

LINDSEY DEVIN



BOUNTY
COLLECTED

SOLSTICE HUNTRRESS I

BOUNTY COLLECTED

SOLSTICE HUNTRESS: BOOK 1

LINDSEY DEVIN

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Try Taken By The Vampire King](#)

[Bounty Collected](#)

CHAPTER ONE

“Come on,” I pleaded with the sputtering faucet of the tub, as if I could coax the water into heating itself where it poured icy cold over my hand. “Not again.”

To add insult to injury, the pipes creaked noisily, and water dripped from the faucet in not much more than a trickle. I sighed and stood up from where I had been perched on the edge of the tub with a towel around me, my fiery red hair tied up in a bun on the top of my head. I pinched the bridge of my nose. For as much as I loved this luxurious claw-foot tub, it wasn't much good to me if the damn hot water was broken *again*. I wasn't exactly my landlord's favorite tenant, either, what with the blood stains he'd seen on the carpets that one time—only once!—and he'd take his sweet time getting the water heater fixed. And probably add it to my rent. Never should've rented from a sprite hybrid to begin with.

Just another day in paradise, aka the cheap part of Warwick, York City.

So it looked like today it was a pirate bath in the sink to get me ready for work. I'd shown up to work in worse states, though, so I was pretty sure no one would bat an eye. I shut the water off and rinsed my face in the sink, then padded out of the bathroom to pull on my work uniform—if it could even be called a uniform—from where it was on the couch waiting for me.

“Dude, seriously? I turn my back for five seconds.” I put my hands on my hips and narrowed my eyes at the offender.

Oscar, my black cat, did not seem the slightest bit perturbed at my irritated expression, or the fact that I was attempting to set him on fire with my eyes while wearing nothing but my functional sports bra and underwear. He didn't even seem concerned by my pissed-off expression. He yawned

dramatically, then stood up, kneaded his paws into the fabric of my hoodie, stretched, and hopped off the couch.

“Thank you,” I said as I examined the new snag in the fabric where his claw had been. “That’s great. You’re the best.”

Oscar wandered into the kitchenette where his food was, tail swishing. My studio was a few square feet bigger than *tiny*, how the hell did Oscar always manage to get into my clothes when my back was turned? I didn’t need much space, though; the studio fit my bed in the corner, as well as the couch, the ancient television with built-in DVD player (very important for those post-job days I was laid up with a weird injury and needed to watch *Top Gun* a few times) and the coffee table that did triple duty as coffee table, dining room table, and office desk.

The claw-foot tub was really the only nice thing in the apartment, and it was part of the reason I’d decided to rent this studio in the first place. Okay, more than part. I thought I deserved at least one luxury in this rat trap. And now the damn hot water was out, again!

I tugged on my work jeans (stretchy enough to kick someone in the face, but not so stretchy they slipped down my hips) and the plain black hoodie Oscar had been lounging on. Black was functional workwear and also hid the cat hair. I opened the fridge and winced at the bleak state of affairs. String cheese for breakfast it was. God, I really needed to get paid. I had two scripts from my last contracts to turn in—that’d at least be enough to stock the fridge *and* buy me a nice big breakfast down at Manny’s.

I deserved that much.

I took my hair out of its bun and tied it quickly into a messy braid to hang over one shoulder—not my favorite look, but the easiest way to manage it when I was taking the bike.

“Hold the fort down, Oscar,” I said over my shoulder. He meowed and hopped onto my bed, curling up in the divot I’d left behind.

“Morning, Tempie. Late night last night?” my neighbor Bob asked, raising his eyebrows over his mug of coffee. He was lounging in the camp chair he always had outside his front door, feet kicked up onto the railing of our narrow, shared porch. We shared a wall of our four-unit building, on the upstairs floor of the house that’d been converted into the four apartments.

“What’s it to you?” I said without heat. Bob was always trying to get into my business because he had nothing better to do. Such was the life of a retiree with no hobbies.

“Damn cat making too much noise last night,” Bob said. “You feed that damn thing?”

“Course I do. He’s just bored,” I said as I hurried down the stairs.

“Well, get him some toys before I break in and turn him into a pair of slippers!” Bob shouted.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said with a wave of my hand. “Good morning to you, too.”

Bob muttered something I couldn’t hear from overhead, and it became even less audible as I pulled my motorcycle helmet onto my head and flipped the visor down.

“Get a new muffler for that thing, too!” Bob shouted, and I grinned to myself, revved the engine, and pointed my bike toward downtown.

My employer—or, more accurately, client—Get Out of Jail Bail Bonds, was housed on the basement level of a beat-up brick office building, just a few blocks south of the downtown bar and club district. Warwick had a handful of places like Get Out of Jail, because there was a fair amount of exciting and often irritatingly supernatural crime.

When supernaturals first made themselves known to humans twenty-five years ago, it was a bit of a logistical nightmare. These days, the systems were pretty well-established and worked, well, about as good as I could hope for. Good enough to keep life running smoothly but not so good that the supernatural council got up in my business unnecessarily.

During the process of society evening out, though, there were some... what I might call... urban casualties. Not lives taken, but cities, well, *restructured*. Warwick was one of the cities that became dominated by supernaturals, so much that they nearly outnumbered the humans that still lived in the city. As a result, there was sometimes strife between the human police and the supernatural police, so cases didn’t get solved as seamlessly as one might hope. Things dragged out and cost a lot, and a lot of problems were solved under the table or by freelancers working outside of the police jurisdiction.

I parked my bike in my usual spot (illegally, just down the block from the office, but I wouldn’t be here too long) and tugged my helmet off. The bike was ideal for getting around Warwick—quick, maneuverable, and pretty unobtrusive considering the crazy cars some of the supers drove around here. I never got a second glance from anyone, which was just the way I liked it.

It was pretty early in the day still, so the streets were quiet, though as

soon as the sun began to dip toward the horizon, activity would surely pick up. I ducked into the office building and headed down to the basement level office, my riding boots heavy on the rickety stairs.

“Hey, Carla,” I said as I shouldered the door open. “Tell me there’s coffee on.”

Carla glanced up over the gold rims of her round glasses. “Good morning to you too, Tempie. Help yourself.”

Today her dark curls were pulled back into a ponytail, and her makeup was pristine as always. How did she have time to do that literally every morning? I tried to surreptitiously sniff my hoodie, even though I knew I smelled like sweat and exhaust from the bike.

She raised her eyebrows, having definitely noticed the sniff. I shot her a winning smile. Her desk was in the front room of the office, the only piece of furniture except for the threadbare couch and the ancient coffeemaker on the dusty shelf. I poured the coffee into one of the Styrofoam cups, took a big swig, then topped off what I’d just drank. I immediately felt better with a hit of caffeine coursing through my veins.

“Long night?” Carla asked, leaning her elbows on her desk.

“Why do people keep asking me that?” I asked. “With those circles under your eyes, I think I should be asking *you* that question.”

Carla gasped in faux annoyance, then her face broke into a grin. “Maybe I had a little bit of fun last night.”

“You dog,” I said. “Who’d you take down this time?”

I stuffed my hand into the side pocket of my work jeans (yes, cargo pockets—slim yet functional!) and pulled out my scripts.

Carla sighed dreamily and propped her chin in her hand. “You know the bartender at Candy’s? The guy who works there on Fridays?”

She and I had spent more than a few nights in that bar, trading shots and not much else. Carla was nice, and in a different world, maybe she and I would’ve even been friends. As it was, we were friendly, but not close. Our relationship stuck mostly to ribbing each other, which was just the way I liked it. She liked me enough to make sure my checks always cleared, and I liked her enough to not drain this entire pot of coffee while I waited for her to regale whatever sordid tale she had for me now.

“The tall guy? With that big tattoo on his neck? How far down does it go?”

“So far down,” she said. “All the way down.”

I whistled. “And?”

“You were right. Not a were, a shifter.”

“Tell me stayed in his human form.”

“Tempie! I’m not that nasty.”

I raised my eyebrows right back at her.

“Okay, okay, maybe he chased me around his apartment in wolf form... But only chased!”

I laughed, hard enough that I nearly sloshed my coffee out of the Styrofoam cup. The image of Carla drunk and bouncing around an apartment with a literal wolf snapping at her heels was nearly too much to imagine.

“You really know how to pick them,” I said. “Hot as hell...”

“And dumb as dirt,” she finished, grinning as she brandished her pen at me.

“You know your type.”

“Smart guys are too much work,” she said. “This guy, too, he’s especially loopy when he shifts out of his wolf form. It’s delicious.”

“I assume you’re seeing him again?” I slid the scripts across the desk.

Carla hemmed and hawed a bit. “We’ll see.”

She reviewed the scripts, tapped at her immense keyboard for a moment, squinting at the ancient monitor. Then she pulled a check from her desk drawer, filled it out, signed it, and handed it to me. I nodded at the amount—about what I’d expected. Nothing huge, but it’d at least buy me some food, and give me the energy to start harassing my landlord about the hot water.

“What else do you have in the pipeline for me?” I asked, tucking the check into my pocket.

“I’ve got nothing. But—”

“I thought I heard you laughing out here.” Todd stuck his head out of his office door and furrowed his bushy eyebrows at me. “In here, now.”

“Jeez,” I said. “Can we do this at Manny’s? All I’ve had today is string cheese and coffee.”

“Nope, sensitive information,” he said. “Let’s go, let’s go.”

I sighed dramatically and topped off my coffee again before I followed Todd into his office.

“Close the door behind you, will ya?”

I was already doing just that—I wasn’t the type to leave a door open behind me. Todd sighed and fiddled with the papers on his desk, and boy, were there a fuckload of papers. He wasn’t the neatest of bosses, that much

was for sure. The walls of his narrow office were lined with shelves stuffed with books and filing cabinets bursting with records. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a full head of graying hair and his sharp eyes set alongside deep crow's feet and constant frown lines.

I'd worked for Todd for as long as I'd been in Warwick, and he'd never steered me wrong. I wouldn't say I trusted him—I didn't trust anyone—but it came pretty close.

"Take a seat," Todd said, nodding toward the threadbare chair on the other side of his desk. It was in somehow worse shape than his rolling desk chair, and if I sat on it, it'd definitely splinter under my weight. Plus, I wasn't too interested in finding out more about that weird stain right in the middle.

"I'm good standing," I said. "You got another job for me? Because my hot water heater broke again, and I could definitely use—"

"This one's serious," Todd said.

His sharp tone caught my attention, derailing my train of thought mid-rant. When Todd got serious, that meant serious money was involved. And serious money involved meant a serious paycheck for me.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Oh?"

Todd pulled a manila folder of his desk and held it out to me. I took the folder and flipped it open. Inside was a mugshot of a short-haired woman right on the cusp of middle age, looking like she'd really been through the ringer. And under that was a crime scene photo that made me suck my teeth in surprise. This was nasty.

"Greyson Wheels," Todd explained. "Murdered in his home on the night of his wife's birthday."

"Murdered and scrawled all over, it appears," I muttered. "Which came first?"

I flipped the photo aside to skim the police report, but it was, as usual, mostly useless.

"Ritual marks, yes," Todd confirmed. "The SP don't know what the intended ritual was, either."

I nodded, not surprised by that, either. The supernatural police were just as useless as the human police, but slightly less dickish than the human police, so I liked them better. As long as they stayed out of my business.

"And the woman?"

"The wife," Todd said. "Sandra Wheels. That's your skip."

"The wife's the suspect?"

Todd nodded. “She claims she wasn’t home at the time of the murder—she was out partying with friends for her birthday, waiting for Greyson to meet her at the bar. Friends corroborated that, but the timelines aren’t perfect, and there are no other leads. She was arrested after she called the cops reporting the murder. Says she’s innocent, and we got her out on a five-mill bail.”

Five *million*. So this was *really* serious. “She’s that dangerous?”

“Dunno,” Todd said. “But she disappeared. And if she’s gone, so’s my five mill.” A thunderous expression crossed his face. “That wouldn’t be good for this business. Not good at all.”

The office was in such shitty shape, I always assumed Todd was one fucked-up bail away from having his business crumbling beneath him, but that hadn’t happened yet. Five million might be different.

“You’re not the type to usually post a bail that large,” I said.

He scrubbed his hand over his forehead. “There was something a little off about her,” he admitted, “but she’s a human. Humans don’t skip bail, especially when the SP are involved. Plus, she was so adamant about her innocence, I figured she’d just be getting a good lawyer to get all this wrapped up.” He knocked the heel of his hand against his forehead. “Stupid.”

“I’ll get her, Todd, don’t you worry your pretty little head about it.” I flipped the folder closed but didn’t give it back. “What’s the payment?”

Todd shot me a pissy look, but then sighed. “Fifty grand. Cash. A bonus if you’re quick.”

I went slack-jawed in shock, and then snapped my mouth closed. Fifty grand for a *human* skip? One, I almost never brought in humans—I went exclusively after supers, because the paychecks were bigger, and I had the skills to handle them. Human skips were usually relegated to other, less experienced contractors.

“Don’t even try to haggle,” Todd said.

“Won’t go up to sixty?” I half-teased.

“I’m offering you this gig because you’re the best,” Todd said. “It would make more sense to get a bunch of contractors on it to cover as much distance as possible.”

“But you’re not doing that,” I said curiously.

“I don’t know what you’ve got going on,” Todd said, “but whatever it is, I need it to get this mark. I should’ve trusted my gut when I thought there was something off about her. So I’m trusting my gut now. Get this done.”

I pressed my lips together hard. Todd had long given up attempting to wheedle any sort of information about me about what I had “going on.” He’d seen me do a little something-something years ago and was never able to let it go. I kept denying anything weird, and he kept not believing me. It was part of our routine now.

“I’ll find her,” I said.

“I know you will,” Todd said, and dismissed me.

“Later, Carla,” I said half-attentively as I left, thumbing again through the file Todd has given me.

“See you Friday?” she asked.

I waved a hand in nonanswer and climbed the stairs back up to the street. This didn’t seem like *that* complicated of a case. A human hiding from the York City Police and the Supernatural Police? There were a *lot* of people looking for her, and humans always made mistakes when they were under pressure like that. This wasn’t going to be a hard find; if anything, I just had to worry about bagging her before the cops did so I could get that paycheck.

Speaking of paychecks, I had one burning a hole in my pocket and the extra-crispy bacon at Manny’s calling my name. I stuffed the file into the saddlebag of my bike and pulled my helmet back on.

I swung my leg over my bike and was about to peel out to Manny’s when a familiar prickling sensation raced over my skin, from the nape of my neck down my spine. Following it was a faint sharp smell of ozone, like a storm coming in the distance. I froze on my bike and narrowed my attention onto the sensation, then outward, tracing it toward its source.

And the source was a man. Tall, lithe, in a dark leather jacket with his blond hair mussed and pushed off his forehead. I withdrew my seeking attention immediately, bundling the small amount of power I’d used tight into my chest again, lest this guy sense it—if he could. I had the ability to read people by their auras, but it wasn’t an ability that everyone had. I could generally get a read on supers’ vibe, roughly—how powerful they were and what kind of power they wielded. Definitely came in handy in the bounty-hunting business.

Maybe I’d get more information if I pried a little more into this guy’s aura, but I wasn’t going to risk it. Just from that prickly feeling I could tell he was powerful. Really powerful.

What the hell was a guy like that doing going into Get Out of Jail?

Another prickly feeling skittered over me, but this time, it was plain old

human anxiety. The thought of that guy being in the office with Carla and Todd didn't sit right with me. I had half a mind to bust back in and demand he tell me what the hell he thought he was up to.

But Todd could defend himself. He was a human, sure, but I knew he had some weird shit stashed in this filing cabinets of his. They'd be fine.

Hell, I was curious though. I'd ask Carla about it after I got a few drinks in her later. Right now I had to eat. I'd make my plan once I got my blood sugar up a little. That was probably why I was anxious.

Had to be.

CHAPTER TWO

“Hey there, hon,” Dotty said with a wide smile as I stomped into the diner. “Been a while! You want your usual booth?”

“Yes, please,” I said with immense gratitude.

Dotty was the fucking *best*. She ran Manny’s tighter than a Navy ship, which is why the diner had survived and even thrived as Warwick’s landscape changed. It was a small diner a few blocks north of the office, with red vinyl booths and pristine linoleum floors, and a menu that hadn’t changed in half a century. Dotty’s husband, Earl, ran the kitchen behind the counter, and the grill had started hissing as soon as I’d opened the door.

Dotty didn’t even bother stepping out from behind the counter, nor bringing me a menu. “You want the usual?” she asked.

“You know it.”

“Even though it’s not even noon?”

“*Especially* because it’s not even noon. I’m celebrating.”

“You always seem to be celebrating, hon, I love that about you.” Dotty glanced over her shoulder. “You hear that, Earl?”

“Sure did,” Earl said.

The diner was quiet today, with just a few patrons at the counter and in the other booths. I spread the file out on the table in front of me, and Dotty brought me a cup of coffee and placed it at my elbow. I murmured a thanks and stared irritably at the photos spread out on the table. Luckily, I’d been doing this job long enough that the gruesomeness of the crime scene photos didn’t do anything to affect my appetite.

And they *were* gruesome. The vic, Greyson, was spread-eagle on what looked like their kitchen island. Nasty. He was stripped naked, and his body

was covered head-to-toe in what appeared to be runes. Runes I couldn't read. But this was very obviously something ritualistic, and from what the kitchen looked like, the people doing it were rich as hell.

The police report was written up as if this was a regular-ass crime, just crazy people carving each other up as they were occasionally wont to do in Warwick. But these clearly weren't random carvings. And the lack of information from the SP in the report made me itchy. Something was off here. Really off.

Dotty arrived at the table with my meal, and I placed my palm flat over the evidence photos lest I give the poor woman a heart attack when she was currently saving my life. "Working again?" she asked.

"Always," I said, taking the strawberry milkshake out of her hands with the eagerness of a five-year-old. "Thanks, Dotty."

"Let me know when you need your coffee topped off," she said with a smile as she set down the rest of my usual order: a bacon cheeseburger with the extra-crispy bacon that haunted my dreams, and a basket of chili cheese fries big enough for an entire family. I took a huge bite of the burger and sank down a little deeper into the booth with a happy sigh. Man, this burger was really the thing of dreams. I could feel my brain start to work better almost immediately. It was so good I thought I might spontaneously gain the ability to understand the runes.

Then, the delicious taste of my burger was slightly worsened by a sharp ozone smell cutting through the homey atmosphere of the diner.

"Mind if I join you?" a low, velvety voice asked.

I hesitantly set my burger down and straightened up in the booth.

The blond man raised one eyebrow curiously at me, peering with some interest or maybe disbelief at the spread of food in front of me. I defiantly picked up a chili cheese fry and stuffed it into my mouth.

"Who are you?" I asked.

His curious gaze drifted over to the file. I slapped it closed.

"I'm your new partner," he said.

"And I'm sitting on a secret stock portfolio from early Amazon investment," I said.

He did not seem amused. "Corbin Frost," he said as he slid into the booth despite my nonacceptance. "I'm with the UnSeelie Court."

My eyes widened. I tamped down on my shock and another emotion that was definitely not fear, no way. But that did explain the sensation—the

prickling, the ozone, and the familiar glimmer in Corbin's amber-flecked eyes.

"Good for you," I said. "Now if you don't mind, I have some cheese fries to focus on."

I flipped my hand toward him in a dismissive off-you-go motion.

"This isn't an offer, Temperance," Corbin said coolly. "I'll be working with you on this case. With the, hm, *curious* details of this case, the courts want this wrapped up and solved as quickly as possible."

And they want to make sure the humans keep their noses clean, I thought to myself. With the shit that was going on in Warwick, the Fae likely wanted to keep said curious details as tightly under wraps as possible. And that was all well and good, but that didn't mean I was going to let this jackass—a jackass with offensively nice bone structure, damn UnSeelies—just charge in and stomp all over my case.

Plus, a partner meant a smaller bounty. Fuck that.

"Don't call me Temperance," I said. "Only my granny gets to call me that. It's Tempie."

"Like the vegan protein?" He smirked.

"No, Tempie, like Tempie's going to put her foot up your ass if you don't watch it," I grumbled. "Who exactly let you in on this case?"

"Mr. Leary," Corbin said. "Todd?"

I stared at him. "You're joking."

"Why would I do that?" Corbin asked.

I brandished a forefinger at him. "Now hang on a minute. I have to go make a call. Don't touch my fries."

I snatched the case file off the table, and with the folder under my arm, I marched over to the other end of the counter, where I could still see Corbin, but I was hopefully out of earshot.

"Is that guy bothering you, Tempie?" Earl asked, leaning out over the kitchen pass.

I sucked my teeth. "Yes, but I got it, Earl."

"Well, if you need to kick his ass, take him out back first, okay? I don't want to spook the other patrons."

"I'm not going to kick his ass. Yet."

Earl nodded, satisfied, and went back to managing his grill.

With a grimace, I took my smartphone in hand and stared at my own reflection in the black, locked screen. I certainly didn't look my best today—

my braid was a mess from the ride on my bike, and I needed a good ten hours of sleep until the bags under my green eyes went away. Having to figure out how to deal with this asshole wasn't going to make sleep any easier, either. I didn't work well with others, especially in this line of work.

And I definitely didn't need an UnSeelie partner breathing down my neck. Being around Seelies was nerve-racking enough—I avoided Fae in all their forms as much as I could, since they could be selfish and pretty damn manipulative. But UnSeelies were the type of Fae that had an even better shot at figuring out my secret.

The Seelies ruled the Light Court, or the spring and summer seasons, whereas the UnSeelies ruled the fall and winter Dark Court. I didn't like getting involved with either court, and preferred to stick to my own work capturing supernaturals in this normal human realm, not the Fae realm.

If Corbin figured out what I was, I had a feeling I'd end up dead, or worse—a prisoner of the court.

Too bad I couldn't tell Todd that. I'd have to make my feelings known another way. I unlocked my phone and called him.

“Tempie?” he asked, answering after the first ring. “Something wrong?”

“Uh, yeah, Todd, something's pretty wrong,” I said. “Who's this yahoo that just crashed my breakfast at Manny's?”

Todd sighed. “Tempie, you can't call an UnSeelie enforcer a yahoo.”

“He's an *enforcer*?” That was even worse—that meant he worked closely with the court, literally enforcing the rulings they set out, in both Faerie and the human realm. “Dude! He said you approved this. I assume he's lying?”

“It *is* approved,” Todd said. “Sorry about this, Tempie, but you don't get a choice in the matter.”

“Dude!” I said again. “You can't be serious!”

“As a heart attack.” Todd exhaled hard. “You expect me to turn away an enforcer when they tell me the court is interested in this case?”

“Yes, in fact, I do, since that's your job.”

“No, my job is to get people out of jail, hence the name of the business,” Todd said. “I need this skip captured *now*, and if the Fae involvement will speed that up, that works for me.”

“I'm not sharing my bounty,” I said.

“He's not interested in the bounty.”

I chewed on my thumbnail. That was good, at least, but didn't make working with him any better of an option. But I couldn't let Todd think it was

anything more than me just being difficult as per usual. Didn't need him to start getting suspicious and/or putting pieces together.

"You couldn't have warned me?" I asked.

"He just showed up," Todd said.

"You could've texted."

"I don't text."

"You *know* I don't work with partners."

"You don't work with other *bounty hunters*," Todd corrected. "This is a different situation."

"That's for damn sure," I grumbled. "This conversation isn't over."

"Sure, sure," Todd said. "Have a nice breakfast."

I hung up on him and marched back over to the table, where Corbin was leaning back in the booth looking entirely too relaxed. It annoyed me how relaxed he was.

"See?" he said. "Everything's in order."

"We'll have to agree to disagree on that."

Corbin shrugged. "That's fine. So, ready to compare notes?"

"Not exactly." I didn't even sit down, just threw some cash on the table and grabbed the uneaten half of my burger, regretfully a little less than hot now. Still good, though. "I've got stuff to do, as a professional contractor who works solo. Thanks for the unexpected company, see you never."

I nodded my goodbye at Dotty as I stormed out the door, stuffing the remainder of my burger into my face. To my dismay, the door clattered open behind me just as soon as I left.

"Even if you don't like it, you're stuck with me on this case," Corbin said as he followed behind me.

I said nothing, mouth occupied by delicious cheeseburger. Instead, I just wrinkled my nose at him as I approached my bike.

Corbin stuck his hands into the pockets of his black coat and peered at me with his chin tipped slightly down, looking all relaxed and handsome and capable. Freaking UnSeelies.

"*And*," he said, "from the looks of this case, you're going to need my help. Just as much as I'll need yours."

I polished off my burger and wiped my hands on my jeans before I stuffed the case file back into the saddlebag of my bike.

"*You need me?*" I asked, disbelieving. "You're sure you're not on my back just because Todd got to the case before you did?"

“This case has too much human involvement,” Corbin said simply. “The court would like this sorted out without much fanfare. You have a good track record of doing just that. It’s a win-win.”

I wasn’t sure about that part. But it did make me feel a little more at ease knowing that my reputation preceded me. Honestly, I didn’t see a way out of this ‘partnership.’ Either Todd would have my hide, or the court would if I tried to get out of it now.

Looked like I was just going to have to grin and bear it.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m not splitting the bounty.”

“I’m not interested in your money,” Corbin said with an irritating little smirk.

He looked dangerously close to telling me what he *was* interested in, which I didn’t want to hear, so I snapped, “And I’m in the lead here.”

“Sure,” Corbin said. “For now.”

“God.” I picked up my helmet. “Fae can be so annoying.”

“As can humans,” Corbin said. He raised his eyebrow.

“You haven’t even scratched the surface of how annoying I can be.” I tugged my helmet on. “I’ll meet you tomorrow morning at Sandra Wheels’ parents’ house. We’ll start there.”

“I’ll pick you up,” Corbin said.

“You don’t know where I live.”

Corbin just smiled at me, then turned on his heel and strolled away. Freaking UnSeelies!

I snapped the visor of my helmet down. I was going to earn the hell out of this bounty, even if I wasn’t splitting it. I repeated it like a mantra in my mind: fifty grand, fifty grand, fifty grand. That’d set me up for the next year, and I’d be able to help out my grandmother a little more. So it’d be worth it. Eventually. If I survived working with this dickhead—metaphorically and literally.

CHAPTER THREE

I took a few back streets through the narrow alleys of Warwick, ensuring that Corbin wasn't following me before I headed down to the York City Police Station. Sure, maybe that was a little paranoid, but if anything was going to fuck up my generally good relationship with a few of the cops at the station, it'd be a nosy UnSeelie tailing me in to cause problems.

I strolled into the station with the case file in my hand and a big, friendly smile on my face. The young receptionist looked up from his desk and sighed at me. "You again?"

"Again?" I asked. "It's been weeks, Kenny. When are they gonna put you out in the field? Listen, is Hobbs in?"

Kenny narrowed his eyes at me. Come to think of it, I probably shouldn't tease him about being relegated to desk duty when he was between me and my number one favorite source, who was also, lucky for me, the one who had signed the police report. "She's busy."

"She's not busy." I leaned over the desk a little and batted my eyelashes cartoonishly. "C'mon, Kenny. I'll put in a good word for you."

I bit my lower lip just a little, so it looked unintentional. Heavy-handed, but it worked. Kenny flushed, then sighed and picked up the phone on his desk.

"I'll buzz her," he said.

"Thanks so much," I chirped as I stepped away from the desk with a bounce in my step. I had a slight effect like that on people and some supers—people just *liked* me. And would often open up to me with a bit more ease than they might to a regular human. That came in handy for cops, too, and Hobbs helped me out with the understanding that if they needed to bring in

an outside “consultant” to help with questioning, I’d usually agree. Pretty good symbiotic relationship for all parties involved.

“Hey, Tempie,” Hobbs said as she stepped out of the back hallway. “Had a feeling I’d see you around these parts. Come on back, there’s coffee.”

“A woman after my own heart,” I said, then threw a wink at Kenny as I passed the desk, just to see him blush a little harder.

“Don’t harass Kenneth,” Hobbs said without looking over her shoulder.

If I didn’t know better, I’d suspect she had a little bit of clairvoyance of her own. Detective Hobbs wasn’t much older than me, but she’d been on the force for as long as I’d been working as a bounty hunter. She seemed to know a little bit about everything that went on in Warwick, even the underbelly parts that the police typically kept away from, like the Den. She was short, with dark skin and broad shoulders, and her twist out fell in soft curls to her cheekbones. I followed her down the hallway to the break room, which was empty, and as promised there was a pot of coffee that looked like it hadn’t been there for *too* long.

Let’s be real, I wasn’t picky about coffee.

Hobbs nodded at the file in my hand. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Wheels murder,” I said.

She sighed and poured us both a cup. “We’re just as unhappy about her disappearing as your boss is, I’m sure.”

“It’s not pretty down at the office, I’ll tell you that much.” I winced at the first sip of coffee. It always tasted a little weird and watery, but hey, better than nothing. We sat down across from each other at the break room table, and I dropped the file onto the table. Hobbs sipped her coffee and peered at me, waiting. She wasn’t going to offer anything up without me asking. “You were on scene, weren’t you?”

She nodded. “Yep. One of the first responders there.”

“You and the SP?”

Again, a nod. “And the EMTs.”

“And with all those people there, no one classified this as a supernatural attack?”

She shook her head. “Surprised me, too. But the supernatural police didn’t see anything on-scene other than the runes. They figured it was just a regular human murder with the runes added in to spice things up and get us off the perp’s trail.”

“That seems... involved,” I said.

“Doesn’t it?” Hobbs said. “It’s not adding up to me. But the supernatural police were pretty adamant that the runes were just a human’s doing, especially because Sandra Wheels is human. Or at least that’s what her registration says.”

“You don’t think that’s true?” I asked.

“I don’t think the registration is infallible,” she clarified. “Plenty of civilians are registered as human, and are either living under the radar, or don’t know they have supernatural lineage.” She shrugged and sipped her coffee. “It’s not outside of the realm of possibility that Sandra Wheels had been living as a human, but wasn’t purely human at all.”

I very carefully did not fidget in my seat at all as I nodded in understanding. “Makes sense.”

“Plus,” she continued, “the scene was too complicated for me to think it was *just* Sandra that did this.”

“You think someone else was involved?”

“Someone, or a few other people.” She pointed at the gruesome photo of Greyson Wheels spread out on the kitchen island. “Sandra Wheels is five foot five and attended spin class once a week. You think she had the kind of strength needed to haul six feet of dead weight up onto the kitchen island?”

“Good point,” I muttered. Either she had help, or she had super strength. Honestly, it could go either way. “Any leads on the runes?”

“None,” Hobbs said. “Nothing came up on the initial scan of running the runes in our database. I’ve got the research department hunting around to see, but you know how they are.”

“Slow as hell,” I said with a nod. “SP aren’t running it?”

“Not that I know of,” she said. “But you know them, sometimes they tell us one thing and then do something else.”

I nodded. In other cities that might not fly, but relationships between humans and supers were so dicey in Warwick that it was almost a miracle that they could work together at all. So “miscommunications” were often something that both parties let slide.

“We don’t have any other suspects right now,” Hobbs said. “If we can’t find Sandra, we’ve got nothing.”

“I’ll find her,” I said. “You did your thing, now I’ll do mine. Call me if you get any good info.”

“Don’t count on it,” Hobbs said. “But thanks.”

I headed out of the police station, the gears in my head already turning.

Even if Sandra Wheels was a regular old human, that didn't mean she didn't have *access* to magic. There were plenty of things that could help a human murder her husband, runes or no runes. But I was with Hobbs on this—casting the runes as an intentional misleading tactic gave humans a *lot* of credit. In my experience, humans were rarely that forward-thinking or creative, especially the murdering type.

I climbed onto my bike and started heading southeast, over the potholed asphalt of the narrow streets, toward the bar district which was, conveniently, pretty close to my apartment. It was midday, so the streets were fairly quiet, occupied mostly by street vendors, restaurant workers, and sanitation workers gearing up for what would undoubtedly be a busy night. Most were, in this part of town.

Before I started digging into any of the various theories that were starting to roll around in my noggin, I figured I'd better get a sense of what people were actually selling and buying these days. Trends moved fast. Maybe there was a crazy new runic spell book the trolls were cooking up and selling.

I slowed down as I pulled into the bar district, with its squat brick buildings and uncomfortable cobblestone streets leading right up to the dark river that acted as the eastern boundary of Warwick. I parked my bike right outside the familiar faded facade of Candy's Good Time Bar, which did not in any way look like it was a good time. Despite the midday hour, I was pretty confident Laura would be there, considering the whole thing where she didn't really sleep.

I breezed into the bar, which was nautical-themed (why not?) with a big-ass fake swordfish over the bar and dark wood-paneled walls lined with newspaper articles and movie posters all related to boats and fishing and other boring things. There were a few sad-looking patrons at the bar, staring into whiskey glasses or bowls of chili, and one of them I was pretty sure was a merman which was especially bleak considering the décor.

As I'd hoped, Laura was there, swanning around near the jukebox in the back. She wasn't really looking at the jukebox or the patrons, but just kind of... *Swanning*. Like she did. She had dark hair worn in two long braids that fell nearly to her waist, and with her pale skin and her loose green dress she had kind of a Wednesday Addams by way of Medusa vibe. The Medusa part was especially pronounced when she glanced up at me and her eyes briefly flashed red, which, for someone who was part-banshee, wasn't a threat but a simple expression of emotion. In this case, apparently, excitement.

“Tempie!” she called. “Oh, it’s so nice to see you!” Her voice was as soft and slightly hair-raising as usual, making the hair on my forearms stand straight up for a shivering moment before I adjusted to her presence. “Come on, have a seat. Need a beer? Coffee?”

“I’m good right now,” I said as I joined her in her usual corner booth. Even I knew better than to try the coffee at Candy’s. “I won’t be here long.”

Laura looked a little put out, but just sighed and took my hand in her own clammy palm. Sitting across from me in the booth, she looked just as young as she had when I’d first met her a few years ago, breaking up a prostitution ring run by a pimp who’d controlled a dozen or so supernatural women with fear and violence. I’d turned that back around on him real quick.

Laura still made her money as a sex worker, but now she called the shots. What kind of johns were into pasty cool-skinned goth girls with flashing red eyes I wasn’t sure. But hey, takes all types, doesn’t it? And admittedly, there weren’t a lot of women around with banshee heritage like Laura had. Maybe the johns thought they could make her wail.

“Well, if you’re not here for a drink, what is it?” she asked.

I tugged my hand out of her grasp and shook my head a little to try to get my thoughts back on track. “I need a bit of information. Just a little.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly, and she leaned back in the booth with a huff. “You never stop by just to say hi.”

“I’m a busy woman,” I said. “Come on, you know I’d be here more often if I could.”

“You always say that.” She sighed. Pouting, she toyed with one of her long braids. “What do you need?”

“Have you heard anything about covens?”

“Covens?”

“Yeah, covens. Or study groups, or new drug dealers. Anything that’d be like... A group. Of humans, probably. Anyone going around pushing enchantments for sale or hocking new magic.”

“That’s not very specific,” Laura said.

“I know, but it’s all I’ve got right now,” I said. “Really, if you’ve heard anything weird, it could be helpful.”

She tapped one long tapered finger against her lower lip as she thought. Laura spent a lot of time in Candy’s, but she worked with sex workers all over Warwick, and even across the river in York City. She knew people, and she heard things, even if she acted a little ditzy sometimes.

“Not particularly,” she said after a long moment. “Just the usual things are going on. I haven’t heard of any new groups springing up. Can you give me anything else to go on?”

I leaned closer of the table. “Looking for anything runic,” I said. “Even if it seems like nothing.”

“Runic?” Laura’s eyes widened. Kind of ghoulish. “That’s powerful stuff. And old.”

“I know,” I said. “Let’s just say I wasn’t exactly happy to see it pop up.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Dunno,” I said. “Just keep your eyes open for me, okay?”

“Runic,” she repeated again, and then shivered. “I don’t like this one bit, Tempie.”

“I’m gonna get it under control,” I said. For as odd as Laura’s demeanor was, she did inspire a weird protectiveness within me. “You’re sure you haven’t heard anything?”

“Nothing like that,” she confirmed. “But I don’t usually get involved with things like that. My girls and I mostly see knockoff virility pills and botched anti-aging spells.”

“Do the virility pills work?” I asked with a grin that was only slightly skeezy.

“Of course not,” she said primly. “I recommend them to my clients, and in return, the seller sends new clients to me.”

“Symbiotic,” I said with a curt nod. “You are such a businesswoman.”

She flushed, or as much as she could flush with her lower-than-average body temperature. I hopped out of the booth and thanked her with a cheesy little bow, which achieved the intended effect of making her laugh and tuck a stray stand of hair flirtatiously behind her ear.

“Keep me posted if you hear anything,” I said. “Right?”

“Right,” she agreed. “Come have a drink with me soon.”

I nodded my agreement and hurried out the door. Should be promise enough to get her to pass along any information without me actually having to take her on a weird quasi-date. At this point in my career, I was pretty good at striking that balance with informers.

It surprised me that Laura hadn’t heard anything about *anything* that might lead me to information about the Wheels or the runes or anything. I could only hope I’d charmed her well enough that she’d tap her network to sniff around for me.

Or—a darker, less optimistic part of me argued—she *did* know something and was unwilling to tell me. Either because she was involved, or because she was afraid.

I sighed and climbed astride my bike. Surely I'd get something from the Wheels' residence tomorrow, even if I had to navigate my—ugh—*partner* getting all up in my business. At least I had some money now. I stopped by the cheap grocery store in my neighborhood and loaded up with all the groceries my saddlebags could carry, admittedly not that much, and hauled them home with my mind still turning the pictures of the runes over and over.

When I got home, Bob was still on the porch, having moved on from his morning coffee to his midday smoke. He shot me a frown as I heaved the grocery bags up the stairs.

“Heya, Bobbers.” I set the bag down and unlocked my apartment door. Then I paused and fished out the beef jerky I'd grabbed impulsively at the checkout and tossed it to him. “Sorry about Oscar.”

He caught the packet and inspected it. “Teriyaki,” he said approvingly. “My favorite.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “Keep the butts in the flowerpot where they belong, will you?”

Before Bob could grouse about my demands for his smoking etiquette, I grabbed my groceries and stepped inside. Oscar perked up as soon as the door closed; he hopped off my bed and wound around my ankles, purring like he was happy to see me and also wanted me to trip to my death at the same time.

“I'm on a weird contract, Oscar,” I informed him. “And Laura gave me nothing to work with. You know what that means.”

He meowed and hopped up onto the counter in my kitchenette to watch me put away my groceries.

“Exactly,” I said with my head in the fridge. “Time for some good old-fashioned research slash stalking.”

I whipped up a quick sort-of lunch with the things I'd bought: stir-fried vegetables spicy enough to clear out my sinuses and instant brown rice. It was healthy as hell, Todd would be so proud of me. And it meant I'd feel less bad when I inevitably got too wrapped up in my research and ended up ordering a pizza super late. I dropped onto the couch and opened my laptop on the coffee table in front of me; Oscar immediately hopped up onto the table and investigated my meal, only to sniff and depart after his nose was

blasted by my overuse of gochujang.

I settled in and started to dig. At this point in my career, I had a system. Start with the obituaries and work outward. Social media was a godsend to contractors like me. I started with Sandra herself, pulling on threads until I was deep in the alumni records of her university looking for anything that might connect her to a potential coven, or magic user, or something similar like that. But it was remarkably boring. She'd studied communications at school, then got a master's in business administration, then got married and worked at a bank.

Her poor deceased husband was just as boring, if not more: he had more education and worked at a different bank. Even their social media profiles were boring. They didn't post much, and didn't see to travel much, either.

But when they did post, the same faces appeared in most of the photos over and over. Apparently, they didn't have many friends. Those people weren't mentioned in the obituary, though, which was odd. Seemed like if they only had a handful of friends, those friends might've been important enough to warrant a sentence.

I noted down the names in my notebook. I'd be paying those folks a visit soon enough.

I still didn't have any solid leads, but I had a handful of places to start sniffing. That was better than a lot of my contracts in the past had begun. Satisfied with the research, I closed my laptop and found, not to my surprise, that more hours than I realized had passed. So pizza it was.

Oscar perched on the coffee table and gave me a judgmental look as I dialed.

"Yeah, yeah," I said, waving a hand at him. "It'll be breakfast tomorrow, too."

I'd need my strength tomorrow. At least cold breakfast pizza was a pretty failsafe way to put me in a good mood. Because somehow, I was going to have to do my initial investigation at the Wheels residence with Corbin hovering over my shoulder.

The thought soured my mood. Maybe at least he'd have some intel of his own. But this was *not* how I did things, and if Corbin thought I was going to bend over backward to make this work, he had another thing coming.

CHAPTER FOUR

A loud, incessant series of honks woke me unceremoniously from what had been, moments before, a pretty good dream, involving a roll in the hay with some handsome faceless guy and maybe a little bit of vampiric gnawing at the climactic parts, so to speak. I groaned at the noise and pulled my pillow over my head.

Oscar seemed unperturbed by the honking. He was glad as always to see me awake, chirping and walking all over my supine body to encourage me to get up and feed him. How did this damn cat always manage to put all his weight on my tits and stomach?

I sat up, sending Oscar rolling off me with an offended meow. I knew without looking that my hair was an insane mess, like a fiery halo around my head, and patted it down ineffectually.

Then Bob started banging on the wall.

“Hey, why do you think it’s my fault?” I hollered.

“Some asshole in a black sports car honking at the crack of dawn? That’s right up your alley!” Bob yelled back through the wall.

All right, maybe he had a point there. I rolled over and checked my phone. First of all, it wasn’t the crack of dawn, it was nine in the morning. Early for me, but late enough that Bob’s banging on the wall was not totally warranted. And two, I had way too many missed calls, all from a number I didn’t recognize. I was good at my job, but that didn’t mean I kept my phone sound-on during my hard-won hours of beauty rest.

I groaned and swung my feet to the floor. This meant Todd had given Corbin my *number*. What a total invasion of privacy. I wished it surprised me. I made a mental note to chew Todd out later.

I didn't even bother changing out of my pajamas, just a big t-shirt reading I Beat The Candy's Good Time Bar Oyster Challenge And All I Got Was This Stupid T-Shirt and my underwear, before I marched toward the door. I leaned over the railing and peered down at the street. As Bob had said, it was a fancy black sports car, and the driver gave two quick honks when he saw me, like a hello. I rolled my eyes. Hopefully he could see that from here with those sharp UnSeelie eyes. Then I went back into my apartment.

I wasn't shocked when the honking stopped only to be followed shortly by knock at the door. I wasn't even dressed yet! I tugged on my trusty work jeans, still in the Candy's shirt. Not my finest look.

Of course, upon opening the door, I had to see Corbin way overdressed for a day of interrogating senior citizens. He was wearing fine, tailored slacks and a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his forearms. His shoes looked like they cost more than my rent. His blond hair was artfully mussed, a bit falling rakishly into one eye, like he'd just arrived from a photoshoot.

"You didn't bring me any coffee?" I asked, then turned around and strode back into my apartment.

He followed me and closed the door behind him. "Didn't realize that was a rule of our partnership. Should I go pick up some iced caramel lattes for us?"

I threw him a confused look over my shoulder. "Gross. Don't say caramel latte in my presence ever again. It's offensive to real coffee."

"Right," Corbin said with a slow nod.

"And don't honk next time," I said. "My neighbor's gonna get me evicted."

"You didn't answer your phone."

"You didn't tell me you'd be showing up bright and early. I usually work late nights, you know, what with my job being what it is."

Corbin had gotten me thinking about coffee now—or, more accurately, I'd gotten myself thinking about coffee—so I went into the kitchen to put the percolator on.

Corbin lingered awkwardly in what could best be described as my foyer, not quite in the living room area of my studio. "I simply thought we should dive into this case as quickly as possible. Being professionals, and all."

"I think *I'm* the professional here," I said.

"Of a certain type," Corbin said. His blue eyes narrowed slightly, and even from here I could see the amber flecks glow slightly. "And I'm

another.”

Anxiety spiked in my chest. Was he using some kind of power on me?

“Please,” I said, waving a hand. “It’s a bit too early for magic tricks.”

An odd stalemate of silence dragged between us as I finished making the coffee. Corbin still lingered by the door, but he was a bit shifty on his feet, and a furrow developed in his brow.

“Temperance,” he said.

“Tempie,” I corrected immediately.

“Tempie,” he said. “You live alone?”

I paused. “Why do you ask?”

He hummed thoughtfully. “This apartment... The smell is unlike any other I’ve smelled in a human. This is just you?” His eyes softened. “Smells amazing.”

Now my anxiety was going into overdrive. “It must be my cat,” I deflected. “Oscar. He’s under the bed because he doesn’t like strangers.”

Stupid. Stupid. I hadn’t been thinking and I’d just let him waltz into my apartment—of course my scent was more concentrated in here! Hell, my sheets probably reeked of it to his sensitive nose!

“Now,” I said curtly, “I need to change, so if you wouldn’t mind waiting outside?”

Corbin seemed pinned to the spot, gaze still soft and dreamy as he inhaled, slow and long.

“Corbin!” I snapped. “Go outside! I need privacy to change, considering I don’t have *rooms* in this apartment.”

Corbin jolted back into reality and nodded. “Right. I’ll—I’ll be outside, then. If you wouldn’t mind hurrying.”

“Fine,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

With what appeared to be no small amount of effort, Corbin made his feet move and stepped back outside the apartment.

I exhaled hard, leaning heavily against the counter. God, I was so stupid. From now on, I had to be really, really careful. Smelling good was one thing—certain people smelled good to certain supers even when they *were* pure human—but if he started to connect the dots, it wasn’t going to end well for me. I didn’t want anyone to know my status, but especially not an UnSeelie.

If anyone else figured it out, I’d be in trouble with the SP for a bad registration status. But if an UnSeelie did, there was a nonzero chance I’d end up drained dry and left in a ditch for my trouble.

I knew that, because that's what had happened to my mother. She'd been found drained dry of her blood next to a portal to Faerie. I'd been so young when it happened that I hardly remembered her—just snippets of her voice singing more than anything. The memory ached, but the more defined memories were the ones of my grandmother, and the way she channeled her grief into keeping me safe. If she saw how careless I'd just been, she'd boot me into the realm of the dead herself.

I finished getting dressed, putting on a regular-sized t-shirt and tugging a leather jacket on over it as well. In the bathroom, I rinsed my face to clear my head, then tugged my hair up into a bun at the top of my head, taming the wild curls back as best as I could.

I paused and peered thoughtfully at my reflection in the mirror.

Oscar meowed and shoved his paw under the closed door, rattling the entire door in its frame.

“You're right,” I said. “Better safe than sorry.”

I pulled open the drawer of my vanity and fished out the plain black box tucked in the very back. Inside, resting on a bed of blue silk, was my jewelry. It didn't look like anything much: four plain silver rings, one for each finger sans thumb. I slipped each ring onto my dominant right hand, and then snapped the matching silver cuff around my right wrist. I folded my fingers into a fist and squeezed my hand tight a few times, experimentally, like I was testing the tightness of a boxing hand wrap.

And in a way, I was. I hadn't worn my jewelry in a long time—I hadn't had any recent contracts that required it. I'd forgotten the comfortable, safe feeling wearing it gave me. The enchantment carved on the inside of each ring tamed the power galloping through me, like a bridle on a difficult horse. It had a dual purpose. If push came to shove, the jewelry helped me channel my power, should I need to whoop someone's ass. And, hopefully, it'd keep my power in check without me having to think constantly about reining it in.

It might not be enough to keep Corbin from sniffing around me, literally and figuratively, but it would help.

Oscar rattled the door again.

“All right, all right,” I muttered. I fed him as he desired, then fed myself at light speed with cold breakfast pizza. I grabbed my notes, my coffee travel mug, and a couple of knives for good measure, then headed out the door.

His fancy sports car was *seriously* fancy.

“This is seriously fancy,” I informed him as I climbed into the passenger

seat.

Corbin looked a little more clear-eyed than he had in my apartment, and my description of his car obviously pleased him. “I believe in investing in things you like. I saw your bike outside Manny’s and figured you might prefer that I drive.”

“What, you have a problem with riding in the bitch seat?” I asked as he pulled out into the street.

“With you driving, I don’t think I would,” Corbin said, and shot me a smirk.

Damn. Walked into that one. The image wasn’t totally without its merits, though—me straddling my sporty, sexy bike, peeling out onto the highway outside Warwick with Corbin’s chest pressed to my back, his muscular arms snug around my waist as I showed him what the bike could do. In the fantasy, of course, we’d be helmetless, and UnSeelies did that thing with their teeth as foreplay, and his mouth would be really close to my nape in that position--

“It wouldn’t be a professional image, though,” Corbin noted.

What the hell was wrong with me? I resisted the urge to slap myself. I blamed the sexy dream I’d had last night and a severe drought in my dating life—maybe I needed Carla to introduce me to some of her werewolf bartender’s buddies.

Freaking. UnSeelies.

“Maybe not for you,” I said. “It’d look great for me.”

We drove the short distance to Sandra Wheels’ parents’ house, which was over the river in York City proper. I avoided chitchatting with Corbin, choosing instead to bury my nose in my phone and send Todd a series of angry emojis regarding the whole thing of him giving out my phone number and address without asking me. Extenuating circumstances, my sculpted ass.

By the time Corbin parallel parked his fancy car with expert ease, I was caffeinated and had blown off steam via text. That, coupled with my breakfast pizza and the soothing effects of my jewelry, buoyed my mood up from my earlier irritation.

And I was really fucking ready to have an actual lead.

“Let me handle the talking here, okay?” I said over my shoulder as we approached the door to the house. “You guys tend to unnerve people.”

“You guys?” Corbin repeated with a disbelieving tilt of his head.

Sandra’s parents, the Birklands, lived in a two-story attached house in a quiet neighborhood of York City, small porch and a lovely, well-tended

street. I knocked briskly on the door, then cast a serious look over my shoulder at Corbin. He'd better let me run this part.

Moments later, the door opened slowly. The woman who answered looked like she hadn't slept in days. She probably hadn't. She was heavysset, with dyed blonde hair growing out brown at the roots, wearing a housecoat open over her t-shirt and plaid pajama pants.

"Hi, are you Mrs. Birkland?" I asked.

She nodded tentatively. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Shannon Landers," I said, "I'm with the York City Police. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your daughter, Sandra."

Her eyes welled up with tears. "I already told the police everything I know."

"Sure, but you didn't tell *me*," I said gently. "I'm leading the new task force dedicated to finding your daughter. This is my partner, Devin."

Corbin, to his credit, simply tipped his chin in greeting.

"New task force?" she asked.

I nodded. "We're dedicating some additional resources to finding your daughter, so I'd like to ask you a few more clarifying questions, if that's all right with you."

She seemed to turn that question over in her mind. If I was working alone, I'd simply place my hand on her forearm in a kind gesture of comfort, and let my power gently encourage her to trust me. But I couldn't risk doing that with Corbin right behind me. I tried not to grit my teeth. Hopefully my straight-up people skills were good enough to work on this poor woman.

She sighed and glanced between Corbin and me, her eyes still shiny with unshed tears. "Okay," she said. "But I don't want to rehash anything I already told the police before."

"Of course," I said. "Can we...?" I nodded at the door behind her.

She shook her head. "Sorry, I just—I've had enough of the cops poking around my house."

"Sure," I said, and then stepped back. Mrs. Birkland joined us on the porch and tugged her housecoat tighter around her shoulders, like she was dispelling an unfelt chill.

I ran through a series of pretty basic questions with her: was Sandra acting erratically before the incident, did she have any history of drug use or close friends who used, did she have any unexplained absences, et cetera, et cetera. Eventually her husband stepped out and joined us, too. He was a tall

man, with a stony expression and thick glasses.

I could see both of them getting more and more irritated as I went through the list—likely these were all things the police had already asked her. I was about to wrap it up and call this a bust when I finally asked her, “Do you have any history of mental illness in the family?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” Mrs. Birkland said.

“We don’t,” her husband said gruffly. “But we don’t know about Sandra.”

“She wasn’t mentally ill,” Mrs. Birkland said. “She was fine.”

“What do you mean you don’t know about Sandra?” Corbin asked from where he was still lurking behind me.

“Sandra was adopted,” her husband said. “When she was just an infant. We don’t have records of her family health history.”

“Ah,” I said. Adopted. That complicated things.

“She was completely fine before this happened,” Mrs. Birkland said, her voice rising. “That’s what I keep telling all of you. There was nothing off. Something *did this* to her. I just—” She paused and inhaled sharply, then cut her gaze to the ceiling and blinked hard. “I just want my baby back.”

I pressed my lips together. I didn’t have to say anything for them to both know the evidence was stacked against Sandra. My goal was to find her—but I didn’t have much hope for exonerating her.

Mr. Birkland nodded like he could read exactly what I was thinking. “Is there anything else we can help you with?”

“Do you have a copy of the adoption records?” I asked.

He balked. “How will that help find her? Those are private.”

“I can’t offer any details like that right now,” I said. “I can only tell you it’d help the investigation.”

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” Mr. Birkland said, looking down the bridge of his nose at me.

I wasn’t fazed. Especially with his wife next to him, her face still quivering with pent-up emotion. “Hollis,” she said. “Now’s not the time.”

“We don’t even know—”

“Just go get the records,” she said. “Please.”

Mr. Birkland’s frustration lingered in the air like a stench as the silence dragged between us. But then his expression broke, and he stomped back into the house.

“Sorry about him,” Mrs. Birkland said with a sigh. “This hasn’t been an

easy time for us.”

“I understand completely,” I said.

A few minutes later, Mr. Birkland re-emerged onto the porch with copies of the records, freshly photocopied. I glanced over them quickly, and nothing immediately caught my eye, but I’d go over them with a fine-tooth comb when I could.

“Just find our girl,” he said. “That’s all we want.”

“We’ll do our best,” I said. “Thanks.”

Corbin nodded his thanks too, and we made our way back to the car. As soon as the door slammed closed, I hunched over the adoption records. Corbin pulled the car back onto the street, brow furrowed in thought as he drove. I kept expecting him to grill me about the records, not that there was much to find in them. No known information about birth parents or anything like that that would’ve made this whole process simpler.

“So,” I asked, glancing sidelong at him, “you’re not going to ask me what I’m finding in here?”

“Those aren’t the records I want,” he said. So cryptic. I rolled my eyes.

“Okay,” I said, “so where are we going now?”

“I’m dropping you back at your place,” he said. “I’m assuming there’s nothing of use in those records, or else you’d already be crowing about it.”

I huffed. “I haven’t finished looking.”

He smirked at me. “So I’m right.”

“Well, her parents aren’t known,” I grumbled. “Not much else is jumping out at me. *Yet*. I have to look closer. What do you mean these aren’t the records you want?”

“I’m going to go to the Fae consulate,” he explained. “To the records room. If she has any Fae heritage, we’ll have records of the adoption. I’ll need to match them against the human ones, but this could explain how she managed to pull off whatever ritual she was working on.”

He nodded to himself, like he was unfolding this possibility in his mind and seeing all the ways it aligned. It would be a neat solution, I had to admit. Also, how the hell did I not know the Fae consulate kept adoption records?

“I’d bring you,” he said, “but you know...”

“Yeah, I don’t want my brain liquefied inside my skull,” I said. “Thanks for caring.”

Frustration burned through me as I thumbed through the records from Sandra’s adopted parents, just so I didn’t have to look at Corbin, lest my

expression reveal anything. I focused my attention on my rings, instead, letting the silver swallow my frustration, hopefully before Corbin got a whiff of anything weird.

“I don’t like doing the cleanup it requires,” Corbin said demurely.

Humans couldn’t pass through the portal to Faerie—the experience was painful, and then, if you pushed through the pain to keep going, eventually fatal. The worst and most frustrating part of this ordeal thus far was that I *could*, technically, pass into Faerie. It wouldn’t be a pleasant experience, but I could do it. If I was working this case *alone*, I’d be doing just that—or at least that’s what I told myself.

“How long will it take?” I asked.

We crossed the bridge back into Warwick and Corbin took the fastest route to my house with no instruction from me.

“As long as it takes,” he said.

“What happened to us working *together*?” I shot back as he pulled up to my building.

“We are,” he said. “Doing quite well so far, I’d say.”

“Makes one of us,” I grumbled.

Corbin just laughed—a low, deep sound, warm and welcoming despite his frosty exterior. It fell over me like a wave and made me want to scoot closer to him and make him laugh again. I pressed my lips together and shoved that thought aside, which wasn’t hard, considering I was still really fucking annoyed about this records room situation.

“I don’t know how long it will take, Tempie,” he said with a shake of his head I might characterize as fond if I didn’t know better. “I’ve got to talk to some people to even get admittance, and I’m sure you know time passes differently in Faerie.”

“All right, all right,” I said with a wave of my hand. “Just keep me posted, okay? And hurry.”

“Right.”

I opened the car door. It was possible he’d find something in the records room—and it was possible he’d find nothing at all. The part of me that wanted to get paid hoped for the former, and my pride hoped for the latter. If it *was* the latter... I’d have to start tapping networks that weren’t exactly my favorite. I climbed out of the car and leaned back down before closing the door.

“Do me a favor while you’re in Faerie.”

He raised his eyebrows. “A favor?”

“Bring back some Nectar Vectors, will you?”

“I didn’t peg you as a big candy fan,” Corbin said slowly.

“It’s not for me,” I said. “But they’re crazy expensive on this side of the portal, so just do me a favor and grab a bag for me, will you?”

He tipped his head toward me expectantly.

I raised my eyebrows right back. If he thought I was going to explain myself further, he could just stand here and gape all day.

“If I remember,” he finally said.

“Thanks!” I said cheerfully, then slammed the car door shut with a little too much force. He drove off immediately, and I waited for his car to turn the corner before I marched over to my bike.

This was not how I envisioned this contract going. Not even at all. I was supposed to be in the lead here—and now Corbin was taking off on his own, following leads I couldn’t follow with him. Now what was I supposed to do? Just sit around my apartment and wait for his intel like a war wife gazing out the window awaiting her deployed husband?

Fuck that. There were still more leads I could follow—more people I could talk to. I didn’t have a lot of faith that they would *go* anywhere, but there was always a chance. Couldn’t leave any stone unturned. Due diligence and all that.

So off to the bank it was, riding a little faster than necessary.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Jack shit, Oscar,” I said as I kicked the door closed behind me. “You might even say it was a waste of time.”

Oscar meowed in deep understanding from where he was napping upside-down in the center of my bed. I tugged my boots off in the foyer and then collapsed on my couch and tipped my head back onto the back of it. I sighed heavily and stared at the fan circling lazily. The sun was down—it wasn’t exactly late, but I could, in theory, crawl into bed.

The bank had been a bust. I had one potential lead, but it wasn’t anything super promising. Sandra’s coworkers had given me the names of a couple of Sandra’s friends who I’d also seen show up in the photos on their social media accounts, so I’d be paying them a visit. If that didn’t go anywhere, it looked like I would be going back to my old methods. Meaning tomorrow I’d skulk around downtown and pester sources until someone gave me *something*. Anything. Maybe I’d head back to the crime scene. Or Candy’s. Someone at Candy’s *had* to know something about a new seller in town. Or maybe--

My phone rang, breaking my train of thought. Irritated, I grabbed it from where I’d tossed it onto the coffee table carelessly. An unsaved but familiar number flashed on the screen.

This time, I answered. “Back already? Or do you have a fancy phone that can call make calls from Faerie?”

“That’d be a convenient device, do you know where I can get one?” Corbin fired back.

“How much money do you have?”

I could hear him roll his eyes through the phone. I grinned to myself. Success.

“I’m outside,” Corbin said. “Come down.”

I blinked. Well, this was a little earlier than expected. As much as it pained me to think it, this did seem like a better use of my time than passing out for twelve hours and then pounding beers at Candy’s hoping someone would offer me a lead. “Right now?”

“Why, do you have other plans?”

I scoffed. “What if I do?”

“I’ll buy you dinner,” he said. “Hurry up.”

Damn. My biggest weakness—a free meal. “What day is it?”

“...Tuesday?”

Excellent. Chicken cutlet night. “Fine,” I said. “I’ll be downstairs in a minute.”

I hung up without waiting for his response, then levered off the couch and stretched my arms over my head.

“Hold the fort down, Oscar,” I said. “I’m only agreeing to this meeting because he said he’s buying.”

Oscar didn’t look convinced, just blinked at me then rolled over and went back to sleep. I stepped back into my shoes, then paused in the foyer, gazing down at my right hand. I still had my jewelry on, glinting in the low light of my apartment. I rarely wore it for this long, and it was beginning to feel heavy on my hand. Not sapping my power, exactly, but just making me feel a little weighed down. Even tamed horses needed to run loose in the fields regularly. I wasn’t used to wearing it like this yet.

But better safe than sorry. It was my best defense against revealing what I really was to Corbin. So I shook off the low-grade headache developing at the base of my skull and headed down the stairs. Those chicken cutlets would definitely make me feel better.

As I descended the stairs down to the parking lot, Corbin stepped out of his sports car and walked around to open the passenger side for me. I paused a few steps away.

“Are we going to prom?” I asked.

“What’s prom?” he asked. “I don’t know your human customs.”

“Don’t be cheeky,” I said. I shooed him away so I could slide into the passenger seat.

I was careful to leave a fair amount of distance between us—with this

headache building, I wasn't sure how much I would be able to keep a lid on my power. I'd have to rely on my jewelry to do it. Best to make sure Corbin didn't touch me and get an accidental zap or something. Or, if he had a particular UnSeelie power, like touch-based telepathy, I wouldn't be able to misguide it. And that was only one of a multitude of potential UnSeelie powers he might have.

My grandmother had beaten the list of potential abilities into my head of nearly ever threatening supernatural being that could cross into this realm. My knowledge was basically encyclopedic. It was handy for contracting, of course, but Granny had done it in order to make sure I could protect myself.

So far, I wasn't so sure how well I was doing with that. At least I didn't let Corbin into my apartment this time. But even with my jewelry on, the electric-ozone sensation of his aura was strong. It stung my nose deliciously, like intense aromatherapy, and danced over my nerves. Fae auras were always stronger when they'd just been in Faerie, and Corbin was no exception. I tried not to shiver and shifted on my seat as the sensation washed over me, rich and a little intoxicating.

"There's a Malaysian restaurant across the bridge," Corbin said as he started the car. "We'll be able to speak without worry there. I need to hear about—"

"Manny's," I said.

"You just had Manny's," Corbin said.

"It's Tuesday," I said. "We're eating at Manny's."

"You're acting like a child," Corbin said. "This Malaysian place—"

I unlocked the car door. The car was moving, but not very fast, so I could tuck and roll if I absolutely had to. "This isn't what I agreed to."

"Are you being serious?"

I undid my seatbelt. "Fine."

"Hell's bells," Corbin said under his breath. "It's like working with a toddler." He executed a three-point turn and turned the car away from the bridge and back toward Manny's. "What's the big deal about it being Tuesday?"

"Chicken cutlet night," I said, like this was the most obvious thing in the world. "It's my favorite special at Manny's."

"I can't believe you," Corbin said. But he kept driving toward the diner, so I counted it as a win. It wasn't that I didn't like Malaysian food—I knew the place he was talking about. Cute that he thought I didn't. It was a great

hole in the wall, located in a basement, *incredible* bak kut teh, but he didn't know that the sprites that hung out in there *loved* to gossip. Whatever we talked about would be common knowledge in Warwick within twelve hours. Manny's was reliable, and no one there talked.

Plus, I liked seeing Corbin get all flustered and frustrated. Winding up an UnSeelie was a special kind of treat. I rebuckled my seatbelt, feeling inordinately pleased.

Manny's was packed when we walked in, bustling with humans and supers alike. No one gave us a second glance. Dotty nodded toward the back corner booth, where I usually sat, and I mimed tipping my hat in thanks, which made her smile and shake her head at my antics.

Corbin and I slid into the booth. I glanced at the patrons in the booth closest to us: two humans, one with a hearing aid that appeared to be turned off. Excellent. I loved this place.

Dotty strolled over with two menus and a beer in hand, set them down, then glanced meaningfully at Corbin and shot me a wink. I shook my head vigorously, but Dotty just mimed zipping her lips. Corbin glanced between us, his face slowly contorting into an expression that looked very similar to Oscar's when he got too close to my spicy stir fry. Half confusion and half disgust.

Corbin pushed the menu aside. "So what did you find out at the bank?"

I gritted my teeth and took a swig of my beer. How did he know about that? I wanted to know what *he* had found in the Fae consulate records room. I wasn't so keen on sharing the things that I had found. Considering those things were nothing. Was Corbin keeping tabs on me? Or working with Todd behind my back? Whatever it was, it was starting to annoy me.

I wanted to raise a stink about it.

Corbin peered at me, one elbow on the table, his chin propped in his hand. He blinked his blue eyes, the amber flecks glowing pleasantly from his time in Faerie.

Except raising a stink would just cause me more problems. I knew that, and I still wanted to do it because it would make me feel better, but I had to prioritize the case. If I wanted this bounty, I needed Corbin to work with me. This was a temporary arrangement. I could let his invasiveness slide. Plus, he was buying.

"Jack shit," I admitted, then took a swig of my beer.

Dotty reappeared at our tableside. "I forgot to ask," she said to Corbin.

“Do you eat?”

Corbin raised his eyebrows. “Yes, I eat.”

“He’s Fae, not a vampire,” I clarified.

“Ah!” Dotty said then smiled wide. “The special for you, too, then?”

“Just a coffee for me,” Corbin said. “Thanks.”

“You’re missing out,” Dotty said, then nodded at me. “We’ll have it up in just a moment.”

After she left, Corbin said, “Please don’t tell people I’m Fae.”

“It’s not exactly a secret,” I said.

“Maybe not to you,” he said.

I swallowed. “What does that mean?”

“You work with my kind and others like me regularly,” he said.

The anxiety that had bubbled to life in my chest sank back down. Jesus, this case was going to kill me. “So what?”

“So you have a better eye for the tells,” Corbin said. “I prefer to pass as human whenever possible, in this realm. People tend to distrust my kind.”

“If I hadn’t said anything, Dotty would’ve shown up with one of her signature blood cocktails to test on you,” I said.

“I wouldn’t be opposed to that,” Corbin said primly. “Though I usually prefer it in... particular contexts.”

His sharp eyes traced over my face, then down to my neck, to the join of my neck and shoulder. His aura spiked, washing over me, and desire curled low in my core. I tugged at my hair, pulling my braid down over my shoulder like I could stop his gaze. But that only made him smirk, because he knew we were both thinking of the same thing.

“Have you experienced it?” he asked.

“None of your business,” I said. I hadn’t ever slept with an UnSeelie, but I’d heard about it extensively from Carla. She’d been so enamored with that particular hookup that she’d ended up driving the guy away. Seemed like he was used to that, though. UnSeelies didn’t need blood the way vampires did, but they enjoyed it during sex, and sleeping with an UnSeelie usually involved getting a bite or two on the neck or the inner thigh. And according to Carla, the experience was beyond euphoric.

I couldn’t deny that conversation had piqued my interest. But not with someone I was working with. And not with a jackass like Corbin. But my face still heated up and I knew I was blushing—damn my complexion.

“It’s quite pleasant,” Corbin said. “For both parties involved.”

“You literally just said I have advanced knowledge of supers and now you’re explaining basic UnSeelie lore to me?” I asked, trying to get rid of my blush through sheer willpower.

“Not explaining,” Corbin said. “Just reminding.”

Dotty swooped in again, saving me from this conversation by delivering me an enormous plate of chicken cutlets with a side of mashed potatoes, and a coffee for Corbin. I dug in immediately. The sooner we ate and discussed what little we’d found, I’d be back home, and definitely *not* thinking about the way his gaze had settled on my neck, and how the tip of his tongue pressed against his upper teeth.

“I barely got anything,” I said around a mouthful of mashed potatoes, redirecting us back to the *real* conversation at hand. “Everyone she worked with at the bank said she was a delightful, reliable employee who didn’t have beef with anyone and always showed up on time. The way they talked about her, you’d think she was the one who got murdered, instead of the suspect.”

“Barely?” Corbin sipped his coffee and cringed. What a snob.

“They mentioned two of her friends,” I said. “And those names had come up in some of my sniffing around her social media, too. Figured I’d pay them a visit to start tomorrow.” I sighed and took another swig of my beer. “What’d you turn up?”

“No records in the consulate,” he said. “Nothing that aligns with the human records, at least.”

“You did get my Nectar Vectors, though, right?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Yes. Are they your favorite?”

“They’re not for me,” I said. “But I’m getting the feeling I might need them, if these friends of Sandra’s don’t know anything.”

“I’ve never known someone to be so cryptic about candy,” Corbin said.

I hummed. “Really *nothing* in the records?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I looked everywhere.”

Always a chance he’d missed something, though. Fuck, it annoyed me that I couldn’t have gone in there with him. I finished my meal, then raised my eyebrow expectantly at Corbin.

With a shake of his head, Corbin put a few bills on the table. “So we’ll start tomorrow interrogating these friends.”

“Why *we*?” I asked. “Don’t you have any leads of your own to follow?”

“You’re the investigator,” he said.

“That only seems to be the case when you don’t have anything to go on,”

I noted. I stood up and slid out of the booth. “Let’s go, then, I’ve got some interrogating to do tomorrow.”

Corbin followed me out of Manny’s. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning.”

I made my way to his car—I’d inform him that wasn’t going to be the case once we got to my place. I hurried to the passenger side so I could open it myself before he got any ideas about doing his cute little prom date opening the door for me thing again.

I tugged at the handle and found it locked. “Hey,” I said, “you gonna unlock this?”

No answer—but my nape prickled. I turned around and found myself abruptly close to Corbin; I tried to step back and only succeeded in pressing my back to the cool door of his fancy car.

Corbin didn’t back off. His eyes flashed fully amber for a moment, before receding back to the speckled blue, and he tipped his chin down so his nose was close to my temple.

“How is it that you always seem to find the leads? People just open up to you so easily. What is it that does that?” He inhaled. “Admittedly, I have my theories.”

“I’m just a nice person,” I said, and my voice only quivered a little. Being this close to Corbin had anxiety and desire warring inside me—my brain knew I needed to get away, but my body wanted me to surge forward and press against him. The tingling traveled from my nape down to my heels, all through my body, drawing me to him like a magnet.

“You smell so good,” he murmured, voice newly low. “It’s familiar, but I can’t place it. Smells like a memory.” Another inhale, and then he pressed his tongue to his upper teeth again, but this time, his canines were a little longer than normal. “I’m sure I could place it, though, if I just got a little—”

That snapped me out my daze. I shoved him back, both hands on his chest, my jewelry buzzing on my skin.

He stumbled back a few steps, eyes amber again and teeth still slightly elongated. Then he shook his head briskly like a dog shaking water off its coat, straightened up, and cleared his throat.

“You’re strong,” he noted.

My heart pounded. I hadn’t meant to push a bit of my power into that shove, but I had in my panic—and it seemed like Corbin was too distracted to notice. Or maybe he was just trying to act like he didn’t notice. Was it getting

worse? Maybe the jewelry wasn't enough—maybe I needed to go out into the woods and let some steam off, like a pressure valve.

“Nature of the job,” I explained. “Gotta be able to defend myself.”

He pushed his hair off his forehead. “That required defense?”

“Apparently,” I snapped. “Put your teeth away and let's go.”

We drove back to my apartment in a tense silence. Once we arrived, he cleared his throat. “I'll pick you up tomorrow for the interrogation.”

“Nope,” I said. “I'll meet you.”

This time he didn't fight me on it. He seemed almost cowed—I hardly recognized this version of him. I climbed out of the car and slammed the door a little too hard. That was another close call. Corbin was going to figure something out if I didn't get this under control. But part of me wondered if maybe this would be a turning point between us. He seemed almost embarrassed by his own reaction. Maybe now he'd follow my lead and I could get this investigation back on track the way I wanted to do it.

But I had a feeling it wouldn't be so simple.

CHAPTER SIX

Jill and John Smucker lived on the south side of Warwick, in the old-money neighborhood that was established before the supers made themselves known. As a result, the neighborhood was mostly human, quiet and tree-lined, very unlike the mess and noise of my beloved neighborhood.

I pulled my bike onto the quiet street and parked right in front of Corbin's fancy black sports car.

"Well, this isn't suspicious at all," I said as he climbed out. "How long have you been waiting here?"

"Not too long," Corbin said. "You were supposed to be leading this interrogation, I thought?"

"Yeah, and having a guy lurking outside their house in a blacked-out sports car is a great way to build trust," I muttered.

"Humans," Corbin muttered back with a shake of his head. "You're all so sensitive."

"Right, humans are the problem here."

"Exactly," Corbin said.

I rolled my eyes and led the way up the sidewalk to the Smuckers' modern gray house with vast glass windows. I knocked briskly on the door.

Jill Smucker answered, dressed in a thin silk nightgown that did not leave much to the imagination. Her hair was curled, but messy, like she'd slept on the styling, and she smiled at me with her eyes slightly glazed over. Her fingers were loose around the base of a martini glass.

"Hello," she said with a slow smile. "Can I help you?"

"Bit early for a martini," Corbin muttered.

I elbowed him. Jill didn't seem to notice. "Hi, Mrs. Smucker. I'm Shannon, an investigator with the York City Police. This is my partner. Do you and your husband have a moment to answer a few questions about your friend Sandra Wheels?"

Her face fell. "Oh, yes. Sandra. Oh, it's so tragic, isn't it? Please, come in. Can I fix you a drink?"

Corbin glanced meaningfully at me. I elbowed him again.

"We're fine," I said. Usually, I'd go for a cup of coffee in a situation like this, but I didn't trust Mrs. Smucker not to spike it with a bit of whiskey—or something stronger. She looked a little too glazed over to *only* be drinking. Maybe an opioid, too—housewife's little helper.

"John's in his study," she said. "He knew Sandra better than me. They worked together. Not at the bank, but he's in investments. You know how the finance world is."

I certainly did not know. "Right."

"This way." Jill swanned down the hallway, martini sloshing in the glass. She led us back to a set of fine wooden double-doors and knocked twice with her knuckles before pushing it open.

"John, dear? We've got company. This lovely young woman wants to talk to us about Sandra."

"Sandra? What's there to talk about? Who is it?"

"Oh, he's on one of his moods," Jill said with a knowing frown. "I'm sorry about him, he gets like this sometimes. Just give him a moment to warm up to you. You know how men get." She glanced at Corbin. "No offense meant."

Behind me, Corbin was on high alert, eyes flickering around the house. He didn't even seem to notice Jill's words at all. He followed me into the study, looming like an attack dog. Usually, I considered having someone with me a burden, but something was off about this couple—really off. I wouldn't say no to a little extra muscle in a situation like this. Especially if that meant I didn't have to use my abilities. Corbin could take that kind of heat a lot easier than I could and with a lot less risk to himself.

We stepped into the study. It was a small, round room with a high ceiling, lined with dark built-in shelves stuffed to bursting with dusty books. It was windowless, with no clocks anywhere to be found. John was hunched over a desk in the center of the room, in front of another imposing wooden door. Books were spread out and open all over the desk, and the floor, lit by a few

dim lamps.

John's forehead was resting on one of the books. Jill smiled at us, then breezed out of the room.

Corbin cleared his throat.

John didn't move.

Corbin glanced at me quizzically. I shrugged. I gave it a shot: cleared my throat, then said, "Excuse me?"

Still no movement.

"Maybe he's dead," Corbin muttered.

I elbowed Corbin. "Better not be," I said under my breath. "At least, not yet."

Something weird was going on with this couple—and this library. I reached out to the bookshelf, pulled a large, dusty tome off, and then dropped it. It hit the ground with a loud *whump*, sending a billowing cloud of dust up from its pages and making my nose itch.

John jerked into awareness. His thinning hair stuck up in all directions, and his glasses were slightly askance on his face roughened from lack of shaving, and his sweatshirt was stained with sweat at the armpits and coffee at the front. He looked like a cross between a college professor and a strung-out boardwalk barker about to ask me if I was ready to accept Jesus' love into my heart.

"Whoops," I said. I leaned over and picked the dusty tome off the floor and swept my hand over the cover. "Sorry about that. Was just looking."

I was expecting something boring in this library—science textbooks or do-it-yourself entrepreneurship books, not this leather-bound monstrosity stamped with text I couldn't read. Curious. What language was this? I went to open the front cover, but before I could, John was up like a shot. He snatched the book from my hands and added it to his pile of books on his desk.

"Who are you?" he asked, wild-eyed.

"I'm Shannon," I said soothingly, with my hands up like I was approaching a spooked horse. "I'm with the York City Police. Your wife let us in and said you could tell us a little bit about your friend Sandra."

"York City Police?" John asked. "We already spoke to them."

"Sure," I said, "but you didn't speak to me. This won't take but a few minutes."

I stepped closer to the desk. The books spread open across its surface were similar to the one I'd knocked from the shelf—the same unknown

alphabet, the same dusty covers and yellowing pages. These books were *old*. Corbin's gaze was zeroed on them as well.

"Where'd you get these?" I asked.

They weren't just old. They were Fae text. I couldn't read the alphabet, but it wasn't entirely unfamiliar. Not a Fae language I knew, but it seemed kin to one—like I was looking at Portuguese when I only had a mild understanding of French. And the closer I got to the books, the more their old power tingled at the edges of my senses. Jealousy and confusion flared in my mind as I shot a narrow-eyed look at John, who was beginning to fidget where he stood. I'd never had anyone around to teach me how to read this old language. How the hell did John learn it? Was he actually reading these books?

"I don't know anything about Sandra," he said. "Now, if you don't mind, I have to get back to work."

"What are you working on?" I asked. I reached out toward one of the books and John stepped closer, hand up abortively like he had considered grabbing me. Interesting.

Corbin watched us closely, the amber flecks in his eyes glowing.

God, I wanted to poke around closer at John's aura, but I couldn't risk Corbin sensing that use of power—he'd definitely notice with his attention focused so closely on us. If he was a super, though, I'd be able to tell without even trying. I wasn't getting anything from John. Pure, boring human.

"What does that have to do with Sandra?" John asked.

"Just making conversation," I said. "This is quite the collection of books."

"I don't know where Sandra is," John said. "I haven't heard anything from her."

"But you were close with her?" I asked.

"No," he said.

You didn't have to read auras to know this guy was lying. He was shifting his weight endlessly from foot to foot, cutting his bloodshot eyes left and right like he was looking for an escape route.

"That's not what we've heard," I said. "How would you describe your relationship with Sandra?"

"There wasn't one," he said.

Behind me, Corbin turned his attention to the bookshelves.

"Don't touch those," John snapped.

“Where *did* you get these?” Corbin asked, repeating my earlier curiosity.

“I don’t think that’s any of your business,” John said. “I have to get back to work. I think I’ve answered your questions.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

I tamped down on the frustration flaring in me and tightened my hand into a fist as my jewelry gathered some of that anger into its metal. If Corbin wasn’t here, this would be an easy fucking process. All I’d have to do would be to take John’s hand and sweeten his mood with my power, and he’d tell me everything. But no, with Corbin here, I had to deal with this tweaker without anything to ease the conversation. And it was already going off the rails.

I took a deep breath. “Listen, why don’t we have a cup of coffee, and you can tell me about Sandra?”

Without warning, John exploded into movement. He vaulted up and over the desk with a spryness that did not match his disheveled appearance, slammed his shoulder into the door behind the desk, and took off down the hall.

How the fuck did a guy like that run so *fast*? Something was going on with this guy—and I was going to find out what. A door down the hallway clattered open. I charged after him, only to see a door into the back swinging open on its hinges, like he’d nearly blasted it off the doorframe.

“Tempie!” Corbin called from behind me, but I hardly heard it over the blood rushing in my ears. I wasn’t letting this guy get away.

The door opened to their surprisingly vast back yard, and a huge fence in the back hid them from the similarly expensive-looking houses behind theirs. John charged toward the fence, and I was hot on his heels. I wished my feet were bare in the grass—that’d make me even faster—but I settled for launching off the balls of my feet, picking up speed like a cheetah. My jewelry vibrated on my hand as my body worked, thoughtlessly channeling my power into my speed as I was single-mindedly focused on John ahead of me.

John stumbled in the grass as he reached into one of his pockets. That was what I needed. I was on him, just an arm’s length from a linebacker tackle, when he stumbled. He twisted on the grass, landing flat on his ass, but before I grabbed him, he pulled something out of his pocket and hurled it at me.

For a moment I thought it was sand, or dirt. But then—
I inhaled. Coughed. And then blinked out of existence.

I opened my eyes into a dense veil of darkness, with nothingness so intense it seemed to weigh on me from all sides, heavy and cold like being trapped beneath an avalanche. I was supine on my back, nearly paralyzed, and my breath came shallow as if I was running out of oxygen. Maybe I was. In the distance, low groans sounded.

My skin was on fire with sensation. I searched wildly for the source of the activation and found nothing. All I knew was that there was strong magic here, magic I couldn't identify. But it felt dark, and wretched, and... Undirected. Like I'd slipped somewhere I didn't belong.

And then I smelled it.

Sulfur.

With effort, I heaved myself to my elbows.

The sulfuric smell worsened and worsened, making breathing even more difficult as I struggled to haul myself up to my feet. I moved like I had weights strapped to my limbs, and the dark avalanche pressed down on me like it wanted me to stay supine. I clenched my fist and focused my power.

And God, despite the terrible weight of the darkness and the growing headache and the noise and the smell, it felt really fucking good to feel the magic rushing through me. It was like letting an under-stimulated puppy loose at the beach, the way it roared through me gleefully.

The sulfuric smell worsened. The groans increased in volume.

Whatever I was smelling—it could smell me, too.

I took as deep of a breath as I could, ignoring the burning pain in my lungs. Then I hauled myself into a crouch and flattened my hand on whatever surface I was standing on. I found it gooey and hot, like tar, almost hot enough to burn.

My magic vibrated through me, making all the hair on my body stand on end. I channeled it into the tar, surrounding myself with it, and the groaning became a roar. The substance vibrated beneath me—I didn't know if that was me or whatever roaring thing was coming my way—and then—

Pop.

I blinked back into the back yard.

“Fuck!” John hurled another handful of dust, but this time, the throw was directed at the fence. The air swirled where the dust floated, quickly forming into a dark, glowing portal. Where it led, I couldn't see. John trusted it, though. He dove headfirst into the portal, and it zipped shut behind him and was gone.

I dropped flat onto my back with a sigh. “God dammit,” I swore mildly to myself. “How did I not see that coming?”

My hands were clean, but I still felt the phantom sensation of the gooey tar on them. I wiped both hands restlessly on the grass. I closed my eyes and took a slow, deep breath, savoring the cool, clean air despite the slight prickle of leftover magic hovering in the atmosphere.

When I opened my eyes, Corbin was leaning over me, peering curiously down.

“Thanks for the help,” I said sarcastically.

“You’re a fast runner,” he said.

“*That’s* what you’re concerned about?” I asked. “Not me getting sucked into a portal?”

At least the whole portal thing might distract him from realizing that I’d unthinkingly used a bit of magic to boost my speed. It was easier to keep a lid on my power when I was doing mostly intellectual pursuits. Once things got physical, it was a bit harder.

He leaned closer, towering over me. The amber in his eyes swirled and then consumed the blue, as his pupils dilated until the amber was a shining ring around the dark.

“How’d you move so quickly?” he asked. “And how’d you shift back to the garden?”

“Back off,” I said with a frustrated wave of my hand. My pulse thundered in my veins—I was still riding high from the adrenaline of the chase, not to mention the fear and admittedly excitement of being chucked into that portal. What the *hell* was that guy working with?

I’d used more power to get out of that plane than I’d used in ages. I scrambled out from under Corbin’s looming gaze as quickly as I could, then sniffed my armpit theatrically. “Smells like demons.”

“Is that what that is?” Corbin said without intonation. His eyes were still glowing.

It wasn’t just sulfur on me, that much I knew. But my power was making Corbin go a little hazy-stupid again, which might work in my favor.

“It’s a mix,” I admitted. “Faerie magic and demon sulfur.”

“So he *is* a magic user.”

“Yup,” I said. “Obviously. Considering you just saw him fly into a portal. Do you need a glass of water or something?”

Corbin blinked hard. I took another step back. The amber cleared from

his eyes, and his brow furrowed in confusion. "I've never seen a portal work like that."

"Like what?" I asked. "Seemed like a normal portal to me."

"Not the one he used to escape," Corbin said, "though that was surprisingly neat. The one he used on you."

He stood where I had disappeared, crouched down, and ran his fingers over the newly dead grass.

"What was different about it?" I asked.

"It didn't look like a portal at all," he said. "It wasn't an opening one would step through, like the portals Fae use. It was like a living thing. Whatever he threw at you... It coalesced into a darkness with weight that swallowed you, instead of cutting a hole in between planes like most portals do."

"Makes sense," I said with a nod. "Portals are doors, but you can't shove someone through one that doesn't want to go. So it's not a door, it's a piece of the plane itself. Meant to take the target back into the plane with it."

Corbin glanced up from his crouch. "Yeah. Exactly."

"What are you looking at me like that for?" I asked. "Surprised I know stuff about the field I work in?"

"No, it's not that," he said with a shake of his head. "It's just—that's an elegant explanation."

"Well, it wasn't an elegant experience," I grumbled.

"I know," he said as he straightened up. "That's why I'm surprised you're able to talk about it the way you are."

"What do you mean? I'm a professional."

"Where did it take you?" he asked.

"From the sulfur smell, I'm guessing a Hell-adjacent pocket realm," I said. "And it was dark as hell. No pun intended."

Maybe the sulfur had gotten to my head a little bit.

"Not Hell-adjacent," Corbin said. "In Hell itself. Deep, too. John didn't intend for you to get out."

"You can tell that just from the remains?" I asked. "Couldn't you be wrong?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I don't question *your* work."

"Yes, you do," I said. "Constantly."

"The point is," Corbin said with a huff, "this isn't amateur stuff. That was a portal intended to give you a very bad rest of your life."

I suppressed a shiver. That groaning I'd heard approaching... That hadn't been a trick, or in the distance. That had been a demon, ready to get up close and personal. If I hadn't gotten out when I did, I probably wouldn't have gotten out at all. Being alive in Hell was a *lot* worse than being dead.

"Can you do that same trick with the other portal?" I asked. "Figure out where John went?"

A scorch mark on the wooden privacy fence revealed where the portal had opened. Corbin walked over to the fence and ran his hand over the mark, following the ashy streak down the wood to the dirt where it'd killed the flowers blooming. He stayed there for a long moment, tracing his fingers up and down the mark, so focused that his aura widened, sending that now-familiar ozone scent rushing over me like a breeze. Much to my annoyance, the scent and feeling of his aura eased some of the tension that my little trip to Hell had caused. I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to ignore that.

"Anything?" I asked as Corbin swept his hand over the scorch mark for the twentieth time.

That made him sigh and turn around. "Nothing."

"Seriously? From what I saw, it looked like a Fae portal. Which tracks, considering all the literature he has inside. So, you should be able—"

"I know," Corbin snapped. "I know I should. But I'm getting nothing. Not even a hint of where he went."

"This guy is serious," I said. "Did you get any non-human vibes off him?"

Corbin shook his head. "Seemed like a regular Fae-chaser to me. I've seen humans like him before—obsessed with the realms, trying to figure out how to get in under the impression they'll find the fountain of youth or something."

"Has anyone succeeded?" I cracked the knuckles of my right hand idly.

My jewelry had finally stopped thrumming against my skin. Using my power to get out of that pocket dimension had made it easier to contain, and at this point, I was pretty sure I'd folded my power away. Or at least the sulfur residue would conceal it.

"Of course not," Corbin said haughtily. "Humans can't use Fae portals."

"Apparently they can," I noted, gesturing at the scorch mark.

"Something's different about this," Corbin said. "I've never seen anything like it. We'll have to search the house."

"Oh, shit," I said, eyes widening as realization hit me like a bolt. "Jill!"

I turned on my heel and rushed back inside. God, I was really losing my touch. Actually, that wasn't true at all. I was still fucking awesome at my job. It was just that having to manage an investigation, deal with Corbin's terrible bedside manner, *and* make sure he didn't discover my secret was a lot to juggle in my brain at once.

Getting sucked into Hell for a second didn't exactly make my brain work better, either. So odd little Jill and her swanning around had slipped my mind.

"Jill?" I called. I burst back into the house, careful not to disturb the mess in the study, then stilled and listened. No footsteps anywhere in the house, no voices nor tell-tale pattering about of people moving around.

It was empty.

I did a rudimentary search anyway, scanning the rooms and halls for any sign of Jill. As I expected, there was nothing. She was gone.

"Fuck," I muttered. I pushed a few sweat-dampened strands of hair off my forehead.

They'd planned this, I was sure. The residual magic lingered in the air of her bedroom like a candle recently put out. She'd probably stepped through the same kind of portal he had. I'd bet my jewelry that she'd expected John to zap both of us into Hell and they'd be back to whatever crazy shit they were up to.

Speaking of crazy shit. Maybe it wasn't just the portal that was causing that irritating residue in the air.

The Smuckers' bedroom looked like it'd been plucked directly from a fancy interior furnishings catalog, with a California king-sized bed neatly made under a big bay window, large his and hers dressers and closets, and not much else.

I didn't want to use my power any more than I already had today, but I had a non-power-related hunch. Two closets seemed excessive, since one of the two in the couple seemed like he was barely hanging on to basic hygiene. And if I were a human attempting to dabble in insane portal-opening Fae arts, I'd probably have a pretty intense setup where I could keep a good eye on it and spend a lot of time with it. Charging it with my energy and chants and blood and all the stuff humans attempting to practice magic needed to do.

I opened the left-hand closet. It was bursting with silk dresses and expensive shoes and bathrobes and other things I didn't bother looking at before I slammed the door. Then I opened the closet next to it.

Bingo. Almost too easy.

The other closet had been stripped of clothes, and the inside was built up into what I could only call an altar. It was a small, low table peppered with candles, books similar to the ones in the study stacked up on each side, and a mirror leaning against the wall. On top of the table, and lining the closet shelves, were materials familiar to magic users. Sage, animal skulls, crystals—all expected—and more specific things too, like jars of pressed flowers, old, thin blades, and notes carefully handwritten in ink that looked suspiciously like blood.

And I couldn't tie anything directly to Sandra, or the Wheels murder. I knew better than to disturb their altar; when they inevitably came back, I didn't want them to know I'd found it. I took a series of pictures of it all on my phone, then stepped out of the bedroom, leaving it all undisturbed.

So back downstairs I went.

"They're gone," I said as I shouldered the door to the study open.

"I know," Corbin said.

"You know?"

He glanced up from where he was picking through the books on John's desk. "Yeah, I can sense it. Figured it'd make you feel better to search, though."

I rolled my eyes. This guy was seriously so annoying.

"Well, I found their altar," I said. "I don't know what they're trying to pull, but it's serious."

That got his attention. "Anything that looks like the Wheels crime scene?"

"No," I said. "Maybe the knives. But that's it."

"I'll go look," he said.

"Nope." I stopped him with a hand on his chest. "You can't."

His eyes blazed as his gaze met mine. "I can't?"

"You'll touch stuff," I said. "And your Fae-ness will fuck with their setup. I took pictures of everything, you can take a look."

"Let me go upstairs."

"No." My hand was still on his chest. What a firm chest it was. Whew. "If they know we're sniffing around, we'll never have a chance of finding them. The pictures will have to suffice."

"That's a bad call." His voice dropped an octave.

I shivered and pressed my fingertips hard into his chest. His eyebrows raised slightly. I dropped my hand and stepped back.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “It’s my call. My investigation.”

“*Our* investigation,” he corrected. “These are Fae texts. The consulate will not be happy to know that humans are both in possession of and apparently *using* Fae texts for rituals.”

“They’ll be even less happy to know that you found that out and then couldn’t capture the humans because you couldn’t keep your lid on,” I said. “Relax.”

He huffed, then looked away, looking remarkably like a petulant teenager. I bit back a laugh. This guy was hundreds of years old, and still got fed up like a kid when he didn’t get his way. I couldn’t deny that I got a bit of a thrill getting under his skin.

“Fine,” he said. “But I’m taking some of these books from the study. Humans should not be in possession of some of these. They’re too powerful.”

“That’s fine. They knew we were in here, so they won’t be surprised that we took a few.”

“We’ll have to figure out where they got them,” Corbin said as we left the house with a few books in tow. “That’s the next step.”

“That can be *your* next step,” I said. “But I’m more concerned about finding Sandra.”

“Pulling on this thread might lead us to Sandra,” Corbin said.

We climbed into the car. “*Might*,” I emphasized. “If you want to chase that rabbit, feel free. I’ve got a source I need to tap before I start running into the dark, though.”

Corbin glanced over at me curiously as he pulled the car out into the street. “A source?”

I sighed. I’d really hoped I wouldn’t have to resort to this, since it always took a major chunk out of my savings. But if I followed Corbin’s lead and tried to source these texts, I’d end up on a wild goose chase that benefited the UnSeelie Court a lot more than it benefited me. I had to keep my goal in mind: Sandra Wheels, and that fifty grand reward.

“Yeah,” I said. I grabbed my bag out of the back. The candy was still in there. “If this goes nowhere, we’ll try your method, all right?”

Corbin said nothing. After a long few moments of silence, I stopped rooting around in my bag and glanced up. He glanced away from the road and met my gaze. Then gave me a small nod. “Sounds like a fair deal.”

I blinked. I had expected a little more pushback from him. “Seriously?”

“You seem to know your stuff,” Corbin said. “I thought you were just a

bounty hunter.”

“I *am* just a bounty hunter,” I said. “I’m just good at it.”

“I’ve never seen a bounty hunter shift out of Hell.”

“It wasn’t Hell,” I said. “It was a pocket dimension. You’ve been in pocket dimensions before.”

“I’m not human,” he said. “It’s different for humans.”

I pulled out my phone and fiddled with it, attempting to radiate nonchalance, even as my pulse quickened. He was asking too many questions—and questions made me nervous. The last thing I needed was for Corbin to start getting too curious about me.

“Again,” I said, “I’m good at my job. Now drive west. It’s about an hour outside of town. Do you like podcasts? I love podcasts. How does the Bluetooth connection work on this fancy car?”

Again, to my surprise, Corbin didn’t push back. But he didn’t let me use the Bluetooth connection.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Pull off here.” I gestured to a small, rocky driveway on the shoulder of the narrow highway. Warwick was far behind us now, and there was nothing to see but the spread of trees along the horizon. I glanced at my phone again, triple-checking the message Stanley had sent me. “I’ve gotta go on foot from here on out. Just wait in the car, will you?”

I climbed out of the car, slung my bag over my shoulder, and tried to hurry down the narrow path winding into the woods.

Of course, it wasn’t going to be as easy as that. Corbin closed the door of the sports car and followed after me, his footsteps unnaturally quiet on the soft earth of the path.

“Stay in the car?” he asked. “Like a child waiting at the grocery store?”

“Something like that,” I muttered. Dealing with Corbin in an investigation was one thing, but dealing with him *and* Stanley was already giving me a headache.

“Certainly not,” Corbin said. “We’re a team. Where you go, I go.”

“We’re not a team,” I said.

Corbin grabbed my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks. His grip wasn’t hard, but it was firm, almost demanding, and my attention narrowed to the warm weight of his touch. I swallowed, then turned around and pushed his hand away.

Corbin’s expression soured, a small furrow forming in his brow. “This investigation would be a lot easier if you would be less difficult about it,” he said.

“I’m not being the difficult one,” I snapped. “You’re the one who

swooped in and tried to snipe *my* contract. I work alone, I always have. I'm not going to change my methods just because you want me to be a little nicer."

"I don't want you to be *nice*," Corbin said, with a small smile creeping onto his face. "Just want to *communicate*. Like we are now."

"Ugh." I rolled my eyes. "Just follow me, okay? And try not to freak out my source. That's what I'm most worried about."

Corbin trailed after me like a curious dog. "Promise I'll be nice to this mysterious source."

That wasn't what I was most worried about at all, though. My little outburst had only seemed to draw Corbin's attention to me even more. Usually, guys got the hint when I snapped like that. Of course, my temper only made Corbin walk even more closely behind me.

Beneath my feet and all around me, the forest thrummed with life. The roots dug deep into the earth, the trunks of the immense oaks reached skyward, the breeze brushed its gentle fingers over the branches and the leaves. Birds and ants and worms and voles and deer and foxes, alive and dead, born and gone, digging in the dirt, hunting, eating, fucking, burying into the dirt, soaring into the sky. The life force of the forest embraced me from every side, its heartbeat syncing effortlessly with my own.

This was why I lived in the city, and why I wanted Corbin to wait in the car. This was also why I only used Stan as a last resort—this, and his skyrocketing prices. The forest always wanted me back. Spending too much time in the forest made me drunk with the sensation of it and made it harder for me control my power.

Again, I was weirdly grateful to John for attempting to trap me in Hell. If I hadn't expelled so much power earlier, it would've been impossible to get to Stan's without Corbin smelling me for exactly what I was. Containing it fucking sucked. If I was alone, I would've taken my time walking through the forest, barefoot savoring every sensation, letting the natural power of it ripple through me like breaths.

Holding back was pissing me off.

I picked up the pace, shoved my hands into my pockets, and put a little more distance between myself and Corbin. The mile-and-a-half hike to Stan's bunker was excruciating, but I made it, thanks to my breathing exercises and my jewelry thrumming against my skin.

Finally, I knelt down in front of a few big lichen-covered boulders,

leaning against each other with a small gap in between.

“This forest is powerful,” Corbin murmured. He flattened one hand on the trunk of a nearby oak. “I can feel it speaking to us.”

Ha. He thought that feeling was the forest.

“Yeah, lots of weird shit in this part,” I muttered. I swept the debris aside from the base of the boulders, revealing the busted old keypad. I fished out my phone and pulled up the code Stan had sent me, punched it in—did it really have to be twelve digits?—and then stepped back.

A dim green light glowed from the gap in between the boulders. Then, the ground shifted in front of as the trapdoor slid open, sending the debris on the ground falling into the dark, newly revealed staircase.

“Come on,” I said with a sigh. “Down we go.” I glanced over my shoulder. Corbin was still lingering by the tree, staring wide-eyed at the newly revealed staircase. “What?” I asked.

“We’re going down there?” he asked.

I laughed. “What, are you scared?”

“I had no idea anything like this was even out here,” he muttered.

“There’s a lot of shit in Warwick the Fae don’t know about,” I said. “Just because you’re old doesn’t mean you know everything.”

“That’s not what I said,” Corbin said, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say he was pouting.

“Stan!” I called as I descended the stairs. “Brought a second with me.”

“A second?” Stan’s gruff voice echoed through the bunker. “You? Working with someone?”

“I know,” I said. “I don’t like it either.”

As we descended the stairs, the trapdoors creaked closed, and for a moment we were shrouded in total darkness. Then, another dim green light flickered into life, and the bunker was somewhat revealed, though much of it was still hidden in shadow.

Stan lived and worked in this slightly depressing setup. It was one big, vast room, with a bed and kitchenette at one side, and an impressive array of computers on the other. The screens took up the entirety of the wall, six of them, each one displaying something complicated I didn’t understand. Stan spun around in his huge chair.

“You brought someone *else* here?” he asked, sneering at Corbin.

Corbin glanced at me, one eyebrow raised. I nodded briskly.

“I’m with the court,” Corbin said. “Assisting Tempie on a contract.”

“A Fae?” Stan squealed. “Assisting? Tempie! What the fuck! I can’t have Fae in here!”

“Why not?” I asked. “You’re being paranoid again.”

Stan chucked a piece of chocolate at me. “I’m paranoid because of the shit you bring knocking to my door!”

“Aw, Stan,” I teased. “Don’t you like seeing me?”

My little poke had the intended effect. Stan stammered; his pale green face darkened as he blushed. Or blushed as well as a half-troll could blush. There weren’t a ton of trolls in Warwick, and Stan’s heritage was particularly noticeable in the width of his broad shoulders, towering height, and the chipped tusks emerging from his lower jaw. As a result, he was pretty shy, hence the bunker in the middle of the woods. But he was the best tracker I knew, and because he was such an agoraphobic, I trusted him not to sell me out.

“I don’t like seeing anyone,” he muttered unconvincingly.

“I missed you, too,” I said.

Stan spun his chair back to face his screens. “What do you want?”

“Nothing major,” I said. I hung over the back of his chair and peered at the screens. I didn’t understand most of it, lines of code moving too fast for my eyes to track, but the maps caught my attention. “Just a little bit of cell phone tracking.”

“Nothing’s ever ‘a little bit’ with you,” Stan said. But he sighed and nodded. “Who are we looking for this time?”

“Sandra Wheels,” I said. I reached into my bag and pulled out a photocopy from the case file, with her name, address, and phone number. “She’s skipped on bail, and we need to find her as soon as we can.”

“What was she in for?” Stanley asked as he skimmed the sheet.

“Murder,” I said.

Stan glanced up, peering meaningfully at Corbin’s reflection in the screen of his computer. “Not just your average human crime of passion, I assume.”

“It was a pretty nasty crime scene,” Corbin said. He crossed his arms over his chest. “Nasty enough to get the court interested.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be the one to get on the court’s bad side,” Stan muttered. “There’s an extra fee for bringing a Fae into my home, Tempie.”

“Told you that you should’ve waited in the car,” I said over my shoulder to Corbin.

Corbin rolled his eyes. I folded my arms on the back of Stan’s hacker

throne and watched as his sausage-like fingers flew across his customized keyboard. The screens shifted and changed, lines of code disappearing as they were replaced by new maps and what appeared to be the internal website of the local cell service provider. He was seriously good.

After a few minutes of tapping and typing, he grimaced and muttered to himself. The map zoomed in and out erratically, and then he turned his attention to another one of his screens, with more code rolling across it that I couldn't see.

“What is it?” I asked. “Can you track it?”

“Yeah, I can,” Stan said, “but it's not going to be as fast as it usually is.”

“What happened?”

“I'm getting false locations,” he said. “Whoever gave your target this phone—or your target herself—was anticipating being tracked. My bug's getting intercepted and rerouted.”

“Can you get around it?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “But it'll take a while.”

“How long is a while?” I asked.

He hemmed and hawed, peering at the screen as he typed. “I should be able to have an approximate location for you tomorrow. I'll have to write the code to bypass the rerouting and let it run overnight.”

I sighed and swiped my hand across my forehead. Tomorrow was less than ideal, but it wasn't terrible. “Listen, can you look into something else for me in the meantime?”

He huffed. “It'll cost extra.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “I'll pay it. Can you look into these two? Let me know if they're registered with the council, or if they have any records or arrests? Or really just anything weird. Even just weird things in their credit card statements.”

“You must be really reaching for leads on this job,” Stan said. He took the other page from the file I offered and skimmed it. “More humans?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Ran into John today and saw some fairly non-human behavior, though. Trying to figure out exactly what that was.”

“I'll sniff around,” Stan said. “You know I don't do rush jobs for anyone else.”

“I know, that's why you're my favorite,” I said. I ruffled his coarse hair, then straightened up. “I've got something to make it worth your while.”

“Wad of cash, I hope.” Stan spun back around in his chair and leaned

back in it, watching me expectantly.

“Yes,” I said, “but also...” I swept my arm dramatically overhead, and then reached back into my bag and pulled out the bag of candy.

Stan’s eyes lit up like a kid. “Holy shit!” He jumped out of his chair, so all seven feet of him towered over me. “Are those Nectar Vectors?”

“You know it,” I said, then tossed the bag at him.

He caught them with a delighted giggle and hugged the bag to his chest. “Forget the rush fee,” he said. “Where the hell did you get these?”

I threw my thumb over my shoulder. “My compadre here had to run some errands in Faerie, so I asked him to pick up a bag.”

“You’re forgiven for bringing him into my home,” Stan said. Then he nodded at Corbin. “And you’re welcome anytime.”

Corbin’s expression was somewhere between confused and horrified. “They’re just fancy gumdrops,” Corbin said.

“More like fancy Werther’s,” I said.

“Neither of you understand true cuisine,” Stan said dreamily. He opened the bag gingerly like he was handling a prize jewel, pulled out a single golden candy, and popped it into his mouth. “Incredible,” he mumbled. “Better than I remember.”

Corbin looked exceedingly weirded out. “O...kay.”

“Thanks, Stan. Call me when you find anything on either of those requests, will you?” I handed him a wad of cash, which he pocketed without counting it, distracted as he was with the Nectar Vectors. “Let’s go, Corbin.”

I led him back up the stairs of Stan’s bunker and back into the sun-dappled forest. The trapdoors closed behind us and I, being the great friend I was, even kicked some dirt and debris back over the doors to conceal them. Corbin was oddly quiet as we made our way back to the car, and I savored the silence, walking with a bounce in my step. I had some potential leads coming my way. I was on good terms with Stan, and it hadn’t cost as much as I’d feared. The forest was bathing me in its warmth and clean-smelling power, the soft floor seeming to propel me back toward the car, like it was helping me move with every step.

I felt good. Felt strong. Even though I’d been in Hell just a few hours before, the promise of a lead and the welcoming rush of the forest imbued me with a good feeling I couldn’t shake.

We climbed into Corbin’s car. He was still silent as he pointed the car back toward Warwick. I kicked my feet up on the dash and cracked the

window, enjoying the cool breeze as we drove.

I was so relaxed I didn't even notice the ozone smell until Corbin parked the car outside of my apartment.

"Thanks for the ride, I'll be in touch," I said as I lowered my feet off the dash.

"Wait." Corbin grabbed my wrist.

Well, there went my good mood. I tried to tug my hand away, but his grip only tightened.

The blue in his eyes had disappeared again. His gaze was full amber, and desire poured off him in waves as he leaned closer. He inhaled and his eyes flickered closed. His lips parted, and I thought I got a glimpse of his canines slightly longer than usual, but maybe I was imagining it.

Whether I was imagining it or not, my reaction should *not* have been the swoop of desire in my gut, settling low in the cradle of my hips. I swallowed.

"What *are* you?" he asked. "It's not the forest. It's *you*. You smell different. You always smell good, but now—now it's different." He inhaled. "What *is* it?"

"Marc Jacobs Daisy perfume," I quipped nervously. "I'll introduce you to the counter lady at the mall, she has great taste."

He inhaled again, then drew my hand closer to his face, so his lips were dangerously close to my inner wrist. That made it very clear his canines were sharpening. His gaze flickered up to mine, freezing me with its intensity, as his lips gently pressed to the skin of my inner wrist. It was such a soft touch that I could barely feel it. Right behind his lips were those sharp canines. So close. And I knew if he bit down, it'd be good. So good. Good like an ice-cold beer on a hot, crowded dance floor—good enough to make me drunk on the sensation of it, make me want more and more and more.

I jerked my hand away and opened the passenger door of the car so fast I nearly fell out.

"Don't use your weird UnSeelie powers on me," I snapped. "It's unprofessional."

The amber in his eyes swirled and faded. "That wasn't—"

"Bye," I said, and slammed the car door closed.

That was too fucking close. Way too fucking close. I rushed up the stairs and into my apartment, ignoring Bob's shouts. I locked the door—deadbolt too—and leaned my forehead against the cool wood.

His teeth had been *right there*.

If his nature had gotten the better of him, he could've bitten me. And part of me had wanted him to. What the fuck was that? What the fuck was happening to me?

One more breath in that car and I would've been up shit creek without a paddle. I'd been careless, drunk on the forest's effect on me. Something about *Corbin* kept making me so careless. It was like my non-human half wanted to trust him. Wanted me to reveal myself.

I straightened up and scrubbed my palm over my forehead, then took a deep, steadying breath. Okay. It'd been a fluke. Something about Corbin's UnSeelie influence had gotten to me. Made me lose my head a little bit. Now that I knew that could happen, I could keep a better handle on things.

Or that's what I told myself to try to shake off the nerves. The nerves and—I could barely admit to myself—the desire.

At least I had some potential leads for this case. This would all be over soon enough.

Once I had my fifty grand, I'd never have to see Corbin again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning, I woke up exhausted. Turned out that getting shifted into Hell *did* take a physical toll on the body, which was not fully mitigated by getting high on the forest and almost eaten (sexily) by an UnSeelie.

I groaned and rolled over, pressing my face into my pillow. Oscar meowed in irritation as the movement jostled him where he'd been sleeping between my knees. My head pounded, and my whole body ached like I'd been run over by a truck. The last thing I wanted to do was, well, anything. But such was the life of a bounty hunter. I dragged myself out of bed and got dressed. There wasn't much I could do until I heard from Stan, but I had a hunch there might be something for me at the office. And if there wasn't, hell, there'd be coffee. And having someone else make me coffee sounded a lot better than dealing with my finicky percolator right now. Maybe the ride would help with my headache, too.

I made my way to the office, parked my bike as close as I could, then picked my way downstairs feeling like I might fall over at any moment. Only the promise of coffee kept me upright.

"Hey there, Tempie," Carla said from behind the desk. She glanced up and then made a face like she was investigating spoiled milk. "You don't look so good."

"Weird day yesterday," I said. "Need coffee."

"A day so bad you couldn't make coffee at home?" she asked. "Go ahead, there's plenty."

I poured myself a Styrofoam cup of coffee then stood in front of the machine for a moment, swaying on my feet as I savored the smell of the

coffee.

“There are donuts, too,” Carla said.

My eyes flew open. “Donuts?”

“You seriously have a sixth sense for donut day,” she said with a laugh. “Here.”

“It’s why I’m so good at my job,” I said. “Donut sense.” I took a chocolate-covered donut from the box and sighed with contentment as I leaned against her desk. “Oh, man. I needed this.”

“Me too,” Carla said. “Had a rough night last night.”

“Good rough or bad rough?”

“Good rough,” she said. “You should see my back.”

“Werewolf boyfriend again?”

“He’s not my boyfriend. But I just can’t seem to get rid of him... That doglike enthusiasm is seriously addictive.” She chewed contemplatively on a donut. “I’ll ask him if he has any friends, if you’re interested.”

I chewed with similar contemplation. Maybe that’d be good for me. Let off a little steam with a no-strings-attached werewolf fuck. Maybe then I’d be able to deal with Corbin’s intensity without getting caught up in it again. “I might take you up on that.”

She nodded. “You deserve to have a little fun. You work too hard. What are you in the office for today?”

I shrugged. “Just had a feeling.”

“I don’t like it when you have feelings,” Carla said. “It always makes my workday more complicated.” The door to the office clattered open. Carla sighed. “Here we go.”

“Hello?” a high, musical voice sing-songed. Laura drifted down the stairs, moving like she was walking across water, looking gorgeously alabaster and slightly undead as usual. “Is this the bail bonds place?”

“Sure is, honey,” Carla said. “Can I help you?”

“Oh, Tempie,” Laura said with a smile. “You’re here. I was so hoping I’d find you here.”

“See?” I said to Carla with a wink. “Just a feeling.”

I set my half-eaten donut down and pushed myself off the desk. “Hiya, Laura. What’s going on? Need a donut?”

“That sounds really nice,” Laura said. “Do you have the cream-filled type?”

“Picky,” Carla muttered as she handed one over to Laura.

“So,” I said. “You got something for me?”

She nodded, then took a tiny, delicate bite of the donut. Honestly, it was like working with a well-mannered Victorian child.

“I’ve heard some weird rumors down at the bar,” she said. Then she trailed off and had a few more bites of donut.

“...Okay,” I prompted. “And those rumors were...?”

“Oh,” she said, blinking like she’d just realized she was in the middle of the information. “Oh, right. One of my johns said there’s a group of humans running around town claiming they’re going to transform into Fae.”

Carla and I glanced at each other and raised our eyebrows. “Transform?”

“Mm-hmm,” Laura said.

“That’s... not a thing,” I said. You were either Fae or you weren’t. It wasn’t something a human could change into, like a vampire or a werewolf.

“I know,” Laura said. “That’s what I told the john.”

“What’d he say to that?” I asked.

“He said he didn’t care if it was real or not, as long ‘product kept moving.’” She twirled one of her long dark braids around her finger. “I don’t know what that meant.”

“Probably a dealer,” I murmured to myself. “Did he say anything else? Mention any names? Sandra Wheels? A John, or a Jill?”

“No names,” she said. “He wouldn’t say much beyond that. Like he didn’t mean to tell me at all. But it sounded sort of related to what you were looking for.” She shrugged. “Doesn’t it?”

I took a sip of coffee, the gears in my brain slowly beginning to turn. A dealer knowing this meant he was probably selling to this group, whoever they were. I nodded. “Could be.”

Laura blinked at me. “And I came all the way down here.”

“And you got a donut,” I said.

She tipped her chin up a little. “Don’t you want me to keep listening for information?”

“Ugh,” I said. “You run a hard bargain.”

“I’m a businesswoman,” she said with a smile. “You know about that, don’t you?”

“I’m not going to have any payout the way this case is going,” I grumbled. But I fished a twenty out of my pocket and handed it to her.

Laura tucked the bill into the band of her bra. “Thanks for the donut,” she said. “I’ll let you know if I hear anything else.” She drifted back up the stairs.

“See?” I said to Carla with a grin. “That’s why I knew I had to come in today. That’s a decent lead.” The coffee and sugar rush was beginning to help with my headache, too. A good new lead always made me feel a little better. I took another sip of coffee. “Guess I have to go sniff around the river district again. Find this dealer.”

“You’ll have to question pretty much every person you see down there,” Carla said. “Talk about a saturated market.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Good point.”

The door to Todd’s office creaked open. “Carla, I need the records from —Tempie?” He rubbed his forehead, then blinked at me like he thought he might be hallucinating. “What are you doing here?”

“Working,” I said. “What are *you* doing? Have you slept in the past week?”

It certainly didn’t look like it. Todd hadn’t shaved, his hair was disheveled, and his usually neat suit was wrinkled with his tie hanging loose around his neck.

“I’ve been trying to keep this business afloat,” Todd snapped. “If we don’t bag Sandra Wheels soon, my investors are going to come for everything I’ve got.”

“I’ve got some good leads,” I said. “Don’t worry. I’m on her tail.”

“Don’t tell me not to worry,” Todd barked. “You’re in here eating donuts while she’s getting further and further away.”

I reeled back at his venomous tone. Sure, I could chalk it up to sleep deprivation, but Todd didn’t ever speak to me like this. We could be honest with each other, but rarely was he outright snippy with me.

“I’m waiting on intel,” I said.

“Do something else while you wait,” he said. “Something productive. If you can’t get this job done, I’m going to have to put more bounty hunters on this contract.”

“What?” I asked, shocked. “This is *my* contract.”

“No, Tempie,” he said firmly. “It’s *mine*. And if you’re not able to track her down, I need someone who can.”

“It’ll get done,” I said, and crossed my arms over my chest.

“It better.” Todd turned to Carla. “I need last month’s records, please.”

She nodded, clearly trying not to cringe as she turned her attention back to her computer. Todd nodded sharply at me, and then disappeared back into his office.

Suddenly, I wasn't hungry anymore. I chucked the remainder of my donut into the trash and straightened up.

"You good?" Carla asked carefully.

"Yeah," I said. "Fine."

"He's just in a mood," she said, low. "He won't actually put other hunters on this contract."

I nodded, but I didn't believe her. I'd seen Todd in lots of his sour moods, and none of them were like this. This was the first time I'd ever felt like he actually didn't trust me to get the job done. He really thought I'd fail.

My heart clenched at that realization. Todd had been one of the first people to trust me, *believe* in me, and gave me a chance when no one else would. Sure, this case had a lot of money involved, but I was making progress. Good progress. What was going on that was making him so antsy? I had half a mind to kick his door in and demand answers, but I'd better wait until he wasn't in this mood. One wrong word from me and I'd have other hunters on my contract like flies. It was annoying enough navigating working with Corbin—I wasn't going to risk someone else getting their grubby hands on my payout.

"He's right about one part, though. I gotta get my ass in gear." I grabbed my coffee and chugged the rest of it. "Thanks for the coffee. Call me if Laura shows up again."

Carla nodded, and I hurried up the stairs before Todd decided he wasn't done chewing me out. As I emerged into the headache-worsening sunlight on the Warwick streets, my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a notification on the encrypted message service Stan demanded I used, even though he was the only person I used it to communicate with. He'd sent me coordinates, with a short message: "Rough location. No promises."

"Thanks," I texted back rapidly. "IOU more Nectar Vectors."

Stan replied with a string of thumbs-up emojis. For all the trouble Corbin was causing, his access to Stan's favorite candy was making *this* part of my job substantially easier. Silver linings and all that.

I punched the coordinates into the map on my phone. Apparently, Sandra's phone was in the south part of Warwick, in the warehouse district—which was, notably, huge and abandoned. Before supers had revealed their presence in this world, Warwick had had a bustling shipping industry operating on the port by the river, making use of a couple blocks of warehouses. But as the supers gained a foothold in town, the shipping

companies moved out, leaving the docks and warehouses sitting empty. A few on the edges of the neighborhood had been converted into big dance clubs, but the heart of the district was empty and decrepit, prowled by broke vamps and pissy ghouls.

Not a place one wanted to hang out. But definitely a good location if one was trying to figure out a messy ritual.

I rushed to my bike, ready to pull my helmet on and speed to the site to see what I could find.

But then I paused, holding my helmet in my hands.

Todd was, apparently, keeping a close eye on this investigation. My success was not the most important thing to him right now. The most important thing was getting Sandra Wheels back in custody so he didn't lose the five mill he'd taken from his investors to get her out. If that meant putting more bounty hunters on the case for the chance of finding her sooner, he'd do it. He didn't care about my payday. I'd known, logically, that the business was his priority. But to my surprise it still hurt to have that fact shoved in my face so callously.

Whatever. I shook it off. The best way to deal with this for both of us would be for me to solve this case as quickly as possible. But at the same time, I didn't need to give him a reason to open up this bounty to the unwashed masses. So I'd play by his rules—his rules, and the court's rules, too. Even if it made me cringe to do it.

I steeled myself with a deep breath and then pulled out my phone.

“Tempie?” Corbin asked, answering the phone after a few rings. “You’re calling me?”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” I said. “Stan got back to me.”

“He was able to track the phone?”

“Yup.”

“And let me guess, you’re already on your way?”

God, I fucking wished. “Thought you were all about this partner thing.”

He paused. “So... Where are you?”

“I’m at the office. Make use of that fancy car and come get me and we’ll go check out the site the phone was tracked to.”

“On my way,” Corbin said crisply, and hung up.

I leaned against the brick of the office building, arms crossed over my chest, and waited. I wanted more coffee, but I wasn't going to risk going back into the building and igniting Todd's temper again. That reality only soured

my mood further—how did my cool, high-paying, solo freelancer bounty-hunting gig become a series of babysitting appointments for volatile men?

My current least-favorite volatile UnSeelie peeled around the corner, tires squealing on the asphalt. He pulled an extremely illegal U-turn right in the middle of the street—lucky for him not a lot of people were ever out in early Warwick mornings—then flung the passenger door open.

“Good morning,” he said, eyes gleaming with humor. “Can I offer you a ride?”

“That was extremely unnecessary,” I said. “You must spend a lot of money on tires.”

“I expense it to my business account.”

“For some reason I don’t believe you.” I slid into the passenger seat.

“The part where I expense it, or the existence of my business account?” Corbin just grinned at me. “You’re telling me you don’t expense your riding boots?”

“I get paid in cash,” I said. “You’ll have to ask my accountant.”

Corbin laughed. He had a nice laugh, low and musical. It was nicer hearing him laugh than hearing him run his mouth, at least. I sunk lower in the seat and fished out my phone.

“Warehouse district,” I said. “Stan couldn’t get an exact location, but this is a good starting point.”

He nodded. “Good. I just need to get close.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What exactly does that mean?” I was pretty sure I knew what it meant, but it was always better to get information straight from the Fae’s mouth, so to speak.

“If Sandra Wheels isn’t fully human, or if she’s using Fae magic, I should be able to feel it,” he explained as he drove south. “Or sense it, at least. It’s like a blend between smelling something and feeling someone watching you.” He glanced over. “Or I should be able to, as long as you don’t distract me.”

“That’s your fault,” I said. “Just stop smelling me.”

“Stop smelling good,” Corbin shot back.

“I’ll stop showering. That’ll help.”

“That’d probably make you smell better.”

“Gross.” I leaned closer to the window and tried to expel the mental image of Corbin dragging his nose up the column of my neck when I was all sweaty and adrenaline-high, fresh off a hunt. Last thing I needed was him to

smell any of my reactions—I had to get a fucking grip. You’d think I’d be immune to his UnSeelie-ness, but if anything, I felt *more* susceptible than a normal human.

Corbin pulled the car into the warehouse district. I turned my attention gratefully back to the map on my phone and guided Corbin as he drove through the wide, potholed streets surrounding the big empty warehouses. The dance clubs weren’t open this early in the morning, and a few ghouls were passed out in the shade of the dumpsters, but it was otherwise empty and still. I guided us to the warehouse in the crosshairs of the coordinates Stan had sent me.

It was right on the river—that made sense. Fae magic always worked better with something elemental nearby. The roof was collapsing inward, and the walls were graffitied to hell with faded paint. Didn’t look like anything spell-related, though, just bored teenagers carving up the landscape as they were wont to do in every city.

And under all of it, a shivery cold chill of magic.

“Feel anything?” I asked, glancing over at Corbin.

He parked the car outside the warehouse and stilled for a moment, like a bird dog surveying the horizon for pheasants. Then he shook his head. “Nope. Maybe when we get closer, though.”

A thrill that went through me was extremely mature and professional. I hid my triumphant little smile. *Sucks to suck, Corbin*, I thought, *but my senses are way sharper than yours*.

I twisted my rings on my right hand, a nerve-steadying tic, and then climbed out of the car and approached the warehouse.

“Wait,” Corbin said when my hand was flat on the big metal door. “There’s something going on here.”

“You feel something?” I asked. Something going on was an understatement. The residual magic crackled around me, prickling at my skin, like I was walking toward a tornado.

“Yeah,” he said. “And I don’t like it.”

“Well, I’ve got money to make, so let’s see what Sandra’s got going on,” I said quietly.

I shouldered the warehouse door open. The metal creaked on the hinges as it swung open, dragging on the wet concrete of the warehouse floor.

With the door open, the crackling sensation was even worse. Behind me, Corbin’s aura spiked, and I knew without having to look that his eyes had

gone from blue to amber. Which meant his senses were heightened. I'd be a lot more comfortable if I could send a little power over my skin to block the crackling, but I'd just have to deal with the uncomfortable sensation. *Again*. This *whole investigation* was just fucking uncomfortable.

The warehouse was empty inside, except for a few cardboard boxes stacked instead the walls that appeared to be halfway to melted. There didn't seem to be much going on in the warehouse; the unfinished concrete floor was stained and pockmarked, with puddles of stagnant water collecting bugs.

"There," Corbin said. He strode purposefully into the warehouse, just to the left of center, as if he saw something.

"What?" I asked. "What is it?"

"Here." He knelt down onto the warehouse floor.

"What?" I repeated. I followed him and stood a few paces away, facing him. "Did you find her phone, or what?"

"Better than that," he said. "Now back up."

I took a step back.

He flattened his hand on the concrete (gross). His amber gaze met mine, and he grinned, now revealing his lengthened canines. His blond hair floated, just barely, like he'd just rubbed a helium balloon over his head.

And then his aura hit me like a fucking train. I staggered a step back, knocked off-balance, as the ozone scent and rich weight rolled over me like I'd suddenly been encompassed by a storm cloud. It easily overpowered the crackling residue, and it made my head pound and my heart somersault. Dizzying. Intoxicating.

I'd known he was powerful, but this was something else. Something different.

From where his hand was flattened on the warehouse, faded lines began to appear on the concrete, like ink flowing across the dark surface, creeping toward me from both sides until the two ends found each other. It revealed two vast, if sloppy, concentric circles, with four runes drawn like the four points of a compass. To my frustration, I didn't recognize the runes. *Again*.

I got out my phone to snap a picture, but Corbin just shook his head. "Won't show up," he said.

I took the picture, and as promised, it was just the picture of the blank floor with Corbin kneeling. "What the fuck?"

"This is just an approximation of what was here," he said. "It's not the actual spell—it's my magic you're seeing. And my magic doesn't show up."

“Well, that’s annoying,” I muttered. “I didn’t bring a pen to *draw* the runes.”

“Should’ve planned better,” he said. “I know them, though.”

“Is this a portal?” I asked. I looked at each rune carefully, doing my best to commit them to memory. These had to line up with some of the runes I’d seen carved into the victim’s body—they had to.

“Was,” he said. “An UnSeelie portal. Whoever opened this was trying to get directly to the UnSeelie Court.”

The runes faded and disappeared, but the circle remained. Corbin’s hand shifted on the floor, and the lines thickened, darkened, from a memory to something real. Then he lifted his hand and the image disappeared.

Corbin stood up. The power sloughed off him like a snake shedding. His aura dropped from the atmosphere, a heavy cloud breaking into rain, and dissipated. The crackling residue was gone, too; it’d been subsumed by his power. His eyes gleamed with flecks of amber, but he was back to looking normal. Or, as normal as he ever looked. He stood up a little straighter after using his power, like it felt good to flex his abilities a little. Now that I related to. And it made me jealous. If he saw what I could do, he wouldn’t be so flippant with me.

“This isn’t just any Fae magic,” he said.

“I know. You said it was UnSeelie.”

“Not just UnSeelie, either.” He raked a hand through his hair and sighed. “It’s from *my* clan.”

My eyes widened. “What? Your family is working with Sandra—or whoever is helping Sandra with this?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I know this magic like I know my own blood. It’s the only way whoever did this could’ve put together a portal directly to the UnSeelie Court—especially one as slapdash as this.”

“There’s no way whoever did this is human, then,” I said. “Trying to use this portal would kill them instantly.”

“Worse than that,” Corbin said. “Just attempting to set this up would be enough to kill the average person.”

“But apparently they succeeded,” I said.

“Apparently,” Corbin said darkly. “Who knows if they made it through.”

I knew where this was going. “You think they did.”

“If anyone could figure out how to get humans to survive a trip into Fae, it’d be my clan,” he said.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” I asked, tipping my head to the side curiously.

He started, as if he hadn’t realized he’d let that slip. “Just that they have strong magic. Did you find the phone?”

Right. The phone. I shook my head briskly, then started to case the warehouse systematically while Corbin pondered the space on the floor where the sigil had been. Eventually I found the phone, stomped to destruction behind one of the grosser cardboard boxes. I picked it up gingerly and tucked it into my bag. With any luck, I’d be able to hook it up to my computer and see who the hell Sandra was messaging when planning this mess.

“I’m going to follow them,” Corbin said suddenly.

“To Fae?” I wiped my hands off on my jeans. As soon as he’d said it was a portal, I’d known this was coming, but that didn’t make me any happier about it. Just another instance of how this would be way fucking easier if I were on my own.

“I’ll talk to the members of court that I can,” he said. “See if Sandra is hiding out in Faerie. I should be able to track whoever put this portal together.”

“If you find her, you can’t handle it in Faerie,” I said.

Corbin raised his eyebrows. “Of course I can,” he said. “If anything, it’d be easier to deal with the implications of a human using Fae magic within the UnSeelie Court.”

“You’re forgetting a minor important detail here,” I said.

“Which is...?”

“If you keep Sandra in Faerie, I don’t get my fifty grand,” I snapped. “I could care less about whatever ways she’s wronged the Fae courts or whatever rules you people are always obsessed with. I need this payout.”

Corbin pressed his lips together in frustration. “Right. The bounty.”

“Yeah, it’s in my job description and everything.”

We stood there for a long moment, staring each other down. I was unmoved—no matter how much Corbin flashed his teeth and did impressive magic-revealing tricks, I wasn’t giving up my contract to the court. Not just because of the money, but because of my relationship with Todd, and my pride, too.

“Fine,” Corbin said with a sigh. “If Sandra’s in Faerie, I’ll bring her back here if I can.”

“*If you can?*” I asked. “That’s not good enough.”

“You may have forgotten that the courts wield a fair amount of power in the realm,” Corbin said. “If they want her, I’ll be hard-pressed to convince them otherwise.”

“Then don’t let them know she’s there,” I said. “If she’s there. Easy as that.”

“Right,” he said incredulously. “Easy.”

“Don’t fuck this up for me,” I said, brandishing a finger at him. “Promise.”

“You want me to pinky-promise?” he asked with a smirk.

All right, I walked into that one. I did sound a little whiny—but this case was starting to mean more and more the deeper I got into it.

“Yes,” I said curtly. “I do.”

“Unbelievable,” he said, with a small shake of his head.

I marched forward and stuck my hand out, pinky extended, with a serious expression on my face. “Promise you’ll bring her back to this realm.”

He nodded, then hooked his pinky around mine and shook once, like a handshake. “I promise, Tempie.”

The unexpected intensity of his gaze sent a quick thrill down my spine. I pulled away. “Thanks,” I said.

“I’m going,” he said. He tossed his keys, and I snatched them out of the air more out of reflex than anything else.

“Right now?” I asked.

“Not a scratch on my car,” he said. “Seriously.”

Then he briskly opened a swirling portal and was gone.

I stared at the keys in my hand. I still didn’t really believe he’d actually be able to wrangle Sandra back into this plane if he found her—hell, I didn’t know if he even *wanted* to do that. It’d probably be better for him to just deal with it in Faerie. The weight of the keys in my palm made me question my own doubt, though. If he was leaving his car with me, surely he intended to come back.

Not that there was anything I could do now. The only choice I had was to trust him.

His car drove like a dream, and I only sped a little bit. Just enough to see how she handled on the tight corners downtown. I parked outside my apartment and climbed the stairs, already exhausted and ready to fall into bed. Nothing in my life was so simply pleasant, though.

“God dammit, Tempie,” Bob hollered from his chair outside his apartment as I approached. “You gotta do something about that damn cat.”

“What did Oscar ever do to you, huh?” I asked half-heartedly as I unlocked the car.

“Damn thing won’t shut up,” he said. “He’s been yowling all day. Do you even feed him? I’ve never heard a cat sound so miserable.”

“He has separation anxiety,” I said. Unless—fuck. “Hey, Bob, what’s today?”

“Wednesday,” he said. “Losing track already? You’re a bit young for that, don’t you think?”

Shit. This case really was getting to me. Guilt racked me, icy cold like a physical touch.

“This one’s on me, Bob, I’ll deal with it,” I muttered.

“That’s all I’m askin’!” Bob shouted as I closed the door behind me.

Oscar meowed defiantly as I walked in. I toed off my boots and hurried over to where he was curled up in the middle of the couch. “Aw, Oscar, I’m sorry,” I murmured. “I lost track of time, didn’t I?”

He bared his teeth and hissed at me.

“I deserved that,” I said. “I’ll bring you some tuna tomorrow.”

He looked awful. During the time I’d been away, he’d transformed into a skeletal shade of the athletic cat he usually was, with his spine visible along his back and his coat haggard and matted, his eyes cloudy. Oscar was old, and sick, too, but it was easy to manage at home. So we did that. We managed. He was my best friend, and this was the least I could do for him.

At least when I fucking kept up with the schedule. I hadn’t forgotten in a long time.

I pulled my bracelet and rings off, then tossed them carelessly onto the coffee table. I scooted closer to Oscar and put my nose right against his, my chin resting on the cushion and my legs folded under me on the floor. He touched his nose against mine. He knew what was coming, even if he was mad at me.

I closed my eyes and let myself sink inward, into the deep bright core where my power was at rest. It felt good to go here unfettered, especially after a day of hiding and wanting to use my power and not being able to. I should’ve done this this morning—would’ve made the rest of the day easier. The rich, sunny warmth of my power ran through me, and I could feel it radiating outward through my skin and my hair like a glow.

I smoothed my hand over Oscar's body, kind pressure over the top of his head and down his knobby spine. As my hand traced over his body, he transformed. His coat darkened and smoothed out. The cloudiness cleared from his eyes, and they shone with renewed intelligence. His ears perked up, and sleek muscle re-emerged on his body. His tail became fluffy and quick again, flicking with eagerness.

I withdrew my hand, and he was his cute, young, feisty self again. He stood up on the couch and stretched luxuriously, then meowed at me as if to say, "About time." Then he hopped off the couch and ambled toward his food bowl.

I shook my head fondly at him. "Yeah, yeah, I'm coming."

So maybe it wasn't the most court-approved use of my power. But neither the courts nor the Supernatural Registers knew about me. No one did. And if I wanted my cat to live a little bit longer, using the magic that my kind had been wiped out for having, then that was my business alone.

"Sorry about that," I said to Oscar as I poured his food. "I'll set a reminder in my phone for next month."

I made myself a quick dinner, too, then settled down on the couch with the busted cell phone. I hooked it up to my laptop and booted up the software I'd gotten Stan to build me about ten contracts ago: copying all the information off the phone and onto my laptop so I could explore the contents at my leisure. Hopefully, the stomping of the phone hadn't damaged its guts beyond saving.

I let the program run as I leaned against the countertop, chewing idly on my microwaved corndog as I watched Oscar eat. Watching his tail flick happily, I wondered if Mom would approve of this use of my powers. I thought she would. I learned it from her, anyway. She would do the same thing in the garden, gently healing butterfly wings and fallen baby birds, unintentionally luring critters until the garden was overgrown and bustling with life.

I sighed. Maybe that's what this place needed—some plants.

A sharp knock on my door shocked me out of my reverie. I straightened up. That wasn't Bob's knock—that was someone else. Someone whose aura felt a little pissy. I pushed my hand through my hair and tipped my gaze toward the ceiling. When would I ever catch a break?

Well, at least I was still wearing my pants. I padded as silently as possible as I could to my front door and peered through my peephole.

“Tempie!” my visitor said, pounding on the door again. “I know you’re in there!”

“I told you she’s not home!” Bob shouted. “Get the hell off the property!”

The guy on the other side of my door was unfortunately familiar—though I hadn’t seen him in ages, and would honestly be quite all right if I never saw him again. Jace looked worse than ever, with his narrow face pallid and his dark hair shaved right down to the skull. He was dressed in all black, and it looked like he had a few new tattoos crawling up his neck.

If it were anyone else, I would’ve let Bob chase him off the porch. But I knew Jace wouldn’t give up, and if Bob pissed him off too much, Jace was the type to throw him over the porch railing with no regard for the consequences.

I swung open the door. “What the hell do you want?”

“Get this asshole out of here,” Bob snapped.

“I’m working on it,” I said, and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?” Jace asked. “Didn’t you miss me?”

Bob caught my eye and raised his eyebrows enquiringly, then tapped his temple with his forefinger. I shook my head. He tapped again, and I shook my head again. Had I nodded, Bob would be back out here with a crowbar or a twelve-gauge or some other crazy shit he kept in that apartment. For as annoying as he was, we did take care of each other in these parts.

“Keep the fucking noise down,” Bob grumbled, and then went inside his apartment and slammed the door behind him.

“So I hear we’re working the same case,” Jace said, smirking.

“What?” I snapped. “You know I work alone.”

“Not what I’ve heard,” Jace said. “I’m on the Wheels contract.”

I balled my hands into fists, physically resisting the urge to launch myself at him like a crazed baboon. Of all people—*Jace*. This was even worse than the simple knowledge that Todd wanted to put other hunters on the case at all. This was a slap in the fucking face.

“So what?” I asked. “Did you come here to try to convince me to help you with it?”

“Sounds like you’re the one who needs some help,” Jace said. “Since the boss thinks you’re dead-ending on this one.”

“I’m investigating,” I said. “It takes time. Not that you would know anything about that.”

Jace sneered. “You were always such a cocky bitch,” he snapped. “I just

need the file.”

I rolled my eyes. “Nice try. Get your own copy.”

Jace had been going for my contracts for as long as I could remember. He wasn’t half the bounty hunter I was, and he swung wildly between wanting to steal my cases out from under me and wanting to tag along to figure out how I did what I did.

“Come on, Tempie,” he said, almost petulantly. “I can’t get into the office until the day after tomorrow. Just let me get a copy of your file.”

“Why didn’t Todd give you one?”

“He just called me and told me about it.”

“Then this is your problem, not mine.”

“We’re on the same team here, Tempie,” he said. “Come on. Don’t be such a bitch.”

“It’s what I do best, Jace,” I said, and slammed the door in his face. I peered into the peephole and watched Jace’s face crumple so dramatically I almost felt bad for him. He raised his fist like he was going to knock on the door again, but then slumped his shoulders in defeat, turned, and went back down the stairs.

Jace definitely had a way to get the file. He just wanted to let me know that he was on the case—and he probably wanted to see me again. Jace was slightly delusional in that way. He’d asked me out probably a dozen times, and finally figured out that my rejection wasn’t just me being coy, it was just straight up rejection. Since then, he had waffled between being pissed at me, hating me, and being desperate for my approval, often within the span of a single interaction.

Volatile men. At this point, I basically collected them.

It wasn’t that Jace was a bad guy. Honesty, when he had a little muscle on him and more than three hours of sleep, he could be kind of cute and funny. But after what happened with my last boyfriend, Tucker, I wasn’t ever getting involved with another human again. Wasn’t worth the risk. A lot of things in my life weren’t.

This was not how I had wanted my relaxing evening to go, that much was for sure. I had Oscar mad at me, Jace emotional and chasing my contracts, and Corbin somewhere in Faerie potentially whisking my fifty grand off into the wind.

“Well, Oscar,” I said, “I think that’s enough excitement for tonight.”

Oscar hopped back up on the couch and flicked his ears at me, his eyes

narrow.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “Maybe I did deserve that.”

CHAPTER NINE

Of course, I didn't sleep well. I'd been up late, trying to relax with some tea instead of booze, and running the program on Sandra's phone. There hadn't been much on it, but she *had* been in contact with Jill Smucker. They'd been texting just a day before the murder, in what appeared to be a casual kind of code. They were talking about buying something illicit. Had to be materials for the ritual, whatever it was.

I couldn't find any detail about what exactly they were buying, or from whom—but this was too similar to what Laura had said about someone dealing around the Den. Too similar to be a coincidence. Since I'd been tossing and turning, chewing on this potential link instead of sleeping, of course I woke up to another knock on my front door too early in the morning. I was a fucking hot commodity in this town, apparently.

"Good fucking lord," I muttered as whoever wanted me gently knocked on the door again. "Whoever is out there better have brought coffee."

Oscar chirped in agreement, stretching long and yawning before curling back up.

"Lucky," I muttered. I tugged my bathrobe on, which only had the effect of making me look somehow less presentable in my pajama pants and tank top. I stumbled to the door, rubbing my eyes and peered into the peephole with trepidation.

"Oh, thank God," I said, and swung it open. "You're lucky you got here before Bob posted up, he would've flirted with you so hard you'd be engaged by now."

"Bob's a lovely man," Gram said demurely. "How are you, dear? I had a feeling you might need some breakfast. Is everything okay?"

Even at the early hour, Gram looked gorgeously put-together, in dark slacks and a loose linen shirt, her gold jewelry gleaming on her stubby fingers. She was my grandmother on Dad's side, human, with a hunch in her back, great style, and some old-school clairvoyance. She got hunches and feelings, and they were almost always right.

"I'm just playing the waiting game," I said. "That always happens on contracts like this."

"You're working a new contract?" she asked.

I took the big wicker basket out of Gram's hands and started unpacking it on the counter. She'd brought a hell of a breakfast spread and was already moving around my kitchen like she owned the place, heating up my oven to reheat the quiche and putting the percolator on for coffee. Oscar trotted out of my bedroom and wound around her ankles fondly. She only paused her cooking to reach down and scratch him behind the ears when he meowed insistently.

"Yeah," I said, and tugged my bathrobe a little tighter around my shoulders. "It's a big one."

Gram raised her sharp eyes to me. "I don't like the sound of that."

"Fifty grand," I said.

Her eyes widened.

"I know," I said. "That's enough for both of us to get through the rest of the year and maybe even sock some away."

"So what's the catch?" she asked.

"It's just a job."

"There's always a catch," she insisted.

I sighed. "I have to work with someone else."

She waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, that's not so bad. You could use some practice with teamwork."

"Hey, c'mon now," I said. "I'm not that bad."

"Is that the only catch?" she asked.

I sucked my teeth. "Well... The guy..."

She paused in her quiche-related activities and peered at me. "Tempie."

"Well, it's just that he's..."

"What is he?" she asked and crossed her arms over her chest. It really wasn't pleasant being on the receiving end of that glare. It's why I'd learned to do it from her.

"He's with the UnSeelie Court," I said, then ducked.

Gram squawked and chucked a wrapped stick of butter at me, which missed. I fetched it from where it'd landed on the couch, then placed it gently back on the counter with a small smile.

Gram huffed. "Tempie, I can't believe you."

"It wasn't my idea!" I said.

"I don't care whose idea it was," Gram said. "Under *no* circumstances should you be working with an UnSeelie. It's too dangerous!"

"The circumstances demand it," I said. "I need this money. We *both* need this money."

Gram sighed but didn't deny it. "There are other ways to make money."

"I didn't have a choice in the matter. Todd set it up without asking me."

"You should've pushed back."

"You don't think I did?"

The coffee finished, giving us a brief reprieve as I hurried into the kitchen to take it off the heat and fix us two mugs.

"You remember what happened to your dad," Gram said.

"Of course I do." In the grand scheme of things, Dad had been collateral damage. The Fae had only killed him to find Mom. But he still got killed. Brutally killed.

"They're merciless," Gram said. "If this UnSeelie finds out what you are, you won't stand a chance against him."

"I can defend myself," I said.

"That'll only alert the rest of them to what you are." Gram shook her head. "You have to get out of this contract. It's too dangerous. We'll figure out something else for the money."

"I can't, Gram," I said. "Todd's already threatening to put other hunters on the contract. If that happens, I'll lose priority. I'll have to start fighting for contracts like the rest of the ding-dongs he hires. It's not just about this case—not anymore. It's about my career."

"And I'm talking about your life," she said. Her expression went pinched, pain flashing across it. "It's just so risky, Tempie. It only takes a moment. One slip-up."

Good thing she didn't know about the times I'd already come way too close. I cringed at the thought. Having Gram here and stressing about it made the threat realer than it was before. When I was just worried about me, the actual threat of Corbin realizing my heritage felt risky embarrassing, like getting caught cheating on a school assignment. I'd lowered the stakes in my

mind to make it possible for me to do this job at all. But now, with Gram watching with a deep furrow in her brow, I was forced to remember the reality of this situation.

If Corbin found out what I was, he might not even turn me in to the court or the registers. His sharp canines flashed in my memory. Maybe he wouldn't even report me at all. Maybe he'd drain me himself—maybe he'd be unable to control it. My blood ran cold at the thought. At least it'd be a good way to go, though. Like nodding off during an overdose. Just floating away.

I suppressed a shiver.

“You can't trust anyone,” Gram said. “Remember that.”

“I know. I know that.”

“Do you?” Gram asked. “It sounds like you're getting careless.”

“I'm not getting careless,” I said with a huff. “I'm doing my job. I'm doing the best I can to provide for myself—for both of us.”

“It's not worth it if you get killed in the process,” she said. “You know how quick people are to sell each other out. Tucker did it. You have to protect yourself.”

Hearing Tucker's name was like a slap in the face. “This isn't anything like that.”

“You're right,” Gram said. “It's worse. Because you're working with an UnSeelie.”

Tucker. Even after everything he did to me, I still felt a nostalgic clench of fondness at his name—that was the power of teenage love. We'd been together at the age when everything feels permanent and invincible: seventeen. I'd thought we were soulmates; hell, we'd even talked half-jokingly about marriage. Until one late night in our hometown, when we'd gone to a movie and walked out late. And yes, he'd been wearing a flashy watch, and yes, I'd had some fake pearls on. We were playing house. Trying to pretend like we were richer and more settled than we were. Trying the married life on for size.

That had made us a target. In a life that had been so defined by the risks created by what I was, it was a plain old mugging that caused the most trouble. Our attacker had emerged from an alley with a knife drawn and demanded Tucker hand over his watch.

“No way,” Tucker had said, sneering at the guy in a show of force. “Back off before I make you.”

The threat had been a big mistake. The attacker had lunged at him, blade

first.

I'd reacted instinctively because I'd loved him. He didn't know my secret. I'd been planning on telling him, of course, but I hadn't figured out how. This was one way, though. I'd stepped in front of the attacker and unleashed the full strength of my power, burning hot white light rushing from my palms like water and crashing over the attacker like a wave. Just as I could restore life to creatures like Oscar, I could take it, too, and that's what I did to this man without even thinking. My light stole away his life force, sucking him dry, leaving the pallid shell of a body collapsed on the ground when the light dissipated.

"Holy shit," Tucker had said. He'd turned on me, eyes wide. "No fucking way."

"Surprise?" I'd said.

I'd expected him to be shocked, maybe even scared—but he'd understand. He'd still love me.

That was not the case.

"You're Fae?" he'd asked, spitting the word like it tasted bad in his mouth. "A fucking Seelie?"

I'd nodded gently. "Just half," I'd said, like that'd make it any better.

"Were you ever going to tell me this?" Tucker had asked. As if I hadn't just saved his life. "That you weren't human?"

"I *am* human," I'd insisted, because I felt human—I lived in the human world, I was raised by my human grandmother, I was more human than Seelie. But Todd didn't agree with that assessment.

"This whole time," he'd said, and pushed his hands through his hair like it hurt him. "How am I supposed to know anything between us was real? How can I know that you didn't just fucking—*enchant* me with your secret Seelie magic? I know your kind does that. Fae can get whatever they want. Fae don't give a shit about humans."

"I'm not Fae," I'd insisted again, even as tears welled up in my eyes, and as my heart broke in my chest, shattering like china dropped from a great height.

"I'd never fall for a Fae," he'd said, cruel and cold. "Never."

He'd threatened to turn me into the supernatural council, which would force my registration after some unknown punishment. That had hurt, and I'd had to deal with that—but nothing hurt as badly as the look in his eyes when he'd spat those words at me. *Never*.

After Tucker, I'd sworn to never let anyone so close again. I couldn't trust a human to love me, *all* of me. I was better off on my own.

Gram pulled the quiche out of the oven and set it on top of the stove to cool. Then she turned and peered at me, gaze softened again. "Tucker only knew you were half Fae," she reminded me gently. "He didn't know *exactly* what you are."

"Only because he was too stupid to realize what he'd seen," I muttered.

"What I mean is, if this UnSeelie sees you use your power, he'll know. They've been seeking out your kind for a long time."

"I know," I said. The mention of Tucker had bled the fight out of me. Really, I just wanted to eat a bunch of quiche and then go back to bed.

"I can't stop you," Gram said. "As much as I want to try. Just promise me you'll be careful. Truly careful. Not the half-assed careful you usually are. If you lose the bounty, it simply wasn't meant to be."

God, I wished I could believe that. If I missed this bounty, it was because I fucked up at what was supposed to be a straightforward job. But to appease her, I nodded.

After that, breakfast was muted, but fine. Her quiche was remarkable, and the coffee was drinkable. There wasn't much more than that I could hope for. I sent her off with a warm embrace, and when she pulled away, there was a ferocious, serious look in her eyes.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you," she said. "Take care of yourself."

"You know," I reminded her, "when I was growing up, I never really got into trouble because you always knew I was going to try something before I tried it."

Gram laughed and shook her head. "Don't be ridiculous. You got into a shitload of trouble."

Then with a smile, she turned and left.

Thank God she left when she did, too, because two cups of coffee and one shower later, Corbin showed up at my door.

CHAPTER TEN

At least I was dressed and awake, which was more than I could say about the last few times Corbin had shown up unannounced. “Morning,” he said coolly, and he didn’t look happy. But hell, he was here, which was a surprise in and of itself.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” I said. “Any luck in Faerie?”

He shook his head. “Can I come in? I’ll debrief you.”

I shook my head, then stepped across the threshold and closed the door behind me. “Sorry. Private happenings going on in there.”

His expression shifted, eyes sparkling with new interest. “What kind of happenings?”

“Have you heard of nunya?”

“Nunya?”

My God, he hadn’t heard this one. This was, without question, the best part of working with an UnSeelie.

“Nunya business,” I said gleefully. “Is this the kind of debriefing that requires a table at Manny’s or can we do it on the way to wherever I assume we are going?”

“Nunya business,” he repeated darkly. “You have a guy in there? Or a girl?”

“I have a cat,” I said primly. “We’re coworkers, Corbin, do you see me asking to bust into your apartment unannounced and sniff around all your stuff?”

“I’d welcome the intrusion,” he said. “Would you like to come over?”

“No,” I said. “Wait here, I’ll get my stuff.”

If he’d thought my scent was strong in my apartment the first time he’d

come in, that would be nothing compared to how it smelled after I'd done Oscar's monthly renewal. Especially because it was specifically a life-giving spell—surely he'd be able to put the pieces together once he smelled that up close. With Gram's conversation fresh in my mind, like twenty-minutes-ago fresh, I wasn't about to take that kind of risk.

Inside, I grabbed my jewelry and my boots, tied my hair up, and then stepped outside of my apartment feeling somewhat ready to face the world. Somewhat like my usual self.

"I got a tidbit of info too," I said as I locked the door behind me. "Let's head back to the Smuckers' and you can catch me up on the way."

Corbin nodded. I tossed him the keys to his car back—man, I should've spent more time taking that beast out for a joyride or two—and then climbed into the passenger seat.

"So," I said, glancing over at him as he guided the car out onto the street with much more care than I'd driven it with, "did you find her?"

Corbin grimaced. In the mid-morning sunlight, he looked paler than usual, his skin a bit sallow and his hair unstyled and pushed carelessly out of his eyes. He looked like he'd been through the wringer. Usually when Fae came back from a jaunt in Faerie, they were all glowy and refreshed, not drained. Then he shook his head and sighed.

"Sandra was in Faerie, though. I could track her movements through the realm, following the same magic signature I'd felt on the portal. She wasn't in court custody—I don't know if the court even knew she'd gotten in. She stuck around the borders of the realm, and then outside one of the UnSeelie towns on the border, I lost her."

"You lost her?"

"Trail just disappeared. Gone." He shook his head again. "I tried to pick it back up, but nothing. It was like she'd just suddenly disintegrated. It doesn't make any sense. Never seen anything like it before."

I nodded, turning the scenario over in my mind. If she'd shifted back into our plane, there would've been residue. Something. But to just blip out of existence? I'd never heard of anything like that. What was she using? Was she human? Or something else?

"Did you talk to the court?"

"No," he said. "I want to know what we're dealing with first."

"If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't want the court to know a human had snuck into Faerie, either," I said.

He shot me a dark look. “I have people in Faerie continuing the search. Just in case.”

“Without the court’s knowledge?”

“I’m working for the court,” he said. “I don’t need to keep them updated on my every decision.”

“Right, right,” I said. “Sounds like my relationship with Todd.”

“So what’d you find?” he asked.

“I was able to get some of the information off her phone,” I said. “She was in communication with Jill Smucker. Talking about buying something—I want to take another look around their house if we can. Whatever Sandra used to get into Faerie, it wasn’t just her doing. She must’ve had a circle with the Smuckers. The setup in their closet shows that. So we need to find who else is involved in the circle, what they were buying, and who they were buying it from.”

“You got all that from her phone?” he asked.

“And my own extrapolation,” I said. “I’m a professional.”

He must’ve been exhausted because he almost looked impressed. “What do you think they’re buying?”

“Depends.” I sucked my teeth. “Depends on what they’re trying to achieve. I’ve got some ideas, though.”

If Laura’s intel was anything to go on.

We turned the corner toward the Smuckers’ house, and I snapped to attention at the scene that awaited us. It wasn’t the quiet neighborhood I expected—it was flooded with cars, York City Police and Supernatural Police alike, with their red and blue lights flooding the sunny street.

“What the hell?” Corbin parked the car and we both hurried out, toward the yellow police tape blocking the house off from the rest of the street. We pushed our way through the crowd of gawking neighbors, right to the barrel-chested cop who was managing the crowd.

“What happened?” I asked, moving to duck under the police line.

The cop stopped me before I could. “Whoa,” he said, pushing me back with a hand on my shoulder. “This is a crime scene, I’m gonna need you to stay behind the line.”

A familiar face caught my eye. Detective Hobbs was on the scene, luckily, discussing something rapid-fire with a few of her deputies.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Hobbs!”

“The detective is busy,” the cop blocking me said. “I’m gonna have to ask

you--”

“Hobbs!” I shouted again. “Come get your dog off my back!”

“Her *what?*” the guy asked. “You watch your mouth, you punk—”

“Jameson.” Hobbs strode over, already mid eye-roll. “It’s fine.”

“Detective, this woman thinks--”

“I heard her,” she said. “Unfortunately, she’s working with us. Come on.”

Hobbs lifted up the police tape and waved Corbin and me through.

“The guy too?” the cop asked incredulously.

“He’s with me,” I said. “Thanks, Hobbs.”

“Please don’t antagonize my officers,” she said, then pinched the bridge of her nose. “Especially when we’re trying to keep a lid on a case like this.”

“They’re so antagonizable, though,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“Who’s this?” Hobbs asked, throwing a glance to Corbin over her shoulder, who was following me like an interested dog.

“We’re working together on this case,” I said.

“He’s credentialed?”

“I’m right here,” Corbin noted as we approached the house. He pulled his ID out of his wallet. “I’m with the UnSeelie Court. Can you tell us what happened here?”

“The UnSeelie Court,” Hobbs repeated slowly. Then she sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose again. “Hey, Waybright!”

A tall, serious-looking man in a black Supernatural Police uniform strode out of the crowd of cops and toward us standing on the porch. Hobbs threw her thumb at Corbin. “Need clearance.”

Waybright’s eyes flashed silver as he peered at Corbin and me. A shifter, then. I grinned winningly at him. Could serve me well to have a couple good connections on the Supernatural Police; I’d be nice to this guy.

Corbin flashed his ID again, and Waybright’s eyes narrowed. “The court, huh?”

“Freelancers,” Hobbs said.

“Well, at this point, I’ll take all the help I can get,” Waybright said. “You heard about what happened here?”

“Nope,” I said. “Was just coming to take some additional interviews. I’d talked briefly to the Smuckers about the disappearance of Sandra Wheels.”

“Well, whoever got poor Mr. Wheels got Jill as well.”

“She’s dead?” Corbin asked. “I’ll need to see the body.”

I elbowed him. “We both will.”

“Freelancers,” Waybright said with a shake of his head. “We need this sorted out soon. I don’t want any more deaths like within the borders of the city. And the drugs.”

“Drugs?” I perked up. If they found actual drugs onsite, that was a good lead—it meant Laura was right. “Let’s see it.”

“You’re welcome,” Hobbs said.

I grinned at her and followed Waybright into the house.

It was dark inside. Waybright led us carefully down the hallway, down to the library where I’d first encountered John Smucker poring over his Fae texts. The door to the library was open, with a few Supernatural Police and city police mulling around taking photos and writing notes. They’d set up fluorescent lights and labeled evidence on the floor, and the sheer brightness of the space contrasted with the dark quiet of the hallway made the scene even more stomach-turning.

John’s desk was pushed far to the wall, blocking the back door he’d first escaped through. Bloodstained books were scattered across the floor, marked with evidence numbers, pulled from the desk and the shelves apparently haphazardly. The air crackled with the same magic I’d felt in the warehouse. It wasn’t the magic that made the goosebumps rise on my skin, though.

Overhead, Jill Smucker, dressed in a fine silk nightgown, hung suspended by a twisted rope around her neck. Her body dangled stiff in rigor mortis, feet swollen from the blood pooling south. Bruises and gashes marked her face and arms, but they didn’t appear to be made ritualistically. She wasn’t covered in runes the way Greyson Wheels had been. Why not? I needed to know if that crackling meant there was more residue we could look at, but it wasn’t like I could be the one to investigate it.

“You feel anything?” I asked Corbin.

“A lot,” he muttered.

“Are we gonna get to see it?” I encouraged.

He glanced at me sideways. “What?”

“Like in the warehouse,” I said. “Like that?”

“Maybe,” he said, still looking strangely at me. “Why, do you feel something?”

“No,” I lied. “I’m just hoping it’s the same.”

He didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t push. “Yeah, I’ll look.”

“Excuse me,” I called to the room. “Mind if we get a little space? Back up?”

All the other eyes in the room turned to Waybright. To his credit, Waybright nodded. “Give them a minute, guys,” he said. The other cops filed out of the room with only a few muttered complaints. Waybright stayed, lingering by the door.

“You said there are drugs?” I asked.

“Dust,” he said. “On her fingertips and nose.”

“Like she was using?”

He nodded. “Or forced to. We can’t confirm because it doesn’t show up in autopsy. But it’s likely.”

“Shit. Will you be able to tell if that was the cause of death?”

“You’ll have to ask the coroner,” Waybright said.

“Any other Dust on the scene?”

“Just the baggie it came in.” Waybright showed me the evidence on the floor: a tiny plastic baggie with a marking on it that looked like a stylized lantern. I took a quick picture of the bag—a marking meant a maker. Laura might know who sold this.

But what the hell was Jill doing with Dust at all? Dust was dangerous to humans—often fatal—and addictive to supernatural beings.

“Watch out,” Corbin said.

I guided Waybright to the edge of the room, out of Corbin’s way. Corbin knelt down and did the same song and dance he did in the warehouse: hand flat on the floor, eyes all glowy-amber. And just like it had in the warehouse, the circle revealed itself, in dark lines winding over the hardwood floor of the study. Two concentric circles, and the four familiar sigils. This time I had my case files and a pen with me—who said I didn’t learn from my mistakes?—and scrawled the sigils as best I could.

“Fucking hell,” Waybright muttered.

Then, in the center of the room, beneath Jill’s swollen feet, a small scroll flickered into existence. Fuck, I should’ve noticed its presence. The residue was so strong, though, it overwhelmed whatever mask had been put on the scroll. Before I could grab it, Corbin scooped it up and tucked it into his inner pocket.

“What’s that?” I demanded.

“I need to take this to the court,” he said. “The queen, specifically. This isn’t normal.”

“Well, that much is obvious,” I said, gesturing at Jill’s dangling body. “She was on Dust, too.”

He grimaced. “This could be higher up than just a homicide.”

“What’s the scroll?”

“I’m not sure yet,” he said, then glanced at Waybright. “Just drop it for now.”

I really didn’t want to drop it—I wanted to latch onto the scroll like a dog with a bone—but if he wanted to keep the SP from getting too nosy in our business, I was fine with that. To my surprise, Waybright didn’t demand to see the scroll, either. Either he missed that little maneuver, or he wanted us to deal with this so he didn’t have to. From the narrowing of his eyes, I had a feeling it was the latter.

“I’m going to talk to Waybright and Hobbs about the magic present here,” Corbin said, low. “Just enough to keep communication open between us and them. See if they have anything else we might’ve missed.”

I nodded. “I’ll poke around here a bit more.”

Corbin and Waybright left the crime scene, leaving me alone with the body and the magic. One thing was certain: I wasn’t letting this privacy pass me by. I needed all the help I could get on this one.

I went to the same place Corbin had knelt, mirrored his posture, and flattened my palm on the hardwood. I had to be quick, and subtle. I carefully released some of the power in my core, just enough to get a sense of the magic that had been used in this space. Most noticeable was Corbin’s, fresh and sharp on top of the older magic. Everything else was UnSeelie, as expected, rich and dark and heavy on my senses. But there was an innate humanity to it, too. A human had done this—used this magic.

How the fuck was that possible?

But then something in the UnSeelie magic caught my attention. It felt like a honing rod—something used to channel the power. And it was coming from Jill’s body. I crept over to the body and carefully began to pat it down, cringing at the awful smell and the unsettling way the body swayed even with my most gentle touch. My fingers found a small shape in the pocket of her nightgown, and I reached to find a small bronze ring. There wasn’t much notable about it, it was plain to the eye, but it thrummed with used magic. I stuffed it into my bag—I’d have to investigate that later.

Noise in the hallway caught my attention, and I briskly stood up and withdrew my power. Taking a few deep breaths and focusing on my jewelry, I went back incognito. With all the power rustling around in here, my minor use wouldn’t be perceivable.

I hurried down the dark hallway—something about that hallway was spookier than being in the well-lit room with the actual corpse. I'd never been a big fan of the dark. I liked knowing what I was about to have to deal with, thanks.

Outside, Corbin was chatting amicably with both Hobbs and Waybright. That was a pretty good sign for us. I caught his eye and he nodded. He said something to the detectives, then made his graceful exit. I threw a sloppy salute to Hobbs and Waybright, earning matching eye-rolls from both of them. Mission accomplished.

Corbin followed me out of the thinning crowd. "You find anything?"

"Nothing remarkable," I said. I wasn't sure what that ring was about, but I wasn't ready to turn it over yet. "Did you see the Dust?"

He nodded. "Not a great sign."

"The baggie was on site, though." I showed him the picture. "I've got a contact who gets in contact with a lot of dealers and users regularly—if I show her this, she might be able to guide us to the manufacturer."

Corbin's expression darkened. "No need," he said. "I know who it is."

"What?" I asked. "You know Dust dealers?"

"Unfortunately. The court has to keep an eye on things."

"Seems like they're keeping a closer eye than I thought," I muttered.

"You'd be surprised." Corbin started to drive back to my apartment. "We should go to the Den tonight."

"We?" I asked. "Gotta say, a little surprised you'd suggest that I go there, too."

"You have a good eye," Corbin said. "You notice things."

"Yeah, my good eye won't prevent me from getting eaten alive by hungry ghouls at the Den," I said. "You sure that's not your plan? Get me out of the picture so you can deal with this without me whining about my bounty the whole time?"

"You really think so little of me?" Corbin asked. "I would never let someone eat you before I got a taste."

I blew a raspberry. Walked into that one. I steadfastly ignored the sudden gleam of amber in Corbin's eyes, and the way it sent a warm curl of heat through me.

"I know a guy who can get us information, but no one will believe me if I show up at the Den by myself," Corbin explained.

"Ah," I said. "They think you're a square."

“They don’t think that.”

“You’re like a government guy,” I said. “Total square. Not the type to hang out in the Den, that’s for sure.”

“The last part, yes,” he admitted. “People would assume I was there for work, instead of pleasure.”

“And we need them to think you’re there for pleasure.”

He parked the car outside of my apartment. “Right. So you’ll have to dress the part.”

“Ah,” I said again. “Here’s the ulterior motive.”

“It’s good business sense. Plenty of UnSeelie keep playthings. The Den is where we go to show them off.” He smiled. “You can’t tell me you’re not curious.”

I bit my lower lip. He was right—I *was* curious about the Den. This might be my only chance to see the inside. If I was lucky, I could develop a relationship with whoever Corbin knew, too. A man on the inside of the Den. Possibilities beyond my wildest dreams.

“Fine,” I said.

“What are you going to wear?”

“I’ll figure it out,” I said as I climbed out of the car. “Don’t get too excited.”

“This won’t work if we don’t sell it.” His gaze flickered over me, head to toe, as if he was already imagining it.

“Watch it,” I snapped.

“I will,” he said. “I promise.”

I slammed the passenger door shut. I was equal parts irritated and thrilled—annoyed that I had to play the role of his toy to get into the Den, but thrilled to be going *to* the Den. And part of me was excited to press Corbin’s buttons, too. If he thought I was hot now, he had another thing coming.

He rolled the window down. “I’ll pick you up tonight,” he said. “Around midnight.”

“That’ll be great for my sleep schedule,” I said.

“Just take a nap.” He flashed me that sharp smile.

This was going to be an interesting evening.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“**Y**ou ready for this?” Corbin asked.

I raised my eyebrows at him, which was even more dramatic considering we were basically nose to nose, squished in a decrepit phone booth in the back of Candy’s Good Time Bar. I was in a bad mood for a couple reasons. First, I hadn’t even known the entrance to the Den was in the back of Candy’s Good Time Bar, which felt like a major oversight on Laura’s part. Second, I was on a terrible cocktail of a suppressant, a concoction of tea and drugs and magic that dulled my power to a low hum in my core. I couldn’t use it often—I preferred to use it never—but it was necessary if I was going to be around a lot of Fae.

It felt like rats were chewing on the nerves behind my eyes, but I’d be fine in about twelve hours. Third, I needed to get really used to Corbin’s hands all over my body, and the heat of his touch was nearly enough to make me forget about the headache.

“Do I look ready?” I asked.

“You look like something,” he murmured, his eyes sparkling.

As instructed, I’d dressed for the part. So far, Corbin had only seen me in my usual workwear: jeans, hoodie, hair pulled back. For tonight, I’d done the works. I’d straightened my hair (which took long enough that I had to forgo my nap) and dyed it dark brown temporarily. There was no way I could stuff all my red hair into a wig cap, so dye it was.

Figuring out an outfit that said “plaything” was a little harder, but that was what I had Carla for. She’d been beyond delighted to show up at my apartment with a laundry basket full of options. Eventually we’d settled on this slutty-yet-functional number: high-waisted leather short-shorts over

fishnet tights, which made my combat boots look stylish instead of just ass-kicking. With my dark bustier and red lipstick, I looked ready to be ravished, instead of ready to chew someone out for taking my preferred parking spot at Manny's.

And Corbin was loving it. Desire poured off him in waves, and I didn't need my power to sense it. His hand was currently resting on my lower back like he owned me. And unfortunately, for the night, I had to go along with it.

I had to pretend like I didn't sort of enjoy this game too.

It was nice to be wanted. I could never be this person—the girl out on the town, the hot girl looking for a good time. It wasn't safe, not with what I was. And even though I was walking into a literal lion's den of creatures that would be delighted to eat me alive, this part, the desiring part, was in a weird way safe. Because Corbin wasn't going to fall for me, nor I for him. But we could pretend to be attached to each other.

It was fun. Hot. Dangerous. All things I liked. It'd be best for our working relationship if Corbin didn't know I liked it, though. So I stuck my tongue out in response. "Let's go."

He snorted. "All right, if you say so." Then he picked up the phone, tucked it between his ear and shoulder, and tapped a long string of numbers. It wasn't just numbers, though—the keypad glowed under his touch. He was infusing it with magic as he went. I could feel it, sharp and smooth in the air.

Then, the floor beneath us shifted and swirled with darkness. A dark fog crept up to my ankles, and then my stomach lurched suddenly like I was cresting the top of a rollercoaster and beginning to fall. Corbin hitched me closer with his hand at my lower back, then hung up the phone.

As soon as the plastic phone hit the cradle, the portal beneath us activated, snapping us smoothly into the Den. I grimaced and fought back the wave of nausea—fuck, was this what being a human was like? No wonder Corbin could smell when I phased out that pocket Hell dimension. Going through a portal with my powers dulled was a nightmare.

At least I still had my jewelry on, though. If things really went to shit, that'd help me channel what little power I could access.

"All right," Corbin said. "Let's get this party started."

He skated his hand up my spine, then swept my hair over my shoulder so he could rest his hand at my nape, folded over the dark leather choker I'd worn. Yes, it looked like a collar. It suited the role. Corbin seemed to like that part quite a lot.

We stepped out of the phone booth and into the Den.

It was a big space, with high vaulted ceilings overhead and tile floors like a grand subway station. Except there was no subway, just rows of shops, built into the walls, freestanding, built on top of each other, brushing the ceiling, and below the surface, with stairs winding deeper under the tile.

“Where are we?” I asked. Before Corbin could crack a joke, I clarified, “Like, physically.”

“Under the river,” he said.

“Ah. Smart.”

“Until it floods,” he said, then cringed up at the ceiling. “It’ll happen eventually.”

“Hopefully not tonight.”

“Eh, we’ve probably got a few hundred years.”

“Well, that makes me feel better,” I muttered.

Corbin tightened his grip on my nape and guided us out into the flow of supernaturals. All types were here, dipping into shops and bars, pausing in the street to argue and say hello. It was loud and chaotic: banshees wailing, werewolves snapping their teeth, ghouls oozing into the dumpsters to look for stray spells, Fae and shifters, even a few vampires, though most vampires preferred to stick with their own kind. “This way,” Corbin muttered. “Stay close.”

“You’re kind of forcing that,” I grumbled back. His hand was still on my nape, keeping me right at his side, but I didn’t exactly want to go further with the way the patrons of the Den were looking at me.

“This way.” He led us down the main strip, just a block or two until we reached a decrepit staircase under a near-empty bar. Down the stairs we went. How deep underground were we? I couldn’t help but imagine the river rushing overhead. Kind of unsettling.

The bouncer at the immense wooden door gave Corbin a serious look. He was a huge guy, UnSeelie, with his sharp teeth out and at the ready. He and Corbin had some sort of weird silent Fae exchange, eyes narrowed, and then the bouncer’s eyes slid to me.

“This yours?” he asked.

“Obviously,” Corbin said.

“No liability of the bar if something happens to her inside,” the bouncer said. “You cool with that?”

“I assume I’m allowed to defend my property.”

“As long as you do it outside,” the bouncer said. He smiled at me, revealing a mouth full of sharp teeth, instead of just the canines like Corbin. “That will cause some interest with the guests.”

“What can I say?” Corbin said. “I like to show off.”

Appeased, the bartender opened the door and waved us inside.

I tamped down on my anticipation, which was half excitement and half terror—a delicious combination of feelings, the pursuit of which was part of the reason I’d gotten into this field of work in the first place. The place was low-ceilinged and dimly lit, with a troll working surprisingly elegantly behind the bar, making complicated cocktails with ingredients I certainly didn’t recognize.

Other than the bartender, the clientele appeared to be all Fae—all UnSeelie. And there were a lot of them. Nearly every seat at the bar was full, as were the booths along the wall and the tables in the back. They were drinking, laughing, arguing, selling wares, and of course, doing Dust. It looked a lot like cocaine, except for its shiny hue, lined up on the table of a booth nearby, where two pretty UnSeelie women were trading lines and cackling. At the end of the bar, an immense man grimaced, then stuffed his forefinger in a small pouch, then rubbed the silvery contents on his gums.

Heavy use. Intense use. And a lot of it. The bartender didn’t seem to mind. Hell, he probably sold it.

Even through my dulled senses, the auras pounded at my brain like the cops trying to bust into my apartment. There was a *lot* of fucking magic in here. “Who are we looking for?” I muttered.

“Be quiet,” Corbin hissed. “Follow my lead.” His eyes swept over the space, but he didn’t appear to immediately see what he was looking for. He guided us toward an open space in the middle of the bar and flagged the bartender.

The bartender smiled amicably at us around his large tusks. Small horns were visible in his neatly coiffed hair, dark against his pale green complexion. His beady eyes flickered to me curiously, then back to Corbin. “What can I do for you?”

“Vodka soda for this,” he said, nodding at me, “and a brain-bender for me.”

I wrinkled my nose. I thought it was pretty unfair that he got a cool-sounding cocktail while I got the boring girl-on-a-diet drink, until I saw the drink, bright blue and letting off a foul-smelling smoke from the neck of the

bottle.

The bartender turned away to serve the next unruly UnSeelie, and Corbin muttered, “He’s not here. There’s one other place he hangs out, so we’ll have this drink and then head over.”

“Can’t go there now?” I murmured back.

He shook his head. “Don’t want to look like we’re looking for something.”

“Even that would seem suspicious?”

“To this crowd, yes.”

As we sipped our drinks, more eyes began to fall on us, curious and lingering. I figured it was because I was a human—as far as I could tell, I was the only human in this entire place. And I looked good. I was unnerved by the looks but not too fazed; hell, I looked hot, I’d take a gander at me, too.

Corbin’s posture stiffened. He held his bottle close to his lips, but didn’t drink, as his gaze cut back and forth over the bar.

“Everything okay?” I asked under my breath.

“Shut up,” Corbin hissed.

“Look who it is,” a deep, rough voice behind us said. “You’ve got a lot of nerve showing your face around here, mongrel.”

Corbin sneered, then set his bottle on the bar and turned around. I did too, and Corbin wrapped his arm around my waist, hitching me close to his side with his hand set at my hip. “What, you didn’t miss me?”

The owner of that deep voice was the biggest UnSeelie I’d ever seen. His arms were like tree trunks sprouting from his denim vest, and dark swirling tattoos crawled up them all the way to his neck, and they seemed to shift and move in the dim light.

“I’ll tolerate you in the Den,” he said, “but not in this fine UnSeelie establishment. Your kind aren’t welcome.”

“Come on, Hawkes,” Corbin said with an eye-roll. “Haven’t we done this enough?”

Two more big UnSeelie appeared behind Hawkes with their arms crossed over their chests. “And you’ve brought a pet.” He sneered at me. “Have you forgotten all the rules? No pets allowed here.”

“That must be a new one,” Corbin said. “It’s been a while since I’ve stopped by.”

I glanced between Hawkes and Corbin. I was still stuck on the ‘mongrel’ comment, and the way it’d ruffled Corbin’s feathers. And what did Hawkes

mean by *his kind*?

What was going on here?

“Get the fuck out of here,” Hawkes said. He reached out and fisted his hand in the front of Corbin’s shirt, nearly dragging him across the floor. “Before I force you. This establishment is UnSeelie only.”

I stepped away, my back bumping against the bar.

“Yeah?” Corbin asked, peering up at Hawkes with a sneer. “You forget I’m UnSeelie, too?”

“You’ll never be one of us,” Hawkes hissed.

“Fine,” Corbin said. “Never wanted to be, anyway.”

Then—

The unmistakable sharp smell of sulfur pried into my nostrils. The dim lights of the bar flickered, and a heavy darkness emanated from Corbin like a fog; tendrils of inky dark slunk down his arms crept toward the floor, winding like snakes. Hawkes’ face suddenly filled with terror, his eyes widening and sharp teeth flattening out as he tried to release his hold on Corbin. Before he could, Corbin wrapped his fingers around Hawkes’ wrist and twisted hard, sending Hawkes to his knees with a gasp of pain.

Corbin glanced over his shoulder at me, like he was checking I was still okay.

I was slack-jawed before I could stop the expression.

That wasn’t the face of an UnSeelie. Hawkes was right.

Corbin’s eyes, usually blue or amber, were now deep, bloody red in the iris, with the same inky darkness swirling in his sclera. His teeth had all sharpened, and his mouth seemed larger, unsettlingly so, like a snake ready to drop its jaw open to swallow prey.

The sulfur. The telltale deep red eyes. The weighty darkness so similar to the darkness that had pressed on me when John Smucker had shifted me into hell.

This was a demon. And not just any demon.

“Fucking Shax,” Hawkes spit through gritted teeth. “Can’t even fucking control yourself.”

“I’m in perfect control,” Corbin said in a deep, echoing voice. “That’s what should scare you.”

Shax demons were close to feral—they moved like hellhounds, insatiable, driven by instinct to destroy and devour. Shax were powerful enough to use magic of their own volition but were too animal and dangerous to ever

function in society. Shax stayed in Hell.

Except for this one, apparently.

Corbin grinned.

The room exploded into chaos. Hawkes' two henchman launched forward at Corbin, and he threw them off with a sweep of his arm that sent them careening into the back wall, landing on a booth with an explosion of dust—the drugs and the dirt combined—thus making the patrons shriek. Hawkes scrambled to his feet and attempted to get his hands around Corbin's neck, and they were locked in a battle for dominance for a noisy moment. One of the UnSeelie at the bar tried to grab me, and I knocked him off with a quick punch to the face. The bartender shouted over the noise. The bouncer ran inside, but the chaos was already too much to be controlled.

Two more UnSeelie got their arms around Corbin's, pinning him, and Hawkes decked him hard in the gut. Corbin barely grunted, but then Hawkes got his hand around Corbin's neck and started to squeeze. Hawkes' eyes glowed with UnSeelie power; he grinned as he squeezed tighter.

Fucking hell. This was a mess.

I squeezed my right hand into a fist. I didn't have much power, courtesy of the drugs I'd taken, but I still had enough to give me a little boost of strength. I gritted my teeth, charged forward through the crowd, and then kicked hard at Hawkes' temple.

My heel landed true, right on the side of his head. It both broke Hawkes' concentration and his grip. His magic faded and he rocked sideways, which allowed Corbin to explode to his feet and shake off the two guys holding his arms.

“Come on,” he barked. He wrapped a hand around my bicep—his grip was strong, and oddly warm—and we ran toward the back of the bar.

We jumped the bar, much to the troll bartender's dismay, and charged through the doors into the back room. With the bouncer and other UnSeelie hot on our tails, I ran at Corbin's heels as we leaped over boxes of liquor, mixers, and prep equipment to the employee entrance. He led me up the narrow stairs and back onto the streets of the Den.

Only then did I realize his devilish appearance had gone back to normal. We eased into the flow of pedestrian traffic, not running but moving briskly, down a few narrow alleys, backtracking up and down until we'd lost our pursuers.

“Fuck,” I said around an exhale. “What the hell was that?”

“We need to keep moving,” Corbin said.

Down the street, a row of twinkling lights caught my eye. Suddenly I had a feeling—a hunch. “This way.” I tugged him toward the lights.

“You haven’t even been here before,” Corbin said.

“Just got a feeling,” I said. “Hurry up.”

To his credit, he did.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The twinkling lights were hung from the awning of a narrow shop, tucked in between a bar and what appeared to be a tailor but for scary-looking leather armor. It was the only shop in the Den that had any lights at all, and in the window, there was a small display of well-tended plants and ancient-looking amulets. I tugged Corbin in through the door, setting off a jingle of bells as we stormed in.

The shop was quiet. We appeared to be the only customers onsite, and I didn't see an employee. The place seemed to press in on us anyway: overstuffed bookshelves and piles of crystals, plants reaching down from the ceiling, amulets and weapons mounted on the wall. A little bit of everything, it seemed. I moved forward and nearly kicked over an aloe plant reaching its thick arms up from a pot hidden by a pile of books.

Now that we appeared to have lost the guys tailing us, I was about two seconds from whirling on Corbin and demanding what the fuck was going on. Before I could chew him out, though, the shopkeeper popped up from behind the counter at the very back of the shop.

"Welcome," she chirped. Her huge glasses shrank her eyes to the size of beads, and she was small but fairly fit for a woman of her age. Twinkling jewelry adorned every finger of her hand and hung in thick chains around her neck. "What can I help you find today?"

"Uh," I said, blinking a little wildly. I hadn't thought this far ahead.

Then she straightened up and hurried around the counter. Behind her glasses, her eyes widened, and she glanced between me and Corbin. Her gaze flickered over us like she could see the story of what had happened just from the dirt on my clothes and the bruises now littering Corbin's arms and neck.

Her eyes lingered on my right hand. I tried to tuck it into my pocket, but the pockets on these dumb little leather shorts were way too small to do any good. Seriously, this was why I always wore my cargo jeans.

She stared at me. “Are you okay?” she asked, clearly not concerned with Corbin. “Do you need help?”

“We’re fine,” I said. “He’s with me.”

She didn’t look convinced. “Come on, let me help you get cleaned up.”

“That’s not necessary,” Corbin managed to say.

“It is for you, too,” the shopkeeper said. “You look terrible. There’s a bathroom down the hallway for customers where you can clean up. The employee one is upstairs.” She set her hand on my shoulder. “Come with me, I’ll show you where it is.”

“I don’t—”

Something about the woman’s touch made me trust her. So I nodded, then glanced at Corbin. “It’s fine. I’ll just be a second.”

That made the shopkeeper’s expression sour. She waved Corbin toward the back hallway, and then led me to a narrow staircase just to the side of the desk. We went upstairs, and as promised she ushered me into a larger bathroom.

She gestured me to the edge of the bathtub, and I sat down on it. Only when I was seated did exhaustion roll over me like a wave. “Listen, this is really kind of you, but--”

“Does he know you’re Seelie?” she asked.

My heart slammed into my throat. I straightened up and began frantically patting myself, a weird instinctive reaction, like maybe my power was visible and leaking out of my skin. But wait, I’d taken my cocktail, and there was still a lot of time before it fully wore off. It got less potent as time passed, sure, but my power was still not much more than a low hum in my core.

“What?” I asked. “I’m not Seelie. I’m just a human.”

I cringed. It didn’t really sound convincing to my own ears, either.

“I can’t sense it,” the shopkeeper said. “Don’t worry. Whatever you used is working.”

Who the fuck was this woman? “Who the fuck are you?” I asked.

“Mala,” she said. “My name’s on the front window.”

Well, I missed that part. “Then—I mean—I’m not—”

“Give me your hand.” She stood in front of me, hand outstretched.

Dumbly, I extended my left hand.

“The other one.”

With some trepidation I extended my right hand, with my rings on and my bracelet still snug around my wrist.

Mala nodded gently and smiled as she took my hand in hers. She smoothed her thumb over the metal of my bracelet and shook her head incredulously. “Been a long time since I’ve seen this piece of work.”

And my jewelry *reacted*.

I jerked my hand back, out of her touch, and cradled it to my chest with my eyes wide. The metal thrummed, pleasant and powered, not too unlike an eager dog who hadn’t seen a beloved family member in a while.

“I made that,” Mala explained. She wet a washcloth in the sink and handed it to me. “Wipe the dirt of your face, Temperance.”

“You—what?” I stared at her, washcloth dangling from my hands. “How do you know my name?”

“There’s only one Fae who can use that kind of weapon,” Mala said. “I made it specifically for you, based off your mother’s measurements.”

“You knew my mother?”

Mala nodded. Then she lowered her voice. “I’m Seelie, too. But I’d like to keep that under wraps, here in the Den. I prefer everyone to think I’m an out-of-practice shifter.”

I nodded, dumbstruck. Mala gave me a look, and I dutifully started wiping the dirt from the fight off my face.

“Your mother and I had a working relationship,” Mala explained. “She knew you’d need a way to conceal your powers if you were going to exist in this world as a hybrid. So I crafted that for you. I’m glad to know it’s served its purpose.”

I’d never thought to ask where Mom got the jewelry. It’d just always been in my life, packed in a box in my dresser, waiting for me to grow up enough to use it.

“What was she like?” I asked.

“Your mom?” Mala sighed. “She was a firecracker. She always had a rebellious streak, and when she met your dad, they were like two troublemaking peas in a pod. She wanted to change the world. Rehabilitate the relationship between Fae and humans.” Mala shook her head sadly. “If anyone could’ve done it, it was her. But those damn UnSeelie.”

My gut clenched. I twisted the rings on my right finger.

“So does he know?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No. I’ve been careful.”

Not as careful as Gram or Mala would probably want, but careful enough.

“And you’re working with him of your own volition?”

“Sort of,” I said.

Mala raised her eyebrows.

“The court got involved. My boss worked with the court to put us together because the case interests both parties.” I shrugged. “It’s not ideal, but I’m making it work.”

“But you can leave if you so desire?” Mala asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “But I need the money.”

“As long as you have an escape route,” she said. “As long as he’s not forcing you into this. Or tricking you. Why did he bring you into the Den?”

“I wouldn’t have let him come here without me,” I said. I had a strange urge to defend Corbin—sure, if he knew what I was, he’d probably try to eat me, but other than that fact, he’d been a good partner. He could’ve done this part of the investigation without me, but he’d seen how irritated I was that I couldn’t go with him to Faerie, so he’d hatched this plan. Dangerous as it was, I was glad to be in the thick of it. And now I had a connection in the Den.

“If that’s who I think it is, you need to be careful,” Mala said.

“Everyone keeps saying that,” I muttered.

“Come on,” Mala said. “I don’t want him to pilfer my shop while we’re up here. But here.” She fished a scrap of receipt out of her pocket and scribbled her number on the back. “If you need anything at all, you call me, okay?”

I took the phone number and tucked it in my pocket. “Like what?”

“Anything,” Mala said. Then she sighed and pulled her glasses off to wipe them off on her shirt. Her eyes were much bigger without the lenses. “To be honest, Temperance, I never thought I’d see you again. I haven’t seen you since you were about three years old. I’d thought it’d be best if you were out of this life completely. But there’s too much of your mother in you, I should’ve known you’d find a path just as wild as she had.”

“What did she do?” I asked. I didn’t know that much about my mother—hell, I’d never met another Seelie who knew her. As much as I wanted to keep this case moving, I couldn’t deny the curiosity itching at me.

“She was an artist,” Mala said. “And she still had a lot of art left to create when the UnSeelie took her. Come on, let’s go downstairs.”

“Wait—”

Mala corralled me out of the bathroom and back downstairs. Corbin was lingering in the shop, peering curiously at a pile of crystals on a shelf. He reached out toward one curiously.

“Watch it,” Mala said.

Corbin ignored her. He tapped one of the crystals, then jerked his hand back, shaking it like he’d been stung.

“Told you. They don’t like your kind.”

“What kind is that?” Corbin asked, narrowing his eyes at Mala.

“Were they chasing you, or him?” Mala asked me.

“Not me. I’m just the plaything,” I said.

“Those crystals repel demons,” Mala said curtly.

Corbin’s face blanched. He straightened up and folded his arms behind his back.

Mala sighed and took her glasses off again. “I’ve got some restocking to do in the back, I’ll be just a moment.” Then she disappeared down the hallway.

Not subtle, but hey, apparently she knew a lot more than she let on. “So,” I said.

“So.”

“Shax demon, huh?”

Corbin sighed. “Half.”

“Were you going to tell me this?”

He gave me a look, like he knew something, but I wasn’t fazed. If he had suspicions about me, there wasn’t anything he could prove.

“It’s not important to the case,” he said.

“Seems important now, since the UnSeelie want to beat your ass because of it,” I noted. “And by extension, my ass.”

“Some of those guys are old-fashioned,” Corbin explained. “A lot of members of the court are, too. Some UnSeelie think that my Shax side makes me too powerful, and too unstable. They’re just waiting for me to snap and go full mad dog, like Shax usually are.”

“Is that a possibility?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It hasn’t happened yet. It hasn’t been a problem thus far. But because it’s there, plenty of Fae don’t think I’m fit to live in normal Fae society. But I’m not fit for Hell, either. It makes me an excellent attack dog, though, which is what the court usually asks me to do.” He sneered. “Errands

and such. Bouncing between all the realms, since my constitution can stand up to it. I try not to let people know about my hybrid status. It's usually not worth the trouble."

Again, a look, a raise of his eyebrows, like he was inviting me to disclose something.

I wasn't falling for it. I couldn't deny strange pull in my gut, though. For the first time, I did want to tell him I was a hybrid, too. I never would—too dangerous. If there was anything that was going to trigger his full-on crazy Shax mode, it would be the taste of my blood. But I *wanted* to. This crazy fantasy slammed fully formed in my mind: Corbin and I, back to back in a circle of UnSeelie, or demons, or worse, him using his Shax powers, and me unleashing my burning Solstice light at max capacity.

Wrecking shit. Together, we'd be unstoppable. Two unlikely hybrids, two people that shouldn't exist, showing the world what we could do.

But that's all it was. A fantasy. Mom's fate had proven my kind were incompatible with UnSeelie, no matter how nice their blue eyes were.

"I'd like to avoid a situation like that in the future if we can," I said. "You're lucky I didn't wear a skirt."

"Is that what you did?" he asked. "You kicked that guy? In the head?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm flexible."

"If you had been wearing a skirt, you wouldn't have kicked him?" he asked with a smirk.

"Maybe not. If I had worn a skirt, you might be chewed up by nasty UnSeelies by now. So, you're welcome."

He nodded. "Thanks, Tempie."

The earnestness of his voice caught me off guard. I swallowed around the confused lump in my throat. "Uh."

Luckily, Mala saved me, as she re-emerged from the back room with a stack of dusty books and dropped them heavily on the back counter. On top of the stack of books was a small box. Mala swept her hand over it and winced at the cloud of dust that burst forth. "Here, both of you." She waved us over.

From the box, she pulled out two small silver necklaces, and placed one in each of our hands.

"Wear these," she said. "Temporary masks while you're in the Den. Should at least be able to get you out of here with a little less fanfare than before."

Corbin peered at the necklace in his hand with doubt. “This?”

Mala nodded.

I tugged the necklace over my head. The spell washed over me like a cool breeze.

“Whoa,” Corbin said.

My complexion had changed, it was a few shades darker, and I looked a little less muscular than my real self. My clothes changed, too, to plain slacks and a dark shirt—nothing complicated, and nothing that would catch a second glance on the street. I shrugged at Corbin. “What do you think?”

He nodded. “This’ll work on me?” he asked Mala.

“Not for as long,” Mala said. “You’ll have about an hour.”

“Plenty of time,” Corbin said. He put on his necklace. The air around him shimmered, and then the mask fell over him like a sheet.

I snorted.

“What?” Corbin asked. Now he was the one with the shock of curly red hair, and a pale, freckled complexion. The mask had also given him round cheeks, already turning pink with frustration.

“Nothing,” I said. “It suits you.”

The mask couldn’t do anything to hide his huffy expression, which somehow made it funnier.

“You’re shorter,” I said. “I like that.”

“Let’s go,” Corbin said. “We need to find this guy and get out of the Den before the UnSeelie start looking for me.”

“Be careful,” Mala said. “And Temperance—”

“Tempie, please.”

“Tempie,” Mala said, with her eyes soft. “Call if you need anything. Really.”

I nodded gratefully. We left the shop, Corbin in front, me peering over his curly red hair. I held my breath as we stepped out, glancing around to see if anyone was looking for us, but it looked like we were in the clear. If any UnSeelie were sniffing around, Mala’s mask had worked.

“All right,” Corbin muttered. “Follow me. There’s one other place this guy hangs around. And it’s late enough that he should be there.”

“Tell me this won’t end in another brawl,” I said.

“No promises.”

We hurried down the narrow street deeper into the Den. The further in we got, the darker the streets appeared, and the more ominous were the wares in

the shop windows. No more books and armor in this part of the Den—we were getting to the real stuff, with strange, mummified creatures hanging in windows and jars of what appeared to be pickled fingers. I grimaced at said jar, stuck staring at it in grim fascination until Corbin grabbed my sleeve and kept me moving.

He led me into another bar, but this one was even smaller than the first one and appeared to be even less welcoming. But at least it wasn't as crowded, so if shit hit the fan, we could probably keep it under control.

It was dark with a sticky floor and raised stage on the back, lit in glowing red. On stage, a slim banshee crooned a slow ballad to an audience of three distracted men in suits, possibly UnSeelie but possibly something else. Hard to tell with the deadening combo of the cocktail and Mala's mask. The bartender wiped down the same part of the bar over and over, his attention fixated on the banshee as she sang. Banshees tended to have that hypnotic effect. At the end of the bar, a squirrely-looking sprite was ignoring the show as he tapped his fingers over an ancient calculator about the same size of his head.

"Kyle, there you are," Corbin said as he sauntered over to the bar and slid into the seat next to the sprite.

Kyle glanced up and adjusted his visor curiously, his big ears twitching. "Can I help you?"

His feet dangled high above the floor at the bar; he was only about two and a half feet tall, at best. He was gangly and beady-eyed and slightly off-putting, as if he'd sprung into existence when a kindergartner was instructed to craft a troll out of clay but had never actually seen one.

"I think so." Corbin gripped the necklace in his sausage fingers and then tugged it hard enough to snap the chain, breaking the mask. I grimaced. A cool, albeit dramatic move—hope we didn't need the masks to get out of here, because now he was fucked.

The mask slid off him like rainwater, and suddenly Corbin was taller, broader, with that handsome smirk and his blond hair pushed off his forehead. He leaned casually against the bar, feet crossed at the ankle.

Kyle reeled backward. "Oh, shit."

"Not happy to see me?" Corbin asked. "It's been a while."

"What the hell do you want?" Kyle hissed. "I can't be seen talking to you."

"This won't take long. I just need to know who you've been selling to,"

Corbin said.

“I move a lot of product,” Kyle muttered. “You need to be more specific.” He glanced nervously at the suited men watching the banshee.

“Anyone Earthside?”

Kyle cringed. “Uh.”

Corbin inched closer, so he loomed over Kyle threateningly. “You’ve got until the end of this song,” he said, low and dangerous. “As soon as that banshee stops singing, your friends here are going to notice me. And I don’t think either of us want that.”

“There’s—there’s a group,” Kyle stammered. “They buy a lot of product.”

“A group? Earthside?”

Kyle nodded. “Yeah, they call themselves supernaturals, but they’re just humans. I don’t know what they’ve been doing with the Dust, they just buy it, so I keep selling.”

“To who?” Corbin asked.

“You know I don’t do names,” Kyle said.

Corbin glanced at me.

I nodded and stepped forward, pulling the case file from my back.

Kyle scanned the photos. “These two,” he said, pointing at a smiling photo of Jill and John I’d pulled from their social media. “They don’t look like that around me, though.”

“You sell to them?” Corbin asked.

“Yeah, a lot, mostly the guy,” Kyle said. “He’s crazy. There’s no way he’s actually using the amount of Dust he buys. Just a fraction of the amount would kill a human.”

“What does he say he’s doing with it?”

“It’s none of my business,” Kyle said. “It doesn’t make any sense. He just keeps telling me he’s going to ‘ascend’ or some shit. He’s just run-of-the-mill crazy.”

Ascend. Corbin and I exchanged a glance. That didn’t sound run-of-the-mill to me.

The banshee onstage swept into the bridge of the song, her voice lilting and carrying up to the ceiling. This song wouldn’t last much longer.

“Where do they meet?” I asked.

“Outside of Warwick,” Kyle said. “In the woods. There’s this clearing, they meet there at the full moon.”

“Of course they do,” Corbin muttered. “That’s tomorrow.”

The banshee’s voice faded as the song melted into its last few bars. “You have to go,” Kyle said. “Please, seriously.”

Corbin straightened up. “Is the basement still operational?”

Kyle nodded frantically.

The rest of the patrons in the bar began to mutter and shift a little, like they were coming out of a trance. Corbin nodded at me again, and I followed him into a small side door just off the bar, and down a set of stairs before we were seen. The basement was grimy. Water dripped off the pipes overhead and hit the back of my neck, making me cringe.

“You sure you didn’t bring me down here to murder me?” I asked, half-joking.

Corbin spun the lock on an immense steel safe, built directly into the back wall of the basement. He shot me a grin over his shoulder. “Take off the mask,” he said. “It’ll just break in the portal, anyway.”

“Portal?”

He swung the door of the safe open. I expected to see—well, I didn’t know what I expected, but it certainly wasn’t a rich, swirling dark portal where the interior of the safe should be. “You know where this goes?”

“Of course,” Corbin said. “I just put in the location myself. You think I’d just jump into a random portal?” He raised his eyebrows.

I pulled the necklace off over my neck gingerly, hoping I’d maybe get another use or two out of it, but no dice. The damn thing dissipated in my hands like ash. The mask fell off me in a gentle wave, cool like a breeze; I bounced on the balls of my feet, happy to be in my own body again, even if I was still wearing a ridiculous outfit.

I straightened up, ready to follow Corbin into the portal, and found his gaze lingering on me again. But it wasn’t the teasingly scummy look he’d worn when I’d first appeared in this outfit, or the irritated look I was used to seeing. It was something different, a little more wide-eyed and curious, and it was gone before I could figure out what it was.

“Come on,” he muttered, and motioned me toward the safe door.

“How’d you put the location in?” I asked. “Is that what the knob does? It’s not just a lock?”

“God help us both,” Corbin muttered, and then shoved me through the portal.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“**A**re you prepared for this?” Corbin asked as we approached the edge of the woods. “This isn’t going to be pretty.”

“Hell, yeah,” I said as I laced my boots up tight.

I was beyond ready. I’d had a full night—well, morning and half-day—of sleep, three cups of coffee, and a meal. I’d confirmed that tonight was the full moon. I’d messaged Stan to ask him if he’d picked up any magic users in his woods, and he’d said yes, he had, and I’d deal with the fact that he didn’t think to mention that to me earlier another time. (“What?” he’d whined on the phone. “I figured it was rogue werewolves, they’re always running around causing trouble and disregarding everyone else’s privacy.”)

I had my jewelry on my right hand, a knife strapped to my thigh, and a real bone to pick with whatever idiots were doing insane fucking Dust rituals right outside Warwick.

And maybe, if I was really luckily, I’d get my hands on Sandra, and get my payout.

“You can still wait here,” Corbin said. “By the car. Not too late. Wouldn’t judge you for it.”

“Nice try,” I said. “There’s no reality in which I’d let you handle this alone.”

“Still afraid I’m going to run off with your skip?” Corbin asked. He adjusted his own gear, jeans and a plain t-shirt with a harness over his chest. I had no idea what was in the pack the harness held, but knowing Corbin, it was probably some serious shit.

“Something like that,” I said. He looked good. Focused and effective. At this point, I didn’t really think he’d try to pull the rug out from under me and

take Sandra to the Faerie. If that happened, I figured it'd be something out of his control.

And when had *that* happened? At some point during this process, I'd started to—well, not *trust* him, but believe him. Maybe. A little bit.

Whatever these psychos were doing in the woods, though, I had a hunch that it wasn't going to be easy for one person to take them down. Not even a sneaky UnSeelie with a secret demon side. If I wanted my skip, and he wanted to figure out what the fuck these people were doing to get into Faerie, we were going to have to work together.

It'd taken a solid twenty minutes of arguing before we left, but it seemed like Corbin was finally resigned to that reality. He nodded. "Let's go, then."

The moonlight flooded the woods as we started to make our way. The full moon only heightened my connection to the forest, and I felt its power under my feet with every step, letting it seep into me in small amounts. Even if Corbin noticed it, I had to take the risk—I'd need the power.

He didn't seem to notice anything odd, though. He led the way, picking carefully through the trees with his attention darting around. Eyes to the sky, then to the barely visible path in front of us, then to the trees.

"What are you following?" I asked, low.

I could feel the path, too, running like a wound through the magic of the forest. It wasn't quite like the residue I'd felt at the other scenes. It was darker. Stickier. It made me curious, and at the same time, it made me want to turn away.

"It's different," Corbin said. "This is... It's a blend of magics. It's not just Fae."

"Fae and what?"

He cringed. "Demon."

"Well, at least it's familiar to you, then," I muttered.

He shot me a dark look over my shoulder. "We'll see how much good that does us."

"That confidence does make me feel better," I said sarcastically. Fae and Demon. I'd seen what Corbin could do when he unleashed his Shax side. That was intense enough—what would it be like when a bunch of inexperienced humans, or human-adjacents, were attempting to channel that kind of power?

I decided to let Corbin do the navigating and focused my own energy on the forest. Its energy wound around mine, boosting my power subtly and

gently. It felt good. It always felt like coming home. But even with forest's power embracing me like a friend, I could still feel the wound of the coven underneath it all.

That made it feel a little more personal. How dare these people fuck with the energy of the forest? That offended me almost as much as Jace trying to get involved in my contract.

"Here," Corbin said, barely audible. "Through here."

We crept a little closer, tucked behind the broad trunks of a few trees. In the clearing ahead, there they were.

"They always wear robes," I muttered. "Why is it always the robes?"

Corbin shot me a dark look as if he could shut me up with his mind. He wished.

Four people stood in the center of the clearing, like they were four points of a compass. All of them wore dark robes with hoods drawn up, but even with the hood up, I recognized the man directly across from us, leading the chant in a language I didn't recognize.

John Smucker. He looked a little more rested than the last time I'd seen him, that was for sure. He and the three others—all women, as far as I could tell—stood with their arms spread, chanting repeatedly. God, I really wished I wasn't here with Corbin. If I were handling this alone, it'd already be *handled*. My feet itched to charge forward and interrupt this ritual before it could really get going.

But apparently, we were too late. The magic prickled over my skin, and a freezing breeze whipped up around us, like it was flowing from the earth itself.

"Oh, shit," Corbin muttered.

Two concentric circles formed around the coven, entrapping them. A dark grin spread across John's face, his barely visible eyes wild as he kept chanting, and chanting. At his feet, the earth shifted, its surface suddenly gooey and visibly moving, like disturbed quicksand. The wind picked up. A rumble sounded from deep below our feet.

I gasped and grabbed my head as a sudden throbbing pain shot through it, as a sudden rush of magic coursed over me.

"Tempie?" Corbin hissed. He looked affected, too, grimacing in pain as he leaned heavily against the trunk of the tree.

"M'fine," I managed to say.

"It's a summoning," Corbin said.

“Yeah, I can see that,” I snapped. The acute pain abated, leaving a dull pressurized throb in its wake, like I was deep underwater.

From the shimmering surface of the earth, a dark, reptilian hand emerged. Then the arm, gangly but muscular, scaly, wet. Then another hand. Both dug claw-like into the earth and heaved up. The creature emerged from the earth like it was clawing its way out of a birth canal. And in a way, it was.

“This doesn’t look good,” I muttered.

The thing stood hunched in the center of the circle. It looked like a cross between an immense wolf and a terrible lizard, with its jaws open and dripping, its back ridged, tailless, but with claw-like feet digging into the dirt. It panted, its bright red eyes gleaming as it stared, dazed, at the ones who had summoned it.

“That’s a fucking Shax demon,” Corbin whispered. “A full one.”

My blood turned to ice. “Why the fuck would they summon one of those?”

“It shouldn’t even be able to cross into this realm,” Corbin said. “It should be disintegrating. This shouldn’t be possible.”

The concentric circles around the coven glowed and shifted. The chanting grew louder. The demon turned its attention to John, its mouth still wide open, its drool dripping in long, dark strands onto the grass, fizzling where it landed.

Then, the woman behind the demon threw her hands up in the air and howled with delight. “Oh, great master!” she called out. “Grant us a taste of your dark power!”

“No!” John shouted. He tried to recover the rhythm of the chant, but it was too late. She’d broken it, and from the crazed tone of her voice, it was probably because she was high out of her mind on Dust.

The demon whirled around to face her. It staggered to its feet, bringing itself up to its immense height—like a Clydesdale on evil steroids. Then it swung its nasty clawed front foot out and grabbed the woman who’d shouted, dragging her in close with its claws around her middle. The woman squealed with delight, her hands digging into the demon’s wrist. She threw her head back, hood falling off as she cried out, “My lord! My lord!”

Then the demon ripped out her throat. With the size of his reptilian jaw, it wasn’t a pretty sight. Her head lolled lifelessly back, empty eyes wide and still swirling with the aftereffects of Dust. The demon stuck its tongue into the bloodied mess on her neck and drained her dry in moments. Then it

tossed her lifeless body aside, like a cat with a toy, and snapped its reddened teeth with pleasure.

The demon made a terrible rumbling-hissing noise. It clawed at the concentric circles, hissing in pain when it touched, but then attacking it again and again.

“No, no, no!” John began chanting louder, and faster, but the demon didn’t seem to be affected by it at all. He was rapidly losing the thin thread of control he had on the Shax demon he’d summoned. I wasn’t sure if the woman being eaten alive was part of the plan, but the demon getting out of the summoning circle obviously was not. My eyes widened, fear coursing through me as I took a minute step back. My entire body was coiled, ready to launch into action—not to attack this demon, but to fucking *run*. If that thing got out of its summoning circle, there was no way I could take it without making my powers extremely obvious.

But if I was planning on running, Corbin clearly had other plans.

“Nice try, buddy,” Corbin said as he stepped into the clearing. He unsheathed a short blade strapped to the back of his harness, then another, so he had one in each hand. “You’re not getting out of that circle, though.”

The demon made a sound that I could only call a laugh. It fixed its red eyes on Corbin hungrily.

“Who are you?” another woman in the group asked in a high, terrified voice.

Bad choice. The demon whirled on her, like it had just noticed she was there, and she met the same fate as her peer.

The remaining woman and John inched closer to each other, out of the demon’s line of sight, and kept chanting, quiet and steady. The woman’s hood fell backward as she gazed up at the demon, and from the sudden squaring of Corbin’s shoulders, I knew he was having the same realization I was.

Sandra fucking Wheels. I almost cursed aloud. Should’ve fucking known.

“Cute,” Corbin said to the demon. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?”

Dark tendrils crawled down Corbin’s arms to his blades, wrapping around them like snakes and making them shimmer. His aura shifted too, barely noticeable through the terrible press of the demon’s aura, but I could still feel it, tuned in to him as I was. His Shax side was out and ready to fight.

The demon rumble-hissed again, then shuddered and charged through the

concentric rings that had brought it to this plane in the first place.

Behind the demon, John and Sandra bolted. Whatever effect their chanting had on the demon, if any, it wasn't there anymore.

The demon snapped its jaws and lunged for Corbin.

And all I could do was watch. This terror felt different. There was no way I was running now.

My power burned in my core, pressing at my bones from the inside, urging me to unleash it. I could help him. Trying to take down a Shax demon with Shax magic was ridiculous—even with the enhancing UnSeelie magic, it was nearly impossible. And the demon had just fed—*twice*. It was itching to keep eating.

I clenched my hands into fists at my side, feeling my power rush down my arms and into my hands. My jewelry thrummed, containing the power, eager to unleash it in a controlled blast. It was an itchy, almost nauseating feeling—my power burning, galloping, pushing to be released, while I had to stay pinned in place, helpless, only hoping that Corbin could take this creature down without getting himself killed. And I wasn't very good at being helpless.

Corbin sidestepped the demon's attack, then slashed at it with his blade, creating a long, oozing gash in its side. The demon wailed, pissed off now, and whirled back toward him. Corbin laughed, then went for its legs. Smart move, trying to slice the demon's tendons and keep it from moving too quickly.

If it got out of this clearing, we, and Warwick as a whole, were well and truly fucked.

Corbin succeeded at first. His blade dragged through the tendons on the demon's front leg, and the demon roared and collapsed down. But Corbin wasn't quite quick enough—or he had misjudged how quickly the demon could move—and it collapsed half on top of him. Corbin shouted, pinned under the demon's weight. He raised his blade and swung it toward the demon's chest, but the demon knocked it aside. It raised its good front leg, curled its claw, and then slammed it into Corbin's shoulder.

Corbin roared in pain as the claw dug into his shoulder like a knife. Sticky darkness spread from the wound; not Corbin's blood but what looked like poison from the demon's claw. The darkness swept over him quickly, gliding into his mouth and nose, and his body went limp.

Terror ran through me—terror and *rage*. John was gone. The demon was

loose. And now it'd fucking done *something* to Corbin.

That was it. I was done fucking standing here. I wasn't running, and I wasn't hiding my power. This bitch was going down.

The demon withdrew its claw, then opened its mouth, a single strand of dark acidic saliva dripping dangerously from its tongue toward Corbin's slack, unconscious face.

"Hey, asshole!" I barked as I stepped into the clearing.

The demon snapped its jaws closed and looked up. Its red eyes burned with hunger, its reptilian nostrils flaring. And I knew I smelled fucking delicious.

I unleashed my power, letting it course through me, charging my blood and racing over my skin, making me glow faintly. It was the power of the sun burning away the darkness the Shax brought with it when it crossed over.

It lunged toward me, salivating and sloppy with hunger, dragging its bad leg underneath it. I stood in place, letting it get close. A breath before the demon could snap its jaws over my head, I dodged, sliding under its maw. A drip of saliva landed on my back, burning through the fabric, and I hissed in pain, but my power easily burned it away before it could do too much damage on my skin. I dug my fingers into the gooey flesh of the demon's back and swung up, over and on top of it like I was mounting a horse. The demon hissed in rage and immediately attempted to buck me off, but I held on, digging my legs hard into its shoulders.

"Nice try, fucker," I said. "A nicer hunter might send you home. But not me."

I dug my fingers into the demon's red eyes, and it howled, a terrible sound that echoed through the forest. I shouted back, my own cry mixing with the demon's noise, and then flooded it with my power.

Light raced down my arms and into my hands, channeling through the demon's eyes into its body. The demon resisted, its body attempting to reject my magic, pushing back until it felt like I was trying to move my body through a tar pit.

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth, reaching deep into my core where my power burned like the sun. I breathed into it, focusing there, as tendrils of light wormed their way into the demon's body, gaining a foothold in its dark, gooey muscle.

I opened my eyes. They burned in their sockets with crackling force.

Then I let go.

My power surged. Light ripped through the demon's body like a river shattering a levee. It tore through the darkness, eating away at its innards, leaving nothing but ash and emptiness in its wake as I burned it from the inside out.

I lifted my hands, the light dissipating. The demon's body slumped to the side. The skin began to crackle and hiss under me; I jumped off in a hurry, then rushed over to Corbin, grabbed him under the arms, and dragged as best I could away from the demon's corpse.

Even with my enhanced strength, this guy was fucking heavy.

In the clearing, the demon corpse bloated, like a time-lapse of a body rotting. "Gross," I muttered. Its belly split open, releasing a rush of that freezing cold wind, and then it deflated and disintegrated back into the earth, leaving behind a patch of dead grass.

"Fuck," Corbin groaned.

I whipped around. "Oh, shit," I said. "Are you okay?"

All the Shax magic—both the demon's and Corbin's own—had disappeared from his body. He heaved up onto his good elbow. The wound in his shoulder looked bad, dark with blood and oozing, but it wasn't bleeding heavily anymore. It was like his body was already attempting to stitch itself together. Wounds that would've left a human bleeding out weren't any worse than a sprained ankle to an UnSeelie.

"What the hell did you do?" he asked.

"Killed it," I said. "You're welcome."

"How?" Corbin asked, voice dazed with either injury or amazement, I wasn't sure which.

"Skills," I said. "And a blessed Fae blade. Got it as a gift."

"What blade?" he asked.

"Destroyed now," I lied, gesturing at the empty patch of dirt where the demon's body had been before. "Guess it was a one-time-use thing."

"Hm." Corbin was clearly not buying it, but he didn't have the energy to argue with me. He grimaced and staggered to his feet. I briskly stepped to his side, and to my shock, he did place his hand on my shoulder for balance as he steadied himself. "Fucking hell. That thing had a bite on it."

"Yeah, I'd say so." The two corpses of John's unfortunate followers burst and dissipated in the same way, leaving nothing behind but scorched earth. "John ran."

"I figured," Corbin said. He heaved himself up to standing on his own.

“Let’s get his ass.”

Could he feel the residue of the portal? Could he feel what I’d done, too? I’d tried to tamp down on my power, but I’d used a lot. Had it all dissipated with the demon’s body? If Corbin could sense it, he wasn’t saying anything. He didn’t seem to be picking up anything, not in the attentive bloodhound way he had been on the way into the clearing. I chewed on my lower lip nervously.

We followed the now-familiar residue into the woods. This time, I led the way. It wasn’t far outside of the clearing that the trail ended, and one of the larger tree trunks was marked with the circle of a sealed portal.

“As expected,” I said. “He and the woman must’ve gotten away.”

“Did you see—”

“That it was Wheels? Yeah.” I shook my head. “It looked like she was John’s right-hand woman. He probably has her under some sort of spell—and he’s using her to do his dirty work.”

“Awesome,” Corbin said dully.

I was about to turn around and walk back toward the clearing when a gleam in the grass near the base of the tree caught my eye. I knelt down and grabbed it. A small bronze ring, unmarked.

I pocketed the ring and straightened up. Corbin didn’t even remark on it. He just turned and began to make his way back, feet dragging in the dirt, shoulders slumped and wound still oozing slowly. I’d never seen him look so exhausted.

“Come on,” I said. I hiked his good arm over my shoulders, and he grunted but leaned his weight on me as we walked. “I’ll clean that up for you.”

“It’s fine,” Corbin muttered.

“Yeah, I’m sure it is,” I said. “I just watched Shax magic ooze into your mouth, forgive me for wanting to make sure you don’t pass out and die randomly.”

He smacked his lips curiously. “That’s what that weird taste is.”

“What did the Shax magic do?” I asked as we made our way back toward the car. The sun was beginning to crest over the horizon. Under my feet, the forest sang with gratitude and joyfulness, now that the demon was taken care of. I’d depleted a lot of power killing it, and already the forest was giving it back, from the earth and from the sunlight above.

“Nothing,” Corbin said. “It’s like a sedative. If it had done that to anyone

else, they would've been burned alive from the inside, like acid. But since I've got Shax in me, it's just kind of tiring and annoying. It dulls my senses, makes it hard for me to sense anything else. Everything just stinks like Shax." He cringed. "I'll be fine in a couple hours. Fast metabolism."

I steadfastly ignored the relief that rushed through me. "All right, Terminator, let's go."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Standing outside my apartment, I took a steady breath. Corbin stood behind me, already looking a little steadier on his feet, but still dazed. I could only hope that he wasn't lying about the effects of the demon's magic. Last time he'd been in my apartment, my scent had nearly made him drunk with desire. He'd said a few hours, though. So if we could just get cleaned up and leave, we'd be fine.

This was stupid.

Gram would kill me.

And yet I didn't want to turn Corbin out into the world when he was this loopy. What if he was wrong about the magic? What if he had some weird, delayed reaction?

I unlocked the door and stepped inside. Corbin crossed the threshold behind me and closed the door. I paused in the center of the room, waiting on tenterhooks.

Corbin blinked at me. "Can I shower?"

I swallowed around the tightness in my throat and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, come on. And let me look at that wound."

Corbin raised his eyebrows at me, but I just shook my head and pushed him into the bathroom. He sat down obediently on the closed lid of the toilet, then peered up at me as if waiting for instruction, with a small, teasing smile on his face. Of course, he still had the energy to be snarky.

"Let me see," I said again, wagging my hand demonstratively at his shoulder. "I need to make sure you're not going to go septic and die."

"I don't think UnSeelie can get sepsis." But he shucked off his leather harness anyway. It clattered to the tile floor of the bathroom. Then without

any preamble, he peeled off his bloodied, dirtied shirt as well.

“All right,” I said, definitely not awkwardly at all. I kept my attention far away from the defined muscle of his pecs, way, way far away from his abs, and instead peered with my nose wrinkled at the nasty wound on his shoulder. It wasn’t the gross, gaping stab wound I expected. It looked almost half-healed, but despite the dissipation of the Shax magic, there was still black goo mixed with the dried blood. “I’m going to clean it, okay?”

“I can clean it,” Corbin said. His voice was oddly low, and his eyes glimmered with both red and amber when he looked at me—an unnerving, but compelling sight. “It’ll heal fine regardless.”

“Why do I feel like cleaning it means you’ll just rub one of my nice washcloths over it, probably staining it with gross Shax leftovers?” I asked as I pulled my first aid kit (one of many) out of the cabinet.

Corbin said nothing.

“Thought so.” I soaked a thick piece of gauze with hydrogen peroxide, then swept it over the wound.

Corbin hissed through his teeth as the peroxide bubbled in the wound.

“Seriously?” I asked.

“What?” he shot back. “No adrenaline this time.”

“You big baby.” I swept the gauze over the wound a few more times, with pressure, making Corbin grimace. Then I withdrew it and inspected my work. The wound was still pretty nasty looking, but it was red and ragged-edged now, without the darkness picking away at the inside. If I looked closely, I almost thought I could see his flesh healing itself together in real time.

“Ah,” Corbin said. “That is better.”

“Told you,” I said curtly. I stepped back.

Corbin levered to standing, a lot steadier on his feet than he was before. Had I shot myself in the foot just now? Were his senses coming back? I swallowed, then pressed my lips together, staring pointedly over his shoulder at my ugly patterned wallpaper instead of directly into his chest.

“Thanks,” he said in that low voice, sending a shiver down my spine. “Mind if I shower now?”

“Sure!” I said, and to my embarrassment, my voice came out more like a squeak. Before he could tease me, I charged out of the bathroom and slammed the door behind me.

It was just adrenaline. Adrenaline, and the thrill of using my magic, and

the forest, and all that shit. I was just heightened. Plus, this case was stressful, and it'd been a while since I'd gotten laid, and he had, like, a twelve-pack. What was a girl supposed to do in a situation like this?

Oscar meowed plaintively at me. He was on the couch, and he flicked his ears with irritation. He narrowed his eyes at my phone, where I'd abandoned it on the coffee table before heading into the forest. Upon inspection, I saw that I had a lot of missed calls, and they were all from Todd.

"Oh, shit," I said. "Sorry, Oscar, this probably interrupted your beauty sleep, didn't it?"

Oscar meowed again, then curled back up on the couch, tail over his eyes. That was answer enough.

I braced myself, then called Todd back.

He answered on the first ring. "Where the hell are you?" he barked.

I held the phone a slight distance away from my ear, with a grimace. "Working," I said. "What's going on?"

"I've been trying to reach you all morning," he snapped. "I need you in the office. Now."

"What?" I asked. "I just got back from running an investigation all night. I need sleep."

"Your investigation isn't doing anything at all," he barked. "Sandra Wheels is still missing. I've put other hunters on it."

"Yeah, I know," I grumbled. "How's that working out for you?"

Todd exhaled hard. "Just get in here."

"Todd, I need—"

"This isn't a negotiation," he shouted. "If you want keep working for me, get your ass into my office now!"

He hung up without waiting for my response. I stared at my phone, dumbfounded. This wasn't like Todd at all. Sure, he'd always been a little on the brash side, but this outright rudeness wasn't normal. He'd always cared about me—or at least pretended to care really well. He always respected my boundaries around this work, knowing that when I said I needed a break, I meant it.

I knew he was irritated about Sandra's disappearance, but this was beyond the pale. This wasn't just about money anymore. Money could be recouped. Sure, it was a nightmare, but it could be recouped. Something else was bothering him—something more than just his investors breathing down his neck.

And why would he need me to come in? If he was really worried about Sandra, he'd want me focused on the case, right?

"Something about this is weird," I said to Oscar.

He rolled over onto his back and went back to sleep.

The shower cut off. I busied myself chugging some water and making some instant coffee—not my favorite—since apparently, I had to get my ass down to the office. And I was trying to distract myself from the fact that Corbin was puttering around my bathroom. After a few moments, the door swung open and he padded back out, his dirty jeans back but his shirt definitely not on. He toweled his hair as steam billowed out of the bathroom behind him.

"Thanks," he said. "That's better. Starting to feel like myself again."

"That makes one of us," I muttered.

"So," Corbin said. He stepped into the kitchen with the towel slung around his shoulders. "Can I see this blade you used to kill the demon?"

My heart climbed into my throat. "No," I said. "Listen, I have to go."

"Hm." The ozone-spark of his aura was coming back to the forefront of my attention. "Where to?"

I took a sip of my instant coffee and leaned back against the counter, trying to stay relaxed. He'd only get nosier if I made it seem like he was onto something.

"Todd called me in," I said. "I'm gonna run to the office."

"Does Todd know about this blade?" Corbin asked. He stepped closer, until he was nearly boxing me in to the counter. I swallowed, feeling pinned by his gaze, which was beginning to sparkle with amber. His nostrils flared.

"Todd doesn't know anything," I scoffed.

"I don't think there's a blade at all," Corbin said. "You'd need a lot more power than just a single enchanted blade to bring down a demon of that size and power. I felt his power up close. That wasn't a demon one person could take down with one strike."

"Guess you were wrong," I said, and set my coffee aside.

"Was I?" Corbin said. He leaned closer, his nose close to my ear. "I'm not one-hundred percent yet, so maybe my senses are a little off. But did you think I forgot how good your apartment smelled last time I was here?" He inhaled. "How good *you* smell?"

My voice caught in my throat. I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. "Must be my shampoo."

“I was just in your shower.”

“Right.” I was trying to ignore that fun fact.

“Stop being so coy, Tempie,” he said, his voice so low it was almost a purr. “What *are* you?”

My brain told me to shove him away, laugh in his face and then force him out of my apartment. That was the responsible thing to do. That’s what badass bounty hunter Temperance Fleur would do. That’s how she should manage this situation, messy as it already was.

But my body had other ideas. I didn’t shove him away at all—I just flattened one palm on the plane of his chest, still warm from his shower. He really had no business being so jacked. It made for an unsafe working environment. And maybe it was the adrenaline, or the power still thrumming in my veins, or Corbin being so close and curious.

But I had one way to shut up him.

I kissed him. Hard on the mouth, roughly, with a little bit of teeth. Proving my dominance.

Corbin was stunned into stillness for just a moment, his mouth open against mine.

Hey, well, at least he wasn’t asking any more questions. Guess I was calling that plan a success.

Then his hand fluttered to my hip. He shifted, starting to deepen the kiss —

And then I snapped back into reality.

“Shit!” I broke the kiss and shoved him backward. He stumbled a few steps back, grinning, his eyes fully amber now, and his aura burning against my senses.

Before he could say anything cocky, I shoved past him. “I’m going, so you need to leave.”

Corbin raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” I said sharply. “Not like I’m going to just let you hang out in my apartment. Chop, chop.”

He stretched his arms languidly over his head. I very purposefully did not stare at the line of his abs as he did so. “Well, I’m coming with you.”

As if. “As if,” I said.

Oscar stood up on the couch and stretched equally as languidly, then hopped down and wandered over to Corbin. He curled around his legs, tail up alertly and brushing over Corbin’s calf.

“Traitor,” I hissed at Oscar.

“We’re a team now,” Corbin said. “Where you go, I go.”

“Unbelievable.” I shook my head. We were back to bickering like the kiss hadn’t even happened—maybe I could push it to the back of my mind, too.

“Fine. Hurry up. Put a shirt on.”

“Must I?” he asked with a smirk.

I ignored him and tugged my boots on. I didn’t notice until we were out the door that he’d pulled on one of *my* hoodies.

That realization made heat twist in my gut, which I ignored.

We made our way to Get Out Of Jail Bail Bonds, in Corbin’s car, which I drove. I told him that was so he wouldn’t strain his arm, but really, I just felt like if I had to sit in the passenger seat and do nothing, I’d blow the top off my head somehow. There was too much going on—the case, and Todd, and now that stupid foolish kiss—at least driving I could focus on not driving his car directly into the river, instead of all the case details and Corbin-shaped personal problems whirling in my head. The whole drive, his gaze kept flickering over to me, and it took all my self-control to keep my eyes on the road. But I did it, and we arrived downtown in one piece.

And it was early enough in the morning that Carla hadn’t even arrived in the office.

“Todd!” I called as I stepped into the dark lobby and flicked the lights on. “You rang?”

Todd burst out of his office like a hurricane. He looked like he hadn’t slept in a week, with his jacket hanging loose around his shoulders and his hair a mess. “Fucking finally,” he said. He slammed a folder onto Carla’s desk. “I need you to take care of this.”

“What?” What the hell did that mean? I picked up the folder and thumbed through the contents.

“A skip?” I asked. “Todd, I’m busy with—”

“I’ve got other people on it,” he snapped. “I need you to take care of this one.”

“I know you do,” I shot back. “Jace showed up at my door, so thanks for that.”

“If you can’t get it done, someone else will. Since Sandra Wheels was able to skip out, now everyone thinks they can do it! So whose fault is that?” Todd barked.

“Jesus, Todd,” I muttered. “You need to brush your teeth.”

His face reddened. “Bring this guy in. If it’s so easy, it shouldn’t be any trouble for you. Unless you’ve lost your touch.” Then his attention flickered to Corbin, and his eyes narrowed as he stared at him.

Something in Corbin’s mood shifted. I could feel it in his aura, prodding at my subconscious. Were these two assholes about to have some kind of masculinity standoff?

“Fucking hell,” I said, shaking my head at the file. “Fine! I’ll do this and then I’ll bring Sandra in, too!”

“You keep saying that and I keep not seeing results!” Todd barked, and then stormed back into his office and slammed the door.

“Wow,” Corbin muttered.

“He’s like a teenage boy,” I muttered. “He might as well turn on some death metal to drown me out.”

“Well, hey, you’re here early,” Carla said as she descended the stairs, balancing a box of donuts on one hand. She paused and cringed at the office door. “Is he still here?”

“Yup,” I said with a nod.

“And you’re here because...?”

I wagged the folder in the air demonstratively. “Apparently, I’m pulling double duty now.”

“Yeesh.” She smiled at Corbin. “And you are...?”

“Leaving,” I said. I grabbed a donut and hauled Corbin up the stairs.

“So,” Corbin said as we climbed back into his car, this time with him driving, “what’s this about?”

I thumbed through the folder with a shake of my head. “It’s a bullshit contract. I know this guy.”

“You’ve brought him in before?”

“No, but I’ve seen him causing trouble down at Candy’s, and at some shops nearby. This shouldn’t take more than an hour or two.”

“Great,” Corbin said. “Where are we headed?”

“We?” I asked. “We’re heading back to my apartment, where you’ll drop me off and then leave, and I’ll go get this guy on my bike.”

“How are you going to pick up a skip on your bike?” he asked.

“Do you think I didn’t do this job before I met you?” I said with an eye-roll. “Obviously, I hog-tie them to the back of it.”

“Are you being serious?” Corbin asked.

“Look, we make do.” I shrugged. “Seriously, back to my place.”

“If this is such a quick case, I’ll just come with you.” Corbin started driving.

“Oh my God,” I said, and ran my hand over my forehead. “I really need to sleep. This is giving me a headache.”

“Then let’s get it over with fast.”

I sighed. It wasn’t much of a contract at all—just under three hundred dollars—but it’d pay for food for now. And it’d prove to Todd that I was still the best one working. That was still true, since none of the other guys he’d put on Sandra had found anything. The money would be nice, but really, a petty part of me just wanted to prove Todd wrong.

“It’s too early for him to be at Candy’s,” I said. “Go this way.”

I pointed out the windshield, directing Corbin toward the bar district by the river. If Candy’s wasn’t open, there were only a handful of places Roger would be lurking.

“Park here,” I said as we pulled into the parking lot of the tiny liquor store at the edge of the neighborhood. “If you’re coming, be quiet.”

Corbin gave me an odd, questioning look, but then nodded and followed me. I crept carefully around the back of the liquor store, where the recycling bin was pushed right up against the back of the building, creating a nice little nook for Roger to snooze in as he waited for his favorite places to open up.

“Heya, Roger,” I said. “Have too much fun recently?”

Roger groaned, rubbing his hand over his forehead. He was sprawled out on a bed made from a stack of cardboard boxes, in a sleeping bag that’d definitely seen better days. He blinked his bloodshot eyes open, then realized who was talking to him. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Good morning.”

He scrambled out of his sleeping bag and onto his feet. I stood with my arms crossed while I waited for him to decide how he was going to attempt, and fail, to get away from me. I expected him to run—that’s what a normal person would do—but instead Roger jumped up and grabbed the edge of the dumpster, already overflowing with cardboard boxes from the store, and attempted to crawl his way inside it. “Oof!” he grumbled, gasping as he tried to kick his way up and over the edge of the dumpster. But he’d underestimated how much strength a real pull-up actually takes, and he was mostly just hanging on to the edge of the dumpster and flailing.

I reached out and grabbed the back of his waistband, then tugged him off the dumpster. He hit the ground with both feet and then groaned and tried to

take off running, which wasn't possible with my grip still tight.

"All right," I said. "That's enough."

"Jeez," he muttered. "No mercy, huh?"

"Sorry, Rog, you cause trouble when you're out on bail, and you end up having to go back in."

"It was just a couple drinks!" he whined.

"Yeah, and a big-ass fight afterward, according to the file I got," I said. "Come on."

I grabbed a zip-tie from my bag and wound it quickly around his wrists, snug but not too tight. Roger dropped his head, resigned, as I led him back toward the car.

"See?" I said to Corbin. "Easy."

Corbin raised his eyebrows. "You get paid to do this?"

"Yeah," I grumbled as I pushed Roger, who was complaining and whining, into the backseat of Corbin's car. "And it's definitely not enough."

We climbed back into the car and Corbin wrinkled his nose. "This guy reeks."

"I'm right here," Roger said.

"Yeah, and you reek," Corbin said over his shoulder.

"Guys, can it," I said. My head was already starting to pound from irritation or lack of sleep or both.

"My car's going to smell now," Corbin said, sounding almost petulant.

I raised my eyebrows. "You see why I take the bike most places now?"

Corbin rolled down the windows in response.

I bit back a smile. At least this was an easy skip—I'd get my money and to rub it in Todd's face a little, too. Then a quick nap, and right back onto this godforsaken case.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Come on,” Roger whined from the backseat of the car. “Please. I just woke up. I didn’t realize I was supposed to show up at court. I didn’t get the notification.”

“That’s not my problem,” I said from the driver’s seat. I was getting pretty used to driving Corbin’s car—maybe he was onto something with this whole real car thing.

“Ugh.” Roger sank down in the backseat. “You really had to come find me this early?”

“Can you shut up?” Corbin said over his shoulder.

“At least get me some food before you drag me in,” Roger said. “I didn’t eat anything last night.”

“Yeah, you were too busy fighting people at Candy’s,” I said. “Maybe if you had eaten and slept instead, you would’ve made your court date.”

“Just a breakfast burrito,” Roger said. “Please, come on.”

“Oh my God,” Corbin said. “You just got picked up by a bounty hunter and you’re asking for *burritos*?”

“This actually isn’t that uncommon,” I muttered.

“Can it,” Corbin said, “or I’ll make you shut up myself.”

“I’m a lot easier to be around when I’m not starving,” Roger said.

Corbin’s aura spiked, the ozone sharpening.

“Dude,” I said. “Don’t even think about it. You know you can’t use magic on humans Earthside.”

He shot me a sideways look. “I wasn’t going to.”

“You sure?” I asked.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “There’s something off about this guy.”

“Still here,” Roger said. “Still can hear everything you’re saying.”

“I can tell when people Earthside aren’t fully human,” he said. He kept his gaze on me, and I kept mine on the road in front of us and did *not* tighten my grip on the steering wheel, even as my heart climbed anxiously into my throat.

“That must be handy,” I said, extremely casually and normally.

“Sometimes,” Corbin said. His gaze still burned into the side of my face.

“Come on,” Roger whined. “Burritos.”

“Anyway,” Corbin said, finally turning to face forward again, “it’s illegal by the rules of your Supernatural Police, but my role with the court supersedes Earthside law.”

That didn’t sound right, but I didn’t know the intricacies of the laws enough to raise a fuss. And the way he glanced back at Roger made it clear that might not be the point, anyway.

“So, if your contract keeps acting up, I could do something about it with very little legal repercussion. If any at all.”

“Great!” I said, a little too loudly. “Well, don’t do it when I’m around, so I don’t have to explain it to the cops.”

Corbin was threatening Roger, but it didn’t feel like that. It felt a little more personal. I bit the inside of my cheek, feeling like I’d just had ice water dumped over my head. Even though we worked as a team on this case, that didn’t *really* mean anything. Corbin was using me to figure out how these humans were using Fae magic. I was going along with it because I needed the check that catching Sandra would bring. It wasn’t anything more than that.

We’d spent too much time together, and now I was Stockholm syndromed into liking him.

I tried not to think too much about the kiss. It was just a moment of total delirium. That’s all.

I pulled the car into a drive-through breakfast joint, which I knew had decent burritos.

“Are you serious?” Corbin said. “You’re rewarding this behavior?”

“I need coffee,” I said. “I only had that instant crap this morning.”

“I know,” he said. “I got a taste.”

I coughed loudly and nearly veered the car into the drive-through speaker. Corbin looked way too pleased with himself at my reaction.

I ordered a breakfast burrito for Roger, coffee for me, and purposefully nothing for Corbin. He didn’t even look peeved about that, just kept looking

smirky and pleased with himself.

Once I got the food, I parked in the lot and climbed out of the car. “Here,” I said, shoving the bag at Roger.

He raised his eyebrows pointedly at me, wiggling his shoulders.

I sighed dramatically, then grabbed another zip-tie from my bag. I cut the one currently on him, and Roger obediently crossed his hands in front, and I cuffed him that way instead. Not great, but at least he’d be able to eat, and thus, stop complaining.

“Stay here,” I said.

“Mm-hmm,” Roger said, already tearing into the paper around the burrito.

I left Roger in the backseat of the car with the door open. He was still cuffed, which was making the eating situation a little challenging, and he was so inordinately focused on it. Then with my coffee in hand, I summoned Corbin out of the car, so we could get a little bit of distance from Roger.

“After I get him booked,” I said, throwing a thumb at Roger, “I need to get back on the Wheels case.”

“Obviously,” Corbin said.

“I’m going back to the Smuckers’ residence,” I said. “There’s got to be something still there—as long as the cops haven’t fully dismantled the altar in their bedroom, I should be able to get some details on how they’re doing these rituals, and maybe even where the magic is focused.”

“That’s pretty advanced work,” Corbin said. “You’re able to do that?”

“You keep acting surprised that I can do my job,” I said.

Corbin shrugged. “You’re surprising.”

“But first I’m going to sleep,” I said. “Then I’m going. I’ll keep you updated.”

“You know what I’m going to say.”

I closed my eyes and took a steadying breath before I could launch into a rant. All right. Well, the rant wasn’t going anywhere, so better to just get it off my chest. I raised one finger and sucked my teeth and started to say, “If you think—”

And then Roger jumped out of the car.

He scrambled to his feet and took off a lot faster than his gangly frame would suggest he was capable of doing. Impressively, he still had his burrito in hand.

“Fuck!” I swore, and then took off after him. “Roger!”

Roger cackled and kept running. He was headed straight for the street,

and not looking where he was going. Man, if my fucking skip got hit by a car right now, I probably wouldn't get paid. Admittedly, I hadn't looked at the contract too closely, since I thought this was going to be a piece of cake. This whole case was just one fucking nightmare after another.

"Get fucking back here!" I shouted, as if that would make him stop.

He was fast, sure, but I was faster. My boots pounded on the pavement, and I was a breath away from grabbing him by the back of his shirt and slamming him into the pavement.

Roger whipped around and fired a bolt of bright blue magic over his shoulder, directly from his hand.

Instinctively, I raised my right hand, blocking the bolt from hitting me with a brief flash of my own magic, honed by the jewelry on my hand. It blinked into existence and then out as soon as it swallowed his magic, which felt cold and painful. Good thing it hadn't hit me in the face. I had no idea what that would've done to me, but it wouldn't have been pretty.

I surged forward and tackled him bodily to the asphalt, right before he rushed into the street. I put one knee on his back and wrenched his arms behind his back. "Nice try," I said. "And after I bought you breakfast, too."

God, I was so fucking exhausted. And furious. This was all such a shitshow.

I hauled Roger, his wrists freshly tied, to his feet. I gripped him hard at the elbow and then turned around.

Corbin was standing by the car across the parking lot, his arms crossed over his chest.

Oh, shit. My breath froze in my lungs, and then a crushing pressure hit my chest, like I'd just taken a donkey kick to the sternum.

Had he seen? Did he know?

Fuck. All this fucking time I'd spent keeping things under wraps, and then I just went and used my magic thoughtlessly like that. It'd been instinctive—my body had reacted before my brain could think it through. That magic had felt nasty. It'd been automatic, instinctive to use my magic against it, like throwing your hands out to catch yourself when you tripped. This case was getting to me—*Corbin* was getting to me.

Maybe he was far enough away that he hadn't seen it. Or felt it. Or maybe his senses were still fucked up. Or maybe he'd just let it slide.

I felt pinned to the spot, like a prey animal, like if I didn't move, I wouldn't have to face this.

Maybe I'd have to kill him if he tried to reveal what I was. Or if he tried anything worse.

I took a slow, careful, shuddering breath.

All right. One way to find out.

With terror still racing through my veins, I marched Roger back toward the car, then shoved him into the backseat again.

Corbin said nothing. He watched me go through the motions of belting Roger into the backseat, and then take the driver's seat again. He was silent.

We drove to the police station. Even Roger remained wordless in the heavy tense atmosphere of the car. Corbin said nothing. All I could do was grip the steering wheel and try to focus on the road, and not the thrum of magical residue in my jewelry.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I stormed out of the police station with my script in hand, verifying that Roger had been accounted for and thus I could get paid.

Corbin, of course, was still there, lingering outside of the building. He was leaning against the brick wall outside the station, feet crossed at the ankle, looking very debonair and nonchalant and honestly pissing me the fuck off. Still wearing *my* hoodie. Booking people with the York City Police was always a pain in my ass, and I had half a mind to turn Roger in to the Supernatural Police instead, but it wasn't worth the paperwork.

Corbin raised his eyebrows like he was about to say something. Well, he hadn't tried to bite my throat open yet, so I figured he could wait a few more minutes. I waved him off and marched down the street, attempting to get out of earshot as I called Todd.

"All sorted out?" Todd asked sharply when he answered the phone.

"Roger's booked, yeah," I said. "Were you going to fucking tell me he was a magic user?"

Todd cleared his throat. "He used magic?"

He did not sound nearly surprised enough. "Yeah," I said. "You know anything about that?"

"No," Todd said.

He was always a bad fucking liar. "Don't bullshit a bullshitter."

"He's not registered," Todd said. "He just hangs out in high-trafficked areas."

"That didn't ring any fucking bells for you?" I snapped. "Why didn't you tell me this?"

"All that matters is that he's booked," Todd said. "If you want your

paycheck, bring the script in.”

“Fine,” I said, and ended the call a little too abruptly. I grimaced at the lock screen. This didn’t make any fucking sense. Why would he send me on this contract with only half the knowledge? And more importantly—why would he interrupt me right in the middle of the Wheels contract to do this?

“That was stupid,” Corbin said.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. He was literally right behind me. “Christ. Do I have to put a bell on you?”

I turned to face him, and he had a curious little smile on his face, like a cat about to start a new game with its prey. I didn’t quite like that look—but I couldn’t really say I disliked it, either.

“You shouldn’t have gone after Roger like that,” Corbin said.

“Again, telling me how to do my job,” I said. “Is this because you’re old? Are you just used to bossing women around?”

“You’re too impulsive,” Corbin said. “You should’ve just let him run, and then followed him in the car.”

All right. Point. That was a pretty good idea. “Well, my way worked, so I don’t think I’m in the mood for your constructive criticism.”

“And you shouldn’t have used that ‘Fae blade’ to take down that demon,” he said. “Especially without backup.”

“Whose fault is it that I didn’t have backup?”

“Shouldn’t have gotten in my business at the Den.” He leaned closer.

I backed up until my shoulders were pressed to the brick. My blood rushed in my ears, a mix of fear and anticipation. “This is starting to sound like a laundry list.”

“It should,” he said, his voice cool and steady. “Because you keep fucking up.”

“Case seems to be going pretty well to me,” I muttered. I pressed my fingertips to the rough brick behind me. I was pinned.

There was no way I was getting out of this one. I’d already used the distracting kiss tactic once. If I wanted to get away from him this time, I couldn’t do it without using my power.

How did I want to be exposed? By knocking him on his ass? Or by this awful conversation? Both options made me equally nauseous.

Leaning close, Corbin’s eyes glimmered with that now-familiar amber. I briefly thought I could see the red there, too, but I had to be imagining it. He leaned even closer, so his lips were dangerously close to my ear.

He murmured, “I know what you are.”

My blood turned to ice in my veins. I slammed my hands into Corbin’s chest, using just a little of my power to boost my strength, shoving him off me with the force of a man a lot stronger than either of us. He stumbled backward and his eyes flashed amber, and he was grinning, showing his sharp canines.

Oh, fuck. *This was it.*

Gram was right. Mala was right. I never should’ve been so careless. I never should’ve been so stupid to think that maybe our partnership meant something more than convenience—that he respected me.

He knew what I was, and like any UnSeelie would, he wanted to drain me.

I had to get out of here. Out of Warwick. Fuck the job. Fuck the money. Gram was right—it wasn’t worth my life. Why did I only realize that now, with Corbin’s eyes flashing amber as he watched me?

I did the only thing I could think of—I ran. I bolted down the sparsely populated sidewalk, cutting hard to turn into a narrow alley. Corbin’s footsteps were hot on my heels. My heart pounded hard, fast, driving me forward, and I turned the back corner of the alley expecting it to open up into the street behind it—I knew this part of the neighborhood, and the restaurant next door used this narrow alley to run their trash, and there was this tiny little opening I could squeeze through to get out and lose him—

And it’d been bricked up.

“Dead end,” Corbin said. He stood blocking the only way out, his eyes gleaming and his hands tucked into the kangaroo pocket of my hoodie. “Nice to see you run as fast as you *actually* can, though.”

I glanced up. The brick was kind of featured, maybe I could try to climb

—
“Don’t even think about trying to climb,” Corbin said.

“I wasn’t,” I shot back. Then I cringed. Now was not the time to be a smartass. Or maybe it was exactly the time to be a smartass, considering I would probably be dead in three to five minutes.

Corbin stepped forward.

I stepped back. My back thumped into the brick. This was exactly as we’d been just moments before outside the police station, except now instead of being conveniently outside of a police station where someone might’ve been able to help me, I’d led Corbin into a nice, abandoned alleyway where we

were alone in the cool, shaded emptiness. Awesome. Another great impulsive decision. This case was going so fucking well.

Corbin stared at me, chin tipped down and eyes glowing amber. His lips were slightly parted, shoulders square. Even with my pulse pounding, the world seemed completely still, from Corbin's posture to the air between us. Every breath potentially my last.

Then he zipped forward, with inhuman UnSeelie speed, and kissed me.

I was so shocked I gasped into the kiss, which Corbin took as an invitation to deepen it. I moved to shove him away, but my body betrayed me, and my hands fell to the dip of his waist instead. He hummed, then wound one arm around my waist and hitched me close, kissing me harder, a little mean and intense, and I couldn't resist returning that energy. The kiss turned mean, bitey, all of our frustration and tension bleeding into it.

I nearly lost myself in the sensation, not just the kiss but the knowledge that he really *did* know, so no matter what happened, at least I didn't have to fucking hide anymore. I hadn't realized how exhausting it'd been.

In the alley, metal clattered noisily to the ground. That brought me back to reality, and I shoved Corbin away, my eyes wide.

He was flushed, chest heaving, eyes amber and gleaming.

In the alley, a stray cat stretched languidly, then trotted away from the trash can lid it'd just knocked over.

I stared at Corbin, slightly slack-jawed. I was still standing. Hell, I still had all my blood.

"We need to finish this case," Corbin said. "No more fucking around."

"Is that what this is?" I asked.

"I don't know what this is," he said, with a disarming amount of sincerity.

I swept my thumb over my lower lip, where it tingled, like I could touch the remnants of the kiss there. Corbin's gaze tracked the motion. I dropped my hand before I got distracted again. "What are you going to do?" I asked.

"About what?"

I raised my eyebrows.

He shook his head. "We don't have time to be concerned with that right now."

"Then why—" I started, irritating blazing up in my chest. Just like this asshole to do something like this and then blow me off.

"Right now," he said, "we need to find Sandra Wheels and John Smucker before this goes from bad to worse."

I exhaled hard. “Fine.” Begrudgingly I knew he was right. “But I’m not letting you get off the hook. Once this is all over.”

“Right,” he said. Again with that fucking *sincerity*. This was easier when he was being a dick. “Once it’s all over.”

Corbin drove me back to my apartment in silence, with the air thick between us and the backseat of the car still smelling like hangover and breakfast burrito. It wasn’t exactly a romantic environment. But I couldn’t help but steal glances, like I’d be able to figure out what the fuck he was planning if I just got a close enough look. Of course, I had no such luck.

“I need to sleep,” I said as he parked outside my apartment.

“Right,” Corbin said. “That proves you’re at least part human.”

I cringed. “And I want that hoodie back, too.”

“What?” Corbin asked. “You don’t think it looks good on me?”

“Definitely not,” I lied. My face heated.

Corbin shot me a smirky look that made it pretty obvious what he thought of that lie. I slammed the door to his sports car a little too hard and then hurried up the stairs and back into my apartment.

“Fucking hell,” I said to Oscar as I collapsed face-down onto my bed.

He chirped and hopped onto the bed as well, walking all over my back.

“What the hell would you do if that guy drained me dry, huh?” I asked. “You’d starve. You’d have to go next door to kill and eat Bob.”

Oscar meowed again, then hopped off the bed and went into the kitchen, tail swishing like my comment had made him hungry.

I did need to sleep. But first I had to figure out what the hell my next steps for this case were going to be. I sat up, then pulled my phone out and dialed an unfamiliar number for the first time.

“Mala’s Apothecary.”

“Hi, um, is this Mala?”

“Sure is, and this is...?”

“It’s Tempie,” I said. “You said I could call if—”

“Of course!” Mala said, her voice brightening on the other line. “What can I help you with?”

I stood up and paced to my coffee table, where the two brass rings rested on an upturned mug.

“I’ve got some evidence from this case I’m working at that I’d like some clairvoyant eyes on,” I said. “Do you know of anyone who works in that space? Just need a bit of a guidance on a lead.”

Mala hummed. “You’re in luck,” she said. “Can you come to the Den?”
Of course. Nothing could be simple in this line of work, could it?
Couldn’t just find a nice *Earthsides* fortune teller.

“Sure,” I said. “Does tonight work?”

“It most certainly does,” Mala said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The elevator in the Candy's phone booth clicked and began to lower down. "You know," Corbin said, with his hand possessively at my lower back, "if I didn't know any better, I'd say you did this on purpose."

"Sorry for having great leads and ideas," I muttered. "Someone's got to figure out this case."

"Right, right," Corbin said.

Plus, it wasn't my fault this was still the best way to get into the Den without being recognized. It'd worked last time—to a point. As long as Corbin kept his head down, we could maybe get to Mala's without getting into trouble. The bucket hat I'd forced him to wear might actually encourage him to keep a low profile, since he had fought me extensively on wearing it at all. Not like UnSeelies keep up with fashion trends or anything, so he was forced to trust me.

As for me, I'd basically worn the same thing I had the first time we'd gone into the Den but left my hair undyed. Instead, I'd wound my red hair into a tight braid, and then tied a bandanna over it, hoping that'd keep eyes off me enough to get to Mala's.

"Keep it chill," I said as we stepped out onto the streets of the Den. "No causing trouble in bars."

"That wasn't my fault," Corbin said.

"Technically, I could say *all* of this is your fault." We stepped into the flow of pedestrian traffic. "Including this outfit."

"Your outfit is the best part of this," he said.

"So is yours."

Under his bucket hat, he frowned petulantly. I tried to bite back a smirk.

It was bustling in the Den as we walked along the edge of the crowd, moving briskly and trying to remain as low profile as possible. It wasn't far to Mala's. We'd sneak through, get the information for the psychic, then get out.

But of course, nothing could be that simple. Not for this case.

We made our way down a less populated side street of the Den, toward the twinkling lights of Mala's.

"Thought I smelled a familiar mongrel," a voice said from the shadows. I glanced around, anxious, but I couldn't see the source of the voice.

Corbin wrapped an arm protectively around my waist, and for now, I let him.

Then, a few paces ahead of us, a dark figure emerged from what appeared to be a storm drain—though of course there weren't storm drains in the den. He oozed out of it and flowed into a human shape: tall and broad-shouldered, in plain clothes, with red eyes and a snarling smile. The scent of sulfur poured over us.

"Hi, Thar," Corbin said, voice dripping with condescension. "It's so nice to see you again."

"Been waiting for you to show up again," the demon, apparently named Thar, said. "Pretty ballsy of you to show your face in the Den. Heard you got your ass whooped by one of my colleagues recently."

"Didn't realize you had progressed to calling Shax demons your colleagues," Corbin said. "If I'm remembering correctly, you used to use words that were a lot less amicable."

Thar's expression darkened. "Sentiments haven't changed too much."

The air shimmered behind Thar, then a portal tore open like a knife had been driven into the atmosphere itself and dragged down. From that sloppy portal, two UnSeelie stepped out, just as big as Thar and just as mean-looking, with their eyes gleaming and sharp teeth on display.

"I figured I'd have to track you down," Thar said. "Not that you'd just show up in my territory. So convenient." Thar's eyes flickered to me. "Is this the same slave you showed up with last time? I've heard things." His nostrils flared. "And she smells good."

I hadn't taken my power-deadening cocktail this time. I didn't have to hide from Corbin anymore, and I'd wanted to have my wits about me. I'd weighed the risks of having my power versus the potential need to defend

myself.

Looked like I'd made the wrong calculation.

"Smells *really* good," the tattooed UnSeelie behind Thar said. His partner, who had a big scar over one eye, nodded in agreement. He looked like he might be drooling at the corner of his mouth.

"There are rumors downstairs that this little slave of yours was able to handle a Shax on her own," Thar said. "How's that possible? That have something to do with that smell?" He inhaled again. "Smells old. Old and powerful."

"I'm not old," I snapped, frustration building in me. Fine, if everyone fucking knew what was going on, I might as well fuck them up before I got the hell out of here.

"That's not what he means," Corbin said, low.

"It's been a long time since I got a good taste of Seelie blood," Thar said. "I should be thanking you, Corbin, for bringing this snack in. Think I'll enjoy that, and then take care of you."

Thar launched forward toward me, the edges of his body fuzzing slightly like he was losing control of his form. Dark energy fizzed around him, the sulfur smell increasing in strength.

This part I knew how to do.

And fuck it. If this was my last hurrah in Warwick, so be it. I'd go out with a fucking bang.

I wrenched out of Corbin's grasp and launched forward to meet Thar where he stood. He moved like a starving dog, desperate and sloppy. I dodged under his arms, then slammed my elbow hard into his ribs. His body flickered dark, and then back to the human form.

Corbin charged forward too, eyes flashing as he tackled Tattoo to the ground.

He could handle the UnSeelies. I'd take care of Thar. Whatever Thar was—my power would hurt him more than Corbin's would. And I intended to hurt him. I wasn't getting drained—not today, at least.

Thar whipped around to face me, red eyes glowing. His mouth dropped open and widened, showing multiple rows of sharp teeth. "You smell so good," he slurred, like he was drunk. "Just a taste."

"Yeah, I don't think so," I said with a grin. I stood my ground in a wide stance and let my power rush through me like a wave. My own aura spiked as I unleashed it, and Thar's eyes widened.

Corbin, Tattoo, and Scar all stopped in their scuffle too, looking up at me slack-jawed. Yeah. I knew I smelled good. And I knew my power was going to draw a lot of attention. So we had to do this fast.

Thar lunged forward, thighs flexing as he leaped off the asphalt toward me with his mouth wide and drooling. Not the most finessed of attacks, drunk as he was off my scent, and I knocked his head aside with a strong punch to the face. His head whipped to the side, but he didn't make any sound, like he didn't feel any pain at all. Our arms locked together as I braced against him, keeping him away as I funneled power into my jewelry to blast him into next week.

Before I could, though, Thar surged forward with a burst of his own power, ducking under my arm and sinking his teeth into my ribs. I gasped as pain ripped through me like lightning, so sudden and sharp it made my vision blur. The bite went deep, and he stuck to me like a leech, growling with pleasure as my blood flooded his mouth. The pain wasn't just from the physical bite—it was intensified by the gross magic spilling from his teeth, keeping my blood flowing and mixing with my power.

Nasty. I fucking hated demons sometimes.

I slammed my elbow into the soft part of Thar's temple. He cried out and collapsed, taking a bit of my flesh with him. I stumbled backward and pressed my hand to the wound, cringing as I regained my balance.

Behind me, Corbin was handling both Tattoo and Scar—or least I hoped he was. The familiar sounds of fists hitting flesh were audible, but I didn't dare look away from Thar, not even for a moment. Especially not when he was looking at me like that. He was on all fours, more like a beast than a man, and his mouth was stained red with my blood. His eyes glowed deep, dark red, all the way into the sclera, and his tongue lolled from his mouth.

"Tastes good," he rumbled.

"Yeah, well, that's all you're getting," I shot back through gritted teeth. This bite fucking *hurt*, like it was worsening by the minute, eating away at my skin like acid.

Thar charged for me again, ready for another bite, and this time I wasn't going to try to do this the old-fashioned hand-to-hand way. I raised my right hand and released a bright burst of power. The bright light rocketed forward and slammed into Thar's chest, making him help in pain. He drew back, up onto his feet like a man again.

His eyes flashed as darkness swirled around him.

Great. Awesome.

I pushed more power into my jewelry. At least a hungry demon was a predictable demon.

Thar raised a hand and shot a ray of dark power at me, which I met with my own, burning up against it. He growled as I blocked his power, which was intended to either knock me out or drag me into Hell with him, like a leopard dragging its kill into a tree. My light burned against his darkness, eating away the surface of it. I braced myself and strengthened it, pushing harder, and my light began to overtake his darkness.

This was just a taste of what I could do. I hoped it wouldn't be too much to draw *more* curious attention.

Thar's nasty growl increased as he also pushed harder, trying to outgun me.

The sick cracking sound of bones breaking sounded to the side. Corbin laughed pleasantly—well, that was a little unnerving—then I heard the unmistakable thump of a body hitting the ground.

Thar made the mistake of looking that way.

As soon as his attention diverted, I channeled more power, enough to rapidly overtake his darkness. I was aiming to kill here, and fast. I wanted to burn this motherfucker from the inside out. I focused my gaze, my power, and my light burned through the last of his dark power oozing from his hands —

Then he lurched toward the side, breaking the connection between us before my light reached him. I pushed more power into my jewelry and readied another attack.

Thar ripped a sloppy portal into the asphalt beneath him.

“Fuck!” I hissed as soon as the sulfuric smell poured from gash in the ground. “You better not—”

Thar disappeared into it. The portal sealed up, leaving just a smoking, bad-smelling scorch.

“Little help here,” Corbin choked out.

Behind me, Tattoo was dead on the ground with his neck turned at a grotesque angle. Scar had Corbin in a chokehold, and his forearm was tightening steadily around Corbin's neck. I paused. Could one asphyxiate an UnSeelie to death? Like, did they actually need to breathe? I was sort of curious about the possibility, but Corbin was starting to turn purple as his hands clawed at Scar's muscular forearm.

“Don’t move,” I said.

“Say goodbye to your friend, little girl,” Scar growled. “You’re next.”

I pulled a small knife from my boot and let it fly from my hands before Scar could react. It buried itself in his bad eye, all the way to the hilt. He gurgled in pain, blood dripping from the wound.

Corbin wrenched Scar’s arm off his neck and then kicked him aside. Scar collapsed, twitching on the ground.

“That knife could’ve hit me,” Corbin said.

“Told you not to move.” I grimaced. The bite on my ribs was *really* starting to hurt, especially as the adrenaline began to fade. “My aim’s good.”

I could’ve healed him, too, if I’d really fucked it up, not that I wanted him to know that.

“Good to know,” Corbin muttered. “Shit, are you okay?”

“Fine,” I lied. “Who was that guy? He was pretty put-together for a demon.”

Corbin didn’t look convinced, his gaze lingering on my hand pressed to the bleeding bite.

“Thar’s high-ranking,” he said. “UnSeelies and demons working together... Not something I’ve seen a lot in my time.” He shook his head. “This is getting messy. Figuratively and literally. We need to get you to a healer.”

“I’ll handle it. Anyone gonna miss the Fae?” I asked, gesturing to the dead bodies. The last thing I needed was the Court on my ass for this.

Corbin pressed his lips together. “Unlikely,” he said. “If they’re following a demon’s lead, they’re not operating within the confines of the law, that’s for sure.”

A low siren sounded, then shouts from the main strip on the street.

“Shit. Cops,” Corbin said. “Get out of here.”

“What?” I asked. I blinked, still reeling with adrenaline and the rush of using my power.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Corbin snapped. “I’ll deal with the Supernatural Police. I have more leverage since I’m with the court.”

“Oh, shit,” I said as my head cleared. “Right. Fuck.”

“Now! Go!”

He was right. If the supernatural police caught me at this crime scene, they’d immediately know I was a magic user myself, and they’d quickly see I was unregistered. If I wanted to get out of Warwick, I did not need to end up

in a jail cell and on the registry.

I ran as best as I could with my hand clamped to the wound.

I slipped down the alley and around a corner, then back onto the main street, easing into the flow of pedestrian traffic again. As I walked, UnSeelie heads turned and perked up, nostrils flaring, eyes darkening.

Yeah. I reeked.

I walked faster, trying to stay at the edge of the crowd, head down. I moved quickly enough that no one could pinpoint the scent to me, at least not before I was gone, my scent muddled by the rush of UnSeelie and other supernatural bodies around me.

The twinkling lights of Mala's shop finally came into view. I made my way to the shop nearly at a run and burst through the front door, making the bells chime restlessly. No one else was present inside—was anyone ever here?—and so I fumbled with the front door and locked it closed.

“Hello?” Mala asked from the back of the shop.

I turned and leaned heavily against the front door with my hand still pressed to my wound. “Is this place warded?” I asked.

“I thought that might be you,” she said. “Yes, it's warded.”

I sighed and leaned my head back against the glass. That was good—that should keep my aura contained, so none of the UnSeelie outside could track me in here or see what I could do.

“You don't look so good,” Mala said, ambling through the teetering stacks of good. “Have some trouble getting here?”

“Just a bit,” I said with a grimace. “You ever think about setting up shop Earthside?”

I closed my eyes and finally let my power wash over the bite wound. I sighed in relief as my light erased the traces of the demon's magic, then knitted the flesh back together until it was just a minor, surface-level scratch.

“Ah, you're so much like your mother,” she said with a fond smile. “Now how can I help you?”

Part of me ached to hear more about those similarities—but it'd have to wait. “I've got evidence from my case,” I said. “Two of the same pieces of jewelry showed up after two similar rituals were performed. I need someone to tell me where they were sourced. You said you knew someone who could do that?”

“You're in luck, honey,” Mala said. “That someone is me.”

Mala guided me toward the back of the shop. The hallway narrowed as

we went, and darkened, until the hardwood was creaky under my feet, and I had to crouch to avoid knocking my forehead on the beams. This place was a lot bigger than it looked from the outside.

Mala pushed a shimmering silver curtain aside, then ducked through an even narrower and shorter doorway. Inside, the room was small and dark, with a low small wooden table and a floor covered with plush red cushions. Overhead, yellow fairy lights glimmered, casting the room in a relaxing, warm glow.

“Sit,” Mala said, gesturing at one side of the table. “You have the evidence with you?”

I pulled the two rings out of my pocket and placed them on the table. Mala nodded at them, her face pinched in thought. Then sat down across from me and folded her legs under her body.

“I need to know where they’re from,” I said again, “so I can stop the next ritual before it happens.”

Mala nodded. “This is good,” she said, mostly to herself. She leaned over the table, peering curiously at the rings, but not touching them yet. “I can work with this.”

“You’ve seen something like this before?”

“Not exactly like it,” she said. “But similar. You said you found these at the sites of the rituals?”

I nodded. “Usually very close to where the ritual actually took place.”

Mala stood up again, then stepped over to a small shelf on the wall and lit a stick of incense. She inhaled the scent deeply, then turned and faced me, a serious expression on her face.

“Don’t disturb me while I do this,” she said. “It’s been a while.”

Well, that didn’t exactly fill me with confidence. But what was I else was I supposed to do?

Then she sat back down at the table, across from me, and carefully placed the brass rings into her palm. She folded her hand closed over them.

The atmosphere in the room shivered and changed. Goosebumps rocketed down my arms, and I shifted backward unconsciously as power rushed into the room like it was filling a vacuum. Mala’s grip on the rings tightened. She closed her eyes as her silver hair began to spark, like it was generating electricity of its own accord.

Her power was unlike any I’d felt before. It didn’t have the powerful darkness of Corbin’s, nor the overwhelming intensity of mine. It felt brisk

and surrounding, almost cool, refreshing and dangerous like a wild river.

Mala opened her eyes, and her irises glowed blue so pale they were nearly white. “I’m at the source,” she said.

I leaned forward, closer to the table. Her gaze was on me, but it was unseeing, her eyes shivering in their sockets as she examined wherever she was. In a different plane, or a different time.

“There are two people,” she said. “A woman and a man. They’re arguing. They both look sick.”

I wanted desperately to ask questions, but I bit my tongue, gripping the edges of the coffee table as I hung on to every word.

“They’re outside. On a lawn? Maybe at someone’s house. There’s a fence.” She straightened up. “I can see a fence. It’s charred—like a portal was opened in a hurry.”

No fucking way.

No fucking way they had been under my nose this whole time.

“I can feel it,” Mala said. “There’s something under my feet. Something dark.”

Then she inhaled sharply and rocked backward, forcefully, like she’d been shoved. The rings clattered from her hands back onto the table. The atmosphere cut out, all the power sucked from the room, and Mala blinked rapidly as her eyes went back to their normal deep brown.

“Whatever they’re working with,” she said, her voice shaky, “it didn’t like me being there.”

“Is that normal?” I asked.

“Usually my presence isn’t noticed,” she said. “This thing is powerful.”

“That much I did know.” I reached into my bag and pulled out the case file, then flipped it open to the pictures of John Smucker and Sandra Wheels. “Either of these people familiar?”

“That’s who I saw,” Mala confirmed.

I nodded and stood up. “Thank you.”

“You know where they are?” she asked.

“Yep,” I said, ignoring the frustration snapping at me. They had been under my nose this whole time. Not even under my nose—under my *feet*. “And I’m going to put an end to this.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Let’s go, buddy,” I said as I zipped the top of the backpack closed. Oscar peered irritably at me through the bubble-like window of the cat backpack and meowed. “I know you hate this part. Probably feels like Mala’s portal did, I feel like I was jostled around on the back of a bike, too.”

He meowed again as I heaved the backpack up and onto my shoulders. I grabbed my overnight bag, then tightened the straps of my work bag, which was fastened beneath Oscar’s, and locked up my apartment.

“Going somewhere?” Bob asked from his seat on the porch. He blew a smoke ring up toward the sky.

I glanced over. Bob raised his eyebrows inquisitively.

This would probably be the last time I was ever going to see him.

Despite all the bickering we’d done, my heart still crawled into my throat. Warwick was my home. This apartment had been my home for years—with its creaky floors, and busted water heater, and crotchety old neighbor who hated my cat and always kept the cops off my back if they came knocking.

This case was falling apart. My *life* was falling apart.

“Yeah,” I said. “Might be gone a few days.”

“Glad you’re taking the cat, then.”

“I bet you are.” I shook my head. “See you later, Bob.”

I rode my bike to Gram’s house as quickly as I could without jostling Oscar too badly on the ride. When I pulled up to her bungalow just outside of town, she was on the narrow porch waiting for me with a coffee in hand.

“Had a feeling you were coming,” she said. “You brought Oscar?”

“Can you watch him for a little while?” I asked.

She nodded, then motioned toward the front door. I opened it a crack, then unzipped the top of the backpack. Oscar chirped and darted inside, tail flicking irritably. He disappeared under the couch.

“You’re welcome,” I said with a shake of my head.

“What’s going on?” Gram asked. “I don’t like it when you just show up like this.”

“I screwed up,” I said.

Saying it made it real. Fuck. I’d *really fucking screwed up*. Gram raised her eyebrows.

“He knows,” I said. “Corbin knows.”

Her eyes widened. “And you’re alive? Did you fight him off?”

I shook my head. “He—he let me go.” In a way. “I don’t know what his plan is.”

“The money’s not worth it,” Gram said. “You need to get out of town. *Now.*”

“I know,” I said. “I will. I just—”

“Just go,” Gram said. “Before it’s too late.”

I pressed my lips together. It’d be wise to flee immediately. There were places I could go, cities I could move to start a new life. I could dye my hair, change my identity, melt into a new city across the country and rebuild my career. This possibility had always been on my radar, and I had everything I needed to make it happen.

But something about this case itched at me.

What the fuck was that ritual in the woods? How had *humans* managed to summon a Shax demon Earthside? What would they do if no one stopped them? What if I left, and in a few weeks, Warwick was just a smoking crater?

Well, maybe that was putting a little too much importance on my own role in all of this. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that I couldn’t leave this behind.

“I can see your brain working,” Gram said. “You’re considering making a stupid decision.”

Damn, I really had to work on my neutral face. “This case—”

“—is too dangerous,” Gram said. “Leave the UnSeelie to figure it out and get out of town.”

I exhaled. “That’s the problem.”

“How?” Gram said. “He’s UnSeelie. He’ll be fine.”

“I don’t know if he will.” He hadn’t been able to take down the Shax

demon in the forest—only my Seelie magic had been able to do so. Whatever these people were doing, if they were using UnSeelie magic, Corbin’s own magic might not be enough to defeat it. My Seelie power might be the only thing that could.

Might.

What was I more worried about? Warwick getting torpedoed by crazy demons? Letting Sandra Wheels slip through my fingers and thus my coveted lifestyle-sustaining paycheck?

Or losing Corbin?

All of those outcomes sucked, actually, and it wouldn’t do me any good to dwell on them. First, I had to figure out exactly what I was dealing with, and then get in touch with Corbin about it. If he wasn’t in Fae or supernatural police jail, that was.

“That’s not your problem,” Gram said, even though it basically was my problem considering it was my case. “Get out of town.”

I nodded, then stepped forward to wrap Gram in a hard hug. “I’ll contact you when it’s safe.”

Gram sighed. I knew she knew I wasn’t actually going to leave yet. But she also knew there wasn’t anything she could do, besides tend to Oscar and cross her fingers. She nodded. “Take care of yourself, Tempie. And—hang on.”

She broke away and hurried inside. When she came back, she had a something wrapped in blue velvet in her hands.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Oscar looks terrible,” Gram said. “You have to get a car if you’re going to keep transporting him.”

“Gram.”

She unfolded the velvet. Inside it was a thin knife, six inches in length with wooden hilt inlaid with opals.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Belonged to your mother,” she said. “And now it belongs to you.”

I picked up the knife gingerly. It hummed with power, which only seemed to strengthen when I took it in hand, like it was waiting for me. It felt good in my hand, light but strong. “Was this made in Faerie?”

“Yes,” Gram said. “This is old magic. Take care of it.”

If this was old magic, it didn’t need me to take care of it—it could take care of itself. I nodded and slipped the knife into my boot. I had plenty others

strapped to my person, but this one would be for emergencies only.

If Gram thought I'd need it, there was a pretty good chance I would. I gave her one last quick, hard hug, and then hurried down the porch and swung my leg back over my bike. Gram watched me with both hands wrapped around her coffee mug, her face pale.

This wasn't going to be the last time I saw her. I'd make sure of that. If I kept telling myself that, maybe I could make it true.

I rode back to the Smuckers' house with my lights cut off as I entered their neighborhood and guided my bike at a slow, creeping pace to their house. The house was dark, no lights on and no movement inside. There was still crime scene tape on the door, but no one else visible on the property.

Yet something prickled at the back of my neck. There was a bad aura about this place, a heaviness that wasn't there the first time I arrived. I dismounted my bike, then adjusted my jewelry. I stepped into the driveway, knelt down, and placed my hand on the concrete.

Yeah. There was some serious shit going on here.

I didn't even have to open my consciousness to the power around this place. It oozed into the atmosphere, heavy and uncomfortable, like it was brewing deep underground and then escaping upward. Originally, my plan had been to go inside first, investigate the altar in the closet, and see if I could figure out in better detail what I was dealing with, but the sheer strength of this aura made me reconsider.

Whatever was brewing underground was nasty. And it felt like it was about to break out.

This couldn't wait.

I pulled out my phone, but the signal was blocked...likely an aftereffect of the major power and magic brewing underground.

"God dammit," I muttered to myself.

I straightened up and stepped back to my bike, halfway down the block. I glanced around the neighborhood—it looked nearly abandoned. Couldn't really blame the other homeowners, though—if there had been a gruesome murder on my street, I'd want to go on a little vacation, too.

Satisfied I was alone, I placed my hand on the saddle of my bike and let my power flow into it. The golden light coursed over the metal and the leather, making it warm to the touch, and then faded.

"Hope that works," I said. "Hope you've got a good nose, Corbin."

If this worked the way I thought it would, he'd be able to sense my aura

and follow me here. In the past I would've just charged in alone. But now, I had a distinct—if unsettling—hunch that I might need Corbin's help. I could only hope it worked. Either I could handle it alone, or he'd be able to find me here. I wasn't sure which outcome I hoped for more.

I crept toward the house. I hung close to the wall, edging carefully toward the backyard, where John had first sent me into that Hell dimension the first time. I was hoping to avoid an encounter like that again. I peeked around the corner and held my breath.

Empty.

Just the dying grass, the scorch mark on the fence, and the back wall of the house. Nothing. Nothing except the intense, terrible aura oozing out of the ground, thick enough that I felt like I was walking through mud. Like it wanted to suck me down underground with it. I didn't dare use my power to investigate, not this close to the source, whatever it was.

Under my feet, Mala had said.

The fence was lined with an untended, dying garden, but the bushes against the back wall of the house were lush and overgrown. Ivy crawled over the green of the bushes, creeping up the house, and the bushes were so large and close together, they looked more like one enormous plant.

If this house didn't have a good basement for this kind of work, maybe it had something else.

I inched into the yard, careful where I stepped like one wrong move might draw some unknown attention. I moved to the far end of the house, where the bushes were the most overgrown, pushed one of the big branches aside and—bingo.

Storm cellar. By the looks of it, one that hadn't been used in an actual storm in a really long time. The wooden doors looked close to rotting away entirely, but there was a big, ancient padlock on the handle anyway. And it was open. Here, the aura was so thick I felt like I was moving underwater, slowed-down and dizzy. I kept my power tucked away deep within me, then knelt by the storm cellar and took a slow breath.

With an aura this dense, I could hide in it. It wouldn't be easy—actually, it'd be super gross and unpleasant—but it would work. I closed my eyes and focused on the weight of the aura on my skin. Then, with each breath, I let it come closer and closer, like its atoms were mixing with mine right at the edge of my body. It pushed into me, through me.

And it felt *awful*.

Worse than the Shax demon's body under my hands. Worse than the Hell dimension. This felt violating, dark, toxic—like it was oozing over my organs and leaving a mark of poison I'd never be able to expel. I was *pretty* sure I'd be able to burn it all out when I needed to.

Pretty sure.

I wasn't going to be able to stand it for long, though. Carefully, I pulled one of the storm cellar doors aside. From within the thick oozing aura voices floated up—chanting. Not as loud or ferocious as the chanting that had brought the Shax demon Earthside, but chanting nonetheless.

I crept down the rickety wooden stairs into the storm cellar. It was dim and cobwebbed inside, lit only by a handful of half-melted candles glowing weakly against the heavy dark.

I stilled at the end of the stairs, shrouded in shadow and the aura of darkness. There was only one voice chanting: a woman's voice.

In the center of the room, John Smucker was strapped to a low table—or maybe altar was a better word. He was in the dark robe I'd seen him wearing in the clearing, but it was thrown open, revealing he was wearing just boxers and a t-shirt beneath it. Like pajamas. Honestly sort of ridiculous, you'd think one would at least wear jeans to their dark rituals. At his side, my mark was in a robe of her own, arm outspread as she chanted over him.

Sandra fucking Wheels. God, I could almost feel the smack of the bills in my hand already.

"C'mon, Sandra," John pleaded. He tugged at the restraints at his wrist. "C'mon, this wasn't what we talked about."

His eyes were wild, bloodshot, and his breaths came quick and rapid—was it fear or Dust? From the unsteady twitching of his limbs, I'd guess both.

Her gaze was fixed down on him, down the bridge of her nose, with her hood loose around her shoulders. Her hair seemed to float around her, like she was underwater. It still felt like we were, with the atmosphere as dense as it was. Sandra didn't seem to hear a single word John was saying. She simply kept chanting rapidly, quietly, in a language I didn't recognize. It sounded like Fae. Old Fae. The kind of Fae that only existed in books, not in common language.

"Please, Sandra," John said.

Her chanting escalated in speed.

"Oh, no," he begged. "Please, Sandra—there's another way—you don't have to—*augh!*"

His words devolved into a wordless cry of pain as he thrashed on the altar.

Sandra's lips curled into a cruel smile. Her hands moved delicately through the air, slowly and rhythmically. Dark magic began to dance like sparks over her arms, then expanded to snakelike tendrils, curling around her.

UnSeelie magic.

Impossible. Humans couldn't use UnSeelie magic—not like that.

Her hand glinted in the candlelight. Only then did I notice the rings—multiple rings on each finger, stacked up to the middle knuckle, the same as the rings I'd found in the grass by the portals. They were only on her right hand, and they seemed to glow faintly as the tendrils of power wound around her. Somehow the rings were helping her channel UnSeelie power. But even with the aid of a tool like that, she shouldn't be able to use it so masterfully.

Blood began to soak through John's t-shirt. His screamed, thrashing harder. I bit my lower lip to keep from making a sound. I couldn't figure out what she was doing—where was the blood coming from?

Then it became clear. The shirt ripped as a deep gash split open of its own accord on his chest and worked its way down to his hips, then began to widen, like an invisible force was prying him open. Blood gushed from the wound; the thick coppery smell permeated the atmosphere. Maybe I was imagining the heat.

This was beyond fucked.

I tugged a knife from the holster on my hip.

“Hey, you freaky bitch,” I sneered. In a single breath, I unleashed my power, pushing the nasty atmosphere away. Immediately, my head cleared as I let my light rush through my body, the sudden intensity making me glow briefly and dispel the darkness before it rushed back in. Then I snapped the knife forward. It flew from my hand and buried itself in the meat of Sandra's shoulder.

And nothing happened.

She just kept chanting, arms outspread and waving gently in the air, except now, her gaze was on me. The knife didn't even make her flinch.

John gurgled. He was still alive. Even with his guts on display.

“Fine,” I said. “Let's fucking dance.”

I charged forward, intending to plow into Sandra with all my strength and knock her sideways, and hopefully ending that irritating chanting. Before I could reach her, I slammed into a ward.

This ward was no fucking joke. It was like I'd walked face-first into an immense cobweb, except even grosser than normal and a lot more magical. "Ew!" I shouted, and wriggled, trying to brush the ward off me, but that made it tighten its hold.

"Oh," Sandra said. "Oh, this is a wonderful surprise."

My skin began to glow again, except this time, it wasn't of my own volition.

The ward was draining me.

"Fuck," I hissed, twisting in its hold.

My power seeped into the ward, making its dark, thready structure begin to fade into existence, winding all over me. Every time I fought it, the ward picked up more power, the way a spider begins to wrap its silk around its prey. Each movement of my body encouraged it.

So I stilled.

"I can feel it," Sandra said. "I can feel what you are." Her eyes flashed gold—*my* power.

This fucking bitch. Rage burned inside me. How fucking dare she?

She laughed, head thrown back, and started chanting louder, faster, her voice directed up toward the ceiling.

If I didn't want her to steal any more of my power, though, I had to keep my temper in check. I barely breathed. If I wanted to break out of this ward, instead of letting it seep everything out of me, I'd have to do it in one big, powerful swoop, like an explosion. If it hadn't already stolen too much. I could feel the missing power like an ache inside me.

Then John's body began to twitch. It wasn't the Dust-induced tremors of earlier. This was weirder. Centered on the gash on his torso.

The smell of sulfur crackled through the air.

"Gotta say," I mumbled, "I'm getting real sick of dealing with these bastards."

Darkness spilled from the wound, oozing into the blood and dripping off the table like hot tar. A low rumble sounded from everywhere and nowhere at once, making my ears pop like the room was pressurized. I grimaced, trying to stay relaxed as my senses were assaulted by the dark, demonic magic.

In the clearing, the Shax demon had crawled out of the ground. And now, this demon—Shax, or something worse—was crawling out as well. But it was crawling out of John's body.

One black, oozing arm shot out first. The claw-like hand splatted onto the

altar. Then the other arm. The other hand. It heaved itself up. From the gash emerged a humanoid head, with deep red eyes and a mouth of sharp, rotting teeth. The demon gnashed his teeth at me then his mouth shaped into a grotesque grin.

This one didn't look like a creature residing in Hell, dragged up here forcibly. This demon looked unnervingly like John Smucker. Like as the demon had taken John's life force, it'd stolen his shape, too. Insult to injury, honestly. After the head came the shoulders. Didn't look like John would be coming back from this one—Dust added a lot of endurance to the human body, but not enough to heal a disembowelment like that. Which was probably the point.

Sandra chanted louder and louder, the tendrils of power around her body increasing in thickness as the demon hauled itself up and out of John's body, until it was crouched on the altar, feet straddling John's unmoving legs, and its bloody gaze on me.

Well, I wasn't going to just stand there and let this fucking demon *eat* me.

The ward was still barely visible where it had me entangled. I reached up slowly and curled my fingers in the magic, ignoring the way it crackled electric over my skin. UnSeelie. How the fuck was Sandra using UnSeelie magic *and* demonic magic simultaneously? I'd seen a lot of crazy shit in this line of work, but a human wielding magic like this was unprecedented.

The demon inched closer to me, curious and hungry, its eyes flashing with power.

"Yes," Sandra urged with her arms still outstretched. "Yes, take her! Grow stronger!"

A gunshot cracked through the room and the demon rocked backward as a bullet tore through his shoulder and into the back wall of the storm cellar. It screeched, a sick, inhuman sound that threatened to burst my eardrums with its awful high pitch. Sandra screeched simultaneously and slumped to the side, like she'd been shot as well, her chanting interrupted.

"Tempie!" Corbin called. "You all right?" He stood on the stairs with his gun drawn—some sort of Fae weapon, I assumed, since the wound on the demon's shoulder wasn't healing.

"Fucking peachy," I said. "Nice of you to join us."

I unleashed my power.

Similar to the way I'd flooded the demon in the clearing, I let light explode from my core like a bomb. It briefly filled the room with bright,

blinding light; Sandra howled, and the demon made a sound like a tea kettle boiling. My power burned through the ward, overwhelming it, the way a short circuit knocks out the wiring of a building. The ward dissolved, freeing me; my power dissipated, and I took a sharp, sudden step back to let my eyes adjust to the darkness.

“Holy shit,” Corbin said from behind me.

I was free, but that was a shitload of power to expel all at once. My head pounded. I felt suddenly tired, weakened, like I had a hangover. An instinctive, animal part inside me itched to run out of this storm cellar and into the wilderness where the forest could recharge me.

The demon chittered. He’d been knocked from the altar by the force of my power, but now he was crouched on the ground, drooling dark oozy saliva from his sharp teeth as his gaze skittered over me.

“Yes,” Sandra urged with her arms still outstretched. “Yes, take her!”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” I whipped the knife from my boot and gripped the hilt. Its heft was surprising, like it was heavier in my hand than it was on Gram’s porch.

“Me neither,” Corbin said. He rushed forward, in between the demon and myself, and drove his foot hard into the demon’s chest. The demon howled as he was forced backward, then did a weird little roll over the ground and drew himself up to his full height. “Get Sandra,” Corbin snapped over his shoulder. “I’ll handle this one.”

He charged the demon, driving it back against the wall. His magic joined the powerful miasma in the storm cellar, but Sandra didn’t seem to notice. Her attention was focused solely on me.

“You think your little pet can handle a tamed Shax?” Sandra asked. “How cute.”

“Meh, he’ll be fine,” I said with a shrug. “You, on the other hand.”

I spun my knife in hand.

Sandra hummed. She stepped around the altar, moving like she was gliding over water. The mix of Fae and UnSeelie power was still winding around her arms, and up to her neck, and crawling into her hair like Medusa’s snakes. Most offensively, her eyes still glowed gold with my fucking power.

“Me?” she asked with a smile. “I’m not going anywhere. Especially not now. Especially not when a solstice nymph has stumbled into *my* ritual.”

Corbin’s ozone aura spiked so intensely, I felt it in my spine. But he said nothing, eyes blazing red as wrestled with the demon, attempting to shove it

into a rough portal opened in the floor.

“I thought your kind had gone extinct,” Sandra purred. “What a wonderful surprise. With your power, I’ll be able to ascend—I’ll be truly free.”

“You’re fucked in the head, lady,” I said curtly. “I can connect you with some Dust addiction resources.”

“Your power feels so good in my veins,” she said. “It’s meant for me. That’s why you’re here. This is my destiny.”

“All right, I don’t have time for those kinds of philosophical discussions,” I said. “If you want it so bad, come and get it.” I braced my feet wide on the floor, knife in hand as I leveled my gaze at her.

Sandra leaped at me, mouth opened to reveal sharp, inhuman teeth. She tackled me backward and I hit the ground with a painful thump, knife in hand, which I shoved horizontally between her teeth. Sandra chomped at the blade, eyes blazing and rapidly changing color from black to red to my own gold. The blade drew blood at the corners of her mouth, but she didn’t seem to notice, just gnashing her teeth around it like a rabid dog. Gross.

I grimaced, avoiding the splashes of blood and saliva the best I could, then hooked one leg over hers to brace her, keep her from thrashing around, and began to channel my power into my jewelry so I could blast her insides to smithereens the same way I did to that fucking Shax demon in the clearing.

Nice try, lady. I’d try to keep the body intact to ensure I got my paycheck, though.

Then the tendrils of dark magic swept over me.

I’d wrestled with lots of supernatural beings in the past: demons, banshees, sprites, UnSeelies, et cetera, et cetera. Being subjected to someone else’s magic was never a pleasant experience, but I’d always been able to hold my own. Keep them out of my business, so to speak. I’d expected Sandra’s to be a little spicier, but this—this was unlike anything I’d ever experienced.

The tendrils swept over me and across my face, shrouding my vision in darkness. There was a weight to them, a heft, but no real solidity—like being covered in poison Jell-O.

Then the magic sunk *inside* me.

It wasn’t a possession. It wasn’t a draining. It felt like being emptied out—not just of my own power, but of my *self*. My brain went static, then empty. The power ate away at me, leaving me with nothing but an echoing

sense of hopelessness. Despair. Even as my mind raged against it, knowing this wasn't real, knowing it was a trick to keep me helpless, I couldn't make myself push back. It was like I was drowning, trying to keep treading as my lungs filled with water.

No reason to fight back. No, wait—*I had to fight*. I had to stop this. But the despair pressed on me, weighed me down, and even as my mind screamed, my heart felt like it was dying in my chest.

I went lax against the storm cellar floor.

No point in fighting. This was it.

The magic sank into my core, smothering my power like a rag over a fire.

What was I without my power?

Not even a human. Just a shell. The last of the solstice nymphs, gone, just like this. I was supposed to be a life-bringer, a healer, a connection between the mystery of nature to the lives of those of us Earthside.

Sandra had that power now. She'd twist it, corrupt it, use it to build her own power, to drag more and more demons to the surface. Fuck, I had to stop her. I had to do something. But the nothingness ate at me from the inside. Hollowing me out. I was powerless. I was hopeless. My mind raged at me to get up, to move, to push back, but my body wouldn't respond, my *soul* wouldn't—it was like my mind was all that was left. And not for long. All I could do was wait for my body to dissolve into ash like the other ones had.

And Sandra was laughing. She was laughing, loud and maniacal, as she glowed with my power.

A rumble sounded through the cellar, vibrating the floors and the walls, seeping into my bones and making them quiver, too. Sandra's laughter stopped as her attention flicked up. The rumble escalated into a roar. The atmosphere crackled with electricity, like the eye of a hurricane. It was crisp, lightweight, powerful, and swept the heavy toxic residue of Sandra's power away like it was nothing.

Then something rushed over me, dark and quick-moving, dragging Sandra with it.

I gasped, sucking in a breath like I'd just broken through the surface of the ocean. Vitality rushed back into my body as I arched up, off the cellar floor, and then dragged my hands over my skin, through the tendrils of magic, which slid off me, like as my vitality had returned, the magic had withered.

The portal at the other end of the storm cellar was closed, and the

demon's lower half was on the ground beside it, the top half nowhere to be seen. In Hell, apparently. And the body was already beginning to disintegrate.

Corbin did not look like Corbin.

He'd handled the demon in a way I hadn't thought possible, considering the way the Shax demon in the forest had handled him. But apparently, I underestimated him.

Apparently, he'd been hiding, too.

His eyes were red, and his teeth elongated, as I'd seen before—but now power surrounded him, like flame, black as night with shades of rich red rippling through it. Except it was a shape. An immense creature, a mirror of his own body, taller, with red eyes, snapping jaws. Like his Earthside body was just a vessel for this bigger, stronger, more demonic being. Maybe that's exactly what it was. Maybe this shadow was what he looked like when he visited the realm downstairs.

He gripped Sandra's wrist tightly as he dragged her bodily backward. She shrieked and thrashed in his grip, but to no avail—Corbin hardly moved at all.

Why had he been holding back in the park? Why hadn't he used this form?

Sandra's eyes flashed gold, red, black; the tendrils of magic reached for Corbin in a desperate bid to attack him, but they burned to nothingness as soon as they attempted to breach his shadowy form.

"I don't know where you got these," Corbin said, in a low, rumbling voice—not his normal voice, but not entirely unlike it, either. "But rings won't save you now."

He tightened his grip on her wrist.

"No!" she screamed. "No! They're mine!"

Corbin chuckled. Then he opened his mouth—it was a larger than usual—revealing two rows of sharpened teeth.

He bit off her fingers.

She screamed. Her body went lax as she was only held up by Corbin's grip on her wrist. Blood gushed from the mutilated nubs where her fingers had been. Corbin cringed and spit the fingers aside, then shook his head rapidly, face pinched like he was a teenage girl who'd just taken her first ever shot of tequila. The fingers rolled toward me, each one stacked with those familiar bronze rings.

The dark tendrils of magic began to weaken and fade, squirming sadly

around her body.

“Need her alive?” Corbin asked.

Wide-eyed, I shook my head.

He snapped her neck.

The atmosphere broke like a thunderclap, like a rainstorm washing away thick humidity. The last tendrils of toxic magic melted away, dissipating into the ground.

I took a long, slow breath.

I still had my power. The sunlight deep in my core still burned. I knew it had just been a myth that it was gone, a trick to get me to stop fighting. It’d worked, it’d felt so real—but it’d take more than that to wipe out the source of my power. If there was any one person—man? Creature? Being?—that could extinguish my power, he was standing in this cellar with me, chest heaving with exertion.

He stood over Sandra’s body. His gleaming red eyes flickered to me, shrouded in shadow beneath the presence of his Shax form. He tipped his chin down. His nostrils flared.

“Corbin,” I said delicately as I raised myself up onto my elbows and scooted tentatively backward. “It’s all good now. You can put your, um, whatever that is away now.”

He said nothing, and shifted his weight, leaning forward slightly toward me.

“I know I smell good,” I said, holding a hand up like I was trying to calm a spooked animal. “I thought we had an arrangement. Remember that? Our arrangement?”

If his demon side got the best of him, it was over for me. I still had power innately in me, but I didn’t have the strength to conjure another blast like I’d just used to break the ward. And honestly, after how hard I busted my balls to solve this case, I’d be pretty pissed if it ended with me getting drained instead of my fifty grand.

Corbin bared his teeth.

“Come on,” I said, forcing my voice to remain steady and irritated, and not reveal the fear crawling into my throat. “Get a hold of yourself.”

He lunged for me.

And then stopped. Abortively, in the middle of the movement, it was awkward enough that he nearly fell off balance. He lurched backward, snapped his teeth at the ceiling, then whipped around to face the wall, like a

scolded child.

I clambered to my feet and braced myself, waiting, pushing all the power I could muster into my jewelry, and my knife in the other hand. I'd have to hope it'd be enough.

This wasn't how I wanted this to end.

Corbin placed one palm on the wall, then dropped his head down. The shade of his Shax form suddenly collapsed, melting into nothingness around him. Then it was just his familiar human form remaining, his shirt stained with sweat and his legs quivering beneath him. "Sorry."

I paused. Didn't let go of my knife. "You good?"

He nodded. He took a few more steadying breaths, then turned around. His face was back to normal—his blue eyes were flecked with amber, not red, and he had nice straight normal teeth. There wasn't a trace of Sandra's blood on his face, either, like when he'd dispelled the magic, he'd simultaneously dispelled the evidence of how he'd cut her power.

"Yeah," he said, but kept his distance. "What about you? Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said. The adrenaline was beginning to wear off. "Kind of dizzy."

"We need to get you to a hospital," he said.

"I'm fine," I said. I put my knife back into my boot, and when I tried to stand back up, my vision went spotty around the edges. I stumbled and swayed on my feet.

Corbin rushed forward and steadied me with his hand wrapped firmly around my bicep. Usually, I'd shrug him off and launch some pithy remark, but my head really was swimming. If he let go, there was a real chance I'd lose my footing.

"That magic was no joke," he said.

"Yeah, no shit," I muttered.

"You need a professional healer," he said. "It'll speed up the process of flushing out the residue."

"Gross."

"You'll thank me later."

I leaned against him. "Guess I need to thank you now."

"For what?" Corbin asked. "You were doing fine when I showed up."

I snorted. "What, entangled in an UnSeelie ward?"

"Eh, looked like you had it under control."

I sighed, then carefully straightened back up. His grip loosened on my

arm, like he was half-expecting me to tip over again. Not a totally unfounded fear, honestly. “Thanks for dealing with Sandra,” I said. “And for not eating me.”

Whoops. Maybe wouldn’t have said that last part if my head wasn’t so foggy.

“You’re crazy, by the way,” he said. “You good to stand?”

I nodded.

He released me, then knelt down, cringing, to pluck the rings off Sandra’s detached fingers. “You’re really a solstice nymph?”

“No,” I said.

“Your kind is supposed to be gone.”

“Yeah, I know,” I snapped. “I know that intimately. Thanks for the reminder.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

I stepped away from the crime scene and sat down on the stairs. “I know. Forget it.”

He looked up. Our eyes met and he pressed his lips together like he wanted to say something, but then he just finished gathering the rings.

“What are those?” I asked.

“UnSeelie tool,” he said. “Some of the less, well, civilized UnSeelie have been known to use demons for labor or for combat purposes. Or just for fun. Running demon-fighting rings and such. The rings act like a leash, helping to control the demon. They’re imperfect, though, which is why she was using a lot.” He tucked them into his pocket. “I’ll take them back to the court.”

“Cool. I think that makes us even. You get your evidence and I get my paycheck—and I get to rub Todd’s nose in it, too.”

Corbin faltered. “Right.”

I tilted my head. “Something wrong with that arrangement?” He better not be changing his mind about the bounty. Maybe he got the kill shot, but I’m the one who figured it out, so—

“No, no, it’s not that.” He stood up. “It’s about Todd.”

I blinked. “What about him?” Sure, he’d been acting weird lately, but I expected he’d relax now that we had Sandra. Or at least talk to me about what had his panties all in a twist.

Outside, a siren blared in the street. I staggered to my feet, getting emotionally prepared to handle the onslaught of questions I’d soon have to answer. There’d been so much magic blown out in the past few minutes, I

was surprised it'd taken the supernatural police this long to pick it up.

"I'm not on this case because of the case itself," Corbin said.

I stopped. "What?"

"I'm assigned to investigate *you*. And Todd knows."

"*What?*" I said again. My headache worsened, and I placed a hand on the wall to steady myself. "What do you mean investigate *me*?"

Corbin blanched. Before he could answer me, a voice overhead shouted, "Police! Hands up where we can see them!"

"This conversation isn't over," I hissed. Then I put on my best smile and hoped Hobbs was here to make my life a little easier.

The police rushed into the storm cellar—way too many of them for the small space. At least one good thing happened: Hobbs *was* part of the team, and she sighed long-sufferingly as soon as I waved at her and welcomed her down the stairs.

She gave me a script to turn in for Sandra as the coroners handled her body. I walked her through the crime scene and the narrative of events, as best I could with my head spinning, while Corbin talked to the Supernatural Police about the magic Sandra had used. Couldn't deny that was a major benefit of working with him—I didn't have to do all the cop navigation.

Hobbs led me out of the storm cellar and back into the yard. "Come on," she said. "Let's get you to the paramedics. Nice work on this one, Tempie."

"Not exactly the word I'd use, but thanks," I said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The next morning, I woke up to the unfortunately familiar beeping of the machine tracking my vitals. I sighed and kept my eyes closed. I could do a lot of healing myself, but whatever Sandra had done to my insides was a little beyond my pay grade. From a quick body scan, though, it seemed like the healers in the supernatural ward of the York City Hospital had done a pretty impressive job of expelling the dregs of it. But fucking hell, I was exhausted.

“I can tell you’re awake.”

I snapped my eyes open and sat up furiously, about to climb out of the bed, until I realized I was wearing nothing but the flimsy paper hospital gown. “I’m seriously going to put a bell on you,” I said.

Corbin was sitting in the ugly, uncomfortable-looking recliner in the corner of the room, idly thumbing through a magazine. He leaned forward in the seat and then set the magazine aside. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” I said. “You being here isn’t helping.”

I glanced at the door to my hospital room—firmly closed. Would anyone even notice if he decided he was going to drain me? Or worse—turn me in to the court for being an unregistered Seelie—an unregistered solstice nymph?

“I’ve been here all night,” he said.

I balked. “What?”

Now that he mentioned it, he did look, well, *tired*. I’d never seen a Fae look tired, but Corbin was pulling it off, with dark circles under his eyes and everything. “We need to talk.”

“No, I don’t think we do,” I said.

“I had a feeling you might cut and run as soon as you got out of here,” he

said. “Which is why I stayed.”

Damn. Maybe he did have me partially figured out. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Tempie—”

“If you’re going to turn me in, just fucking go ahead and do it,” I hissed. “No point in playing this game.”

Corbin leaned forward, one elbow on his knee and his chin propped in his hand. “You think I’m going to turn you in? To the court?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” I asked. “That’s the whole reason you were part of this case, right?”

“Initially, yeah.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Decide to drain me instead?”

He sighed. “Don’t you think I would’ve done that by now?”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re planning,” I said. “Which is, admittedly, nerve-racking.”

“You already know the”—he tilted his head slightly—“*effect* your scent has on me. Of course, I’m curious to taste. But only if that’s something you want.” He smirked. “I don’t need your power.”

Honestly, I was almost offended. “If that’s true, then why—” I snapped my jaw shut.

Then why did UnSeelies kill my mother?

“An UnSeelie would get an incredible boost from ‘draining’ you, as you inelegantly put it,” Corbin said. “But I—well. You saw.”

“What exactly *did* I see?” I asked. “You said you were half Shax, but I’ve never seen anything like what you did in the cellar.”

“Like I said, I don’t need your power.”

“You have plenty,” I said with a slow nod, starting to understand.

“At the risk of sounding like a self-important asshole—”

“—that ship has sailed—”

“—that’s exactly it, I have plenty. Honestly, I think if I imbued myself with power like yours, it might push me over the edge.”

“Like turn you insane?” I cringed.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Might not be pretty, though. I’m not interested in taking that kind of risk.”

“Well, that makes me feel great,” I said. “You’ll let me live just because you’re not willing to take the risk of killing me.”

He rolled his eyes. “I want you to live because I like you, Tempie,” he

said. "I figured the logistical reasons would help you believe that."

I fell silent.

This asshole. He was right. It was easier to believe that he wasn't lying to me, knowing that there was a *selfish* reason he wasn't draining me, too.

"The court—and the queen—think my demon side is weak," Corbin admitted, quietly. "And mostly dormant."

"It's definitely neither of those things," I said.

"And you're one of two people who knows that," Corbin said. "I've had to keep it under wraps. It's the only way I could stay in the court with my mother."

"Why?" I asked. "What will happen if they find out?"

He drew his finger across his neck in the unmistakable gesture of murder. "I'm not exactly a point of pride in the court," he said with a sardonic little smile. "If they knew I had the capabilities I have... Well, they'd want to make sure I didn't decide to do something with them."

"What, like you'd try to take over the court, or something?" I rolled my eyes. "Seems paranoid."

"The rings Sandra was using," Corbin said, "were UnSeelie. Used to control Shax, by high court Fae only. Notoriously hard to get, and hard to use. You have to have a lot of credentials to use them—because if just anyone could control Shax, they could have an army, very quickly."

"I think I see where this is going," I said.

"Right," Corbin said. "I don't need them."

"Are you telling me this as a friend, or as a threat?" I asked, half-teasing.

"I know what you are," Corbin said, "and you know what I am. And neither of us want anyone else to know."

I nodded in careful agreement.

"So I'd say we're in a truce," he said.

"A truce," I repeated. "Seriously?"

"You still don't trust me?" He stood up from the recliner and sat on the edge of my hospital bed. "I've done nothing but hold up my end of the bargain."

"And lie to me about why you were here in the first place," I noted.

He sucked his teeth. "All right, you got me there."

I sighed. He was right, though. He hadn't led me astray this entire time. Hadn't attempted to kill me even once. I knew that was a low bar, but after the guys I'd met in this line of work, that was unfortunately the reality.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” I said, even though I still wouldn’t quite use the word *trust*. “This just... Complicates things.”

“It’s been a long time since my life has been properly complicated,” he said. His blue eyes flickered curiously over my face. “Have to say I’m kind of looking forward to it.”

“Don’t get too excited.” I reached for him, tangling my fingers in the front of his t-shirt and gripping tight. “You keep quiet about me, and I’ll keep quiet about you.”

“That’s all I expect,” he said. His gaze flicked to my mouth.

“Listen,” I said softly. “Thanks. For saving my life.”

“I think we’re square on saving each other’s lives,” he said. “I haven’t really been keeping track.”

I rolled my eyes. Then with my grip still in his shirt, I tugged him closer and kissed him.

Corbin made a soft sound of surprise, but then kissed me back. He slid one hand to my nape, directing the kiss, like he was afraid I’d change my mind—which I supposed was a valid fear, considering the way I’d behaved last time. But after all the shit we’d been through, I thought I deserved at least one *actual* kiss. And hell, he was a good kisser. Slow and luxurious. I couldn’t help but sigh into it, savoring the sweetness for a long few moments.

When I broke the kiss, Corbin’s irises were amber, and his cheeks were flushed. “I need to report to the queen.”

“What are you gonna tell her?”

“The truth,” he said. “Just leaving out some minor details.”

I nodded. “Good. I’ll do the same in this realm.”

He brushed a stray strand of hair off my forehead. His touch was surprisingly soft. “Take care of yourself.”

“I’m pretty good at that,” I said, steadfastly ignoring the way something behind my ribs clenched tightly.

Someone rapped sharply on the door, and then it creaked open. “Ms. Fleur?” the nurse asked. “Good morning, I’m here to check your vitals.”

I cleared my throat, then dropped my hand, which was still tight in Corbin’s shirt. “Sure, come in.”

Corbin nodded curtly, more to himself than to me, and then stood up. “I don’t know how long I’ll be with the court,” he said. “But I’ll be seeing you.”

“Right,” I said, feeling slightly dazed from the kiss and the reality that Corbin was, apparently, going to keep my secret.

“Thank you,” he said to the nurse.

And then he was gone.

The nurse began to ask me a barrage of questions about how I’d slept and how I was feeling after whatever the healers did last night. I hardly heard the questions as I stared at the closed door.

I’ll be seeing you.

I couldn’t figure out if that was a threat, or a promise.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Two Months Later

Oscar jumped up on the coffee table, right in between me and the tiny television currently showing *Top Gun*.

“Hey,” I said, brandishing my spoon at him. “Move. This is the best part. They’re about to bang in that crazy dramatic blue lighting.”

Oscar meowed judgmentally.

“What?” I asked. “I’m on vacation. I’m allowed to have ice cream for breakfast.” I pointedly took another bite, then raised my eyebrows at him.

Sure, maybe two months was a long vacation, but the Wheels contract had been a hell of a case. I deserved some real time off after almost dying and collecting my fifty grand as promised. I usually took time off after each contract, but this was a long break, even for me.

The thing was, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go back. I was glad to still be living in Warwick—I fucking hated moving, and I wanted to stay close to Gram—but how could I keep working for Todd? How could I trust him to set me up with good contracts when he’d been in on the *investigation*? I didn’t even know who or what set up this investigation into me, and Todd hadn’t said a single word about it.

Which meant that, as far as I knew, Corbin had kept *his* word.

Todd hadn’t said anything about it. Hadn’t acknowledged it. Had barely said a word when he’d written my check.

And God dammit, my feelings were hurt. I’d thought that after what had happened with Tucker, and the way Todd had helped me, really been there

for me, I thought he'd always have my back. That if someone came knocking asking to *investigate* me, he'd be on *my* side. He'd help me avoid exposure. Not put me on a case with an UnSeelie. Sure, it'd worked out, but still!

I sank a little deeper into the couch and took another huge bite of ice cream. I could always try to get a job with another dispatcher. Not that there were many in Warwick. And not that many of them got decent contracts like Todd did.

In his office, Todd's ears must've been itching, because my phone started to ring.

Whatever. I was already in a bad mood. Might as well see what he wanted.

"H'lo?" I said around my mouthful of ice cream.

"Good morning," Todd said curtly in my ear. "I assume you've heard about the string of murders down in the bar district."

I nudged Oscar off the coffee table so I could focus on *Top Gun*. "No. You know I don't watch the news."

"Well, there's been a string of murders, and we bailed out the accused."

"Let me guess, he skipped out?"

"You're the best I've got," Todd said. "I want you to bring him in."

"Thanks, but no thanks," I said. "I'm on vacation."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's been two months."

"All right," I said. "It's not a vacation. It's a sabbatical. A permanent sabbatical."

"Tempie," Todd said. I could hear him rolling his eyes.

That pissed me off. Did he really think I didn't know? Did he really think everything was all hunky-dory between us? "I'm being serious," I said. "I'm not working for you."

He paused. "What?"

"Yeah," I said. "You were an asshole during the last case. I don't need that kind of management in my life." I chuckled. "I need a boss I can trust, Todd. And you broke that trust."

Another long pause. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't," I said. "Why don't you put Jace on the case? He can be your new go-to guy."

"Tempie—"

I hung up, and then set my cell phone down on the coffee table a little too hard. I wasn't even in the mood to watch *Top Gun* anymore. "All right, all

right,” I muttered to Oscar as I clicked the television off. “I’ll go. Stop looking at me like that.”

I was overdue for a visit with Gram, anyway. She’d know what to do about Todd. Or at least she’d get me to stop wallowing about it. With a small amount of regret, I put my half-finished ice cream away and switched out my sweatpants for jeans here at the bright and early hour of one in the afternoon.

Bob was in his chair as usual as I locked up my apartment. “You’ve got company,” he said. “This guy has been lurking. Should I call the cops?”

“Huh?” I whipped around.

Corbin was leaning against the hood of his sports car, smirking up at the balcony.

“He was messing with your bike, too,” Bob said.

“It’s fine,” I said with a sigh. “I can deal with him myself. Thanks, Bob.”

“You need a nice normal guy to date,” Bob said. “I don’t like this one.”

“Yeah, he gets that reaction a lot,” I muttered, then hurried down the stairs.

Corbin greeted me with a smug grin, as he carded one hand rakishly through his hair. It was a little longer than when I’d last seen him, and his blue eyes were a little brighter, like he’d spent the past couple months on a tropical vacation instead of reporting to the UnSeelie Court. But maybe being in Faerie was like a tropical vacation—I wouldn’t know.

“Hey.”

“My neighbor was about to call the cops on you,” I said.

He laughed. “He’s the smoker, right? I’ll bring him some Fae cigars next time.”

“Don’t try to bribe my neighbor,” I said.

He just grinned. The nearly predatory expression sent a sudden spike of anxiety through me. Was he here to take me in? Had I been a fool to trust him? Should I have disappeared from Warwick when I had the chance?

“I’ve got a case for you,” he said.

I raised my eyebrows. “What?”

“You’ve heard about the string of murders in the bar district?”

“Yeah,” I said with a wave of my hand. “Everyone’s talking about it.”

“The perp was bailed out and skipped.”

“As they often do.”

“But he was bailed out of a Fae prison,” Corbin said. “Not a human one.”

My eyes widened. “You can do that?”

He nodded. “Uncommon, but yes.”

“And you’re here trying to get the bounty.”

“I’m less interested in the bounty. But I do need your help.”

“What’s in it for me?” I asked, raising my eyebrows. My blood galloped in my veins as I fought back a grin.

“I thought the bounty was the whole thing for you,” Corbin said. “But it might also be a good time.”

“You think?” I teased.

He shrugged. “Up for it?”

It was only with Corbin standing in front of me that I realized how fucking *bored* I’d been these past two months. And how much I’d thought of that last kiss. And how much I’d hoped he didn’t get brutally murdered by his queen or anything like that, which for me, was pretty fucking sappy.

I shrugged right back. “I could be convinced.”



[Get Bounty Claimed Today!](#)

Get the latest news on releases!

[Click here to sign up!](#)

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+

Try it out [here!](#)

BOUNTY COLLECTED

SOLSTICE HUNTRESS: BOOK 1

Lindsey Devin

© 2021

Disclaimer

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and events are all fictitious for the reader's pleasure. Any similarities to real people, places, events, living or dead are all coincidental.

**This book contains sexually explicit content that is intended for
ADULTS ONLY (+18).**