finally lifted his gaze to meet mine. “When I saw the door open, I was so sure I was too late. That I’d catch Ralnor in the act, the same way that Fae woman had. I thought you’d be the next body I’d bring to Faerie.”

“Come on,” I said, trying to tease, “I’m not that defenseless.”

The joke didn’t land. I couldn’t find any laughter in my voice. Corbin wrapped his hand around my wrist and his gaze lingered at the burning point of contact. “I know you’re not,” he said. “I know that.”

Then he pulled me close and wrapped his arms around me.

It was a sudden, hard embrace, and he pulled me flush against him with a sigh. I stood frozen, shocked for a moment, before the warmth of his body and the familiar sharpness of his aura settled some small anxious part in me, and I wrapped my arms loosely around his waist.

He tucked his face against my neck. “I’m just glad you’re okay,” he murmured, so close I could feel the movement of his lips against my skin. He stayed like that for a long moment, pressed close and breathing me in.

I knew I should push him away. But—he’d been really stressed out by this whole ordeal, and if this comforted him a little, well, maybe that was a good thing.

As much as I tried to deny it, the closeness felt good to me, too. Really good. But strange, too—this kind of affectionate behavior wasn’t exactly a normal thing for an UnSeelie man to do. The kissing made sense. But this? Just craving closeness? Craving my aura?

This was the kind of behavior a Fae showed a mate. We’d grown closer over the course of working together, sure, but not *this* close. The past few days had really shaken him up.

I slid one hand to his nape and pulled him away. He released me with some reluctance, and his irises gleamed amber. The contact between us tingled. The kisses we’d shared in the past flooded my memory; I watched as his slightly elongated teeth pushed into his lower lip.

I swallowed and turned away. “I’m gonna get some sleep,” I said. “You should, too.”

“Right,” Corbin said. His voice was low. “Get some sleep.”

The guest bed was comfortable and smelled faintly of Corbin’s aura. My thoughts tumbled around my mind, but eventually, I slept.

We spent the next day redoing the research we’d lost and carefully not

mentioning the behavior from last night. At the beginning of this investigation, I'd thought Corbin would be irritated by the drudgery of investigative legwork: the research, the review, the headache-inducing digging through piles of material. But as we worked side by side, I found he was just as focused on it as I was, without complaint. It made it easier, too, having him beside me on the couch to bounce ideas off of or steal his pen to scratch notes. We were getting better at ignoring the flickers of odd feelings between us.

We couldn't address it now, not while Ralnor was on the loose and apparently trying to come for me. As soon as the sun went down, I put on my jewelry to head to the Den.

"Why not just call her?" Corbin asked as we climbed into his sports car. I didn't even push back when he'd said he was coming with—with Ralnor around, I could use the backup.

"Hunch," I said. "Plus, she might have some ideas on how to track him. Bring the notebook with the runes, please. And your mask."

He nodded. We made our way to Candy's, then straight into the Den, both of us wearing our small charms to magically mask our identities. Outside Mala's shop, I put a hand on Corbin's chest.

"Wait here," I said. "Keep an eye on things."

"Right."

I left Corbin posted outside the shop like a guard dog as I stepped inside.

There was a chill to the usually warm atmosphere of Mala's. There were no other patrons in the shop, but it looked like it'd been hastily cleaned up: shelves askance with the materials sloppily put back like they'd been toppled, tables free of goods, shattered glass still glinting in the corners.

"Mala?" I tugged my masking jewelry off my neck and tucked it into my pocket. "Are you here?"

Mala stepped out of the back room. I gasped at the state of her appearance as my stomach turned. There was a purple bruise around one of her eyes, and her arm was bandaged close to her chest.

"Mala!" I rushed toward her. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she said, waving me off. "Just a break-in. He didn't steal anything—seemed like he was looking for something. You're back from Faerie?"

"Who was it?"

"I don't know," Mala said. "He had on some sort of charmed mask; it was

so densely black I couldn't make out any features."

"Shit." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Shit, shit, shit."

"What? You know him?" Mala asked. "I'm just glad you're alive, Tempie, it'd been long enough that I was starting to worry. How did the cuff work?"

"Fooled the queen," I said. "And I think I do know him."

Mala's jaw dropped. "You met the queen? Counting on my cuff to keep you safe?"

"It was just for an awkward breakfast," I said. "That same guy broke into my apartment. Whoever he is—it's not safe for you to stay here."

Mala blinked, shaking her head rapidly like this was too much to process at once. "That same masked man broke into your apartment? What was he looking for?"

"I don't know," I said, "but I get the feeling he's not going to give up until he finds it."

She swallowed, face paling. "I wonder if it was something of mine, or something of yours."

"I wish I knew," I said. This shit always happened—anyone who got close to me ended up in the crossfire around me. "I'm sorry. This wouldn't have happened if I hadn't asked you—"

"None of that," Mala interjected. "I'm just glad you're okay. And we are not done talking about you having the balls to meet the queen, but I'll table it for later. The guy who broke in—he clearly didn't find what he was looking for here."

"It's got to be related to the case," I said. "He might come looking again."

"I can handle it," she said.

"Mala, listen." I was beginning to feel a little frantic, knowing the intruder had been here, too. What if something had happened to Mala? Something worse than what already had? That was on me. "Before I went to Faerie, I saw a man here, in your shop."

She nodded slowly. "I remember that. You left in a hurry."

"I just got a weird feeling about him," I said. "Turns out I ran into him again in Faerie."

"He was UnSeelie?"

"Worse than that," I said. "He was the queen's right hand."

"Oh, Lord above," Mala said. She heaved a sigh. "The queen's right hand in my shop. What was he looking for?"

“I don’t know,” I said, “but it looks like they sent someone again. They’re not going to leave you in peace.”

Mala closed her eyes. She looked even more exhausted than I felt. Guilt chewed at me. This was how things were going to be. People who got close to me would get caught in the crosshairs. The least I could do would be to get her to somewhere safe.

“Well,” she said, “you’d better end this contract soon, then.”

“I’m working on that,” I said. “All I’ve really got to go on is a rune I found on the victims. Looks like a personal rune the killer made himself. You wouldn’t be able to do anything with that, would you?”

She shook her head. “Unlikely. Just a rune won’t do you much good. Did you see what kind of magic he’s working with?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s some kind of crazy dark magic I’ve never seen before. He’s siphoning powers from the bodies, using them as a kind of battery, or something like that. It didn’t like me, I’ll tell you that much. First, it tried to drag me in, and then when I got too close, it zapped me.”

“You interacted with it?” she asked, head tilting to the side.

“Just a little,” I said. “I was trying to figure out what it was.”

“I can’t do anything with the rune,” she said, “but you might be able to, if you’ve touched his magic. You might be able to trace it.”

“How?” I asked. “Can you show me?” My mood went from sour to anticipatory in a flash. A lead. A *real* lead.

“I can,” she said. “But not here. Not if the UnSeelie might be watching.”

“I’ve got somewhere we can go,” I said. “You can stay there as long as you need.”

Corbin straightened up, looking more than a little surprised when I walked out of the shop with Mala on my heels. She locked the door behind us, only a little awkwardly with one hand. Corbin briskly took her bag from her and heaved it onto his own shoulder.

“Hell’s bells,” he muttered. “What’d you pack in here, bricks?”

“Just some supplies,” Mala said curtly.

“Our friend who visited us at my place also paid Mala a visit,” I explained.

Corbin’s expression darkened. “I see.” He nodded at Mala. “You shouldn’t stay here.”

“That’s what I said. Come on, let’s go.”

We left the Den in a hurry. I didn’t have that terrible watched feeling, like

I'd had when I'd thought Daniel was pursuing me, but still as I moved through the crowd, it felt like every patron, goblin and banshee and werewolf alike, was potentially looking to get their claws in me. Or worse, in Mala.

This case was making me paranoid. I hardly breathed until we made it out and back to the familiar streets of Warwick. I crawled into the tiny backseat of Corbin's sports car, giving Mala the passenger seat.

"We're going to my grandmother's," I said. "It's private, and she's got plenty of space. Used to be a farm."

"Aha," Corbin said. "So that's where you're storing the horse."

"You have a horse now?" Mala asked.

"Just drive, Corbin."

Gram was standing on the porch when we pulled up. The warm yellow lights glowed invitingly, over the front door and in the windows, and there was little sound save for the chirping of the crickets.

"Ah," Mala said. "I should've known we'd end up at Martha's."

"You know my grandmother?" I asked.

"Of course I do," Mala said. "She was as protective of your mother as she is, I assume, of you."

"That's an understatement," I muttered.

"Martha!" Mala called as she climbed out of the car. "What a sight for sore eyes."

"Mala?" Gram asked, shocked. "How on earth are your knees good enough to get into that car?"

Mala laughed, bright and surprised, then hurried up the porch steps to wrap Gram into a hug. "It's been too long," she said. "Hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all," Gram said. "As long as you'll tell me what the occasion is."

"It's not great news, unfortunately," I said. I closed the passenger door to the car. "Mala's shop was raided. I don't think it's safe for her to stay there until I end this contract. So I was hoping..."

"Of course you can stay here," Gram said to Mala. "As long as you need. I might need some help around the place, though, considering I've got a few extra chores, ever since Tempie dropped off an UnSeelie horse in the backyard."

I cringed. "Yeah. It was kind of an impulsive decision."

"Just *kind of* impulsive?" Corbin asked. He closed his door too and locked the car.

All three pairs of our eyes landed on him. Corbin looked just as put-together as he usually did, in dark jeans and a plain shirt and jacket, with Mala's bag swung over his shoulder again.

"You must be Corbin," Gram said coolly. "I did ask Tempie to bring you over for a meal, but I'd hoped it wouldn't be under running-for-your-life circumstances."

"Most of our interactions involve running for our lives," Corbin said. "Thanks for hosting us."

"Gram," I said, "Mala and I have some work to do quickly. Can we use the study?"

"Sure," Gram said. "Corbin, I'm sure you know about these horses. Come help me close up the stable."

Corbin glanced at me with more fear in his eyes than I'd ever seen before. "Will you need any help, Tempie?"

"Nope," I said cheerfully. "Just Mala's. You can help out Gram."

"Of course." Corbin approached the porch just enough to pass Mala's bag into her hand. "Corbin Frost, at your service."

"Call me Ms. Fleur," Gram said. "This way."

Corbin grimaced at me over his shoulder as he followed Gram around the house toward the stable.

"She's a force to be reckoned with, your grandmother," Mala said with fondness. She hiked the bag higher on her shoulder. "Let's find your skip, shall we?"

I led her inside, past the kitchen and down the hall to Gram's study. Study was a strong word, though—it was a tiny room with a table and a sewing machine, with the walls lined with bookshelves stuffed with a mix of Fae tomes and beat-up mystery paperbacks. Mala looked around approvingly.

"This'll work perfectly," she said. "The more you can focus, the better."

I grimaced. "What exactly does this entail?"

She unpacked her bag carefully. First, she spread a plain thick black cloth over the table, and then laid a mirror glass-down on top of it. Then she set up candles around the edge of the table, lit them with a match, and sat down across from me.

"All right," she said. "Let's do a little scrying."

"I've never--"

"We'll do it together," Mala said. "Since you've touched the killer's magic, you should be able to activate the rune, and then I can guide the



screaming process. You have the rune?" She gestured for me to sit down across from her.

I nodded, then flipped the notebook to the page where I'd copied the rune. "Good," she said. "Give me your hand."

She took my hand in hers, then before I even realized what was happening, she pulled a small knife from her pocket, flipped it open, and pricked the tip of my finger with the tip.

I hissed. "Hey, warn a girl, will you?" I withdrew my finger; blood beaded at the tip.

"Write the rune," she instructed.

I turned the mirror over and traced the shape of the rune onto the glass, staining the mirror with blood.

"Good," she said. "Now, give me your hands."

We held our hands together over the mirror. Mala's eyes glowed golden. It was easy to forget she was Seelie, just like me—and she knew a lot more about how to use Seelie power than I did.

"Now," she said, "look into the mirror. Bring forth the memory of how it felt to touch the killer's power. Together, we should be able to follow it."

I swallowed and tightened my hand around hers. Under the rune on the glass, the mirror reflected the ceiling of the study, but it seemed to be slowly disappearing as a dark mist swirled into the glass. With my eyes on the rune, I did as Mala instructed. I thought of the bodies in the healer's chamber, hovering frozen in time; I thought of the dark tendrils of magic curling around them, and the oozy, heavy feeling of the power as it'd swept over me and tried to draw me into it.

"Good," Mala said. "Good, keep it up."

I could feel it like I was back in the chamber. Thick, heavy, cold, crawling all over my skin and it tried to suck my power from me.

The gold in Mala's eyes swallowed the sclera. She turned her eyes toward the ceiling. Her hand was still on mine, but I couldn't feel it, as I focused on the memory—or summoning—of Ralnor's power.

"Look," Mala said. The dark mist within the mirror swept aside, and it erased the bloodied rune, as well. "This is the source."

The mirror showed a dilapidated building, surrounded by old trees and half-consumed by ivy. I realized suddenly I was looking through someone else's eyes as they approached the building. A gloved hand extended and smoothed over the door, then tapped series of divots in a particular order. The

door rumbled, then swung open.

Inside bustled with activity. The space looked much larger than it had on the outside, extending outward in every direction. It was dark, dirty, and noisy, and my nose burned like I could smell the Dust floating through the air. The UnSeelie here were dealers and addicts, the humans were bloodbags, and the other supernaturals were somewhere in the middle.

Then, suddenly, the eyes I was seeing through seemed to notice my presence. I stood up against my own volition.

“Shit,” Mala said. “Shit—Tempie, don’t let go of me!”

“Hello,” I said, in a voice that wasn’t my own. “If you wanted to come visit, all you had to do was ask.”

The power crawling over my skin suddenly felt heavier. Colder. On the table, the mirror began to shiver and vibrate. We’d opened a door, and now something was trying to come through.

I closed my eyes, then tapped the power deep in my core and let it out in a controlled burst, just enough to shake off the phantom sensation of Ralnor’s power. My body was my own again, my voice, too, and I released one of Mala’s hands.

“Tempie!” she said, her eyes still glowing, but her expression open with terror.

I slammed my fist into the mirror, shattering it.

The room went still. The glass of the shattered mirror reflected nothing but the ceiling. The gold cleared from Mala’s eyes. I dropped her hand and then collapsed into the seat with a heavy exhale. I was worn out down to my bones—even such a brief, minor possession was enough to leave me drained.

“Jeez,” I said. “You didn’t tell me they could scry back.”

“That’s never happened before,” Mala said. She looked even more shaken up than I felt. “He shouldn’t be able to reach back.”

“Of course not,” I said. “I always seem to be running into firsts.” I rubbed my hand over my forehead. “At least I have a lead on where he is. I should get to him before he can get to me. Did you recognize that place?”

“I couldn’t see it,” Mala said. “I was only following the power to its source. You were the only one who is able to see.”

“Great. Awesome.” I sighed. “All right, well, there were a hell of a lot of supers there. Let me get Corbin in the room too—between the two of you, someone’s got to know what it was.”

Mala nodded. She looked exhausted, beaten down; suddenly my own

worries seemed almost trivial.

“Hey.” I took her hand in mine again, but gentler this time. “One more conversation, then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“I know,” she said. Her gaze softened as she looked at me. “That’s what I’m worried about.”

“I should’ve known,” Corbin said, gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. “That should’ve been the first fucking place we looked.”

I adjusted my rings anxiously as we drove toward Stanley’s forest. Mala had heard of the location when I’d described it—an underground community ruled by exiled UnSeelie. It was unregulated and made the Den look like a children’s amusement park. Corbin, however, had known where it was.

“I’m so stupid,” he hissed to himself. “That place hasn’t been of any import in nearly a hundred years. It’s just a mess of Dust addicts and Fae and supers who are too far gone to maintain a life in regular society. I’d thought Ralnor wouldn’t be caught dead there.”

“My skips don’t even go there,” I said. “I would’ve known it.”

“It’s too dangerous,” he said. “You have to know *how* to get in—and you have to know people on the inside, or be able to defend yourself.”

“The perfect place to hide out, then,” I said. We drove toward the forest, Corbin still seething with anger.

“Hey,” I said as I turned my rings around on my fingers, “did my grandmother give you too much trouble with Hannie?”

Corbin glanced over, surprised, like he couldn’t believe I was thinking about that now. I couldn’t, either, but I’d never seen him look so anxious. If I was going to be drained by a serial killer in an underground lair, I at least wanted to know what my grandmother had said to him.

“She was cordial,” he said.

“She’s been trying to get me to bring you around,” I said.

“She mentioned that,” Corbin said. He shook his head. “She said I’d been given enough trust, and she wasn’t going to be the one to give me any more.” He smirked. “Can’t fault her for that.”

“That’s better than I expected,” I said. “I thought she was really going to chew you out.”

“I think she might’ve, if Hannie hadn’t been so excited to see me,” he said. “She trusts the horse’s opinion of me.”

“Probably more than she trusts my opinion,” I said. “Let’s deal with this shit and prove her right, huh?”

Corbin nodded. His gaze went steely as he drove further out of Warwick toward the forest. I went through my armory for the third or fourth time, just to soothe my nerves. Jewelry was in place. I had my gun strapped to my side, my Fae knife in my boot, and a few other knives strapped to me. Corbin had his weapons as well. Even with our combined powers, though, I wasn’t sure if it’d be a match for Ralnor. He’d proven himself to be powerful—more powerful than I’d expected, with the way he’d briefly forced my hand when I was scrying.

And now he’d be expecting me. Maybe, if we were really lucky, he wouldn’t be expecting me quite this soon. Hopefully, surprise would be our advantage.

At the edge of the forest, Corbin pulled the car to the side. “We’ll walk from here,” he said. “And keep quiet.”

I nodded. We climbed out of the car, and I followed Corbin onto a tiny path so hidden I would’ve easily missed it without him. Stanley’s bunker was a few miles further into the forest—how many times had I visited him for information without knowing this hideout was so close? I followed Corbin down the narrow, well-worn path, breathing evenly as I let the familiar energy of the forest surge through me. I’d need all the help I could get.

“Here,” Corbin said. The tree line opened up to a clearing, in which stood an abandoned train station and an overgrown railway that had once cut through the forest. That made sense—transients could always find it this way. “This is the place.”

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “This is the place I saw.”

I stepped closer to the door of the train station and held out my hand, searching the surface until I saw the divots I’d seen in the scrying mirror. I pressed my fingertip to each one, in the same order I’d seen Ralnor do it.

I withdrew my hand and waited.

Nothing happened.

Behind me, Corbin said, “Is there a password, or something?”

“No,” I said, “this is how Ralnor opened the door. I saw him do it.” The door was unlocked, so I shouldered it open, but there was nothing behind it but the collapsing interior of the station.

“Did you get the order wrong?” Corbin asked.

“No!” I snapped. “I did exactly what he did.”

“Did you use your power?”

I paused. “What?”

“It’s Fae magic,” he said. “It won’t let a human in. Unless they’re whacked out on Dust, probably.”

I turned back to the door, letting my power course through me, until I felt it in my fingertips. Then I tapped the divots.

This time, the door rumbled, and dark UnSeelie magic sparked across its surface like it was electrified.

“Ta-da,” Corbin said.

“Shut up,” I muttered.

I pulled the hood of my hoodie up, and then carefully pushed the door open.

The door now opened up to what looked awfully close to a sewer, with hard-packed dirt floors and walls oozing with dark, foul-smelling liquid. Circular doorways split off into dark hallways, and a rickety metal staircase led up to a second level with more doorways. It was quiet here, but busy, with UnSeelie and ragged humans and supers moving from corridor to corridor, making deals, having hushed arguments, and finding covered places to sleep under ratty coats.

It was bleak. It was the kind of place the high court, the supernatural police, and the human police would all rather pretend doesn’t exist. And that made it the perfect place for Ralnor to hide out. In a place like this, he could do whatever kind of dark shit he wanted to get up to without anyone sparing him a second glance. He could be a king in a place like this.

But a pair of people like Corbin and me were definitely getting curious looks.

“All right,” I said. “If you were Ralnor, where would you be?”

“Underground,” Corbin said, immediately. “We already are, of course--”

“—we are?”

“But the deeper, the better. UnSeelie can draw power from the earth if we

need to, and it'd be easier for him to move power between planes if he was underground."

"I didn't know that," I said. "Fun fact. Okay, let's start at the bottom and work our way up."

We made our way down the main hallway. I cringed as I stepped around puddles of sludge and deep potholes, doing my best to keep my eyes low and avoid the people moving around us. They were curious, a little hostile, but no one tried to get in our way. I kept my power locked down and both hands in the kangaroo pocket of my hoodie, twisting my rings. It'd be easier to reach out, see if I could feel that same heavy power reaching for me from somewhere in the depths, but I wasn't going to risk earning any interest from any other UnSeelie that might be sniffing around here.

"This way," Corbin said. We made our way through a narrow doorway in the back, then down a steep staircase to the lower level, even deeper in the underground.

Here it was quiet. It looked like the level above, but with a lower ceiling and a worse stench. There were a few bodies curled against the walls, either sleeping or dead, I didn't know. Rats scuttled through the mess and into cracks in the walls.

"Shit," I hissed, pressing my shoulder to Corbin's. "You were right. He's here."

I didn't need to reach out to feel Ralnor's power here. It was already in the air, dense and thick like a stench.

Corbin nodded. "I can feel it, too."

We crept down the hallway, peering into the rooms as we passed. They were small, circular rooms, as if we were in a mausoleum. Each room was empty of people, though some had tables, or trash, or upturned shelves. The grotesque stench of his aura grew stronger and stronger.

I felt him first. The power oozing over my body.

Then I heard him: a low voice chanting.

And then, when I stepped into the circular doorway of the last room, I saw him.

Ralnor stood in the center of the room, over a metal gurney. He was shrouded in dark clothes with a hood pulled over his head, and his low voice chanted repeatedly in an old Fae tongue I didn't know. A body was spread out on the gurney, a human from what I could tell, with the chest ripped open like a Christmas gift as the limbs dangled from off the metal. Blood ran in

rivulets down the human's arms and dripped off the fingers to the floor.

I stood frozen in place, pinned like I'd been by the abyssal gaze of the intruder. The intensity of Ralnor's power wound around me, tight like a vice—I couldn't see it, not Earthside, and not with my jewelry on, but I could feel it. I knew those dark tendrils were all over me, crawling hungrily. I heard Corbin call my name, but he sounded very far away. I couldn't turn to look at him. I could only watch as Ralnor worked.

He didn't look at me, but I knew he knew I was there.

It was just UnSeelie magic around me. Old and powerful magic, but magic nonetheless.

I could break it. I had to break it.

Ralnor chanted to himself as he reached into the corpse's open chest. He grinned, gazing into the cavity. His hands worked; a stomach-turning, squelching sound filled the room.

I pushed back against the tendrils of power pinning me in place. My power surged through me, molten in my veins, simmering close to the surface. Closer than was safe. But I had to stop him—whatever he was doing.

He withdrew his hands from the corpse's chest cavity. He'd removed the heart. Then he turned to face me.

He looked reptilian, with his skin gray from lack of sunlight and his eyes burning a sickly, flat orange like firelight embers. His nose was crooked, like it'd been broken one too many times, and his teeth were fang-like and elongated as he chanted. I felt his power creep closer to my face, and his voice sounded in the room as if pulled from a different plane.

"I wondered when you'd finally show up. And just in time for the show."

Markings carved themselves onto the fleshy atrium of the heart. Runes. I couldn't see them clearly from here, tiny as they were, coursing over the flesh of the heart like flies.

When the surface of the heart was covered, Ralnor stopped chanting, and pressed his lips to the bloodied heart like a kiss. His eyes fluttered closed in ecstasy. Fucking gross.

I clenched my fist and pushed my power forth in one hard, powerful swell, like a tidal wave crashing into Ralnor's power. He hissed in pain, eyes opening to slits.

"Tempie!" Corbin called from behind me. Still, he sounded distant.

I had to stop Ralnor. The strength it'd taken to break his hold on me left me breathing heavily; I reached into my boot and grasped the hilt of my Fae



knife and launched it.

Ralnor sidestepped. The blade grazed his shoulder.

“Good timing,” he said. A cruel smile curled his lips. “Enjoy your trip.”

Then he crushed the heart in his fist. Blood and muscle seeped out from between his fingers. From the center of his palm, light began to glow. It was a cold, freakish light, nothing like the warm glow of my power. I stumbled backward. The light flooded from his hand, and grew brighter, stronger, until it filled the room and blinded me.

The light overtook me. I couldn’t see anything, hear anything—nothing but the thrumming of my own pulse. I pushed my own power out, searching for Ralnor, for Corbin—but there was nothing. Just freezing cold light around me. I called out but my voice was silenced.

Where the fuck was I? I spun around wildly in the void, as if I’d see something at the edge. Nothing. It was somehow worse than the portal even, but there was that same feeling of directionlessness, of weightlessness—

Oh.

I was in a portal. I was being transported.

Cold terror ripped through me, but I tamped it down. Terror wouldn’t do me any good. I had my jewelry. I still had my gun. I had a few knives. And I had my wits.

I took a deep breath.

Soon, I felt ground under my feet again. The light dissipated like a mist around me.

I took a deep breath of cool, crisp air. It rushed into my lungs and brought with it a surge of energy. I’d been transported all right—there was no Ralnor, no Corbin, no body. No walls around me at all.

I was in a forest. An ancient forest, by the looks of it. The trunks were huge, the roots enormous, and the power surged under my feet like it was happy to see me. The air was still and cold. An owl sounded from somewhere in the canopy. I looked up.

In the lush velvety sky hung two twin moons.

Ralnor had sent me to Faerie.

I stood frozen in small clearing in the forest. Terror clawed at my throat, yet there was still a deep, burning anticipation in my core as the power of Faerie swirled around me. I swallowed. I felt like a prey animal—like maybe if I didn't move, no one would notice I'd been transported here. Maybe the magic of the land would let me off the hook. But already I felt the glow of power under my feet, tingling at my fingertips, rushing over my skin like cool, welcoming water.

I had to stop it. I only had my bracelet and my rings—which would channel my power, but not conceal it at all. I had no mask. No cuff. As soon as an UnSeelie had me in their sights, they'd be able to smell my nymph power rolling off me in waves. And if they did, they'd want to drain me. They'd know what kind of power boost I could give them, and it'd be irresistible.

I was fucked. Seriously fucked. There was no way I'd be able to hide my nature from an UnSeelie. Not here. Not like this.

I took a breath and gazed up at the moons again.

Well, if I couldn't hide it, I only had one other option, didn't I?

The only chance I had to keep myself alive was to be as strong as possible. If I was going to bite it in Faerie—which at this point, was looking extremely likely—I was at least going to go out with a bang.

I closed my eyes and took a slow, steadying breath. Then I knelt down and pressed both hands to the cool earth of the forest, exhaled, and opened my senses.

Power rushed into my body from the forest as simultaneously the warm

glow of magic deep inside me surged forward, like a glowing wave galloping through my veins and sparking over my skin. I glowed faintly with the force of it, all the way to my fiery hair, which escaped from the bun and hovered around me like a halo. The Realm and my power worked in tandem, enhancing each other. Every cell in my body was awake and alight. It was different than the first time I'd stepped through the portal, and different than the brief moments I'd spent without my cuff on. I had a new sense of control. I stood up. My jewelry was warm on my hand, reflecting the faint glow of my skin.

The terror I'd felt upon landing dissipated. I felt powerful. I felt *alive*. I felt like I could take on the fucking queen if I had to—the kind of manic rush of energy I felt when I took my bike out on the wide-open highway. Logically, I knew the queen could still crush me like a bug. But the rush of power made it *feel* like I might be able to stand a chance. I felt strong. Whole.

This was who I was meant to be.

“There you are,” a rough voice said from somewhere in the trees. “I was wondering when you'd finally show up.”

“Who's there?” I barked. I whipped around, scanning the trees, but there wasn't anyone visible in the darkness. The voice seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere simultaneously.

“Temperance Fleur,” the voice said. “You smell even more delicious without that ugly Seelie magic keeping you under wraps.”

“Quit being a bitch,” I snapped. “Let's talk face to face.”

I curled my hand into a fist at my side, channeling the power into my jewelry instinctively. If whoever this was wanted a fight, they'd come to the right place.

A figure melted out of the shadows. His shape came into view slowly, like he was pulling his body into this plane from somewhere else. Somewhere dark. He had broad shoulders, a long, dark coat, and a mask over his face like an abyss.

“You,” I hissed. “You did this.”

“Well,” the intruder said, “I had a little help from Ralnor, you know. He's a fool. It wasn't hard to convince him to work with me.”

“The fuck does that mean?” Ralnor was still Earthside. Did that mean the intruder was the one pulling the strings all along?

The intruder tugged off his mask and tossed it behind him, into the shadows.

Those familiar sharp green eyes gleamed at me. Daniel smiled a predator's smile, revealing his sharp UnSeelie teeth like a promise. "Hi, Tempie."

"You." I took a step back. "I should've known."

Oh, shit—Ralnor wasn't the one sneaking into Corbin's room and my apartment—hell, Ralnor probably didn't give a shit about me beyond the wrenches I threw into his murdering. Daniel was the one who was stalking me. Ever since that day in Mala's shop, he'd been on my tail.

"Took you long enough," he said with a smile. He leaned against a tall tree, one ankle crossed over the other, casual as anything. "How'd you like my gifts? My little missions? Did you find them exhilarating?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I asked. My stomach roiled with nausea. This was just a case. A slightly wild case, sure, but it was just a serial killer and a skip—nothing more than that. Right?

"I knew you were bored," Daniel said, smooth as silk, "holed up in your apartment with no cases to chase. I figured you'd enjoy a little hunt, so I bailed Ralnor out and told him he could kill a few more bodies and test some of his wild magical theories, as long as he ensured you had a good time."

Guilt and rage warred inside me. All those people who suffered—it was just a game to him? A way to get to me? "You're sick," I said with my jaw clenched. "He killed people."

"Humans," Daniel said dismissively. "It's not a big deal. They're usually too busy killing each other, anyway. And you can't tell me you didn't enjoy it, right? The thrill of the chase? Getting to see the Realm?" His green eyes dragged over me, slow and obvious in their enjoyment. "It suits you. It's such a shame you feel like you have to keep who you are hidden."

"It's freaks like you that make it a requirement." I raised my hand in a threat. "How long have you been stalking me?"

"Longer than you know," Daniel said. "I've been waiting for this moment a long time, Tempie. And now it's finally here. You grew up so beautifully."

"What the fuck do you want from me?" I barked, hand still raised. My thoughts raced, and despite the warmth of my power, his gaze made me feel cold and shivery. What did he mean? He'd watched me grow up? How long had Daniel Rutherford been lingering in the shadows, watching me? My power tingled in my palm, eager to attack him, but I had to know. How had he known about me?

"Not much, Tempie," he said. "I don't want anything from you—I want

to *give* something to you.”

“For some reason, I don’t believe you.”

“My love,” he continued, as if I hadn’t spoken.

“Gross,” I said. “No thanks.”

“I knew your mother, Temperance.” His gaze burned.

My spine snapped straight. “No, you didn’t.”

“I knew her well.” He sighed, and his expression went performatively dreamy. It made my stomach turn. “She was supposed to be mine, your mother. She was promised to me as a way to ease the tensions between our kinds, the Seelie and UnSeelie, and start a new era. She was to be a member of the high court with me. A nymph in the UnSeelie Court... It would’ve been incredible.” Again he sighed. “And I would’ve been so powerful. Until she ran off like a whore.”

His expression darkened.

“Don’t fucking talk about my mother like that,” I hissed. “I’ll blast your balls off where you stand.”

“We’ll have to work on your manners,” Daniel said. “Your mother ruined my reputation when she ran off with your father. I was the joke of the court for ages. It was only my good standing with the queen that allowed me to maintain my role in the court at all. And now I’m nothing but her lapdog.” He sneered. “I deserve more than that. You’re only a half-breed, but you’ll have to do.”

“I’m not some sort of consolation prize,” I snapped. “And neither was my mother.”

“That’s true,” he said. “You’re not a prize. You’re a gift. I’m finally taking what I was owed all those years ago—a beautiful Solstice Fae who will give me the power I deserve.”

Corbin’s voice rang in my head. “*I doubt you’d be killed,*” he’d said, what felt like a million years ago. “*It’s much more likely you’d end up as someone’s prized possession.*”

I thought I’d understood the risk. But I’d never really considered the fact that it might actually *happen*. I’d trusted Corbin. I’d had faith in him—in both of us, and in our strength as a team.

Look where that’d gotten me now.

“I’ve been waiting so long for this,” Daniel said. His voice was dangerously soft. “I can hardly believe it’s finally happening. You’re so beautiful, Tempie. I’m going to make you so happy.”

He stepped toward me.

“Get fucked,” I said. I harnessed my power and thrust it forward, a ferocious beam of golden light burning through the shadows to surround him. I gasped; I’d never used my power so intensely and with such focus. With both hands forward, I pushed more power out, until the golden light swept away the darkness of the forest and all I could see was the shape of the trees and the glow.

From the sphere of light, Daniel laughed.

“Impressive,” he said. His voice was strained. “You’re nearly as strong as your mother was.”

Then, tendrils of dark power sliced through my golden light like a hot knife through butter. A shock of pain lanced through me; I stumbled backward and my back knocked against the tree behind me. My light dissipated. Daniel was kneeling in a scorch mark on the earth. His coat was singed, and soot streaked his cheeks and forehead. He grinned at me again, and then raised his hand.

Thick, heavy power exploded from his hand like tentacles. The weight slammed me back against the tree, pinning me hard to the trunk. I thrashed against it instinctively, like an animal tied down.

He just laughed. “That’s good,” he said. “Try again.”

I tried to scream, but his power had stolen my voice, and it came out as nothing more than a gasp. My power burned painfully in my core. I released it, and it burned against the tentacles; Daniel cringed but didn’t let up.

“Good,” he said. “That almost hurt.”

“Fuck,” I hissed through clenched teeth. The initial expulsion of power I’d used against him had left me weak, like a battery drained. With his dark magic against me, I couldn’t pull more power from the forest. Again, I tried to burn him but all I got was a flicker of light like a dimming lamp.

Against me, his power felt sick and cold, like it was pulling my light out of me and into him. It felt—violating, in an intense, horrible way. I’d finally gotten a taste of who I could be with my powers fully activated, and already it was gone. It was worse than the feeling of the cuff. My magic wasn’t being locked away—it was being stolen from me.

“Even like this, I can feel how strong you are,” Daniel murmured. He raised himself shakily to his feet and stepped closer. “Just wait until I get a taste.”

I slumped back against the tree. My power still pulsed weakly, pressing

fruitlessly against Daniel's.

I'd only just started to use my power like this. Daniel was UnSeelie—ancient, and trained. I couldn't break his hold.

"That's right," Daniel said. "You can't."

His green eyes flashed with flecks of cool silver, and that predatory smile was even wider on his face.

I looked up at the twin moons hanging high above. Under their soft light, in the crisp air of Faerie, I was trapped.

*Corbin*, I thought to myself, *where are you?*





**M**y feet hit the cold ground below me, and the light dissipated. I rocketed to my feet, knives drawn and gaze up. Ready to launch myself at Ralnor and tear his ass to pieces. I didn't care what kind of retribution it would get me in the court—he wasn't going to lay a finger on Tempie.

But Ralnor was nowhere to be seen. Nor was Tempie.

My nose burned with the unpleasantly familiar scent of sulfur. My demonic power flared with sudden energy, arcing through me molten like lava. As my eyes shifted into their Shax gaze, the barren landscape revealed itself to me like a dense smoke suddenly clearing.

The earth was hard-packed and cracked beneath my feet. On the horizon, a small shabby town stood in silhouette. Overhead, the sky seemed to shift and moved in rich, dark crimson, the color of blood flowing through a deep river. The moon shone bright like an eye rolled back.

My nostrils flared as more sulfur spat from the cracks in the earth.

*Hell.*

I was in Hell—or part of it, the more habitable part where the demons who could survive Earthside made their residences. Below was the darker, more Hellish realm, where the ancient demons lurked.

Ralnor had transported me to Hell. I gnashed my teeth—already sharper than they were Earthside—in irritation. How the fuck had he done that?

If I was here, where was Tempie?

She wasn't in this Realm, that much I knew. I would've sensed her presence if she was, especially with my Shax power growing steadily

stronger with each sulfuric breath. I started to make my way toward the town in the distance.

I only had one goal now. I had to get out of Hell as quickly as I could in order to find Tempie. Wherever she was—she couldn't face Ralnor alone. Because I had a strong feeling that Ralnor hadn't acted alone. I knew Ralnor, and for as much as he was playing with dark magic, it wasn't easy to force a portal-jump like this. Someone else was working with him.

Someone wanted to separate us. Someone wanted Tempie for themselves.

I'd find her. Whoever had done this... I'd make them pay. Unbidden, the memory of our last embrace bubbled to the surface. She'd seemed unsure when I'd wrapped my arms around her in my apartment, but she hadn't pulled away. Instinctively, I'd tucked my face into the pale curve of her neck. She'd smelled like she always did: like sunshine and leather.

Her scent soothed me. All of me. UnSeelie and Shax both. I'd been playing it off as attraction, but in that moment, with the fear of her loss still fresh in my mind and the sweetness of her aura soothing my rioting nerves, I couldn't deny the truth anymore.

She was my mate. I knew it in my bones. I'd find her. We'd gotten this far. She could take care of herself—she'd told me that, and proven it, dozens of times. I had to keep telling myself that. It couldn't end like this. Not when I hadn't even told her how I feel.

I'd fight my way back to her. Whatever it took.

\* \* \*

### **I'd go to hell and back for my next bounty**

Until recently, I didn't like having Corbin Frost and his overprotective streak around, but now I could really use his help. I'm being held captive by a power-hungry Fae determined to steal my powers by draining my blood. If my captor doesn't kill me first, the Fae Queen will force me to be her servant.

Then the Queen assigns me my most important bounty yet—Corbin. I learn that he's trapped in the demon realm and I'm the only one who can save him.

I'd go to hell and back for Corbin, and I'm certain he feels the same.

If I can find and rescue him, he can help me to escape my Fae captor. I know the Queen wants me dead and considers it a suicide mission. But compared to the Unseelie court, the demon realm can't be that dangerous . . .

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## TRY TAKEN BY THE VAMPIRE KING



*This is a paranormal romance with steamy scenes, no an urban fantasy.  
Proceed if you dare...*

*Never make a deal with a billionaire, particularly one who's a vampire . . .*

The deal is simple: spend a month with a mysterious billionaire who is the owner of Louisiana's La Petite Mort Casino, and he'll forget my father's gambling debts. If it means saving our family home and business, I'll do anything.

With his strong, sexy, take charge arrogance, Nicolas Dupont is a mystery to me. But it doesn't matter how hot he is. This is purely a business arrangement. Nic can have any woman he wants and it makes no sense that he'd be interested in a virgin like me. I'm certainly not about to fall for a guy who thinks he can own me.

So I go hunting for a way to free myself. When I discover I'm the hunted, and there are those who want my blood, Nic claims he can protect me. But can I trust one of his kind?

When this began, I thought I might lose everything. Now I'm not sure if I'll make it out alive...

\*Taken by the Vampire King is 66k words, is the first book in a trilogy, and ends on a cliffhanger. It's recommended for 18+

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**BOUNTY CLAIMED**

SOLSTICE HUNTRESS: BOOK 2

Lindsey Devin

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