



Suzanne Wright

THE  
WICKED  
IN ME

Immortal. Powerful. Unmatched?

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*Also by Suzanne Wright:*

THE DARK IN YOU

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Blaze

Ashes

Embers

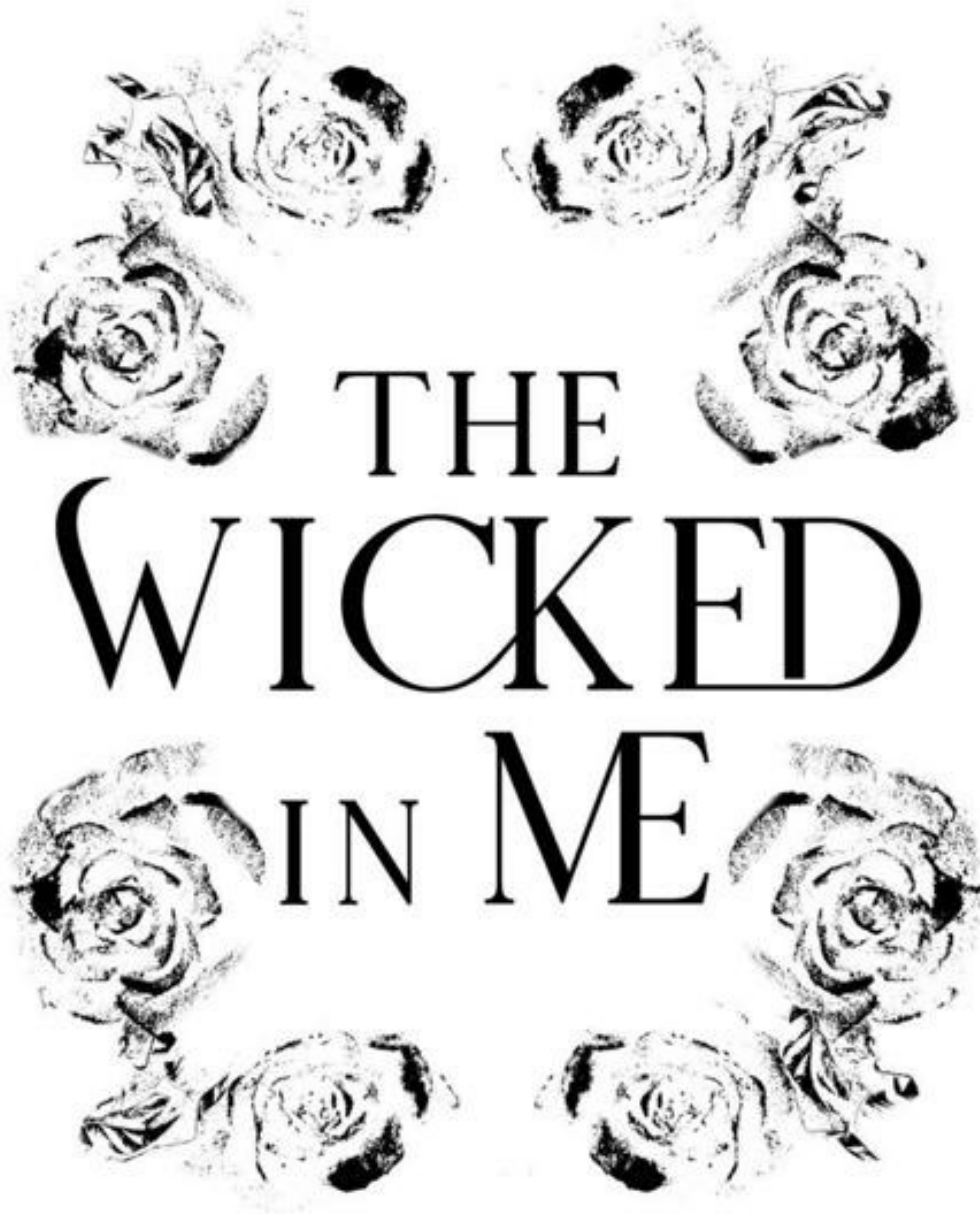
Shadows

Omens

Fallen

Reaper

Suzanne Wright



THE  
WICKED  
IN ME

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*For J, thank you for listening to all my ramblings when I'm  
having my mind-mapping buzz sessions out loud*





# Chapter One

Adopting a stone-cold poker face, Wynter Dellavale struggled to process the disbelief that crawled over her skin. When she'd opened the door to find her Priestess on the doorstep while their coven lingered at the front gate, she'd thought maybe Esther was calling on her to join them all for a late-night ritual or something. But *this* ... no, it couldn't actually be happening. Nu-uh.

Planting her feet, Wynter folded her arms. "This is some kind of messed-up joke, right? Like, you know, humor but sort of ... not?"

"This isn't something I would ever joke about." Esther clasped her hands in front of her, the image of elegance. "We have no choice. A new coven will be selected by one of the ruling Aeons in three days' time. There is no chance of it being us if we have a weak link. For us, you are that."

Anger bubbled up, hot and sharp. Wynter felt a cold smile slowly curve one side of her mouth.

The Priestess tensed. Well, Wynter wasn't exactly known for being a placid, sweet, touchy-feely person. More of a bitey-scratchy girl, really. Her mother used to joke that Wynter came out of the womb flipping the finger and snarling at anyone who dared cuddle her.

"I can be described as a lot of things, but not weak," said Wynter.

"In terms of power, no. But having a witch whose magick has been tainted ... that is a weakness in the coven."

*Tainted.* She hated that word. People had been tossing it at her for most of her life. "Wasn't it you who always told me to rise above my limitations and

make them work for me? That they'd only be an obstacle if I allowed it?" The woman's advice had often carried a condescending note, but still.

"Yes, I believe in not permitting obstacles to block our path. And that is what you are, Wynter. An obstacle to this coven's future prospects. You would have been forced to leave when you turned sixteen if our prior Priestess had not been your grandmother. Agnes could never bring herself to cast you out, but I must. When we moved to this town eighteen years ago, we did it for one reason only—we hoped to eventually serve the Aeons directly. If that means snipping off any weaknesses, so be it."

The pitiless words were as sharp and cutting as any scalpel. Personally, Wynter didn't see what would be so amazing about living among the primordial beings in the underground utopia beneath the picturesque town of Aeon. Oh sure, you'd be privy to their secrets and, given they were the first civilization—yeah, as in Adam and Eve—they no doubt had a whole lot of interesting knowledge to pass on. It was considered an honor to serve them, just as it was considered an honor to be chosen to descend to their subterranean city.

There were a few things Wynter wasn't so comfortable with, though. Like how only the residents of said city were able to go down there and weren't allowed to speak of it to those who lived in the town. Like how the Aeons demanded the respect and devotion that was worthy of deities.

Though they possessed a godly arrogance, they weren't deities at all. They also weren't human. Referred to as Aeons merely due to being long-term natives of this place, they were incredibly secretive immortals who wielded impressive power.

"This is not merely *my* wish," Esther added. "I speak for the majority."

Wynter scanned the swarm of coven members near the gate. Rafe, the mentor she had to thank for all the training she'd received over the years, was notably absent. As for the others ... many averted their eyes or shifted uncomfortably. Others raised their chin or sniffed. And it was clear that none were going to speak up for her.

Hurt sliced her gut like a jagged blade. She hadn't done a single thing to deserve them turning their backs on her. Not. One.

The coven wasn't alone. A few mages were among them, and said mages glared daggers at her. They'd pestered Agnes to cast her out after 'the incident' when Wynter was ten. It didn't matter that Wynter had been the true victim. Two teenage mages had died that night, and that was *all* they cared

about.

Her coven had protected her from the angry families of those teenage boys over the years, but only because her grandmother had ordered it. With the exception of Agnes and Rafe, no one had comforted her after her ordeal, because they'd been too freaked out by the aftermath. They'd emotionally pulled away from her little by little over the years. And now they apparently wanted the Aeons to banish her just as they'd once banished her mother.

Wynter barely resisted snarling. "My magick might not be as 'wholesome' as yours, Esther, but I've proven my worth over and over." She'd trained harder than anyone else, she'd mastered every skill necessary, she'd done everything expected of her.

Esther flicked her eyes upward in exasperation. "Wynter—"

"There isn't one person more dedicated to this coven's welfare than me." Purely because it had been her mother's greatest wish for the Moonstar coven to descend to the underground city; a dream Davina had given up in order to protect Wynter. In return, Wynter had vowed to herself that she would repay her mother by making that dream a reality.

It seemed like she might just have to break that vow.

Esther sighed. "Let us not drag this out. There is no point. My decision is final, I won't change it. Once the banishment has been made official, Wagner will drive you to the border." Her eyes briefly slid to the were-jackal who stepped out of the crowd—one of the town's keepers.

He always looked so dignified. Always flashed gracious smiles. Always addressed people so politely. But there was a darkness in those pale-blue eyes. It made that *thing* inside Wynter stir. A thing that had been her constant companion since she was just ten. A thing she'd kept secret purely to survive.

Wagner had come for Davina all those years ago when she'd been exiled. Back then, as he'd lingered on the sidelines, he'd made Wynter think of a hyena waiting to pounce on whatever scraps were left by other predators. He had that same look about him now.

Wynter flexed her fingers. "You get that this isn't a small thing, Esther, right? It's not just that I'll have nowhere to go—that I'll be out there alone with no family, or protection, or coven—I'll also have *no memories*. I won't even know who I am."

That was the thing about Aeon. If you ever left, your memories were taken from you—it was one of the prices to pay for the privilege of living in such a place of power and safety, though Wynter suspected that the Aeons simply

didn't want outsiders to know much about the town. If it hadn't been for this 'price,' she'd have left years ago to reunite herself with her mother.

Wynter had begged Davina to take her with her when she was exiled, but her mother had insisted she stay—probably because she knew that Wagner was a big enough asshole to dump them in separate places so they'd each be alone, even if only to punish Davina for always rejecting his advances.

"Taking your memories would be a kindness," said Esther. "Surely you would wish to forget some of the things that happened to you here."

"A *kindness* would be for you to not make me suffer for something I have no control over." It wasn't like she'd *wanted* her magick to turn dark. Death always left a mark. And so her magick could no longer heal, calm, create or comfort. But it could all too easily kill, burn, infect, and destroy.

Esther let out a weary 'you're being dramatic' sigh. "This is not about making you suffer. It's not about *you* at all. I am Priestess; I have to do what is best for this coven."

Recalling something her grandmother had said to her on her deathbed, Wynter couldn't help wondering if Agnes had seen this coming ...

*Home isn't really a house, you know, Wynter. It is a place where we feel safe and accepted and content—it could be a building, a piece of land, a group of people, or at a particular person's side. You'll find your home eventually, I promise.*

Wynter understood why her grandmother wouldn't have forewarned her that the coven might pull this shit. Agnes had liked to see the best in people, liked to hope that they would make the right decision in the end—even her bitchy successor.

Wynter shook her head at Esther. "You're making a huge mistake."

The Priestess blinked. "Is that a threat?"

"It's a fact." There were things that Esther didn't know. Things that only Wynter and Davina had known. Things that Agnes had guessed at but hadn't shared with others.

Esther rolled her eyes. "If you say so. Now have some dignity and endure this without causing a scene. Don't make this any more difficult than it has to be."

What, like Wynter was overreacting by not being breezy about having *her memory wiped*? It wouldn't be so bad if she was only being forced to leave, but she'd essentially also have her identity taken from her, because she wouldn't even remember her own damn name.

“Maybe you’ll get lucky and find your mother,” Wagner chipped in. “Of course ... you won’t *know* she’s your mother, just as she would not recognize you. Very sad, really.” He sounded so sincere, but she heard the subtle taunt there.

Wynter sniffed at him. “Try to be quiet, Wagner; the adults are talking right now.”

There was a snort of laughter from someone in the crowd.

His face went red, and his eyes glittered with a promise of retribution. “You won’t be feeling so cocky when Lailah arrives. She’s on her way.”

Wynter’s insides seized. If an Aeon was ready to make the banishment official, it meant that the decision had already been okayed by that oh-so-mysterious race. As such, appealing to them to overturn the Moonstar coven’s decision would get her nowhere.

The crowd stirred as a familiar male witch shoved his way to the front. “What the hell is going on here?” Rafe took in the scene, and realization dawned on him fast. He cast Esther a hard look. “Tell me you’re not—”

“Do not interfere,” she ordered, her tone clipped. “This has to be done.”

His mouth set into a flat line. “You said you wouldn’t do this. You assured Agnes that you wouldn’t do this.”

“I told a dying woman what she needed to hear in order to pass peacefully,” said Esther. “That is all.”

As the two witches began to argue, Wagner leaned into Wynter and said, “Such a shame that you will have to leave. The mages don’t think so. In fact, they have promised me many things in return for sending a ... message to you once we’ve left the boundaries of Aeon. They want you to pay for what you did to those boys. Understandable, I suppose.”

Wynter’s eyes slammed on him, her stomach twisting at the cruel intent there. She didn’t fear him. No, she could handle this motherfucker in her sleep. But after Lailah was done with her, there’d be a short period of time in which Wynter would be utterly vulnerable. Maybe he’d take advantage of that, or maybe he only meant to scare her. Hopefully it was the latter, because he wouldn’t hesitate to oblige the mages.

A sudden silence fell, and Wynter looked to see none other than Lailah elegantly strolling toward the house. There were five generations of Aeons. They’d mysteriously ceased procreating after that, and they’d never shared why ... just as they hadn’t shared why they rarely left their city during daytime hours, or how they could put themselves in a state of Rest that could

last centuries.

Lailah was part of the second generation. The tall, beautiful brunette also ruled Aeon alongside Adam, her consort Abel—yeah, it turned out that he hadn't been killed by Cain after all—and her brother Saul. They were a council of sorts.

She was very powerful. Very detached. Very *other*.

All of the Aeons who Wynter had come across were like that, really. They weren't old-fashioned as one might expect, but nor were they *in the now*. As if, having seen so many eras come and go, they'd somehow become removed from the flow of time.

Lailah lifted a brow at Esther. "Has it been done?"

"I have cast her out of the coven, yes," the bitch replied.

Rafe turned to Lailah. "Please don't do this—"

"Quiet." The Aeon's voice lashed him like a whip ... just as Abel's had lashed Wynter when she'd begged him not to exile her mother. Lailah turned to her, a cool smile touching her mouth. "Hello, Whitney."

*Jesus Christ*. "It's Wynter." But the Aeons ... it was as if they didn't really *see* people. They might glance at you. Might even glare at you. But, to them, you were no more unremarkable than any other mortal.

Wynter supposed it was a little like if a wasp got into your house. You might curse at it, you might want it gone, you might even be wary of it, but you wouldn't look at it as an individual with its own wants, needs, and motivations—it was just a wasp, the same as any other wasp.

"Wynter, then," said Lailah, not looking even a little sheepish. "It matters not. You will need to choose a new name soon, since you will not remember your own. Trust me, this won't hurt. I will simply take your memories, place you into a peaceful sleep, and then Wagner will drive you to the border."

Wynter felt her breathing begin to pick up. "I haven't done anything wrong. It isn't my fault that my magick is different."

"No," agreed Lailah, "it was your mother who shamed the coven."

"She didn't shame *anyone*."

Lailah's face hardened. "She used forbidden magick to bring you back from the dead, knowing it was unnatural and that one should not interfere with fate; knowing it would twist and warp your magick."

Wynter was about to spit out that, no, actually, Davina had done no such thing and that something else had brought Wynter back. But then a familiar otherworldly breeze ruffled over her, one that carried a gentle warning.

Lailah frowned and glanced around, her extraordinary golden eyes narrowing. After a few moments, she seemed to shrug off the slight disturbance in the air. “As I was saying, what your mother did *was* shameful, whether you wish to face it or not. It was a selfish decision on her part. You have paid for it most of your life. Where was the point in what she did?”

“Where was justice when two teenage boys killed me?” Wynter shot back.

Lailah’s smile was brittle. “You took care of that yourself, did you not?”

Sort of. Wynter hadn’t been behind the wheel at the time. She had no clue what exactly went down; she only knew of the aftermath.

Lailah laid her hand on Wynter’s head. “Do not think of this as an ending. Think of it as an opportunity to have a fresh start.”

The *thing* inside Wynter stirred, uneasy. Well, at least it was paying attention. It didn’t always seem present. As if it slept a lot or just saw no need to concern itself with anything unless the circumstances warranted its attention or intervention.

She thought about unleashing it on these people here, but that unnatural breeze returned, carrying that same warning—one that the entity within Wynter automatically heeded.

Squinting, Lailah again looked around, taking a more thorough scan of their surroundings this time. She exchanged a look with Wagner, who merely shrugged. Turning back to Wynter, she elegantly flapped her hand. There was some sort of weird suction from the ground. A suction that locked Wynter’s feet in place with such force she swayed.

*Fuck.*

There’d be no running. Not that she’d have gotten far. Instinct almost had her calling to the sword she’d bound to her magick, which enabled her to conjure it whenever necessary. But she was massively outnumbered right now, and she didn’t doubt that the blade would be easily wrestled from her grip. It might even then be turned on her. She’d rather have her memories scrambled than be impaled on a sword.

Staring at Lailah, Wynter lifted her chin slightly and said, “If you do this, there’ll be consequences.” It seemed only fair to warn her.

Lailah looked the height of amused. “Excuse me?”

“You don’t have to take my word for it. But you should.”

Wagner snickered. “Strange little thing, isn’t she?”

“Strange indeed.” Lailah looked at Esther. “What is her full name?”

Well, of course she’d forgotten it.

“Wynter Dellavale,” Esther replied, her expression one of pure resolve.

Lailah nodded. “Wynter Dellavale, you are officially banished from Aeon. May your new life be plentiful.”

*May your new life be plentiful?* Like the woman gave a damn? What a load of absolute shit.

Wynter opened her mouth to call the Aeon on her crap, but then an unnatural lethargy snaked through her. It was thick. Heavy. Drugging. It sucked every bit of energy and enthusiasm from her body like a goddamn Hoover.

Her vision blurred. Her senses dulled. Her face went slack. She felt both light as a feather and heavy as dead weight at the same time.

She tried fighting the exhaustion. Tried digging deep for the strength to move. But her eyelids drifted shut and her body slumped. Strong arms caught her. *Wagner*. The suction beneath her feet faded away.

“I got her.” He unceremoniously tossed Wynter over his shoulder and then strode away.

She was braced for sleep to pull her under ... but it didn't. She was wide-awake, lethargic but not at all sleepy. More, her memories weren't fading or fracturing. No, they were still clear and intact. Hope blossomed in her belly—

She inwardly flinched as blobs of wetness hit her when Wagner shrugged through the crowd. People were *spitting* on her. No doubt the mages. She heard “good riddance” and “should be dead” and something like “finally some justice.”

*Assholes.*

Rafe yelled out protests, pleading with Lailah to undo what she'd done.

The backs of Wynter's eyes burned. He was the only father figure she'd ever known. He wasn't aware of all her secrets, but he'd known she was ... different, somehow, from other witches. Still, he'd said nothing of it to others.

No quitter, Wynter fought to open her eyes as Wagner carried her further away. But there was no lifting her eyelids. They didn't even flutter. She tried moving her fingers instead, but they didn't so much as twitch.

She was, essentially, a prisoner inside her own body. And this wasn't even the first time it had happened. She'd been this helpless once before, paralyzed by magick as two thirteen-year-old boys had some “fun.”

Her heart pounded as the awful memories crowded her. Feet slamming



into her ribs. The taste of mud as it was shoved into her mouth. The feel of pebbles jammed up her nose. The smell of urine as it splattered over her head like a warm stream. A scorching, blazing heat against the soles of her feet. Lances of pain as a blade sank deep into her flesh over and over. And then, finally, the feel of a knife slicing across her neck.

The lethal move hadn't killed her quickly—that seemed to only happen in movies. The boys had watched while she'd faded away. Until they got bored and thrust the blade into the side of her throat.

Rafe, seeming to sense how important it was to her that she *never* be that powerless to protect herself again, had taught her everything from fencing to magickal combat. Sadly, none of that helped her now.

Still, Wynter had no intention of accepting defeat. No, she went back to battling the exhaustion. She'd get out of this situation somehow. She would. Really. She had managed to stay awake and keep her memories—those had to be good signs.

Hinges creaked, and then she was flung on a cushioned surface. The good ole musty car smell hit her hard. He'd dumped her on the rear seat of his vehicle, she realized ... just as he had Davina back when she'd been exiled.

It wasn't long before hinges again creaked. Moments later, the car shook as his weight settled into it. The engine sputtered to life, and light-hearted whistling filled the air as he drove off.

Inside her head, Wynter growled in frustration as she battled to fight off the paralysis that had overtaken her. Those battles never came to anything, never—

“I know you're awake, Wynter,” he said, making her pulse spike. “I know you still have all your memories, too. You're probably marveling over that. You may feel it's some sort of victory.”

Yes, actually, she did. Or she *had* until that familiar taunting note entered his voice.

“I'll tell you the truth of what's coming. You see ... none of the exiled are ever really put to sleep. None ever lose their memories. And none are ever driven to the border.”

She paused her internal battle. Wait, what?

“No one ever really leaves this town alive, Wynter. An Aeon only seeks to daze and immobilize the outcasts, nothing more. Keepers such as me then drive to the falls and toss the exiled over the cliff. That's what happened to your mother. Yes, she's dead. Has been for a *long* time.”

Her heart sank. She wanted to tell herself he was lying, wanted to believe he was just trying to mess with her head, but the ring of truth in his voice couldn't be ignored. Grief was like a jagged knife in her chest, sawing deep. It felt as if said chest slumped in on itself as she silently screamed with rage and devastation.

Her mother had done *nothing* to deserve being cast out. Not one thing. But she'd pled guilty to the accusation that she'd used forbidden magick, because she'd known that the truth would condemn Wynter. Davina had, in sum, given her life to save Wynter's ... only she hadn't known that would be the *real* price. Not until this motherfucker killed her.

Wynter was pretty sure she'd never hated anyone as much as she did him in that very moment—not even the teenager boys who'd once taken her life as if it were their right.

“Drowning is a harsh sentence, if you ask me,” said Wagner. “Especially when a person's immobilized. You can't do a damn thing while water floods your nostrils, pours down your throat, and enters your lungs. But the Aeons, well, they have their traditions, and they like them.”

Panic thudding through her, she dug deep for the strength to shake off the power holding her in place, but its grip wasn't weakening under her struggles. Calling for her sword didn't work either. *Nothing* worked.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“You know, the mages would like me to rape you,” he said ever so casually.

Wynter inwardly froze.

“I won't, of course. I'm not an animal. But I have nothing against their second request. They want me to kill you *before* I throw you over the cliff. Want me to dismember you, in fact, just as you dismembered those boys with your magick when you took their lives. Hey, you might get a laugh out of this—they also want a ... souvenir, shall we say. An eyeball, to be precise. Seems a little morbid to me, but I'm not one to judge. I've never actually gouged out an eye before. It could be fun.” He chuckled. “Scared yet?”

A little, which was why her heart was slamming frantically against her ribcage like it was trying to find a way out. She could wipe the floor with Wagner in an instant, *but not if she couldn't move*. It was hard to concentrate on fighting the restrictive power when more and more flashbacks slapped her hard.

She'd been far more afraid as a child after those boys had lured her to the

woods. As she'd lay there powerless, swamped by fear and pain and rage, she'd inwardly cried for her mother. She'd told herself that Davina would find her ... but she hadn't. So Wynter had reached out to Nyx, the deity her coven worshipped, begging Her for help. But it wasn't Nyx who came. It was another deity, and She hadn't been entirely clear on what granting Wynter help would fully entail when She made an offer.

Wynter snapped out of her thoughts as the car slowed to a stop. The engine shut off, and then Wagner was out of the vehicle. She didn't think it was possible for her heart to gallop any faster, but it actually picked up speed.

Hands soon roughly grabbed her and snatched her out of the car. "I'll bet you've been trying your hardest to move, haven't you? I'm pretty sure they all do. They never succeed." He threw her over his shoulder once more. "Really, Wynter, you had to know this day would come. You were living on borrowed time. You should have died years ago, when fate intended it. You shouldn't have returned."

No, she shouldn't have. More, after coming back, she shouldn't have *stayed* alive for as long as she had. That wasn't how it worked. But *fuck* if she cared what he thought.

As he walked further and further while her body remained limp and useless, she screamed in her head. Screamed and screamed and *screamed* with fury.

She could hear the roar of the waterfall in the distance. That roaring got closer and closer until it was almost deafening. She again fought the power holding her captive, and she again failed to free herself. Goddammit, she was *not* going to die at this bastard's hands.

Finally, Wagner halted and then dumped her on the hard ground. "There we are. Better. Now ... do I take the eye before or *after* I kill you?" He hummed, rolling her onto her back. "Before, I think."

Her eyes still closed, Wynter silently hissed as she sensed him kneel over her ... just as one of the boys once had. Right then, she screamed at Wagner to get the fuck away from her, but of course those words never escaped her mouth.

"Hmm, I'd rather have you looking at me while we do this. It's not as gratifying when I don't get to witness a person's pain in their eyes." He pried open her eyelids and smiled down at her. "Well, hello there." He held up his knife. "Like it?"

A breeze whispered over her in a gentle, encouraging caress. The entity

inside her shoved closer to the surface until it stared out at him through one of her eyes. Black inky ribbons partially obstructed her vision as they slithered over said eye.

He stilled, his brows snapping together. “What the ...”

Silently praying to the deity for strength, she again struggled to *move, move, move*. Her heartbeat stuttered as two of her fingers jerked. That was all she needed.

Wynter dug those fingers into the ground and thrust her rage and magick deep into the earth. Pure silence fell, as if nature itself had sucked in a breath, and then the ground began to quiver.

Wagner’s eyes widened as the immediate landscape altered. Trees began to crack and blacken. Leaves started to wither. Flowers slowly dried up or wilted while bushes began to thin and decay.

He looked down at her. “What’s happening? What are you doing?”

One side of her face began to burn, and his gaze dropped to where she knew a metallic blue mark would now glisten. A distinctive mark that very rarely showed itself. A mark that would tell him she was Favored by a particular deity.

Realization dawning on him, he paled and scrambled to get away from her.

Now that she could move her fingers, her other muscles began to unlock. Her hands were soon free of the paralytic power. Then her arms, neck, head, upper body, legs.

It was like moving through sludge, but Wynter finally managed to sit upright. She cricked her neck, exhaling a long sigh.

Wagner stared at her, shaking his head, his lips trembling. “I ... I don’t understand. This isn’t possible. You don’t ...”

“Drink blood or eat flesh to survive? No, no, I don’t. Never needed to, thankfully. That would have sucked. Or *I’d* have sucked, if blood had been involved. Whichever.”

He shook his head wildly. “That’s ... no, no, it’s not possible. Your heart beats, I can *hear* it. Nothing that She brings back is really alive. And it never exists for long.”

“I really can’t clear up the confusion for you. I don’t have all the answers. The deity doesn’t tell me much, and She can be kind of cryptic. When She offered to send a monster after those boys, She didn’t specify that I’d be its host.”

Wynter was no longer merely a witch. She was *more*. A vessel for

something not of this world. And, as such, she'd become a monster in her own right.

She'd only seen her entity once. When Wynter's soul had landed in the netherworld—the realm that was effectively purgatory for the souls of preternatural beings—the deity and the monster had been waiting there for her. The deity had sent them out of the netherworld together and into Wynter's then-dead body, reviving it that easily. The entity had taken control in an instant, torn the boys apart, and then just as quickly retreated.

The monster was ... well, monstrous. Neither male nor female, it was as hideous and horrifying as any nightmare. What she remembered most of all were its bottomless black eyes. There was no being that she could compare it to, because it was simply too foreign. And as black tendrils began to creep over her second eyeball, she knew it was about to take her over.

Wagner must have sensed it too, because he tensed as if to flee.

“You can run if you want,” said Wynter, “but it will find you. It'll catch you. Shred you. It'll feast on your fear, drink in your screams, and relish your pain. That's kind of what it does. What it craves, even. After all, it exists only to wreak vengeance. And me? I'm more than happy to let it go wreak.”

The monster lunged to the surface, and her vision went black.



# Chapter Two

## Six months later

Driving along the unpaved roads that cut through a labyrinth of tall, weathered trees, Wynter felt her hands flex on the steering wheel. “This could be a bad idea. A really, really bad idea.”

Riding shotgun, Delilah tossed her a sideways glance. “You said that when we ate at that Indian restaurant with the dodgy reviews last night. That turned out okay. No one got the shits.”

“I don’t know about that,” Xavier piped up from the backseat, his nose wrinkling as he cast the sleeping female on his left a brief look. “Anabel’s been farting past herself, and some of those farts sounded wet.”

“Shh,” said the elderly woman on his right, her face in her book. “This is finally starting to get good.” In other words, it was a sex scene. Hattie read erotic books like it was her job—the filthier the better, in her opinion.

If there was one thing Wynter wouldn’t have expected when she set off alone, it was that she’d pick up some ‘strays’ while on the run. But after she’d saved herself and a bunch of captives from bounty hunters—yes, the Aeons had put a price on Wynter’s head after she fled—four of said captives had decided it would be good for them all to stick together.

At first, she’d protested, but then it had occurred to Wynter that it would be better for her to travel in a group. Like her, they were witches. The people on her ass were looking for a lone witch, not what would appear to be a coven. And if the hunters did find her again, well, it wouldn’t be bad for her to have some backup. Especially from a bunch of beings who had a streak of crazy in them.

Things hadn't been easy since the day she'd fled Aeon. She'd expected the Aeons to send someone to do the job that Wagner had failed to do, of course. The first hunter had tried to kill her. So had the second. But after that, they'd began to come for her in groups. None of those groups tried to end her, though. They'd all wanted to return her to Aeon. They'd even come equipped with *tranquilizer* guns. According to the bounty hunters who'd almost captured her, the Aeons now wanted her alive.

She could guess why.

What she needed was a place to go where they wouldn't dare venture. A place run by people who took in fugitives and who wouldn't be afraid of the Aeons.

There was only one such place she could think of—Devil's Cradle. Also referred to by many as 'the Home of Monsters.'

It was founded by seven beings—quite simply referred to as the Ancients—who were banished from Aeon a millennia ago after a war broke out between the immortals. A war that came about after Cain, Azazel, Lilith, Seth, Inanna, Ishtar, and Dantalion sold their souls to Satan in exchange for power. As you do.

Or so the story went, anyway. Wynter wasn't so quick to believe anything the Aeons claimed.

The Ancients been given many titles, including the Soulless Ones and the Seven Judges of the Underworld. Neither of which were comforting. The Aeons had only referred to them as 'the Condemned.'

She'd learned plenty about the Ancients since going on the run. They lived in an underground city beneath the town. Like the Aeons, they didn't procreate, rarely ventured outside during daylight hours, and were able to put themselves in a state of deep Rest.

Not all people believed that the Ancients truly threw their lot in with Satan, but it *was* confirmed that—unlike the Aeons—they could grant various things in exchange for other people's souls. Power, beauty, fame, fortune, good health, longevity. Anyone who struck deals with them were considered their property and bore the mark of whichever Ancient they subsequently served.

Cain appeared to be the most feared. The Aeons had only ever spoken of him in hushed whispers. He'd apparently led the rebellion all those years ago, and he was considered by many to be the most powerful of the seven Ancients.

In spite of all the rumors, her little crew was *all* for her plan to move to Devil's Cradle. They were tired of being on the run. But in Wynter's opinion, there were worse things. Like being executed because an Ancient felt bored. It was said that they weren't sane in the truest sense of the word. Some people also described them as fickle and cruel, so it was a relief for many that the Ancients seemed to have no interest in leaving their corner of the globe.

Wynter squirmed slightly in her seat. "I just hope I'm not leading us to our deaths."

"I don't think we'll have a problem being accepted there," said Xavier, running his fingers through his tousled brown hair—which was often the closest thing he did to combing it, yet it always looked purposely styled. Just the same, he rarely exercised, yet his body was lean and solid.

"We might not even be granted an audience with an Ancient," said Wynter. "They don't always agree to see people. And when they do, they're not always in the mood to be helpful."

"We have no Plan B, though," Delilah pointed out.

"I proposed a Plan B," said Xavier.

Swerving in her seat to look at him, Delilah frowned. "Bombing Aeon was not a realistic plan. For starters, we don't *have* explosives—"

"That could be remedied," he told her.

"I'm not seeing how."

"You have so little faith in me."

"It's hard to have faith in a chronic liar."

Wynter's lips twitched. He would in fact lie about *anything*, including his very own name. Also, if he didn't like someone, his answer to the problem was to kill them. Really, it was little wonder he had a price on his head. She suspected that his struggle with scruples came from having been raised in a coven that practiced the dark arts. He'd left, wanting to go his own way, and now followed the right-hand path. Mostly.

Delilah sighed and then faced the front. Bracing her elbow against the car door, the Latina started plucking at the short, tight curls that framed her stunning face. All long legs and smooth olive skin, she snagged attention wherever she went. "I still think you should tell the Ancients that you were exiled from Aeon, Wyn. Having that in common with them might help."

Wynter shook her head. "For all I know, they have a loose alliance with the Aeons. It's unlikely, but it isn't impossible. Of course, it's more probable that they despise the people of Aeon. But if so, that could extend to me even



though I've been banished. I'm not taking any chances."

If she'd thought that the Ancients would demand her personal information, she wouldn't have chosen to head there. But she wasn't worried that she'd be asked to part with any of her secrets. Another attractive thing about Devil's Cradle was that no one cared where you came from, what brought you there, or what happened in your life before you arrived. Everyone got to start afresh.

"What do you think the price will be to live there?" asked Delilah.

Wynter puffed out a breath. "I don't know, but I don't doubt that it'll be hefty." Just as there had been a big price to pay for being accepted into Aeon. "But if we can't pay it, well, no harm done. We can leave and take our chances alone."

The problem was ... she suspected she wouldn't survive long if she did. The Aeons would just keep sending people after her, and the groups they sent would just keep getting bigger. Wynter might be a monster of sorts, but she wouldn't be able to fight the Aeons and their people alone.

Finally, the trees around her thinned out. She drove onto a vast prairie land. And as she spotted the badland-type landscape beyond it, she knew she was close to the town.

A few days' drive from here, Aeon was a beautiful place with all its lush land. But as Wynter looked at all the cliffs, crooks, hills, and multi-colored tall, rock spires in the distance up ahead, she found herself more in awe of this place than she'd ever been of her old home. There was a surreal, haunting, primal beauty to all the stark, untamed, rugged landscape here.

She'd half-expected to come up against some kind of shield before getting this far, or to at least be stopped at an outpost and forced to state her purpose. But there were no magickal wards, no forcefields, no border control of any sort.

As she continued to follow the dirt road that cut through the prairie and led to the base of the rocky terrain, she kept a careful lookout for signs of life. But there were no guards stationed anywhere, and no one seemed to be patrolling the area.

And then she got it.

A smile curved her mouth. They didn't stop potential enemies from entering the town, because they believed in letting their prey come to them. It was a trap, really. Any enemies would arrogantly stroll into the heart of the Ancients' territory ... and then they'd be taken out.

Cocky, but smart.

Reaching the end of the prairie, she drove through crannies, under arches, and then shot through a short tunnel. Exiting it, she felt her lips hitch up. Oh, they'd arrived.

"Looks like a cross between a military compound and a coastal town," said Delilah, leaning forward slightly.

Houses of various shapes, sizes, and colors bordered a pretty plaza. Beyond them were warehouses, pastureland, and utility structures. Trees, shrubs, lakes, and steep mountains lay on the outskirts, almost framing the town.

There was no shortage of people hanging around, even at this late hour. A few meandered along the plaza's cobbled paths. Others stood outside houses or bars or other establishments. One particular group was gathered around a bonfire, laughing and drinking.

Since no particular place shouted, *You'll find an Ancient here*, she pulled up at the curb and asked one resident where she should be looking. Even as he eyed her warily, he easily gave her directions to "the Ancients' base," which was apparently some kind of stately building.

Wynter thanked him and drove on. "I half-expected him to be rude or not answer. I mean, everyone we spoke to about this place was clear that the people here aren't all that friendly toward outsiders." Maybe he hadn't been an ass because he'd once been in their position.

"Ooh, I see a herbalist store," said Delilah. "I wonder if they're hiring."

Wynter slid her a frown. "Uh, not sure that'd be the best place of work for you."

Delilah's back snapped straight. "I am *a master* with herbs."

"Undeniable," said Wynter. "But you like many of your concoctions to have horrific side effects."

"Only if I don't like the personality or intention of the customer who buys them."

Delilah had once made a living from selling forbidden concoctions on the black market. But they always had 'side effects.' So, for instance, a guy looking for a date-rape potion would suddenly find himself suffering from a case of penile necrosis even if he hadn't himself ingested the concoction. In short, the magick backfired.

"I like to be a vessel for karma," Delilah added, lifting one shoulder in an unapologetic shrug.

“But your old customers didn’t, and so came the backlash. I suspect there’ll be people *here* you won’t like. I don’t want to have to kill someone because they threatened you.”

“Aw, you’d do that for me? You’re such a good Priestess. I just *love* our coven.”

Wynter’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “I am *not* a Priestess.”

“Every coven has to have one,” said Delilah, her eyes dancing.

Which was why Wynter had firmly decided that ... “This is *not* a coven.” But Delilah persisted with this shit just to irritate her. “All I’m saying is that we’ll struggle to keep a low profile if you’re mutating the bodies of people you dislike.”

As she pulled up outside tall iron gates that surrounded a dark, gothic, three-story Victorian manor, Wynter let out a low whistle. The building was as impressive as it was imposing. Slate multi-faceted roof. Towers and turrets. Decorative trimming. Wrought-iron balconies. Wide wrap-around porch. Stained glass in the door and arched windows.

“Some base,” said Xavier, shifting forward in his seat.

Yanking up her metaphorical bootstraps, Wynter reached out of the open car window and pressed the intercom button on the security post.

After a few moments, there was a crackle of static. “Can I help you?” a rough voice asked.

“I’d like to talk to an Ancient, if possible,” she said, not bothering with chit-chat.

“About?”

“Applying for residency.”

There was a long moment of silence, and then a buzzer sounded. The gates slowly swung open.

“So far, so good.” Her pulse beating faster than she’d have liked, Wynter drove up the long driveway and parked behind one of the few cars that sat outside the manor. “Xavier, wake Anabel.” Wynter slid out of the vehicle and opened the rear door for Hattie.

Holding up her book, the old woman pointed at a page. “Girl, what’s anilingus?”

Wynter felt her head jerk back. “What are you reading?”

“Erotica at its finest,” Hattie replied.

Wynter waved her hand, not sure she wanted to explain the concept of rim jobs to an old woman. “We’ll talk about this later.”

Hattie awkwardly exited the car, looking all stiff and frail. It was a total act. She wasn't quite as harmless as she liked to appear. That said, you were safe with the darling woman as long as you didn't attack her or marry her. She'd killed every one of her husbands. She was the group's very own black widow.

Rubbing nervously at her arm, Anabel crossed to Wynter and the others, looking upon the manor with sheer dread. But then, pretty much everything made the blonde nervous. She was most in her element when in the kitchen making potions, where she wasn't required to interact with anyone. "So this is where we die," she said, her voice solemn.

Delilah sighed. "You say that almost wherever we go. We're not going to—*oh my God, what is that smell?*"

Anabel lifted her chin. "Farting is a normal bodily function."

"Not if it smells like something died up your ass."

"I don't handle ethnic food well."

Wafting his hand, Xavier grimaced. "Just please don't unload anymore of those farts until we're away from the Ancient."

Anabel sniffed. "You're all so dramatic."

Delilah snickered. "You'd know all about that, Miss *So This is Where We Die.*"

The blonde pointed at her nape. "I can feel death's breath on the back of my neck. I know that feeling all too well. And maybe if *you* remembered all *your* past deaths, you'd be a little more understanding."

Groaning, Wynter raised a hand. "All right, let's stop there."

Anabel often saw her potential demise everywhere—the paranoia came from her soul's ability to retain memories and skills from past lives. When you recalled every death, you also remembered just how easily life could be snatched right from under you.

None of the crew were entirely sure if she was in fact the reincarnation of Bloody Mary or if she simply believed it because she'd experimented on herself with one too many of her potions over the years. Whatever the case, if you called for Mary, Anabel's demeanor would change in an instant and she'd happily kill anything standing in her path.

"In case you've all forgotten, we have somewhere we need to be." Wynter exhaled heavily. "Fingers crossed this goes well."

She walked to the porch, unable to fully admire the ornate trim work and gingerbread cutouts while her gut was in knots. A lot rode on whatever

happened next. As Delilah had pointed out, they had no Plan B.

Reaching the door, Wynter pressed the bell. Close-up, she could see that the stained-glass pane depicted mythical scenes of some sort. Nice work.

Finally, the door opened. She'd expected a butler. The dude in front of her was rugged and masculine with an outlaw-warrior vibe. *Gargoyle*, she sensed. He wasn't Wynter's type, but he was definitely hot.

Patting her faded red hair, Hattie smiled up at him. "You look just like the highlander on the cover of a book I read recently. Do *you* know what anilingus is?"

Wynter felt her eyes drift closed. Unfuckingreal. It didn't help that Xavier had choked on a laugh, or that a silently chuckling Delilah was leaning against Wynter as if unable to support her own weight.

Clearing her throat, Wynter opened her eyes and cast the man in front of her an apologetic smile. "Just pretend they're not there. I often do."

He grunted, moved aside, and waved them in with a sweep of his arm.

Stepping into a very grand hallway, she saw that the Old World feel continued inside the manor with its high, vaulted ceilings, carved columns, ornate lighting, imperial staircase, and decorative moldings. *Wow*.

"All of you wait here," the gargoyle instructed.

Wynter nodded and watched him stalk away, wondering just which of the Ancients she'd find herself facing. She then turned to Hattie. "Haven't we told you not to ask strangers sex-related questions?"

"I just want to know what this anilingus thing is," said Hattie, all innocence. "He was a strapping man, so I'm sure he's popular with the ladies—he seemed like a good source of information." She pointed at the page of her book again. "I'm thinking it's possibly back-door finger-fun."

Back-door finger fun? Seriously?

"More like tongue-fun," said Xavier, a smirk playing around the edges of his mouth.

Hattie's hazel eyes went wide. "Ooh, really? My, my, my. Do people wear tongue protection when they do that?"

Wynter sighed and scrubbed a hand down her face. They were all whacked. Every one of them.

\*

"You're serious, aren't you?"

Cain flicked a look at Azazel and reminded him, “I rarely joke.”

“I thought you were just in a bad mood because you had to fire one of your aides. I know you have no patience for conducting interviews.”

Cain sighed and crossed to the vintage liquor cabinet. “Firing him was probably an overreaction on my part, but my mind isn’t in a good place right now. I’ve been awake too long. I haven’t Rested in over five centuries, and I’m feeling the sting of it.”

Azazel sat on the sofa. “I sensed that you were struggling; I just wasn’t sure how badly.”

Cain poured whiskey into a tumbler. “The numbness wasn’t so bad for a time, because things pierced it here and there, but that very rarely happens now. And that’s the problem. It’s emotion that makes a person feel alive.”

When you’d lived so long that you’d experienced the same emotions over and over and over and over—anger, sadness, grief—they eventually lost their power over you. And when you no longer experienced the feelings that made people hesitate to hurt others, like empathy or remorse, it left you capable of many things.

Azazel thrust his hand through his dark hair and gave a solemn nod. “We’ve all hit that stage at some point where you start seeking other ways to make you feel alive. Adrenaline rushes. Doling out pain. Receiving pain.”

“And it’s never long before those things lose their shine, because boredom is our constant and closest companion.” Cain knocked back some of his drink. “I’ve stopped wanting things. The only thing I really crave is retribution—that never goes away, never will. But other than that? There’s nothing.” When there was nothing you wanted, you were just drifting, floating, aimless. “And now there are times when my mood goes black. It’s not anger. It’s not rage. It’s a dark state of mind, and I don’t like the thoughts I have when those moods take me. I need to click the reboot option.”

No more than two of the seven Ancients ever Rested at a time. The sisters, Inanna and Ishtar, had chosen to Rest three centuries ago. Ishtar had woken early, which meant Cain could now sleep if he wished.

“If that’s what you need, I’m behind you.” Azazel cocked his head, his blue eyes sharpening. “You ever worry that one day we’ll wake and find that the Rest didn’t do shit for us?”

Considering it had been an eternally long time since it had made him feel truly refreshed ... “Yes. When we were first banished, I swore vengeance would one day be ours. I didn’t think we’d still be trapped in this place so

many years later.”

“You’ve given up hope that we’ll ever be free?”

“No. I never will. But essentially being caged is wearing on us all, isn’t it? That’s why our Rests are becoming less and less *restful*.” People thought that Cain and the other Ancients stayed in Devil’s Cradle by choice. In truth, they were stuck here, courtesy of the Aeons. “But we can’t open this invisible prison unless we kill the four who created it, and it’s impossible to do that when they won’t step foot on this land.”

“At least we can take comfort in knowing they’ll hate that we still live. The Aeons were sure we’d all lose our shit on being confined and that we’d then turn on each other. They underestimated us on so many levels. They probably have no idea how prepared we are for war.”

“All the preparations mean nothing if we can’t make them bring that war to us. We have no way to take it to them.”

Azazel swept his hand down a face that females everywhere sighed over. He’d been described by more than one woman as having the look of an avenging angel—which might be why he’d been mistaken by humans for a fallen-angel-turned-demon.

“I kept thinking that, annoyed we still live, they’d come to finish us off at some point,” said Azazel. “Particularly you. With the exception of your mother, they hate that you’ve ever breathed.”

More, they upheld that Cain had no place on—or beneath, as it were—this Earth. In his opinion, he had as much of a right to exist as anyone else. He understood why the Aeons felt differently. He simply didn’t agree. “I thought they’d come to rescue Seth, given how convinced they are that I brainwashed him into joining our side.”

Azazel snorted. “They don’t know your brother half as well as they think they do.” He briefly glanced out of the window, adding, “He’ll be disappointed that you plan to Rest awhile, but he’ll understand.”

“I don’t intend to Rest for another few months. I have to settle several matters beforehand. You’ll all have permission to wake me early if a situation warrants it.” Cain sank onto the other velvet sofa. “You know, you didn’t tell me what brought you here.”

Azazel’s eyes lit up. “Ah, well, I heard something you’re going to find *very* interesting. It’ll put a smile on your face like nothing else can.”

“Go on.”

Azazel paused, no doubt for effect. “The land of Aeon appears to be

perishing.”

Cain blinked. “Perishing?”

“It’s as if some sort of wasting disease has settled over the town. It appeared six months ago, and it’s eating away at the land, drying up the water sources, and poisoning the fruit and vegetables that grow there. Not sure if it has also spread to the city beneath it—our source still has no access to that part. But just the thought that the same blight could be there ...” Azazel’s mouth curved into a shit-eating grin. “Yeah, I like it.”

“Your source must have been fucking with you. The Aeons can effortlessly combat environmental decay—they’re masters of elemental power, after all.”

“Oh, they’ve tried to fight the outbreak every step of the way.” Azazel stretched out his long legs. “But whatever’s afflicting the land hasn’t responded to their attempts in any way. It keeps steadily spreading, no matter what they do.”

Frowning, Cain shook his head. “That makes no sense.”

“But it *does* make me smile. You want to as well. You know you do. Go on.”

“If the land was really contaminated—”

“My source swore it was true. He seems fucking terrified. I’m not surprised, because the decay isn’t even the worst of it.”

“How so?”

“People are getting sick.”

All right, now Cain *knew* the guy’s source was talking shit. “No way am I buying that.”

“It’s happening, I’m telling you. Only the mortals have been affected, though. I heard it’s like the black plague on steroids.”

“Come on, Azazel, the healers there are some of the best in the world.”

“Which is why no one has died. *Yet*. I mean, think what will happen if the healers run out of steam.”

Cain took another swig of his whiskey. “You’re not even a little skeptical?”

“I was at first, but my source isn’t that *good* an actor. His fear was real.”

“You sure it’s not that you’d simply love for it to be true?”

Azazel hummed. “Maybe. Can’t deny that I’d like the prissy Aeons to suffer for what they’ve done. They’re oh-so proud of their land. Those who don’t live in the underground city might not realize that it features the biblical



Garden of Eden, but *we* know. And we also know that any damage to their pride and joy would hit them where it hurt. Infecting it ...” Again, Azazel grinned. “Someone should have thought of it sooner. It’s a fucking genius way to piss those assholes off.”

*If* it wasn’t pure bullshit.

“Strange that no one’s come here accusing us of being responsible for it. We were always their scapegoats. I would have thought they’d blame us right off the mark for something like that.”

“Assuming it’s actually happening ... they’d blame us, but they wouldn’t contact us. They wouldn’t want us to know we’d succeeded in what they believed we’d attempted to do.”

“Ah, true.” Azazel draped his arms over the back of the sofa. “Well, my source had no theories for what could be causing the decay or the plague. He said nothing had happened recently that could be connected to it. A keeper seems to have run off with an exiled resident at around the same time that the problems began, but that’s it. I wonder if they’re sick too or if they’ve had a lucky escape from whatever’s running rampant through Aeon.”

“They won’t be so lucky when hunters track them down.” Those hunters liked their prey to die *hard*.

“Considering most of the people in the town are kind of preoccupied with the blight and pestilence, I doubt the rogues are anyone’s priority.”

The door swung open, and Cain’s younger brother stalked inside, the image of agitation.

Cain eyed Seth as he took another sip of his drink. “You all right?”

He grunted, planting his hands on his hips.

“Let me guess,” began Azazel. “Ishtar.”

“I don’t know what bothers me more,” said Seth. “That she’s playing stupid games again, or that she thinks they’re going to work.” His amber eyes narrowed at the expression that crossed Azazel’s face. “Wait, *you* thought they might work?”

“She’s exceptionally good at getting under your skin,” Azazel defended. “Ishtar knows you too well. She knows what buttons to push. And you’re a sickeningly forgiving person.”

Yes, but Seth was ... different from the other Ancients. Good. Noble. And brave enough to side with Cain and the others while the rest of their family fought them head-on and drove them out of their own home.

“I *do* forgive her,” Seth confirmed, slumping onto the sofa beside Cain.

“But when I forgave her, I also let her go and chose to move on. I wasn’t pining for her while she was Resting. It’s been centuries since I’ve touched her. She talks like it was last week. That’s when she’s not flirting with Solomon in the hope of getting a reaction out of me,” Seth added, referring to a mage in her service who’d never gotten along with Seth.

Cain braced his glass on his thigh. “She’s probably hoping you’ll both compete for her.” Anyone who didn’t know Ishtar would think she was a typical attention junkie. She *did* love to be admired and fawned over, but it wasn’t about attention. It was about power. She craved the feeling of power she got from having others yearn for and fight over her.

Seth looked at him. “She came onto you as well, didn’t she?”

Cain only nodded. He hadn’t slept with Ishtar in over eight centuries and yet, like with Seth, she’d spoken of their time together as if it had been recent.

Azazel linked his fingers behind his head. “Well, she didn’t hit on me.”

“She would have done if you didn’t loathe her,” said Seth.

Azazel’s brow creased. “I don’t hate her. I just like to pretend she’s dead.”

Seth sighed. “I have to say, that sounds like hate to me.”

Azazel gave an indifferent shrug. “It’s a weird point of pride for her that she’s had two brothers, you know. It’s like she thinks you two broke some kind of bro-code for her.”

Holding back a snort, Cain downed more of his whiskey. In truth, Seth had spoken with him before getting involved with Ishtar, wanting to be sure that Cain would be fine with it. Cain’s only worry had been that she’d shit all over Seth.

“Really, I brought all this on myself.” Seth skimmed a hand over his close-cropped, dark-blond hair. “I saw how she was with Cain; I ignored the red flags. But it was like with Lilith and Dantalion. When they were together, Lilith came across as a shrew, but it was simply that they didn’t *fit*. They weren’t good for each other.”

“You were good for Ishtar,” Cain told him as he returned to the liquor cabinet to top up his glass. “You’re steady. Patient. You’re the kind of man she needs. But Ishtar’s more about what she wants than what she needs.” That had always been her problem.

“Yeah.” Seth let out a long sigh. “So, what were you two talking about? Anything interesting?”

Azazel beamed. “Actually, it’s fucking *fascinating*.”

Seth blinked. “Oh? What?”

The clock chimed, and Azazel softly swore. “Gotta go. Walk with me, I’ll tell you everything,” he said to Seth. The two stood upright as Azazel began, “So I spoke to my source at Aeon—”

A knock came at the door.

“Yes?” Cain called out.

Maxim stepped inside the parlor. “There’s a coven here requesting to see an Ancient. They want residency.”

“All right,” said Cain. “Bring them to me.”



# Chapter Three

Hearing footfalls, Wynter turned away from the painting she'd been admiring to see the gargoyle coming toward her.

He swept his gaze over her and the others. "Follow me."

Wynter raised an *Are you ready for this?* brow at her crew, who all nodded. "Let me do the talking, please." Because Christ knew what kind of shit they'd blurt out, and they did *not* need to be offending an Ancient.

Trailing after their guide, she asked, "Who has agreed to see us?"

"Cain," he replied.

Her heartbeat stuttered. *Not* the best news, considering he'd been described as a mental sadist, but it was better than being turned away.

Wynter passed through many ornamental arches and glanced into various rooms, noting several people lingering around.

Rolling back her shoulders, she fixed a placid look on her face. Innocuous, staid, uninteresting—*that* was what she was going for. Wynter wanted to fade into the background and draw as little attention as possible while here. She wanted to be simply another resident, wanted to come across as a mere run-of-the-mill witch.

Finally, her guide halted near a mahogany door and wrapped his knuckles on it. A deep voice bid them to enter. Following the gargoyle into the room, Wynter almost blinked in surprise. She'd expected a simple office. It was a parlor. Gothic and elegant, it had antique Victorian furnishings, thick red drapes, a large stone fireplace, Persian rugs—

Sharp, hooded eyes clashed with hers, so serpent-like in their intensity that

it tripped every one of her inner danger alarms. At the same time, though, her body perversely perked up. And she couldn't really judge it for that.

Long and lean and supremely male, this man was perfect in form. His face looked carved from stone, all sharp angles and hard lines like an uncut jewel. His short, smooth hair was the color of obsidian, and he had the kind of full, carnal mouth that made a girl wonder just what he could do with it. His eyes were definitely his best feature, though—they were dark and almost ... lustrous, like two black pearls.

So this was Cain ... The originator of murder, the ancestor of envy, the quintessential personification of sin.

Someone could have warned her that he was also built to compel and seduce.

He stood tall and straight with his shoulders back and his feet planted—the image of self-possession. The long-sleeved tee he wore stretched tight across a delightfully toned chest. He'd shoved the sleeves up to his elbows, revealing ancient-looking tattoos. Even his forearms were toned, like those of a drummer.

"The coven I mentioned," the gargoyle said to him.

Cain lifted a glass tumbler from a liquor cabinet. "So I see." His voice was a deep, rumbly, *I'll talk dirty to you all night long* kind of sexy that made her think *very* filthy thoughts. "You can leave now, Maxim."

The guy obligingly breezed out of the room.

Cain took a swig of his drink, his gaze sweeping over the others, who'd all fanned out behind her. His eyes then once more locked with hers, unapologetically direct.

Her pulse skittered as his long legs began to cover the space between them. He moved with the sinuous grace of a tiger on the hunt, each step slow and precise, like he was callously savoring every fluid stride that took him closer to his prey. Damn, he had an explicit, sexy *rawness* to him. An edge. Not a devil-may-care edge; no, the edge of an apex predator who knew he was the penultimate alpha male and wouldn't hesitate to slit your throat if you stepped a foot wrong. And she was entirely unprepared for how much that revved her engines.

Silently cursing her unruly hormones, she kept her expression blank, trying and failing not to admire the muscles bunching and flexing beneath his shirt. While her combat-trained mind instinctively plotted all kinds of potential preemptive strikes just in case he moved to hurt her, the entity inside her blinked

and lifted its head. It went on high alert, but she sensed no panic from it. It didn't feel threatened or vulnerable. She wasn't sure if it could feel fear.

Finally, Cain came to a stop in front of her, so close she could feel his body heat. He gave her a lazy, head-to-toe perusal. An electric awareness snapped the air taut as little sparks seemed to spring from her to him. Not liking that visceral chemistry or the damn fluttering in her stomach, she fought the frown that tried tugging at her brow.

Towering over her, he watched her. Studied her. Missed nothing. "I am Cain. And you must be ... ?"

She gave him a respectful dip of the chin and said, "Wynter."

"Wynter," he echoed, swirling his tumbler. "Pretty name."

"It is, isn't it?" said Delilah, remaining slightly behind Wynter. "Perfect for a Priestess."

Wynter felt her lips thin.

"So you're a coven?" asked Cain.

Since they no longer needed to pose as one, Wynter shook her head. "No, we're—"

"The Bloodrose Coven." Delilah reached past Wynter and handed him *a fucking business card*.

Wynter whirled on her. "What in the hell? When did you get—you know what, we'll talk about this later." She quickly introduced the others, thankful they remained quiet.

Cain inclined his head at them, a ghost of a smile now touching one corner of his mouth. It didn't soften his expression or relax Wynter's nerves. Something told her he'd still wear that hint of a smile while caning your fingers.

"Drink?" he offered.

"No, thanks." She'd rather keep her wits about her.

The others also politely turned down his offer.

He gestured at one of the sofas. "Sit." An instruction, not an invitation. It wasn't spoken rudely, just in an expectant, no-nonsense tone that told her this was a man used to being in power.

He was also undoubtedly used to being obeyed ... so it would probably be best *not* to spend a lot of time around him, because Wynter had a will of her own and wasn't afraid to use it. That wouldn't help with her whole 'innocuous' act.

She sat in the center of the couch he'd indicated and then crossed one leg

over the other. Anabel and Hattie sat either side of her while Delilah and Xavier each claimed an armrest.

Cain sank onto the sofa opposite them and took another swig of his drink. “Maxim tells me you came to apply for residency.”

Wynter nodded. “That’s right.”

“I won’t ask where you’re originally from or why you’d choose to move to Devil’s Cradle—that’s your business. But I do need to be certain that you’re all fully aware of the realities of this town.” He balanced his glass on his thigh. “It was founded by myself and the other Ancients, all of whom live beneath the surface. There are rules, and everyone is expected to obey them. Punishments tend to be severe. Still, fights often break out. It can be difficult for several breeds of preternatural to coexist in a small town.”

“The population seems bigger than I thought it would be.”

“Oh, Devil’s Cradle is home to many creatures. Some merely come here because they haven’t been accepted anywhere else. I’m talking hybrids, misfits, cursed beings, or those with mutations. We also have species hiding out because they’ve been hunted near to extinction. Then there are the others, and most are the definition of unsavory. Outcasts, criminals, crazies. They have prices on their heads or are fleeing from persecution.” He idly tapped his finger on his glass. “Every single resident has one thing in common—they’re desperate for safety.”

A little like Wynter and her crew, then.

“If you become one of us, the Ancients here will protect and shelter you. We will never give you up to anyone who may come for you, we will never ostracize you, we will never hold you accountable for anything you did before coming here. *But* there’ll be a price.”

“Will there be any exceptions to the whole ‘not giving us up to anyone who’d come looking for us’ thing?” asked Xavier.

“No,” replied Cain. “We protect our own. You must understand, though, that this isn’t a fanciful sanctuary. It’s not some quiet, peaceful haven. Jungle law is very much prevalent here. If you can each hold your own, or at least find good allies, you shouldn’t find yourselves constantly challenged. Going lone wolf—or lone coven, as it were—would be a mistake, especially if you’re people who generally shy away from duels.”

Wynter wouldn’t hesitate to cross swords with anyone who’d think to challenge her. Ordinarily. Here, though, she wanted to keep her head down. Which would be hard to do when the people on this sofa with her were

freaking insane. She was about to once more repeat that they weren't actually a coven, but then Cain spoke again.

"Are you all still interested in becoming residents here?"

"Yes," replied Wynter, and the others answered in the affirmative.

"Like I said before, there's a price," he warned.

And she could guess what it was. "Our memories would be stolen from us if we ever decided to leave?"

"No, we are not interested in erasing people's identities. Although it should be noted that, on leaving, the memories of your time here will become fuzzy and soon after fade."

That wasn't so terrible, since it wasn't like she'd forget her entire life. "Okay, so what's the price?"

"Unless, or until, you officially leave Devil's Cradle for good"—he took another drink from his glass and then tipped it their way— "your souls would partially belong to me."

\*

Cain watched as Wynter went very still. The others exchanged uneasy looks but didn't speak, clearly content to let her take the lead. To look at her, no one would think she was Priestess of a coven. Nothing about her screamed 'authority.'

Average height and slender as a rake, she didn't appear in the least bit threatening. Her posture was both self-protective and submissive. She kept making nervous little gestures—biting her lip, twirling her ankle, swallowing hard.

It would be so easy to dismiss her as any sort of threat, *but* ... there was the noiseless stealth with which she moved. And her quicksilver eyes—sharp, piercing, framed by thick dark lashes—had done a predatory sweep of the room like a leopard on the hunt when she'd first entered. It had snatched his inner creature's total attention.

She also met Cain's gaze easily. Not boldly, not in challenge, but she was utterly focused on him. And he knew she was watching for a sign that he'd attack. He knew she was ready to counter any move he might make. It almost made him smile.

Knowing that she'd strike without hesitation if he should prove a lethal threat stirred his blood in a way he wouldn't have expected. The creature



inside him liked it just the same. Liked her.

They also both sensed that there was something *off* about this little witch. Cain couldn't put his finger on what it was about her that raised a red flag in his mind, or why his monster didn't look upon her as prey. It saw another predator, which was why it had been watching her as intently as she watched Cain.

He stared directly into her eyes, wishing he could see inside her head. No amount of staring made her squirm in discomfort or falter with her act. Her nerves were rock steady. Wynter wasn't a slave to her emotions, no, she was their fucking master. He respected that.

It was possible she was purposely giving off a *nothing to see here, move along* vibe because she simply wanted to fly under the radar. If so, that wouldn't work. No one who looked like her would ever go unnoticed.

She was fucking beautiful with those unusual eyes, the heavy lower lip, her high cheekbones, and all that glorious dark hair that hung down her back straight as rain. But her attractiveness was only a small part of her draw. The way she carried herself, the steel in her spine, the sharpness in her eyes, the magick that hummed around her like an aura of electricity—all of it came together in a very pretty package. And he wanted her.

She gave her head a little shake. “We'd each have to sell you our soul?”

“No. But you would have to submit partial ownership of it over to me.”

“In what way is that different? I don't really understand.”

“When someone signs their soul over to me in exchange for something it means that, no matter where they are in the world, they owe me their compliance. They are chattel, essentially. Puppets on a string, even. If I ever tug on those strings, they have to do as I bid. Each of you, however, would not be under my control as I would only have partial rights to your soul. But you would owe me respect, loyalty, and be in my service for as long as you're residents here.”

“Why you specifically? Why not all seven Ancients?”

“We would all have authority over the five of you, of course. But the other Ancients would not hold such rights merely because it is not *them* making you the offer. Had another Ancient been on duty here tonight and had you accepted their offer, you would all have been in *their* service.”

She gave a slow nod of understanding.

“So ... is this a price you're all willing to pay?”

She glanced at each of her coven members. For long moments, they

silently seemed to hem and haw but, eventually, one by one nodded.

Wynter turned back to Cain. “The issue here is ... I don’t know if you’d actually *want* partial ownership of my soul.”

He felt his brows flit together. “Why is that?”

She shrugged. “It’s undead.”

Cain stared at her for long seconds, taken off-guard—something that very rarely happened. He leaned forward and, careful not to spill his drink, braced his elbows on his thighs. “When did you die?”

“When I was a child. As you no doubt know, magick can do all sorts of things, even bring people back from the dead.”

“I’ve heard that those with undead souls never feel real satisfaction. Is that true?”

“Yes. It’s like there’s a ... detachment there. No taste or smell or sensation fully gratifies us, so we exist in a kind of limbo. But it beats being dead.”

“Yes, I suppose it does.” He felt a slight stirring in his mind—one he hadn’t felt in so long he almost didn’t recognize it for what it was: fascination. “I’ve never touched an undead soul before.”

She double-blinked. “You can ... touch souls?”

“If I’m granted partial or full rights to them, yes.”

“So if we agreed to your condition, you could touch our souls? What would that mean for us?”

“It wouldn’t allow me access to your thoughts or feelings, if that is what you’re wondering. But with one touch, I would have a general idea of your character merely because the soul is the foundation blocks of a person. Additionally, I’d know if you died.”

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “Could you also cause us pain?”

He nodded. “There’s nothing more sensitive than the soul.”

“So, in essence, we’d be completely vulnerable to you?”

“Yes.” And where it concerned Wynter, the dark heart of him liked the idea of that. “You would all also wear my mark on your palm. A brand that declares you’re under my protection and in my service. Every resident is marked by whatever Ancient claims rights to their soul.”

“How do we know you really intend to give those rights back to us when we leave?”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Not even a little. No offense.”

He felt his mouth quirk. Oh, he liked this little witch. And he’d definitely

have her. “None taken. You needn’t worry. I’ll be as bound to the terms of the verbal contract as you.”

“What *exactly* are the terms?”

“There’s no fine print, Wynter. The agreement would be simple: For as long as you’re a resident of Devil’s Cradle, your soul will partially belong to me, and so you will owe me your loyalty and respect while also being in my service. In return, I will ensure you have shelter and protection from insiders or outsiders—no exceptions. The same will go for the rest of your coven if they agree.”

“Just to be clear, we’re not a coven,” said Wynter, though her thoughts were mostly centered around his ‘terms.’ She’d known the price would be hefty; she hadn’t known it would be *this* high. She’d heard that Aeons refrained from attempting to plant temporary spies here. She could now guess why.

Giving up some rights to her soul held no appeal, but neither did leaving Devil’s Cradle. Her gut told her that *this* was where she needed to be. And it wasn’t like she couldn’t reclaim those rights. If she decided she wanted them back, she could just up and leave, couldn’t she?

There was nothing in that agreement he’d mentioned that said he’d be privy to her secrets. He clearly hadn’t sensed the entity she hosted—an entity that was totally chill right now and close to dozing again—so that was good. And since her monster wasn’t bound to her soul, he wouldn’t ‘feel’ it on touching said soul. In sum, she’d be able to keep him in the dark.

If accepting Cain’s offer was a bad idea, she’d have received some sort of warning from the deity who’d branded her by now—She was seemingly full of opinions and often interfered with this or that.

The thing that most encouraged Wynter to accept his offer was that this dude was most *definitely* a match for the Aeons. He wouldn’t tremble in his boots if they tracked her to Devil’s Cradle. More, he’d be bound to protect Wynter from them.

But none of that meant anything if her crew weren’t on board with this, though she doubted they’d turn Cain’s offer down. They simply weren’t sane enough to be as wary as they should.

She glanced at each of them and lifted one brow. “Well?”

Delilah lifted one hand. “I’m in.”

“Same here,” said Xavier.

“I’m tired of running,” began Hattie. “I’m too old to keep doing it. I want

to plant my derrière somewhere. This place is as good as any.”

When Anabel didn't speak, Wynter gave her a gentle nudge and asked, “What about you?”

Anabel gave her a shaky smile. “We all have to die somewhere, so ... yeah, whatever.”

Wynter shook her head. *So morbid.* Cutting her gaze back to Cain, she said, “All right, then; it looks like we're staying.”

His eyes glinting with a dark satisfaction she didn't quite understand, he held his hand out to her. “Then we have a deal?”

Wynter shook his hand. “We have a deal.”

A swish of power curled around their joined hands, warm and binding. At the same time, there was a curious shifting sensation in her chest. More lines of blazing pain whizzed along her palm, as if something was being carved into the skin wickedly fast.

She flipped over her hand to find a large ‘C’ on her palm that curved around a triangle that had a snake threaded through it. The mark was a little red and raw, like a laser had mere seconds ago gone to work on her flesh. The burn had faded though, so she guessed the redness would soon also vanish.

As he went through the same branding process with the others, she traced the mark on her palm carefully, marveling at how she felt no different than before despite apparently only now possessing partial rights to her soul. There was no sense of being shackled or owned or anything.

Done, Cain drained his glass and then smoothly rose to his feet. “Now I'll have Maxim get you all settled. He'll find you a place to live. He'll also explain the rules and just why it would be a bad idea for you to ignore them. I'm hoping I won't have to ever speak to you under other ... more unpleasant circumstances.”

Wynter stood, and the others followed suit. “We won't be breaking rules or making waves or anything like that.”

“Glad to hear it. I treat my own well. Until they displease me.” He paused, looking at her intently. “So don't displease me, Wynter.”



## Chapter Four

Maxim ushered them into an office not far away from the parlor. Wynter glanced around the room. It was clean, masculine, and spacious. A little soulless, though, since it lacked any personal touches. The wood-paneled walls matched the hardwood flooring and sturdy office desk. Filing cabinets lined the wall. Above them were shelves on which folders and books were neatly stacked side by side.

Maxim took the chair behind the desk. “I don’t need background information, but I do need your forenames. Surnames aren’t required.”

Xavier cleared his throat. “It is good to meet you,” he said in a thick French accent. “I am Andre.”

Wynter sighed. “No, you’re not. Nor are you French.”

He only chuckled, the weirdo.

“You’ll have to excuse Xavier; he means nothing by it,” Hattie said to Maxim, hunching her shoulders and shuffling forward, playing the frail card hard. Of course, Maxim fell for it and was quick to help her into a seat, unaware that she ogled his ass and blew it a kiss when he turned away. “I’m Hattie,” she added. “By the way, I found out what anil—”

“Okay, so this here is Delilah,” Wynter quickly cut in. “And over there is Anabel. I’m Wynter.”

Back in his seat, Maxim scribbled down the names. “You have a choice to make. You can live on the surface of the town, or you can live in the underground city among the Ancients.”

Wynter frowned. “People don’t have to, like, *earn* their way down there

somehow?”

“No, that’s not how it works. Where you’ll reside is simply a matter of preference.”

Huh. Well, how about that. “What’s it like down there?”

His brow smoothed out, and a hint of warmth entered his eyes. “Like nothing you’ll have ever seen before. It’s no more peaceful than it is up here, though.”

Maybe not, but being below ground would be extra security. If anyone from Aeon came looking for some sign of Wynter, they’d never get down there to check. The rest of the crew must have had the same thought, because they all voted for living in the subterranean city.

“To be clear, there are no apartment buildings down there,” said Maxim. “There are only houses, and no one has a house to themselves. There are dwellings with enough rooms to accommodate you all, however. Most were extended so that covens and packs etc. could stick together.”

“Good, we’d want to share a place anyway,” said Delilah. “We’d all especially want to live with Wynter. Being away from our Priestess makes us uncomfortable.”

Wynter shot her a hard look. “Woman, I swear if you don’t stop this shit *I will cut you.*”

Grinning, Delilah totally ignored that and slapped one of her damn business cards on the desk. “The Bloodrose Coven at your service,” she told Maxim.

*For fuck’s sake.*

His brow creased, he thanked her and placed the card in a drawer. “Now ...” He opened a thick-ass file that seemed to hold records of some sort. “If I remember rightly, there are two houses in the city vacant that are large enough to accommodate five people,” he said, leafing through the pages before landing on a particular one. “Yes, there are, in fact, two. The problem is ... they’re both vacant for a reason.”

Wynter folded her arms. “Which is?”

“Mostly, it’s about their location.” Bracing his elbows on the desk, he interlinked his fingers. “Like calls to like, so vampires gravitate toward vampires, mages gravitate toward mages, etc., etc. Nests and conclaves and so on have formed. It’s only natural. Some species prefer to congregate in the same area. Several courts of fey, for instance, can share territory with no issue. But other species, such as lycans or were-beasts, do not do so well with

living very close to *other* packs. They don't wish to share their turf with their own kind."

Understanding how territorial those particular species were, Wynter nodded.

"The first empty residence is actually in a very peaceful neighborhood. The problem? You would be the only people in it who are not fey. And while fey can live among each other peacefully, they tend to drive out other types of preternatural using just about any means necessary.

"As for the other residence ... that house plus both the front and back yards are the only slices of territory that separates two packs of lycans. Every other home on that particular street is occupied by them. And these two packs argue frequently. There's usually no physical fighting, merely bickering. But it can get loud and tedious, as I'm sure you can imagine."

Delilah frowned. "Neither house sounds like a winner. But, personally, I'd rather deal with childish lycans than the damn fey."

Hattie hummed in agreement. "Fey are tricksters right down to the bone."

"They'll pull all kinds of shit in their efforts to drive us out," said Xavier.

Wynter looked at Anabel, who was doodling circles on her inner elbow with her fingertip. "What about you, Anabel? Fey, or lycans?"

"I'll go with lycans," she replied. "Statistically speaking, they're less likely to kill us."

Barely resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Wynter turned back to Maxim. "We'll go with the latter option, then."

"I'm not surprised," he said. "Few like to live among the fey unless they are fey themselves. Now, nobody is required to pay rent or bills, but they are required to buy their own food and possessions. To adequately support your coven, I would say that at least two of you will need to work."

Hattie let out a self-depreciating laugh. "I don't think my frail old bones could take another day of work."

Wynter snorted. There wasn't a damn thing wrong with Hattie's bones or any other part of her. The woman would probably outlive them all. But Maxim, totally sucked in by Hattie's act, gave her a gentle smile and assured her that her coven would no doubt support her decision.

Delilah looked at Wynter and rolled her eyes.

"There are various job openings in both the town and the city," said Maxim. "If any of you struggle to find employment, however, let me know and I'll see what I can do. Sometimes shop owners are willing to let people

purchase something in trade, but most prefer cash.”

Wynter twisted her mouth. “I don’t suppose you have a blacksmith’s shop, do you?”

He blinked. “We have several, actually. There’s a smithy who could use an extra set of hands, but he probably wouldn’t hire you because he *likes* to be able to moan that he and his assistant are overworked. They call him Grouch for a reason.”

“I could at least ask him, right?” said Wynter. “If he says no, he says no.”

“There’s no harm in it. I’ll point out where the shop is when we’re beneath the town. Don’t be surprised or take it personally if Grouch turns you away.”

Pausing, Maxim tapped his fingers on the desk. “Now for the rules you’ll live by as long as you reside in Devil’s Cradle. It’s not a long, complicated list. Most of it is pure common sense. No stealing, no assault, no breaking and entering, no stepping into the home of an Ancient unless you’re invited. People are allowed to challenge other residents to duels, but there will be no fights to the death unless it has been first cleared by the Ancient by whom they were marked. Except for in instances of self-defense, murder is the one thing that is not tolerated unless approval has been granted. Is that understood?”

Each of them nodded.

“Excellent. I’m sure you have general questions. I can answer them while I escort you to your new home. First, are there any bags or other possessions that you need to retrieve from your car?”

“Yes,” replied Wynter. “What do I do with the car?”

He pushed to his feet. “I will drive it to the vehicle storage warehouse for you later. In case you’re wondering where that is, it’s the warehouse closest to the river. You can access it any time.” He crossed to the filing cabinet and, after a quick rummage through it, pulled out several sets of keys. “For your new home,” he explained as he gave them each a set. “Now for your bags ...”

After they’d grabbed their luggage from the trunk, Wynter handed him her car keys so he could later drive it to the storage unit. They then followed him back into the manor, through the long halls, and over to a door near the office. He opened said door, revealing a large elevator. It had glass walls, but all you could presently see out of them was the elevator shaft.

They all stepped inside, and Maxim hit the down button.

As the elevator smoothly descended, she found herself wondering if the entrance to the underworld at Aeon was similar. No one ever spoke of it with



those who hadn't been 'chosen' to live beneath the town. The Aeons acted like there was something sacred about the simple downward journey from the surface. Wynter had never particularly understood it.

She blinked as they descended out of the shaft. Glancing out of the glass wall of the still-moving elevator, she felt her mouth drop open as she took in the view. Holy *shit*. The place was huge. So much bigger than she'd expected. It seemed to go on for miles, in fact.

It was nothing like the surface. No, this place was very much a modernized medieval city. There were timber-framed houses with wattle walls, cottages with thatched roofs, whimsical rustic dwellings, and enchanting towers. Some homes seemed to have been built into hills—you could just make out the windows and doors. Many had a real fairy-tale feel.

She could also see a number of small castles scattered around the city that were spaced well apart. More, beautiful canals interweaved through the city, Venice-style. Beyond all the buildings and the well-kept park were forests, rivers, mounds, and caverns.

"Well, fuck me," breathed Hattie, making Xavier snicker.

"The artificial moonlight is created by the Ancients' power, as you've probably guessed," said Maxim as Wynter glanced up at the cavernous ceiling and the aqua-blue stalactites that hung from it. "During the daytime, it's artificial sunlight."

Delilah looked at him. "Are the Ancients really weakened by sunlight? It's a theory floating around."

"There are many theories about the Ancients," Maxim replied carefully. "Few are accurate."

Finally, the elevator came to a stop inside a stone tower. There was no *ping*. The doors merely glided open. They all stepped out and headed for the exit in front of them.

"There's little technology here," Maxim went on. "No internet or Wi-Fi. No cell phones or computers."

Outside, Wynter chuckled as a cool wind ruffled her hair. "Artificial breezes, huh?"

"Yes," replied Maxim. "There's even snow at Christmas. The sunlight gives off warmth. On some days, the temperature is reasonably high. On other days, it's cooler. But it's never too hot or too cold. You'll hear sound effects at times. Birds chirping. Owls hooting. Even thunder, though a storm never follows. You're wondering how all that is possible. The short answer?"

Power.”

God, this was so cool.

They walked along cobbled paths, bypassing residents, most of whom moved with purpose as they carried things back and forth. Some were hanging greeneries on the front of their homes.

“The place is busier than usual because everyone’s getting ready for the festivities,” said Maxim.

“What festivities?” asked Hattie.

“Ancients can enter a coma-like Rest for centuries at a time, if they so please,” said Maxim. “One recently woke from a long one. Ishtar. It’s tradition for the waking of an Ancient to be honored by the other Ancients. Each will throw some sort of celebration for her at some point in the next month. The first will take place in two evenings’ time. All residents will be invited.”

“Are any other Ancients currently Resting?” asked Xavier.

Maxim dipped his chin as he replied, “One. Inanna. She’s Ishtar’s sister.”

They fell silent as they turned a corner. Again, people were striding purposefully around. Most gave Wynter and her crew the side-eye. She didn’t react. She was too busy taking everything in. It was honestly like walking through a fairy-tale book. She internally squealed in delight on seeing an actual gingerbread house.

“I noticed there are no cars down here,” said Hattie. “I’m guessing people walk or use the canal boats.”

His eyes on the crowd outside a tavern up ahead, Maxim nodded. “Some also go by horseback, but the horses are used more for recreational activities than for travel.”

Admiring the stained-glass windows of a house that had the look of a cute little country hideout, Wynter asked, “Where do the Ancients live?”

“Each has their own small Keep,” replied Maxim.

Delilah frowned. “Keep? You’re talking about the small castles that are spread around the city?”

“Yes.” Maxim paused as bursts of riotous laughter came out of the tavern’s open windows. “The Ancients don’t live alone. Their own personal hirelings reside with them.”

Hattie looked up at Maxim. “Do you live at Cain’s Keep, then?”

“Yes. I’m one of his aides. He has several.” Maxim gave each of them a pointed look. “As I said before, you must never attempt to walk into a Keep

unless you're invited. The baileys outside them, however, are open to everyone."

"Okay," said Delilah. "So, we've met Cain. What are the other Ancients like?"

Maxim hesitated. "Azazel is like Cain in some ways—hard, commanding, a predator in every respect. He is not quite as serious, though. Azazel smirks often, as if he knows something you don't ... but if you look close enough, you will see that he's not as entertained as he is removed.

"I've never met Inanna—she went to sleep three hundred years ago. I've heard she is as beautiful as Ishtar, who does not seem to be the most tolerant of people from what I have so far observed. Lilith is equally beautiful and surprisingly not vain about it.

"Dantalion—who, as with Azazel, mythology mistakenly claims is a demon—is more solitary than the other Ancients and seems to prefer his own company.

"Last but not least is Seth, Cain's younger brother. He is softer than the others. Smiles and laughs more."

Pausing, Maxim pointed to a castle not so far away. "That's Cain's Keep." He told them a little about it but quickly rounded up the conversation when he stopped outside a charming cottage that boasted angular lattice windows, a thatched roof, a heavy wooden door, and looked like some kind of magical retreat. "Here's your new home."

Wynter felt a smile build inside her. Oh, this would do her just nicely. It was *gorgeous*.

"If Grouch does grant you a position, Wynter, you won't be far from your place of work," said Maxim. "His blacksmith's shop is located in Cain's bailey."

So the cottage was both fantastical and conveniently located. Fabulous.

Once they'd headed up the path, Wynter used her new key to unlock the front door. It scraped the floor as she pushed it open. Walking inside the living area, she found herself charmed all over again. Curved walls. Wooden beams. Arched, brick fireplace. Columns that were in fact tree trunks. After everyone placed their luggage on the floor near the front door, they began exploring.

Delilah oohed and aahed in the living area while Hattie shuffled into the country-style kitchen to check it out. Xavier and Anabel raced upstairs, wanting first dibs on the bedrooms.

Maxim assured Wynter he'd return her car keys to her soon, wished her a goodnight, and then left.

Delilah turned to her, beaming. "How amazing is this place? Can you believe we live here? I mean, I would have been good with any home—I'm tired of sleeping in our car or motels. But ... we actually live *here*."

Hattie padded back into the living room, the frail-old-woman act firmly gone. "That kitchen is mine, girls. Let it be known that I will cut a bitch up if anyone uses that room without cleaning up after themselves."

Delilah snickered, saluting her. "We hear you, Gangster Granny."

Hattie sniffed. "Now someone needs to get the tins of soup out of my bag before my stomach eats itself."

After they'd eaten a light dinner, they wandered around the cottage, exploring every nook and cranny. The place was a lot bigger than it looked from the outside, mostly due to the extension at the rear of the property. Hattie claimed the downstairs bedroom, saying her 'bad back' couldn't handle the stairs. Anabel called dibs on the attic, so the three main bedrooms were left to Wynter, Delilah, and Xavier.

Wynter's room overlooked the cozy backyard. Like the other bedrooms, it was pretty basic, but it was also bright and clean. A simple lamp sat on the nightstand that was the same cherrywood as the drawers and triple wardrobe. Bare shelves lined the cream walls. Bulky square pillows were perched on the upholstered corner chair. The double bed had a simple white coverlet and pillow cases, and it called her name *big time*.

There was also an adjoined bathroom, but as there were no towels she'd have to skip the shower. She was way too tired to unpack, so Wynter only pulled three things from her duffel before plonking it on the floor—a tank top, a pair of shorts, and the sword that was tucked comfortably in its sheath. Once in her pjs, she carefully placed the sword in the closet ... which was roundabout the time Delilah came into the room with a burning bundle of herbs.

"I won't be able to sleep until the entire cottage has been cleansed," said Delilah, gently waving smoke into the air. "I want all the negative energy gone."

Wynter said nothing as the woman did her thing. She knew that Delilah would cleanse every room, every corner, every cupboard, every closet door. "I'd offer to bless the thresholds of the house, but I'm guessing you beat me to it."

“You guessed right. Hattie swept away all the cobwebs, dust, and leaves. I tell ya, that woman has more brooms than she does clothes.” A few minutes later, Delilah announced that she was done, adding, “Sweet dreams, Priestess.”

Wynter sighed. “Is there no way at all to make you stop?”

“None whatsoever.” Delilah shot her a bright smile and breezed out of the room.

Wynter simply shook her head. Though her crew drove her nuts at times, she couldn’t imagine not having them in her life. It was crazy to think that if she hadn’t been caught by a specific group of bounty hunters, she probably would never have met her crew.

Wynter switched off the light and then slid under the thick coverlet, her mind going back to the day the aforementioned hunters had nabbed her ...

\*

*Wynter slowly began to wake as a breeze lightly whispered over her face. It was cool. Refreshing. Otherworldly. And laced with a healthy dose of you need to wake up.*

*Frowning weakly at the throbbing ache in her temples, Wynter licked her dry mouth. God, she felt sick as a dog. Not to mention super groggy.*

*And hot. Really hot.*

*Her monster, on the other hand, was furious.*

*Furious?*

*She forced her heavy eyelids open and found herself staring at a caged lightbulb that hung from a plain ceiling. She shifted her arms and—*

*Ow. Her right elbow jabbed something hard. A cement wall, she realized. One on which names, dates, and profanities had been carved.*

*Springs creaked as she pushed up from the thin, saggy mattress on which she’d been sprawled. Wynter felt her sensitive stomach pitch. She was gonna hurl at some point for sure.*

*As she took in the rest of her surroundings, her worries of vomiting took a back seat. She was in a small, cramped, dimly lit space bordered by iron bars. Aside from the bed, the only piece of furniture was the dingy metal toilet on the other side of the cell.*

*Yeah. A cell. She was in a goddamn cell.*

*And as she looked beyond it, she realized there was a whole row of them—*

most were empty, but not all. It wasn't an official prison, though. It seemed more like someone had converted some sort of basement into a jail. Which would explain the lack of windows.

Since the last thing she remembered was being pursued by bounty hunters armed with tranquilizer guns, it didn't take a genius to work out that they'd managed to snatch her. The tranqs were no doubt responsible for her headache and nausea.

An otherworldly breeze angrily swooshed around the cell but didn't unlock the door for her. That could only mean that there was a system in place—magickal or otherwise—that would trip an alarm in the event of an escape. The deity wouldn't trigger an alarm that would have hunters bearing down on Wynter until she'd shaken off the grogginess.

Weirdly, her connection to her magick felt weak. It was hard to verbalize, but it was sort of like when your arm went numb and you couldn't properly move it. She suspected that she'd be able to call on her magick, but not use it fast or efficiently. Which could be due to the drugs or some kind of spell, she wasn't sure.

Her monster shoved at her, wanting control; wanting the blood of its captors. Yeah, me too. While the deity calmed it with a mere brush of air, Wynter silently assured the entity that she'd let it have its way when the right moment came along.

She pushed off the bed. Her belly rolled so viciously she balked. Ugh.

“The drug they use is a son of a bitch, right?”

Wynter tracked the unfamiliar male voice to the cell on her left. Although the lighting was crap, she made out a good-looking guy with an unkempt mop of brown hair crouched on the hard floor. “You could say that,” she said. It didn't help that the scents of rust, iron, sweat, and must hung in the air. Or that said air was hot, stale, and stifling.

He gestured at himself with his thumb. “The name's Clay.”

For some reason, she wasn't so sure she believed him. “If you say so. Is that blood you're using?” she asked, realizing he was drawing symbols on the floor. Satanic symbols.

He held up a palm that sported a wicked slice. “Don't worry, it's my own.”

“You're attempting to call on a demon?”

“Asmodeus hasn't let me down yet.”

She didn't know what concerned her more. That he seemed so breezy at

*the idea of calling on a hell-bound demon to possess him, or that he'd clearly done it before. But all she said was, "All right."*

*Looking into the cell on her right, Wynter saw a beautiful Latina sitting on the bed lotus style, her eyes closed, her palms exposed.*

*"That's Delilah," 'Clay' told her. "She sometimes goes into meditative states to talk to her dead ancestor. She's apparently gonna ask Annis for advice."*

*"Annis?"*

*He smiled. "As in the Black Annis, yeah."*

*Wynter only blinked. Annis had earned her ominous title through her extensive use of blood magick and the many dark deeds she'd committed. Wynter therefore couldn't imagine why anyone would ask the dead witch for advice of any kind, but whatever.*

*Hoping to walk off the effects of the drug, Wynter did a few slow laps of her cell, examining every inch of it. Runes were etched into each iron bar. Magick-nulling ruins, she realized. More were etched into the wall and cement floor. Which meant that a captive could blast the cell with magick all they wanted—it would do no damage.*

*"You won't be here much longer," said 'Clay.' "I heard some mutterings earlier about how they're taking you to Aeon once their money's wired through."*

*"They won't be taking me anywhere. Dead people can't do anything." She expected him to let out a skeptical snort, but he instead eyed her with interest.*

*"My name's actually Xavier," he said.*

*"Wynter," she offered, planting her butt on the bed, beginning to feel somewhat better now that—*

*There was a loud plop further along the row of cells.*

*Someone gagged. "Jesus, Anabel, how in God's name can your shit smell that bad?" complained a female voice hoarse with age.*

*"I've been eating tasteless goop for days," a younger female voice defended. "What else is it gonna smell like?"*

*Knowing the stench would soon make its way to her, Wynter inwardly groaned.*

*A hoarse huff. "When you're not dropping bombs in that toilet you're crying or talking to yourself," grouched the old woman. "I'm trying to grieve over here."*

*Another plop and then ... "Well if you'd died on death row in a past life,*

*you wouldn't be coping well with being locked up either. And if you miss your husband so much then maybe you shouldn't have killed him. No, don't say you didn't, Hattie. I heard the bounty hunters talking about it."*

*"You're no more innocent than I am, girl. I heard you went on a killing spree."*

*"That wasn't me. Well ... it was. But it wasn't. My body is responsible. As is a particular part of my soul. But I am totally innocent."*

*Okay, that made not one bit of sense to Wynter.*

*Hinges creaked somewhere up ahead as a door swung open, and a wide beam of light sliced through the 'jail.'*

*Silence instantly fell. Wynter went very still, her system going on high alert, her monster slinking even closer to her skin.*

*More creaks sounded as heavy footfalls descended a small set of stairs. Then more footfalls. And more.*

*"Christ, it reeks in here," a male griped.*

*Before long, heavy footsteps echoed along the stone walkway. Then three burly figures dressed all in black came into view. Wynter recognized them from earlier.*

*They halted on reaching her cell. The one who was armed with a tranquilizer gun smirked at her and let his gun clang along the iron bars.*

*The tallest of the trio pointed at her. "You. Up. Time to leave."*

*"I'd rather not use another dart on you, but I will if you try anything," the armed hunter warned. "It's up to you how this goes."*

*She slowly slipped off the bed and crossed to the door, her monster coiled to lunge.*

*The third hunter pressed the pad of his thumb against the lock. There was a loud buzz and then a horrible grating sound as the mechanical cell door slid open. He then clapped once and said, "Let's get moving, the people of Aeon don't like to be kept waiting and ..." He frowned. "I think you've got something in your eye. Both eyes. It's ... what the hell?"*

*Wynter felt her mouth curl. "This is probably gonna hurt a lot."*

*\**

*Her world had then gone black as her monster took over. When it had retreated, she'd found herself standing in the walkway with the remains of the bounty hunters lying at her feet. The deity had been swirling around her, Her*



otherworldly laugh bouncing off the walls and ringing with power.

More, Wynter had been covered in blood and gore, which was the norm for when she shifted back to her own form. Her monster tended to make a mess of itself in its bid to maim and eat its prey, and the shifting process was so abrupt and forceful that its ‘mess’ would blast outward, only to ricochet back onto Wynter’s body.

As such, if asked, she would have said that the other captives would be terrified of her.

And she would have been wrong.

All four had been plastered against the door of their cell, their eyes wide, their mouths open, but they’d been more fascinated than anything else—even a naturally nervous Anabel.

It was after Wynter had busted open each cell to free them that Delilah shocked the hell out of her by declaring they should all go on the run together. The others had nodded, eager. That was when Wynter began to realize that none of them were entirely sane ...

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*Knocking bits of bone and brain matter from her tee to the floor, Wynter took in each smiling face. “You can’t be serious.”*

*“My ancestor told me I’d live if I followed you,” Delilah told her. “I plan on living. Ergo ...”*

*Hattie began plucking gory clumps from Wynter’s hair. “I think it’s a good idea for us to band together. We’ll be harder to track that way.”*

*“And there’s safety in numbers,” added Xavier.*

*Anabel nodded. “I like safety. I like that my chances of survival will significantly increase if I’m part of a group that not only includes you but a deity.”*

*“You guys all know what I am, right?” Wynter asked them. “You saw what just happened? You know I have people on my ass?”*

*Xavier waved that way. “We all have people on our asses. That’s why it makes sense for us to combine forces. You’re uber powerful, sure, but you still got caught. It’ll be good for you to have us watching your back.”*

\*

They’d been doing that for her ever since.

Wynter did the same for them. Although, honestly, she hadn't needed to save them from bounty hunters anywhere near as many times as she'd needed to save them from themselves. All things considered, though, she probably should have seen that coming.



# Chapter Five

Washed, dressed, and feeling refreshed after the best night's sleep she'd had in a while, Wynter headed downstairs and into the kitchen the next morning. She was immediately hit by the scents of eggs, toast, and fresh coffee.

Both Xavier and Anabel sat at the barn-wood dining table, digging into their food.

Delilah was leaning out of the window that overlooked the backyard. "*Hattie*," she yelled, all accusatory. "You said you'd given up smoking."

"I have!" Hattie claimed from outside.

"Woman, I can smell the weed."

"That's for the pain."

"The pain of what?"

"Fucking cliffhangers."

Huffing, Delilah straightened and shut the window. "Oh, morning, Priestess."

"Stop that." Wynter had no sooner taken a seat at the table than a mug of coffee and a plate of food was put in front of her. "Hmm, thanks. Where'd you get the eggs and stuff?"

"I woke up early and went on a mini grocery grab," said Delilah.

Xavier bit into his cream cheese bagel, and his eyelids drooped. "*Damn* I need more of these in my life."

Spooning her oatmeal, Anabel wrinkled her nose at him. "I have no idea how you can eat cream cheese. It's just *ew*."

A line formed between his brows. “You’re constantly testing your own potions—some of which smell like armpits—but you can’t handle cream cheese?”

“It’s the devil’s work.”

He rolled his eyes. “You say that about everything you don’t like.”

Wynter frowned when Delilah joined them at the table with only a cup of tea. “You’re not eating?”

“Already ate,” replied Delilah. “I was hangry earlier, so I figured it’d be better for everyone if I filled my stomach there and then.”

Considering the woman would argue with you over absolutely anything when operating on an empty stomach, Wynter would have to agree with her.

As she dug into her breakfast, she looked around the kitchen and noticed that Delilah had also made time to unpack her cauldron, mortar, and pestle. Glass jars of herbs, ground roots, seeds, and powders were set near them. Her homemade medicinal tea mixtures were no doubt tucked in a cupboard somewhere, along with her bottles of this and that.

Wynter suspected that Delilah had hurried to set her own bits and bobs around the kitchen because she’d wanted to claim a small area before Anabel had the chance to do the same. The blonde’s cauldron, tools, and the typical ingredients she used for the potions were nowhere in sight, but they’d no doubt be neatly set at the other side of the kitchen before the day was over.

Delilah sipped her drink. “So, is anyone regretting that they’ve surrendered some rights to their soul? Please say no, because I really like this place. I don’t want to leave.”

Anabel shrugged one shoulder. “I haven’t had a freak-out yet, but it’ll eventually happen. Still, I won’t ask to leave.”

“Me neither,” said Xavier around a mouthful of bagel.

“I don’t like not being the *only* proud owner of my soul, but the situation isn’t bothering me half as much as I thought it would,” said Wynter. “Maybe it’s because I know it isn’t permanent and that I could reclaim those rights at any time.”

“Why do you think the Ancients insist on that particular price tag?” asked Xavier. “Do you think owning rights to souls increases their power, or do you think it’s a scare tactic meant to keep people in line?”

“No clue,” replied Wynter. “It might be a bit of both.”

“What do we think of Cain?” asked Delilah. “My opinion? He’s hot as fuck. Man, I’d like me some of that *if* he wasn’t one seriously scary dude. I

was expecting ‘scary,’ after all Wynter told me about the Aeons and all the rumors we heard about the Ancients, but Cain still ruffled my fur.”

“My hackles rose just the same,” said Xavier.

Delilah slid her gaze to Wynter. “We gonna talk about how he eye-fucked you?”

Nope, not at all. Casually forking some scrambled eggs, Wynter said, “There was no eye-fucking.”

Xavier grinned. “Oh, there was. I’m not sure that’s a good thing, given he’s an Ancient, but you definitely had his attention. You once warned me that the Aeons were very removed and didn’t really *see* mortals. I didn’t get what you meant until we walked into that parlor yesterday. Cain’s the same.”

Pausing, Xavier gestured at himself, Anabel, and Delilah as he added, “He saw us, spoke to us, listened to us, but he didn’t focus on us anymore than he’d have focused on a speck of dust. We didn’t really register on his radar. You, however ... *you* he saw.”

Unease settled in Wynter’s gut. Not merely because she had an Ancient’s attention, but because part of her stupidly liked it. Hey, she’d have to be dead not to be attracted to Cain. But he was everything she *shouldn’t* want in a guy—dark, dangerous, pitiless. Sadly, her hormones didn’t give a crap about that.

Anabel bit her lip. “Do you think he might have sensed that you’re not simply a witch?”

“If he did, he doesn’t know exactly *what* I am,” said Wynter. “He’d have turned me away if that were the case. Or killed me. Whichever.” She paused. “On a whole other note, we need to go job hunting.”

Delilah looked at the wall clock. “Yes, we do. And soon.”

Anabel cringed, her fingers flexing. “I-I don’t know if I can. There are so many people, and I haven’t been able to mentally map the place out yet. I want some time to settle in first.”

Wynter touched her arm. “That’s fine. You can watch over Hattie and keep her out of trouble.” She frowned at the sound of voices yelling outside.

Anabel froze, her eyes widening. “Who’s that?”

Wynter sighed. “Seems like our dear neighbors aren’t opposed to screaming at each other first thing in the morning.”

Delilah slipped off her chair and walked into the living room. “They also apparently aren’t opposed to having a standoff outside our front gate. They’ve noticed me watching them and don’t even care. Assholes.”

“I’d rather not make enemies of two lycan packs, so we’re going to have to handle this the smart way.” Wynter looked at Anabel. “Do you have enough ingredients to get working on some potions that might help?”

The blonde nodded. “I brought plenty in my bag.”

The back door opened with a creak, and Hattie padded inside. “What’s with the shouting?”

“Lycans are arguing outside,” Delilah explained, returning to the kitchen.

Hattie *hmp*hed. “An old woman should be able to enjoy a joint in peace. The damn book wrecked me, ending on a cliffhanger like that. And the heroine forgave the hero *far* too easily, in my opinion. She should have made him plead for forgiveness. I like a good, long grovel.” She hefted herself onto a chair. “All my husbands groveled.”

Delilah shot her a look. “Was this before or during the slow, excruciating deaths they endured courtesy of the ‘special teas’ you gave them?”

“During, mostly,” Hattie replied.

Wynter smiled, shaking her head. It was hard to believe that the sweet, fragile-looking woman had ever harmed a single soul. “Well, let’s go job hunting.”

When she walked out of the house soon after, the lycans had stopped arguing but were standing in their own front yards exchanging snarls. Their predatory gazes shot to Wynter, Delilah, and Xavier—none of whom did anything more than spare them cursory glances. Wynter would deal with the lycans later. For now, she had more important shit to do.

She wished the others good luck on their job-hunting adventures and then made her way toward Cain’s Keep, enjoying the feel of the artificial sun’s warmth on her skin. She couldn’t see much of the Keep, thanks to the stone, fortified walls that surrounded both it and the bailey. Stark and imposing, the walls had integrated bastions and watch towers.

Plenty of people passed her; none so much as tipped their chin her way. They merely stared, openly curious. She didn’t get the sense that they were being rude. It was more like they were reserving judgment for the time being. Well, all right.

She walked through the arched opening in the stark walls and then found herself in the bailey. A courtyard lay in the center. Workshops, barns, and stables were on the right. Some sort of quarters were situated on the left, along with a brewery, a bakehouse, and—*aha*—the blacksmith’s shop.

Ahead of it all sat the Keep. Unlike the curtain wall, it was constructed of

black, medieval stone. Tall and intimidating, it loomed above all. Stained-glass windows—some small and square, some narrow and rectangular—dotted the stone edifice. It might have looked grim and gothic if each stone didn't shimmer with power.

The sight was as impressive as the dude who called it his home.

She wasn't gonna think about him, though. Getting her mind back on track, she crossed to the blacksmith's shop. It was small and hot, and the air was thick with the scents of molten iron and coal. Workbenches, forges, and other large equipment were scattered around. There were tools just ... *everywhere*.

One side of the shop was wall-to-wall with weaponry—small, big, modern, medieval. Her mouth fell open. There was everything she could think of. Cutlasses, brass knuckles, claymores, long-swords, pickaxes, hatchets, crossbows, sledgehammers, javelins—it was all there.

God, she thought she might come.

Rafe would *love* the collection. He'd made her learn how to dodge and even snatch weapons before he'd ever allowed her to use one. As a child, she'd had to seize a dagger from him over and over and over in the space of an hour.

Studying the weapons in front of her, she didn't notice any runes or flecks of power ground into the blades. None were enchanted, then. Something she could easily change.

"Who are you?" a gruff voice demanded.

She turned to see a stout male glaring at her like she'd pissed in his shoes. Well, this was off to a good start.

The monster inside her raised its head slightly and eyed him carefully. Like her, it sensed that he was a berserker—an elite preternatural warrior whose race was all but extinct. Still, her monster wasn't intimidated; it settled back down, intending to merely observe.

"Wynter," she finally replied. "I'm guessing you're Grouch." She held out her hand. He only sneered at it.

"What do you want, witch?"

She lowered her arm. "A job. Here."

"Here?" He burst out laughing, scratching his belly. "If you tell me you're a smithy, you're nothing but a liar. You ain't got the muscle for it."

"I'm not a smithy, but I can improve your weapons. Make them ... unique."

A broad-shouldered female who bore a slight resemblance to him strolled into the shop. “Pop, Dina says she ain’t got ... Who the fuck is this bitch?”

Oh, these two were simply charming.

He laughed again. “You won’t believe this, Annette. Winifred over here wants to work for us. Says she can improve our weaponry.”

The female let out a derisive snort. “We don’t need no witch working for us. There’s a strip club up on the surface. Why don’t you go see if they’re hiring?” With that, they both turned away, dismissing her. Annette headed to one of the workbenches while Grouch crossed to the forge.

Wynter sighed long and loud. “Hmm. Such a shame you want to lose custom. But hey, I get it if you’re overworked. It happens.”

Grouch’s head snapped up. “Lose custom? You threatening to hex my shop?”

She frowned. “Who said anything about hexing?”

He grabbed a sword hanging from a peg and advanced on her fast, pointing it at her chin. “Witch, you fucking *dare*—” He jerked back as she conjured her own sword and blocked his move. His face went slack as his eyes landed on her weapon. “What in the love of God?”

Annette sidled up to him, staring at the sword. “Is that ... ?”

“Black glass? Yes.” Wynter angled it so that the light danced along its length. “There’s nothing delicate about it, though. It’s more durable than iron and sharper than any blade.”

Grouch licked his lips. “I’ll buy it from ya.”

“It’s not for sale,” said Wynter.

“What are those runes on it?” asked Annette.

Wynter gave her a hard smile. “Don’t you worry about those.” She ‘sent’ her sword back to its sheath in the cottage. “You two have a good day now.” She strode off. *Fuck them*. There were other blacksmith shops. She could try those. She would.

She did.

And each time, it went almost as badly as it did with Grouch. There was laughing and sneering and an outright refusal to hear what she meant by ‘improving’ their weapons.

Figuring *any* job would do, she sought out others and talked to several shop managers. All turned her away. And she concluded that there really were too many assholes in this world.

It wasn’t merely that they’d been rude. It was that they’d once been in her



position. They'd once been newcomers here, looking for work. People had obviously taken a chance on them, and yet they wouldn't give another newcomer that same chance.

Wynter headed to the surface of the town and searched for work there. She found none. She did, however, realize that someone was following her. The feeling hit her mere milliseconds before a very familiar breeze fluttered over her in warning.

Wynter didn't look back. She continued to walk casually along the path of the plaza. She stopped near the mouth of an alley, feigning being lost, and then began to walk down the aforementioned alley in search of an exit.

She'd reached the large barbed fence at the rear of it when she heard the heel of a shoe scuffing the pavement. She turned and found herself facing a bulky male with a mean scar slicing diagonally from his hairline to an eyebrow.

She jutted out her chin, going for belligerent. "Problem?"

He smirked. "Not anymore. I've been looking for you for some time. And now I have you."

The monster within her woke from its slumber and studied their enemy. Wynter would rather not free it here. Anyone could walk past the alley and see too much—she couldn't risk that. Sending it telepathic images, she showed it what she had in mind for this asshole, knowing from past experience that the bloodthirsty entity was occasionally happy to watch.

As he took a step toward her, she said, "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Oh, you think I'm here to collect on the bounty? I am. Kind of. You see, you're wanted alive. But a mage has offered me yet more money to instead kill you. I'll never turn down more cash."

Irritation surged through her. She really should have executed the families of her killers *long* ago.

"He also wants me to make it hurt." Wicked fast, the male witch raised his hand and let out a gust of magick that sliced at her skin, sharp as a scalpel.

*Fucking ow.* Ignoring the pain, Wynter struck with her own magick. Toxic and scorching hot, it lashed his face and neck, leaving deep welts that sizzled like meat on a grill.

He retaliated fast while chanting under his breath, blasting her with blue fire. She jerked back, but the cold flames seared her lips and chin. Oh, this fucker was *going down*.

She whacked him with a heavy surge of magick that sent him colliding into a dumpster. Even as he slid to the floor, he hit her with blue fire again, but he hadn't moved fast enough—she'd already called to her sword and angled it just right so that the blade deflected the flames.

Then she was on him.

She could have made this quick, but ... *nah*. She jammed her thumb against a bleeding welt on his face and sent a dart of magick straight into his bloodstream.

He cried out as an inky blackness slicked its way up his veins. His skin paled and softened at first, looking almost papery. But soon, it became red and swollen and veiny. He cursed in shock and pain as blood blisters formed over his body; some burst, giving off a cloying rank smell.

What happened next ... yeah, it'd make anyone queasy. His flesh began to blacken. Dry up. Peel. Decay. The rotting magick ate at his body, including his lips, making his mouth look like an obscene hole in his face. His teeth cracked and crumbled, and two of his withered extremities fell off.

The otherworldly breeze that had earlier carried a warning now danced over Wynter's skin, humming with approval. Similarly, the monster within her settled once more, satisfied with how she'd handled the situation.

Just as the inky blackness in his veins reached the witch's scalp, his eyes darted to the side of her now-burning face and widened almost comically.

Knowing her mark was visible, Wynter gave him a bright smile. "Yeah, you went and *fucked up*. I could have killed you quickly but, as you can now see, making people hurt ... well, it's what I'm built for." And so she waited for the life to fade from his eyes before she sliced off his head.

\*

Walking up the path toward the cottage a short while later, Wynter puffed out a breath. Dealing with the male witch had been ... well, fun, to be honest. But it hadn't exactly improved her day, considering she'd failed to find work. Figuring the job-seeking was a waste of time, she'd decided to head home after using one of Anabel's nifty potions to disintegrate the witch's body. Wynter had used a separate potion to heal her wounds.

The blonde insisted on them carrying 'evidence ridding potions,' paranoid that death would come for them any moment and that they'd need to cover their asses. It was at times like this when Wynter was glad of it.

Strolling into the cottage, she found both Delilah and Xavier slouched on the plush sofa. “Any luck?”

Delilah pulled a face. “Nu-uh. I went to all the herbalist stores. None of the witches want an outsider working for them, and they were seriously snarky. I almost had to smack a bitch down.”

Xavier rubbed at his nape. “The witches I spoke to were just as reluctant to hire an outsider. I asked about the job opening in a bar on the surface, but the mage who ran it said I’d have to join his conclave—apparently, they’ll take in any magick user.”

Delilah pulled at her curls. “I tried applying for other jobs—waitressing, bartending, stuff like that. No joy. People were like, ‘*We don’t know you or the Priestess who’d vouch for you, so no.*’”

“Some said the same to me,” said Xavier. “Hell, I couldn’t even get a position as a stable hand unless I’d agree to work three months for free while they ‘got to know me.’”

“You know about horses?” asked Delilah.

His face softened. “Used to have one back when I was a kid.”

“Really?”

“No, not really.”

Delilah flapped her arms. “Then why say it? Why lie?”

“Maybe I just like to hear myself speak.”

Wynter sank into the armchair. “I had no luck finding employment either, and I’m not getting the sense that that will change anytime soon. So ... I guess we could each do what we usually do to make money. Only this time, we join together and start an official business. We could run the whole thing from home, since we now have a permanent base.”

Xavier sat up straighter. “Now that’s an idea.”

Delilah nodded. “Hattie and Anabel would be up for it. Especially since it means they won’t have to leave the cottage.”

“Some of the local business owners might not be too happy,” began Xavier, “but since a lot of them were rude as fuck to me today, I can’t say I care.”

No, neither could Wynter. Mentally running through everything they’d need, she asked him, “Do you still have that tent you often held your tarot readings in?”

His mouth curved. “I do. I could pitch it in the yard whenever I do readings.” He dabbled in cartomancy, and he was damn good at it. It was the

one time you could guarantee he wouldn't lie to you. "Where would you do your thing?"

She twisted her mouth. "The shed in the backyard might work. Anyone know if it's empty?"

"Never checked." Xavier stood. "Let's go find out."

Outside, they pulled open the wooden shed door. Dust motes danced in the air, and the scents of rust, dirt, and sun-warmed wood greeted her. She ignored all that and studied the building. It wasn't too small or cramped, which was good. It also wasn't in bad condition.

Yes, she could use this. It would need a good clean, of course, but Anabel could whip up a brew that was better than any bleach. First, though, Wynter would need to empty the shed. That wouldn't take long, since only the most basic backyard tools were stuffed inside it.

Before she got started on all that, though ... "We need to run this plan by the others and make sure we're right in thinking that they'll both be up for this," she said, turning back to the cottage.

"They'll be up for it," said Xavier, following her. "You know ... I don't have to stick with just card readings."

Sensing where this was going, Wynter shook her head. "No."

He frowned. "People like talking to the dead. They pay good money for it."

"No." Because, while Xavier had mastered the ability to communicate with spirits, he needed to use a conduit to speak with them. And that conduit was always a corpse. "We're not storing dead bodies in our yard."

"Why not? They don't smell that bad."

"Ugh, *yeah*, they do. Also, they freak people out. And the lycans will whine like babies, since their enhanced sense of smell will be tortured by the stench. So, no mediumship."

He huffed. "Fine."

"And no holding false seances either."

"Oh, come on."

Halting, Wynter turned to face him with a sigh. "Remember we talked about right and wrong? Well, conning people into thinking you're communicating with their loved ones is *not* anyone's definition of 'right.'"

"My clients always walk away happy. Isn't that what's important?"

"No, Xavier, it's not." She jabbed a finger toward him. "No seances." With that, she headed into the cottage via the back door.

In the kitchen, she gathered them all together and ran the plan past Hattie and Anabel. Both were up for it. Anabel loved the idea of hanging in the kitchen all day doing what she did best and, in the process, being able to avoid people. Hattie adored feeding others and hearing they enjoyed her food. Mostly, though, she loved the idea of making her own money so she could feed her book addiction.

Wynter turned to Delilah. “Make a list of all the ingredients you guys are going to need. Then I’ll need you to go shopping.”

Delilah’s lips curved. “Shopping is one of the things I do best.”

“First, well, you should know that a male witch just tried to kill me.”

“A male witch just tried to *what?*”

\*

Although he heard footfalls approaching, Cain didn’t look up and wait for his visitor to come into view. He kept his gaze fixed on the sleek black serpent that slowly slithered along the ground near his feet, its unblinking eyes locked on him.

Maxim cleared his throat. “I’m sorry to intrude, Sire, I know you did not wish to be disturbed. But the oracle wishes to speak with you. She says it’s important.”

Cain felt his lips begin to flatten. “How important?” Because Demetria’s definition of that particular word didn’t always cohere with his own.

“She insisted you will want to hear this.”

Inwardly sighing, Cain finally looked up. “Then I suppose you should escort her to me.”

The aide hesitated. “She doesn’t like the garden, Sire. The snakes make her nervous.”

“I know.”

Maxim’s lips quirked and he shook his head. “I’m not sure I’ll ever understand why you find people’s fear so amusing.” He turned on his heel and disappeared down the twisting path.

Careful not to step on the serpent now slinking around his feet, Cain crossed to the wrought-iron bench and sat. A white satin moth fluttered past him and settled on the moss-covered wall ruin. Fatal mistake. He could see the head of yet another snake peeking through the wall’s arched, glassless window; it hadn’t failed to notice the insect.

Cain cricked his neck, his mood a little less black than it had been when he first entered the garden. There had been no trigger for the change in his mood. But, then, there never was. It simply happened. And he'd known it would be best for him to not be around others until the dark cloud passed.

The sooner he hit the reboot button, the better. But not until all his ducks were in a row. And definitely not until he'd coaxed Wynter into his bed. It wasn't as if he could afford to wait. Being mortal, she'd no longer be alive when he next woke. The thought ... it bothered him.

He'd never envied mortals their short lifespan. No, they had their own version of immortality—their souls returned again and again. Cain's kind? Once they were dead, they were dead. And since he had no wish to quite simply cease to exist, he didn't begrudge the curses of immortality. Especially when Resting gave him a much needed reprieve whenever necessary. The aftermath could be annoying, though—waking to new faces, catching up on all he'd missed, seeing so many changes around him. It could be disorientating.

Well, disoriented was far better than the dark state of mind he continually found himself in lately. Being here helped. Few people ever bothered him when he was in his garden. Mostly because the place wasn't exactly safe. Nor was it all that welcoming.

A lot of people didn't understand how he could relax here. Personally, he didn't understand why bright, attractive gardens were considered peaceful. But then, people tended to equate beauty with *goodness* when, in truth, the two didn't always go together.

Soon, Maxim reappeared with the oracle in tow. The tall, Hispanic woman was one of the residents who'd sold her soul to Cain. It was longevity she'd craved, terrified of aging; hating each wrinkle that already lined her face. Really, the red mark on her cheek detracted from the blemishes. It was a mark that said she was Favored by a particular deity. In her case, it was Nemesis. Any witches Favored by Her would receive precognitive visions from the deity, hence why they were referred to as oracles.

Right then, Demetria's brown gaze nervously darted around. A delicate shudder rushed down her spine as she spotted a python dangling from a thick tree branch.

Cain felt a smile warm his chest. If she had any clue what lived inside him, she would not find those serpents so terrifying in comparison.

Sliding her eyes to him, she bowed slightly. "Sire."

“Demetria,” he greeted. “What brings you here? For your sake, I hope it truly is as important as you insinuated.”

“It is, I assure you of that.” She waited until Maxim had left before moving closer and adding, “Something ... something is wrong.”

“Wrong how?”

“My gift is failing me.” She twiddled her fingers. “I *feel* that something is coming. I cannot tell if it is good or bad. I see *nothing*.”

He felt his eyes narrow. “Nothing at all?”

“No. That never happens when there is such urgency behind a feeling I have. A vision always accompanies it.” A shaky breath left her. “I consulted the bones. The reading confirmed that my gut is correct. But still, I see nothing. I believe I am being blocked.”

“By someone here?”

“I do not believe it is a person. More like a presence. A power. It is jamming the frequency of my gift. Purposely.”

He twisted his mouth. He hadn’t sensed any such presence. But then, if something was powerful enough to block an oracle, it was powerful enough to remain undetected. “When was the last time you had a vision of any sort?”

“Six days ago. It was nothing consequential.”

“And this feeling you got that something was coming ... when did that hit you?”

“Yesterday morning. I didn’t report it to you straight away because I had hoped a vision would come to me if I waited. But it didn’t.” She sighed. “Being unable to see what lies ahead ... it feels like I have been cut off from a part of myself. I worry that Nemesis has forsaken me.”

“I doubt it’s anything as dramatic as that. If it was, you would no longer have that mark on your face.”

“I tried reaching out to Her. She did not respond to my calls.”

Cain shrugged. “Deities tend to do as they please.” He pursed his lips. “We’ll keep an eye on the situation. It’s all we really can do.”

Swallowing, she nodded. “I will let you know if ...” She trailed off at the sound of Maxim’s muted voice and the click-clacking of heels along the paving stones.

Cain barely resisted the urge to grind his teeth. He knew the rhythm of that walk. Knew exactly who was coming. And he wasn’t in the mood to deal with them.

Mere moments later, Ishtar sauntered into view, a furious Maxim close

behind her.

She beamed at Cain. “Such a lovely afternoon, isn’t it?” She spared Demetria a disinterested glance.

Recognizing the female Ancient’s voice, the monster inside Cain opened one eye. At one time, it might have perked up in interest. Now, utterly indifferent to her presence, it allowed its eyelid to once more drift shut.

His cheeks red, Maxim looked at him. “I’m sorry, Sire, I explained that you had company but—”

“It is not you who needs to apologize,” Cain told him, a thread of menace in his voice.

Ishtar let out an airy chuckle. “I merely saw no reason why I couldn’t announce my own arrival. It seems silly when I’ve spent so much time here over the eras.”

No, she’d intruded because she’d wanted to know who his ‘company’ was and if said company was female. “You will apologize to Maxim.”

Ishtar stared at Cain for a long moment. “You are not serious.”

“Oh, I’m very serious. You don’t get to be dismissive toward my hirelings. You don’t get to make their jobs difficult. You will treat them with respect, or you will not come here at all. Now, apologize to Maxim.”

Twin flags of red stained her cheeks as her cornflower-blue eyes bore into Cain, hard as diamonds. There was the smallest hint of arousal in their depths. She hated when he made any demands of her, but a part of her got off on it. Which was an annoyance for him, since he didn’t wish to have such an effect on her.

“Do it now, or leave,” he said.

Ishtar gave the aide a sickly sweet mockery of a smile. “I am so very, very sorry, Maximus. Yes, yes, that isn’t actually your name, but it suits you so much better than Maxim. Or Maxie could work, if you’re open to that.”

As apologies went, that was probably the best Maxim would get, even if there wasn’t a droplet of sincerity in it.

Demetria cleared her throat. “I will take my leave, Sire.” She inclined her head at Ishtar, who didn’t deign her a glance.

“Maxim will escort you out.” Once the two had disappeared down the path, Cain cut his gaze to Ishtar, his jaw hardening. “You go too far.”

“And *you* used to be more fun,” she shot back. She bent slightly, making her blonde ringlets tumble forward, as she smiled at a snake that zipped through the long grass. Cain inwardly snorted. If she thought she was subtle



in her attempt to flash her cleavage, she was wrong.

She returned her focus to him. “You are obviously in a frightful mood, so I will not bother staying long. I came to see if perhaps you would like to escort me to the festivities tomorrow evening.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

She frowned. “Whyever not? It would give us a chance to catch up. We haven’t spoken much since I woke. We have arrived at events together before.”

“That was a very long time ago.”

“A time when we were ... close, yes.”

They’d never really been ‘close.’ Not in an emotional sense, at least. Neither had ever cared for the other. What brought them together had been simple: He’d been attracted to the untamed passion for life she’d once had, and she’d enjoyed that he didn’t fall all over himself to please her the way so many other men did.

The trouble was that Ishtar wasn’t interested in an equal partnership, and Cain wasn’t interested in being a mere consort who obeyed her every directive. In that sense, their on-and-off relationship had been more of a battle for dominance. But it had given them both a reprieve from the relentless boredom that plagued every Ancient. For a while, anyway. He’d soon tired of it. Of her. Of things always ending the same way.

“It’s not a time in my life that I intend to repeat,” he told her. “I’ve been clear on that.”

“‘Rude’ is what you have been. And unnecessarily so.” She came closer, swaying her hips. “I have been asleep for over three centuries. Surely you missed me just a little.”

He sighed. “If you need someone to shine your ego, I suggest you find Solomon.”

She made a face. “He gives me my own way in everything. He does not push back or demand to be counted. Not like you. You always challenged me. I need that in a man. Need someone who is my equal.”

Cain gave her a bored look. “Do you really think I’m going to fall for this? It’s not like I fell for it last time you came to me swearing that you wanted a true partnership.” He’d almost laughed, recognizing it for the lie that it was.

“I *do* want us to be equals, I just do not know how to have a relationship like that. You could show me—”

“Why are you pushing this when there are dozens of men out there who’ll

tell you exactly what you want to hear?”

“Because they do not *know* me. You might look down on me in some ways, but at least you know me. See me. Sometimes we just need to be seen. And you ... you are the first person I thought of when I woke. The person I most looked forward to talking with. But you won't even make time for me. You won't even give us a chance.”

“And what would be the point, Ishtar? You like to be seen. Until you don't. Until you want to pretend you're not riddled with flaws and vulnerabilities like everyone else, and so you then lash out at the people closest to you to drive them away. I'm not signing up for that.”

“All I ever wanted—”

“Was me on a leash, just like the souls you own,” he finished. “That's never going to happen.”

She studied him hard. “You are different than you were before I chose to Rest. You hear everything I am saying, but you are not touched by it, are you? It's not even that you don't care, it's that you *can't*.” She swallowed. “I remember that stage. Emotion often just slips right off you. It does not always take hold.” She took a step toward him. “You can talk to me, you know.” She sighed when he didn't speak. “But you won't, will you?”

No. She'd never been someone he confided in. Not even when they shared a bed.

“Have you ever really trusted anyone, Cain?”

“Yes.” Very few of those people hadn't let him down.

Sorrow lined her face. “But I am not one of them, am I?”

“I'm not buying the oh-so sad act. You don't trust me any more than I trust you.”

Her face went hard in an instant. “Fine.” She notched up her pointed chin. “If you change your mind about tomorrow evening, I will be at home.”

Yeah, and if he turned up to escort her anywhere, she'd sniff at him and declare that she'd already procured someone else to accompany her.

She flounced off, putting extra sway in her hips.

Unmoved, he looked away.

Maxim reappeared, his lips thin. “Again, Sire, I'm sorry that Ishtar—”

Cain waved off the unnecessary apology. “It's fine, Maxim.” He stretched out his legs. “Tell me ... where's my new witch? The Priestess who insists she isn't a Priestess.”

He blinked. “The Bloodrose coven moved into the cottage between the

quarreling lycan packs, Sire. I heard ...”

Cain arched a brow. “Yes?”

Maxim briefly averted his gaze. “Grouch has announced to one and all that she intends to hex his shop.”

“Hex his shop?”

“He refused to hire her, and she apparently made it clear that he would lose custom. I don’t believe she’d do as he claims, though,” Maxim quickly added.

“No, she’s smarter than that,” Cain agreed. A hex would have not only the berserkers turning on her but the town’s population reluctant to trust her. Wynter didn’t strike him as a person who’d recklessly make enemies or isolate her coven.

“She probably meant to do exactly what she’s done—rile him.”

“Perhaps.” Cain paused. “I wouldn’t have expected her to seek a job at a blacksmith’s shop.”

“Having spent twenty minutes with Wynter and her coven, I would say they’re the type of people who will do many things we won’t expect.”

“My gut would agree with you on that.” Cain pushed to his feet. “Bring her to me, Maxim.”

The aide stilled. “You’re not ... you’re not going to discipline her, are you?”

“No, I don’t believe Grouch’s claims.” Cain felt a smile tug at his mouth. “But *she* doesn’t know that, does she?”



## Chapter Six

Nibbling on her lower lip, Anabel handed Wynter a box of vials. “Are you *sure* you wouldn’t rather give them something lethal?”

“They’re being loud, not threatening,” said Wynter.

Anabel looked toward the living room window that gave them a clear view of their quarreling neighbors. “But they have claws and fangs and can shift into monstrous beasts.”

“What’s your point?”

“They could kill you. They could *kill us all*.” She rubbed at her throat. “They’ve probably already planned our murders step by step. Being torn apart is *not* a fun way to die, trust me. I once died during a wolf attack. Lycans are even bigger and deadlier than full-blooded wolves.”

“You were attacked by a wolf?”

“It was rabid. My guards didn’t even do anything to help me. Personally, I think they let me die on purpose because they hated my father.” Anabel’s nose wrinkled. “He tended to fly into murderous rages. Even killed my brother while caught up in one. And launching the Massacre of Novgorod didn’t do his rep any favors.”

“The Massacre of—Wait, are you talking about Ivan the Terrible?”

“Well ... I just called him Papa.”

Wynter gave her head a little shake. “Okay. Well. Thanks for sharing.” She tightened her grip on the box of vials. “I’ll be back in half an hour. Don’t worry, everything will be fine.”

Outside, Wynter casually walked down the path toward the gate. She was

totally ignored by the two males yelling in each other's face while several lycans fanned out behind each of them. She'd heard enough of their disputes to know that the tallest was Diego and the other was Elias. They were also both Alphas.

Wynter tutted. "Now boys, is all that shouting really necessary?"

Diego snarled at her, his fists clenched. "This ain't your business. Go toddle back inside."

"Now that wasn't nice."

"I'm not nice."

"I'm thinking she already noticed that, asshole," snarked Elias. He might be shorter than the other Alpha, but he was more powerfully built.

Opening the gate, Wynter began, "What I'm wondering is ... why do you argue amongst yourselves so much when, in doing so, you're giving the vampires what they want? I mean, they hate that you outnumber them, right? It suits them that you're all at each other's throats."

"I don't care what does or doesn't suit them fuckers," Diego sneered.

She hummed. "I don't think that's true. I don't see *how* you could really be so indifferent to them. I've heard what derogatory stuff they say about lycans. Their kind hunted yours at one time, right? Their sharper senses were your downfall. There was even a period when they captured, brainwashed, and used a bunch of you as their guards. That's why they still call your kind their bitches. And don't they still tease you for having weaker senses?"

Diego's nostrils flared. "There a point to this conversation?"

"Yes. You see, I can help you. One of my crew, Anabel, is *extremely* talented when it comes to potions. She makes all sorts of weird and wonderful brews. She'll actually be selling them as of tomorrow. Some will be designed for demons, some for vamps, some for your kind etc., etc." Wynter pulled a vial of green liquid out of the box. "This baby here can sharpen lycan senses."

Elias snorted. "Bullshit."

"No bullshit," she said. "The effect wouldn't be permanent, of course. It would last about three months. Either of you guys want this free sample?"

Diego gave her a brittle smile. "My parents warned me not to accept potions from strangers."

"It isn't poisoned or anything. Here, I'll prove it." Wynter pulled off the small cork and took a sip of the minty concoction. Of course, nothing happened. "There. See. All good."

“Did it work?” Elias asked.

“On me? No. This is designed to work strictly on lycans.” She looked from one Alpha to the other, a challenge in her eyes. “So, which of you wants to try it? I guess this is where we find out who’s the biggest, baddest Alpha around—”

Diego snatched the vial and knocked back the potion. For a few moments, he merely stood there, clearly dubious. Then his back snapped straight, he blinked rapidly, and shook his head hard. The tension slipped from his body, and his eyes widened. “*Fuck.*”

Wynter smiled. “My girl’s good, huh?” She took another from the box and offered it to Elias, who didn’t hesitate to accept and drink the potion.

His physical reaction was much the same as Diego’s. “Jesus Christ.”

“You can call those freebies,” she told them. “Like I said, the effects will last about three months. You want more after that? Well, I can be persuaded to sell them to your two packs at a discount, what with us being neighbors and all. I can even be persuaded to ensure that Anabel doesn’t create a sense-sharpening potion for vampires. That way, you’ll have an edge on them.”

Diego narrowed his eyes. “And what do you want in return?”

She shrugged. “It’s really pretty simple. Stop arguing outside my home. I realize that neither of you want to cross the other’s territorial lines and that this strip of land here is the only neutral ground between your turfs, but it’s also *my home* now. And Anabel ... she can be a little jumpy. Most things make her nervous. Including all the yelling. If you keep that up, she’ll stop making those babies. And who could blame her for that?”

Elias twisted his mouth. “We’d get a discount, and she’d agree not to make potions like this for the vamps?”

Wynter dipped her chin. “Yup.”

Elias finally nodded. “We’re gonna want more of those.”

One of the lycans behind Elias sidled up to him. “It’s *that* good?”

“It’s *that* good,” Elias confirmed.

“As I said, they’ll be on sale as of tomorrow.” She cut her gaze to a female near Diego. “Nice nail art. I’ll bet it comes right off after you shift, though, right?”

“Obviously,” she said, though not *too* rudely.

“Another of my crew whips up her own bespelled cosmetics and stuff,” Wynter told her. “She makes nail polish that will not only actually stay on when you shift but still be perfectly intact when you shift back.”

Her lips parted. “You’re shitting me.”

Wynter smiled. “Nope. She made it for herself. She can shapeshift, so if you see a small black cat with painted claws, that’ll be Delilah.” Really, Delilah could shift into a cat of *any* size, but she mostly used the form of a domestic cat ... unless deep in battle. “She’ll be selling her products tomorrow, too.”

“Where?”

“Here. Baked goods will also be up for purchase, thanks to Hattie. Xavier’s *the best* at tarot card readings, if you’re interested in those. And me? Well, if you have a weapon you’d like to be made a little more ... interesting than it already is, bring it to me. We’ll be running a sort of one-stop-shop. You should check it out. Now, I gotta go, I have some more free samples to give out. You all enjoy the rest of your day.”

Wynter sought out leaders of several species—minus those who’d refused to employ her or her crew—and offered them free samples of potions that would appeal to them, telling them all about the upcoming one-stop shop. Each interaction went pretty well, since the leaders all tried the samples and were impressed by the effects.

The box of vials empty, she headed back home. She was approaching the corner of her street when she noticed Maxim.

Spotting her, he altered his course and made a beeline for her. “Priestess.”

“Wynter is fine. How are you, Maxim?”

“I’m well, thank you. Cain would like to see you.”

Being sent for like this couldn’t be good. But even as her stomach sank, her hormones perversely fanned themselves.

“Follow me,” Maxim added. “I’ll escort you to him.”

Trying not to feel like she was walking the damn plank, she trailed after him as he led her through the bailey and toward the Keep. Curiosity dimmed her nervousness. She’d wondered just what it would be like inside. Wondered what sort of home would appeal to someone like Cain.

Passing two guards, she and Maxim strode through the thick wooden doors. As they walked through the arched halls of the castle, she saw that it was a fusion of both the old and the new. She wouldn’t have thought the two styles would go well together, but it somehow worked.

Even with the modern amenities and state-of-the-art features, the place still had an Old World feel with the carved columns, ornamental arches, beautiful flooring, and the domed, frescoed ceilings. The Keep also boasted an

impressive collection of paintings, sculptures, ceramics, and other artwork.

Maxim led her outside, across a courtyard, and through tall iron gates that made her think of a cemetery. “Stay on the path. It’s important.”

“Okay.” She trailed behind him once more, and then they were in a garden that was like no garden she’d ever seen before. It was gothic and brooding.

Flowers were everywhere in shades of black, scarlet red, and burgundy, including Black Dahlia and Bleeding Heart Dicentra. There were also some night-blooming plants that she knew would glow and give off intoxicating scents after dark.

She recognized some ancient herbs that were often used in forbidden magick spells. There were also lots of vines on the wall ruins that were scattered around. It wasn’t until one of the vines moved that she realized not all were vines. Some were snakes.

Choosing to ignore that little nugget, she continued admiring her surroundings as she wandered down the twisted path. She particularly liked the moss-covered urns and gargoyles that bordered a bog-like pond. A complicated rockery caught her eye, and she realized that all the rocks were actually skull-shaped.

Finally, she and Maxim reached a little nook. Seated on a wrought-iron bench, Cain locked his dark eyes on her. Her insides again did that twisting thing, and warmth bloomed low. The damn immortal stirred up everything feminine inside her.

It wasn’t only his looks that did it for her. She was self-aware enough to know that what really rung her bell was that Cain wore power. *Embodied* it. It was in the depths of his eyes, the timbre of his voice, every single sensual move he made. And, well, she’d always had a weakness for dangerous men. It would no doubt one day be her downfall.

Her inner monster eyed him but didn’t move. Not quite hiding from him, but wanting to watch him without being sensed ... like a tiger might observe its prey from the underbrush.

“The Bloodrose Priestess, as you requested,” said Maxim.

She felt her eyelid twitch. “Really, Wynter is fine.”

Cain nodded at him. “Thank you, Maxim.”

The aide left the way he’d come, and then she and the Ancient were alone. Apart from the many serpents nearby, that was.

“This place is amazing,” she said.

Cain tilted his head. “Most don’t use the word ‘amazing’ when they



describe my garden.”

“Then they’re not really seeing it.” They were probably too distracted by the obvious danger, because many of the snakes here were highly venomous.

He hummed. “How are you liking Devil’s Cradle so far?”

“It has exceeded my expectations.”

He stared at her intently and ... Gah, she didn’t like it. Nor did she like the way her skin heated or her hormones were playing fucking hopscotch. Not much rattled Wynter, but this chemistry spooked the shit out of her. It made her feel vulnerable and off-balance.

He sort of ... uncurled as he stood, sensuous as the snakes surrounding him, and prowled toward her. She cursed her pulse for quickening, for responding to all that latent strength and contained power. She felt both threatened and turned on at the same time. So much sexual tension thickened the air she was surprised it didn’t hurt to breathe it in.

His nostrils flared as he stood before her. “I like the smell of your magick. Jasmine and black pepper. It hums with chaos. So much potential for destruction.” His gaze flitted over her face, broody and far too perceptive. “You like the taste of all that darkness, don’t you?”

To be truthful, yes, she did. She liked what she could do. She liked how easily she could do it.

“Would you remove death’s mark from your magick if you could?”

She licked the inside of her lower lip. “Anyone would if they could, right?”

His mouth hitched up. “Such an evasive answer. You’re rather fond of giving those.” He paused. “So, you threatened to hex Grouch’s shop?”

Blinking, she almost drew back. “I didn’t threaten him in any way. He *accused* me of meaning to hex his shop.”

“Hmm, not according to him.”

“He’s really saying that?”

“To all who’ll stand still long enough to listen,” Cain confirmed.

“Knowing it would eventually get back to you, and that you’d summon me to deal with it, right?” *Motherfucker.*

She was *not* getting punished for something she didn’t do. But that might well happen, and she might have to grin and bear it, because she couldn’t leave this place yet. The problem was ... she didn’t believe the entity inside her would stand for that shit.

Really, she wasn’t so sure that she’d successfully manage it either. It

wasn't in her nature to stand down, admit defeat, or allow herself to be intimidated—hence why she again held his gaze steadily.

“Ah, there's that hunter stare again,” he said, an almost imperceptible note of amusement in his tone. Like she was a puppy barking at a Rottweiler stupidly thinking she stood a chance against it.

“The what stare?”

He twirled a strand of her hair around his finger. It wasn't a flirtatious move—she sensed that right off. No, there was a challenging glint in his eyes. He was testing her, pushing her, trying to make her uncomfortable.

“When we last spoke, you watched me with the stare of a hunter,” he said. “You saw the level of danger in front of you, but you remained calm. Collected. At ease. You're doing it again now. And like last time, you're also ready to lunge at a moment's notice. Even knowing that I'm far more powerful than you, you'd still strike first if you thought I meant you harm, wouldn't you?”

“I have no idea why that makes you smile.” And damn if that smile didn't make her best parts tingle.

“You won't need to act in your own defense today, little witch. You said you didn't threaten Grouch. I believe you. After all, you wouldn't lie to me, would you?” His gaze dipped to her mouth, which promptly dried up.

Why yes, yes, she would lie to him if it was necessary. But she couldn't admit that, so she gave him a different truth that *sort* of answered his question. “I own my shit. If I had made any such threat, I wouldn't have denied it.”

“No?”

“No.”

Cain studied the witch's face, caught the glimmer of secrets in her eyes. “Hmm, I'm not sure I believe that.” Oh, she might very well be a person who would confess to and take responsibility for her actions, but he didn't doubt for a moment that she'd bullshit him if she felt the situation warranted it. She was fearless enough to take that risk—he knew that from the glimpse he'd gotten of the core of her being.

“I like your soul,” he said. “I've never before touched one that has so much to give. It beats with grit, inner strength, guts, and drive. It isn't stained with foul emotions like so many I own or have rights to. It might be undead, but it's not a flickering candle that's close to burning out. It's a roaring fire. Black fire.”

“You talk about it like it’s a pretty, shiny new toy.”

Hmm, maybe he did. Cain liked to collect rare things—art, books, objects. He’d never had rights to an undead soul before, nor one that held so much promise. “I’m sure it’ll be a fun toy to play with.”

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

Oh, she’d find out soon enough.

“There’s nothing special about my soul,” she said. “I’d bet most of them are ‘roaring fires.’ You have people coming to you all the time to make deals, so you’re used to seeing the souls of those who are greedy or envious or chronically dissatisfied. You’ve forgotten that there’s more to people than that.”

“Not all those who bargain their soul do so for selfish reasons. Some wish to save the life of a loved one, find safety for those they care for, or perhaps locate a person who has gone missing from their lives. Desperation is a powerful feeling. It can make a person do all sorts of things they’d never otherwise do.”

Biting her lip, she conceded his point with an incline of her head.

Seeing her teeth digging into that fleshy lower lip, he was tempted to tug it free with his thumb and then replace her teeth with his own. His body tightened at the thought.

It felt good to really *want* something. More, it felt good to feel that there’d be some satisfaction in having it. After eons of nothing being out of your reach, you ceased to yearn for things with any true intensity because there was no real gratification to be had from always getting what you desired. But Wynter ... he fucking burned for her.

And he would have her.

He’d need to be careful with this one, though. She was sharp. Too sharp. He had more secrets than he knew what to do with.

“Do you ever get people asking to have their soul returned to them?” she asked.

“Yes. Some find that whatever they sold their soul for wasn’t quite as gratifying as they’d expected. That particularly happens with fame. Once they tire of its price, they come crawling back to me looking to wangle out of their contract, fairly oozing regret. A wasteful emotion, really.”

“You don’t have any regrets at all?”

“They tend to eat at a person. If you’re going to live an eternally long life, you can’t afford to have regrets. They’d drive you insane.”

“Some might say you are insane.”

He felt his mouth twitch. “Oh, they might. They do. They may even be right.”

“You don’t sound too concerned about that.”

He chuckled. “On an entirely different note ... the sole male in your coven, is he your lover?”

A line formed between her brows, and she shook her head.

Satisfied gripped his gut. “Good.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. I don’t like it when things are in my way.”

Wynter stilled as the implications of that sank in. Her body was totally up for dancing the horizontal tango with him. But nothing about that would be wise.

He moved closer, boldly pushing into her personal space. “Just so there are no misunderstandings, I want you. I want your taste in my mouth. I want my cock in your body. I want my fingers in your mind.”

“My mind?” she echoed.

“When you’ve lived as long as I have, very little can surprise you. Even less can pique your interest. People become too easy for you to read. Too predictable to be entertaining. But you ... you’re difficult to get a handle on. Even now, nothing in your expression is telling me what you’re thinking. It’s incredibly frustrating. I want to be up here,” he added, tapping her temple.

Yeah, well, she didn’t want him up there. As for spending a night in his bed ... that idea held way too much appeal for her liking. She embraced her sexuality; she wasn’t afraid to explore or admit to her desires—there was a certain power in that, really. But this wasn’t a man who’d quite simply fuck her. He was far too dominant, far too used to control, for it to be that simple. “I’m not interested in warming your bed.”

“You’re interested. Oh, you don’t look it. I don’t see any trace of arousal on your face.” He very gently tapped her cheek with his finger. “But I can read your body much better than I can read your expressions. You let people see only what you want them to see, don’t you? It makes me wonder what else you’re hiding.”

She was hiding that she’d reached the unfortunate conclusion that she was fucked in the head. Wynter wasn’t used to being at a disadvantage. Her magick was a force that was almost as dark and deadly as the monster inside her—both those things made her very good at killing. Plus, she was trained to

take down any breed of preternatural, and she was confident in her ability to take care of herself.

But as she stood in front of this immortal, she knew that none of it meant anything. He could overpower her in an instant. And that only made her want him more. So it was official—she was indeed fucked in the goddamn head.

“You’ll be attending the festivities tomorrow evening, yes?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. We’ll talk more about this, then. Or maybe we’ll skip the talking.”

She went still as something seemed to *stroke* over her very being. Something old and dark and powerful. And the sensation ... it was like nothing she’d ever before experienced. It was as if every nerve-ending went up in flames. Little bumps swept over her skin, and cold fingers danced down her spine.

Cain hummed. “I’d wondered if your soul might be unresponsive, what with it being undead, but it isn’t. Far from it. When we last talked, you asked if my being able to touch your soul meant I could cause you pain. I can. But I can also make you come harder than you ever have in your life. There’s nothing more sensitive than the soul. It’s just one big erogenous zone.” He gave her a pointed look. “Think on that.” He turned his back on her—a silent dismissal.

Shaken in more ways than one, she took the hint and left, following the winding, twisting path. She didn’t speak as Maxim escorted her out of the Keep, her thoughts a massive jumble.

She’d known Cain wanted her, so his declaration hadn’t come as some great shock. It hadn’t been entirely expected, though, either. When a being was as *other* as Cain, you couldn’t really ‘expect’ anything of them.

Damn, she still felt a little tingly from when he’d stroked her soul.

Stroked. Her. Soul.

Now that she knew *exactly* what he’d meant by how sensitive a person’s soul was, she was hoping there’d never be a time that he’d decide to demonstrate what kind of intense physical pain he could now inflict on her.

*I can also make you come harder than you ever have in your life.*

Well, she wasn’t going to think about that.

After crossing the bailey, she headed straight home. Her entire crew was scattered around the living room, drinking tea and looking a little drained. They were no doubt tired from how hard they’d worked to get prepped for their ‘shop’ opening tomorrow. Not that it was stopping Delilah and Anabel

from sniping at each other.

“What’s going on?” asked Wynter.

“*She*”—Anabel jabbed a finger in Delilah’s direction— “is blaming me for the wolf attack I told you about. She’s saying it was *my* fault that I died that day.”

“If you hadn’t stepped foot on his territory, it wouldn’t have happened,” said Delilah. “You could have stayed away. But oh no. You pulled a Little Red Riding Hood, and you paid the price. Simple.”

Anabel’s lips parted. “Paid the price? I was eight years old. Have some compassion.”

“It interferes with my choices.”

“It *should*. Maybe if you let it, you wouldn’t have started brewing your precious karma potions and then you wouldn’t have a bounty on your head.”

“I don’t know what you all have against my acting on behalf of karma. My family’s been doing it since our line first began. It’s in my blood, and I’m proud of it.”

“I don’t know how you can possibly be proud of being a descendant of the Black Annis, even if it does mean you can shapeshift into a monstrous saber-toothed cat. That crone was *evil*.”

“She was brilliant.”

“She ate children.”

“Well, we don’t talk about that.”

Wynter lifted a hand. “All right, just stop. I shouldn’t need to point out that this conversation is heading nowhere.” She blew out a breath.

Xavier studied her. “You look kind of flustered. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” said Wynter. “Just annoyed with Grouch.”

“The blacksmith who pointed a sword at your neck?” he asked.

She nodded. “One and the same. He’s telling everyone that I’m going to hex his shop. It got back to Cain, who then had Maxim escort me to him.”

“You went to see Cain?”

“Not willingly.”

Xavier studied her face and then grinned. “He made a play, didn’t he?”

Damn the perceptive bastard. “No—”

“He did.” Xavier let out a teasing chuckle. “I doubt he even believed Grouch. He wanted you there so he could hit on you.”

Delilah leaned forward in her seat. “Xavier’s right, isn’t he?”

Wynter grunted.

Anabel rubbed at her arm. “This isn’t good. Not at all. What are you going to do?”

Wynter knew what she *should* do—stay the hell away from this person who could possibly ferret out her secrets. Besides, she didn’t want to be an immortal’s toy. But ... he’d like the chase. She saw that in him. Saw that he wouldn’t easily give up. And she couldn’t delude herself into believing that she’d manage to hold out against him.

Would it be better to give in, enjoy one night, and then move on? Maybe. She really didn’t know.

“I’ll tell ya what you’re gonna do, Wyn,” began Delilah. “You’re gonna let yourself have this. Gonna let yourself have him, to be more exact.”

“Del—”

“You need to get laid, okay. Let him do the laying. I’m thinking he’ll be good at it.”

“Let’s just—”

“No, no hemming and hawing. Trust your Aunty Delilah, this is what you need. It’s what your body needs. Tomorrow, you’re going to primp yourself up and choose an outfit that flashes some camel toe—”

“*And I’m walking away now,*” said Wynter, spinning on her heel.

“What’s camel toe?” asked Hattie.

Xavier burst out laughing.



# Chapter Seven

Wynter hadn't expected to have so many customers their first morning. Many probably came by purely out of curiosity, but few people left empty-handed—buying potions, baked goods, and bespelled cosmetics via the open living room window. It was Delilah who handled the transactions, leaving Hattie and Anabel able to stay in the kitchen.

Sat in his tent in the front yard, Xavier also got a lot of custom. Wynter spent the first hour keeping an eye on things, wanting to be sure all was going smoothly. She was about to head off to the shed when a male demon, bored waiting for his partner to choose from Delilah's selection, abruptly asked Wynter, "So what do you do?"

She tilted her head. "Do you have a weapon of any sort on your person?"

His tongue flicked out to touch his upper lip. "Yeah."

"Then follow me and I'll show you." She led him into the shed, which was now clean and pretty bare apart from a workbench and two stools.

He frowned at the selection of small bottles on the shelf. "What are all those?"

"Some are reversal potions, some are healing potions," she replied. "So, what do you have?"

He pulled out an athame so sharp and shiny it almost made her drool.

"Nice." She placed it on a workbench. "I can do various things to weapons to give them an 'edge,' shall we say. The enchantments serve as distractions. They give you a way to mess with your opponent's head. I'll make this one a surprise. If you don't like it, I can undo it."



He nodded. "All right."

Her old coven hadn't liked her using her magick much, but even they had welcomed this particular service. In fact, most of the townspeople had—particularly the keepers.

Wynter hovered her hand above the blade and called to her magick. Dark with an ultraviolet undertone, it shimmered in the air like waves of heat as it reached out like vaporous, outstretched fingers.

"Whoa." He moved closer, watching as said vaporous fingers sank into the metal, heating and empowering it. Runes glittered and sparked as they appeared along the blade. And then it was done. He studied the runes. "I don't recognize them."

"Because you don't possess dark magick as I do." She lifted the athame. "All right, to show you what this baby can do, I'll unfortunately have to prick you with it—or you can do it to yourself, whatever."

He took the athame from her. "Why?"

"The runes will cause an illusion, but it will only work on whoever the blade wounds. Others won't experience or be able to witness it." She grabbed a reversal potion from the shelf and handed it to him. "This will undo it."

"All right." He lightly stabbed the pad of his thumb with his blade, making blood bead to the surface. Mere moments later, he reared back, staring at his hand in horror. Caught up in the illusion only he could see, he jerked and cursed, his hand beginning to tremble.

She tapped the vial he held. "Drink."

He swiftly knocked back the reversal potion and then shuddered with a cough. He flexed his hand, studying it from every angle. "Sweet Jesus, that was a mind fuck. I thought I'd stabbed right through my thumb. There was blood everywhere and the wound just kept growing and growing until my thumb was hanging from my hand by a string of skin. The pain was unreal."

"My illusions are strong enough to fool *all* the senses. They create panic and confusion. The runes on your blade will make your opponent believe that their wounds are infinitely worse than they truly are. Even if they suspect it's an illusion, they'll still be distracted, especially by the pain."

"How long will the illusion last?"

"Approximately twenty minutes."

He stared at Wynter, his eyes sparkling with interest. "That's ... I've never seen anyone do anything like that."

She smiled. "Pretty cool, huh? Be sure to spread the word."

Shortly before lunchtime, he returned with several of his lair who wanted their own weapons to be enchanted. They weren't her only customers. Others came—partially out of genuine interest, and partially because they didn't want people with enchanted weapons having an edge over *them*.

Later, after the 'store' was closed and the entire crew was then sat around the kitchen table, Xavier poured their profits onto the surface while Delilah scribbled down the items or services they'd taken in trade. Hattie's 'space cakes' had been highly popular, as were Anabel's potions that enabled people to see past fey glamor.

"I'd say that was what you'd call a successful day," said Wynter.

"And it's only the beginning, darlin'," noted Hattie, stroking a crystal serving platter they'd been given as payment—one she'd been quick to claim for herself.

Lots of witchy stuff had been offered in trade, including candles, plants, and incense burners. Wynter had chosen some items for herself, as had the others.

"How long do you think it will be before local business owners get in a snit?" asked Anabel.

"Considering we're stealing business from the bakeries, the herbalist stores, the cosmetic shops, the blacksmith shops, and the diviners ... I'd say not long," replied Wynter.

The blacksmiths wouldn't suffer a dramatic loss, since she couldn't create weapons, but there would be *some* loss because people wouldn't need to renew their blades when they could simply ask her to jazz them up. They'd also be reluctant to part with their enchanted weaponry, so they wouldn't be in a rush to replace them—she'd seen that for herself back when she lived at Aeon.

Pushing her old home out of her mind, she said, "Well, we'd better start getting ready for tonight's festivities."

Delilah nodded. "The parade part sounds a little boring, since everyone's required to stand around waiting for their turn to wave when Ishtar's float goes by. But I'm looking forward to the feast. There's supposed to be some music and dancing ... *and* there's a rumor that things will get a little, shall we say, raw at one point. Don't know if it's true or not. But if a mist builds up and people start getting down and dirty, fully expect Cain to make a move right there. Oh, and don't forget to show some camel—"

"Jesus, Del, do you have no shame?" demanded Wynter while Hattie

cackled.

“Not when I wanna get laid,” replied Delilah. “I also want *you* to get laid. It’s been too long. We fix that tonight.”

Shaking her head, Wynter turned to Xavier. “Any chance you could help me cart my new stuff upstairs?”

“Sure,” he easily agreed.

Anabel and Delilah also helped, so it only took one trip to move everything upstairs. The trio then left, leaving Wynter to properly ‘nest.’ She set her African violet plant on the windowsill, arranged some candles around the room, and laid her astrological-themed throw over her armchair. She then placed her books on the shelf, which looked great bordered by her brand-new raven bookends. Only then did she unpack her suitcase and spruce up the décor with her collection of crystals. She’d add other things as she went along.

Done, she helped the rest of her crew carry their new things to their bedrooms and then returned to her own so she could get ready for tonight’s event. She chose one of her favorite dresses—made of black sheer lace, the racy number barely hid her underwear and ended just beneath her knees. The latter would no doubt disappoint Delilah.

Descending the stairs a short while later, she found the others gathered around the living area, which now also had some personal touches with the crescent moon mirror, triangular wall vases of fig and ivy, triple moon trunk, pretty throw pillows, and the Moon tarot card rug.

“Everyone ready?” she asked.

Anabel shrank in her seat. “Is it really compulsory for the entire town to attend?”

Xavier nodded, standing. “Ishtar will allegedly take it as an insult if not everyone is there to celebrate that she’s woken.”

Anabel frowned. “But it doesn’t make any sense. You said celebrations are held in the village hall. Everyone can’t possibly fit in there.”

“No,” he agreed, grinning, “but they can all fit in the huge arena that’s apparently located deep in the woods. And I, for one, am looking forward to seeing it.”

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Perched on top of the highest of the underground city’s three towers, Cain

skimmed his gaze along the residents who were waiting for the parade to start. Standing shoulder to shoulder, most lined the streets. Others hung out of windows or sat on roofs.

Aides walked around handing out streamers or balloons—most of which were taken reluctantly. There was no real excitement on the faces of the people below. They might be glad to have another Ancient awake as it was more protection for Devil’s Cradle, but they didn’t seem to like that they had to stand around and essentially pay homage to Ishtar like she was some sort of goddess. But then, Ishtar saw herself as such.

Hearing footfalls, Cain glanced behind him to see Azazel and Seth approaching. The other Ancients would join them soon—it was tradition for them to situate themselves at the main tower during parades or similar events.

Azazel scratched the back of his head. “I just saw a coyote wearing mascara.”

Cain did a double-take. “A coyote?”

“Yeah. Turns out that the new coven in town is selling bespelled cosmetics that aren’t disturbed by the shifting process.”

Cain felt his brows flick up. “Innovative idea.”

“I heard that the Priestess is a pretty little thing,” said Seth, coming to stand on Cain’s other side.

“She is,” Cain confirmed. “She’s also off-limits.”

Seth’s mouth kicked up. “Is she now? For how long?”

“Until I say differently.” Cain spied Wynter and her coven in the crowd. She was shaking her head at Hattie, who was pointing her finger at the page of an open book. Beside them, both Xavier and Delilah laughed. Anabel, however, huddled close to Wynter, nervously eyeing the crowds as if she expected someone to suddenly lunge at her.

“Fair enough,” said Azazel. “But you might want to find a way to make that clear to one and all, because from what I heard, she’s picked up a few admirers.”

Cain had anticipated that, which was why ... “It’ll be made clear tonight.” No one would dare touch her after that.

“Be ready for Ishtar’s reaction,” said Azazel. “She won’t like that someone else has your attention, and she’s never careful with your toys.”

“Wynter wears my mark on her palm. Not even Ishtar will disrespect that.”

“She won’t *physically* hurt your witch, no. But there are other ways to hurt someone or make their life difficult.”

“There are. And I know how to make Ishtar’s life difficult. She’s well aware of that. It’ll make her hesitate to play games.”

“‘Hesitate’ being the key word,” Seth cut in. “So if you want the Priestess for more than one night, you’d better hope that Wynter has staying power, or Ishtar will succeed in making her think you’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

“Which you are,” Azazel quipped.

Cain couldn’t deny it. “Yes, but Wynter doesn’t know that yet.”

Azazel snorted. “By the way, I spoke to my source again. The deterioration is still rampant in Aeon, and people are still getting sick.” When Seth let out a skeptical sound, Azazel looked at him. “You’re still not buying it?”

Seth shrugged. “I find it difficult to believe that decay and illness is prevalent in such a place of power.”

“Why?” asked Azazel. “There’s a whole other kind of rot there. Metaphorically speaking.”

“And you think that perhaps the universe decided it was time that the land reflected that?”

“Maybe. Stranger things have happened.”

Hearing the clicking of heels, Cain turned to see Lilith heading their way with Dantalion not far behind her. They all exchanged brief greetings.

Seth tilted his head at Dantalion. “When I heard you would throw the first celebration, I hadn’t for a moment expected you to suggest a parade.”

“I didn’t,” said Dantalion, rubbing the dust of stubble that was as blond as his short hair. “Ishtar insisted on it being a prelude to the celebration. You can’t be surprised. Having everyone wave and smile at her as she goes by in a carriage is exactly the sort of thing she’d enjoy.”

Lilith locked her vivid green gaze on Seth. “I had thought she would want you sitting beside her.”

“She suggested it this morning. I said no.” Seth’s eyes slid to Cain. “She complained that I was as obstinate and awkward as my brother, which made me wonder if she’d made that same suggestion to you.”

“She wanted me to escort her to the celebration,” said Cain.

Lilith let out a derisive sound and flicked her long, red hair over her shoulder. “In other words, she wanted you both fawning all over her.” She studied the crowd. “Has anyone noticed that the fey seem to be in a foul mood?”

“As of today, there are potions available in the city that allow people to see

past fey glamor,” said Azazel.

Lilith blinked. “Oh. Well, they’ll hate that. They’re forever tricking people.”

Azazel looked at Cain. “Your witch’s coven is responsible for that as well as—”

Marching band music cut through the air.

Seth sighed. “It’s starting.”

Surrounded by dance troupes, stilt walkers, and a uniformed marching band, a horse-drawn carriage exited the bailey of Ishtar’s Keep.

“Doesn’t do anything by halves, does she?” muttered Dantalion.

People clapped, waved, smiled, and whistled as the carriage went by. Most of those wide smiles were forced, but Cain doubted Ishtar would notice. She was too caught up in the personal power she gained from being the focus of so much attention.

Sticks beat on drums. Horse hooves clip-clopped. Balloons popped. Leaders called out to their dance troupes.

“Hey,” began Azazel, “what do you think all these people would do if they knew the truth about the Ancients?”

“Run,” said Dantalion. “I think they’d all run.”

\*

Wynter obligingly smiled as the horse-drawn carriage passed by. Ishtar was as beautiful as Maxim had said. Presently, she looked high as a kite. The Ancient was clearly *loving* this. Personally, Wynter couldn’t see any appeal in it, but to each their own.

Once the parade was finally over, several aides led the crowds through the woods and over to an open-air arena. It truly was huge, just as Xavier had said. Spectacular, too. It made her think of the Colosseum in Rome.

Everyone filed inside and—guided by ushers—filled the many spectator rows. Tray tables were attached to the back of each seat much like on airplanes. No sooner had Wynter and her crew sat down than Anabel had whipped out a vial of antibacterial potion and cleaned her own tray.

The Ancients were the last to take their seats, claiming the VIP area directly opposite of where Wynter and her coven were situated. Flanked by Seth and Azazel, Cain was quick to spot her. One corner of his mouth kicked up. His eyes bore into her own, gleaming with both promise and challenge.

Even as her mouth went dry and warmth bloomed inside her, Wynter slipped on her poker face, intent on ensuring he didn't sense the effect he had on her. That only made his smile widen.

Ishtar rose to her feet, the image of grace. "Thank you all for coming." Power swirled through the air, carrying her voice to every guest. "And thank you, Dantalion, for the time and effort you invested in celebrating my return."

The male Ancient nodded, looking bored.

Ishtar went on to make a little speech, but Wynter barely heard it. Well, it was hard to focus when she could *feel* Cain's eyes on her. She wouldn't look at him. She wouldn't. She wouldn't.

She did.

And the heated glance he speared her with went straight to her freaking womb. She shot him a narrow-eyed look and turned away, relieved her cheeks didn't flush.

Finally, Ishtar quieted, smiling as applause rang out. Music filled the air again, and then the entertainers who'd surrounded her carriage during the parade trickled onto the performance space below. The artists danced and sang and entertained, and the spectators clapped and swayed and sang along.

It wasn't until the interval that food and drinks were served. Which was about the same time that Anabel started panting like an exhausted racehorse.

Lifting her corn on the cob, Delilah frowned. "What's with all the heavy breathing?"

"He keeps looking at me," said Anabel, her eyes wide. "Why does he keep looking at me?"

Wynter tracked her gaze. One of their lycan Alpha neighbors, Diego, was blatantly staring at the blonde, his lips curved.

Delilah smirked. "Girl, you got yourself an admirer."

Anabel began rubbing her temples. "Oh God, oh God, he wants to eat me."

Delilah snickered. "Eat your pussy, maybe."

Hattie cackled and patted the blonde's arm. "You should really let him, dear. He might even be up for some anil—"

"*Please* stop saying that word," begged Anabel. She turned to Wynter. "How do you do it?"

"What?" asked Wynter, cutting into her steak.

"Stay so calm and chill when you know a guy is watching you," replied Anabel. "Don't say you haven't noticed Cain staring at you. You totally have."

Wynter sniffed. “He’s trying to make me squirm with that unblinking stare.”

“He’s also fucking you with it,” said Xavier. “And he’s not being subtle. People have taken notice. I’m thinking he’s doing it so publicly to send a message.”

Yeah, she was thinking the same thing. And she wasn’t sure if she liked it or hated it.

Soon, the dirty dishware and leftover food was collected and taken away. The performers then reappeared. Some did a short dance routine while the band set up shop in the corner of the large space. Once they were done, a stilt walker grabbed a mic and invited people to ‘come on down.’ The band began to play, and the stilt walker belted out song after song.

Some guests left the spectator section and headed to the performance space, which soon became a makeshift dance floor. Others were content to remain in their seats, still clapping and singing along. Wynter and her crew did the latter ... until Delilah drained her drink and jumped to her feet as she said, “Here’s where we go dance and show all the boys what we got.”

Anabel grimaced. “I’m going to nix that and—no, Del, *I don’t want to, you can’t make me.*”

“True, I can’t. But if we leave you alone, that lycan Alpha is gonna come over and—”

Anabel shot to her feet, glowering. “This is some fucking bullshit right here.”

Delilah just snickered.

All five of them made their way to the ‘dance floor.’ Hattie brought out her best moves, none of which were ladylike. Delilah mimicked every move, egging the old woman on. Wynter and Xavier stayed close to Anabel, who slowly but surely thawed out until she was *owning* that dance floor.

Wynter blinked as the lights dimmed low and mist began to haze the air.

Delilah grinned. “And this is where it hopefully gets good.”

Anabel actually whooped, having lost her inhibitions somewhere along the line, and kept on dancing to the thumping music.

The mist became thicker and thicker and thicker, until Wynter could no longer see her crew. It didn’t help that it was dark and—

Hands clamped on her hips as someone plastered their front to her back. Warm lips touched her ear. “There you are.”

Her heart slammed into her ribcage, and she inhaled sharply. She knew



that voice. *Cain*. His breath stirred the little hairs on her ear, making a delicate shudder run through her.

“You knew I’d come for you, didn’t you?” His hands slid down her outer thighs to snake beneath her dress. “And you knew what would happen when I did.” He dragged his fingertips up her inner thighs, digging them into her skin, dragging her dress upward as he did so. “You want this. Don’t you?”

Wynter reached back and slipped her hand between them. She cupped his dick and, finding it delightfully hard and thick, gave it a squeeze. “That answer your question?”

He growled and bit into her neck, ghosting his fingers over her panties. “I don’t know what it is about you ... but I want to mark you the fuck up. Your skin. Your pussy. Your very soul.”

Pleasure *swept* over her being like a firm, warm, electrically charged hand. Her back arched, and she sucked in a breath. *Jesus Christ*. It was like being touched ... *everywhere*.

Static danced over her skin and raised the hairs on her flesh as her body came alive. Her nipples throbbed, her muscles flexed, her nerve-endings turned hypersensitive, and her pussy clenched as if full ... only she’d never been more acutely aware of how empty she was.

“Maybe I’ll feel less possessive after I’ve come deep inside you,” he said. “I guess we’ll soon see.”

She thrust her hips toward the fingers still doing featherlight brushes over her panties. “*Cain*.” A breath stuttered out of her as one hand snaked around her throat. Her lips tingled as his thumb swept over them. She bit the digit, and his cock pulsed against her palm.

“I’m not just going to fuck you, sweet witch. I’m going to ruin you. Corrupt you. Consume you.” His tongue traced the shell of her ear. “You’ll break. You’ll cry. You’ll feel like you’re mine.”

An electric wave of pleasure once more swept over her soul, snatching the breath from her lungs. Wynter’s head flew back. God, her skin was suddenly like one giant hot spot. She’d never felt so sensitive *in her life*. Ever. Her buzzing nerve-endings *screamed* to be touched, stroked, scratched—

Another surge of pleasure. And another. And another. And another.

She lost herself. Lost all awareness of everything around her, except for him; for the hand collaring her throat and anchoring her to the world.

She was ... she was a *mess*. All she could think about was finding her release. Nothing else mattered. Nothing.

She trembled, she whimpered, she arched, she *burned*. Her mind, body, and soul were strung so tight it would take one pinch of her nipple. One. She'd explode like never before. But he didn't give her that. He kept on delivering caress after caress to her soul—each one hot and electric.

She couldn't take it. She couldn't. It was unbearably, painfully intense. Too consuming, too devastating. An overload of sensation that just wouldn't —

She broke. Exactly like he'd said she would.

Wynter thought she screamed, but she wasn't sure. The pleasure hit her with the force of an avalanche and ripped her apart, making her vision darken around the edges. She was honestly surprised she didn't pass out.

She leaned back against Cain, her legs trembling, her breaths sawing at her throat. Tears trailed down her face. Well, he'd told her she'd cry, hadn't he?

That whole soul-gasm thing had more than primed her on a physical level, and she was rearing. To. *Fuck*. She squeezed his cock. "Please tell me you have a condom."

"I don't need one. Ancients can't carry STDs. Nor can we procreate." Cain licked up one tear with his tongue, and his inner creature memorized the taste. It liked her this way—soft, vulnerable, needy. He turned her to face him, drinking in the dazed look she wore, and gripped her jaw. "I want you to come for me again. This time, you'll be stuffed full of cock when you do."

He brought his mouth crashing down on hers and sank his tongue inside. Moaning, she thrust her hand into his hair while he tore open his fly and freed his throbbing dick.

He hoisted her up, constructed a wall of pure power behind her, and slammed her against it. She gasped as he effortlessly tore off her panties, clueless as to how strong he truly was. He inched the head of his cock inside her, stretching her open, gritting his teeth as her inner muscles rippled around him.

"You know what you're going to do for me, don't you?"

"What?" she whispered.

"Anything I want." He slammed her down on his cock. "Everything I want." He took two fistfuls of her ass. "*Anytime* I want." Before she could protest, he sent out a little wave of power, letting it vibrate against her skin. "This won't be the last time I have you, Wynter. Not even close."

He fucked her hard, knowing she needed it, knowing her body would be craving it. She held tight, angling her hips to take him as deep as he wanted

to go. And he wanted to go *deep*. “Fuck, you feel good.”

All around them, there were moans and cries of pleasure coming from the people hidden by the mist. They mingled with his grunts and her whispered demands for him to move harder, faster.

Growling, he gave her what she needed. “Pull your breasts out of your dress, play with them for me.”

She didn’t hesitate, clearly not at all shy. Her hands weren’t gentle as she palmed and squeezed the full globes, or as she pinched and twisted her nipples. She liked it rough, and she owned it without shame. He liked that.

He adjusted his angle slightly, and she let out a hoarse cry that seemed to call to the monster inside him. It unfurled, edgy with a possessiveness it wasn’t used to feeling. It shoved at Cain in demand, and he knew what it wanted. He knew that, far from being done with her, the creature also wasn’t prepared to share her.

Sensing that Cain would resist, it slinked closer to the surface. *Shit*. If his monster took control, if it fucked her ... Cain couldn’t allow that. There’d be no guarantee that she’d live through it, for starters.

He let the creature sense his acquiescence, satisfied when it settled.

“Cain,” she breathed, her pussy fluttering and tightening around his cock.

He snarled. “That’s it, come.” He raked his teeth over the side of her face, drawn to that spot in a way he couldn’t explain, and she all but detonated in his arms.

He slapped his hand over her lower stomach as he gave his creature what it wanted, but she was so out of it she didn’t feel a thread of power *push* its way inside her.

She slumped, her orgasm fading, and he gripped her ass tighter as he hammered into her harder and faster. Finally, he exploded, jets of come bursting out of him as a powerful release thundered through his body and seemed to shoot up his cock.

Boneless, Wynter looked at him through opaque eyes, the image of sated. Gripped by the sight of her mouth all red and swollen, he kissed her softly, needing another taste, swallowing her sigh of pleasure.

She didn’t realize anything was different. But she would. Soon. And he had a feeling he’d find himself on the receiving end of one of her hunter stares when she did.

Perversely, he was looking forward to it.



# Chapter Eight

Entering the kitchen the next morning, Wynter blinked at Anabel. “Why are you walking funny?”

A laugh bubbled out of Delilah, who put a hand to her stomach as she leaned forward in her chair. “Oh God, my ribs are hurting like hell.”

Her cheeks crimson, Anabel glared at the other witch. “Probably because you won’t stop laughing despite your promise.”

Delilah lifted her cup. “I’m not laughing, I’m chuckling.”

“It’s the same thing.” Anabel plopped herself on a chair and moodily dragged it along the floor as she scooted forward.

Delilah looked at Wynter. “Anabel and Diego had some fun in the mist last night, and it turns out he has a *beast* of a cock.”

“Oh, I see.” Wynter hadn’t spoken to either Anabel or Hattie last night, since both had left the arena before her. They’d been tucked up in bed when she’d returned.

“At first, when I saw her waddling like a goddamn penguin, I thought she’d taken him up the ass.”

“That thing in his pants will *never* get near my ass,” declared Anabel.

Beside the blonde, Xavier patted her arm in comfort—a gesture that was totally spoiled by the way his shoulders shook in silent laughter.

Having grabbed a Danish pastry and poured herself a coffee, Wynter settled at the table. “Where’s Hattie?”

Xavier gestured at the backyard. “Enjoying her early morning joint.”

Eyeing Wynter, Anabel tilted her head and said, “You know, I kind of

expected you to be walking bowlegged, since Cain had made it clear with his gaze alone that you were going to get royally fucked.”

Delilah smiled. “From the little she told me and Xavier last night, she *was* royally fucked. I had a feeling the dude would bring plenty of game to the table. I do love to be right.”

Anabel tore off a piece of her croissant, her gaze on Wynter. “Does sex ever really leave you feeling satisfied? I mean, food doesn’t. Sleep doesn’t. So it made me wonder.”

“Usually, no,” replied Wynter. “Even if I come, I don’t feel fully sated. But last night was different. He stroked my soul and, *Jesus*, it was more intense than anything I’ve ever felt in my life.” And she wasn’t as happy about that as she’d like to be because, seriously, what guy could live up to that? How could she not compare any future sexytimes with what happened last night?

Delilah’s eyes lit up. “Oh, now that sounds intriguing. The sidhe I fucked last night had some amazing tricks, but soul-touching wasn’t one of them.”

“Being bitten by a vampire was an interesting experience,” said Xavier, his mouth curving.

“One you’d repeat?” asked Anabel.

“Maybe,” he said. “I might have gotten more than simply bitten if Elias from next door hadn’t interfered to be a dick. He came over, acting all flirty with me—even suggested a threesome with him and his boyfriend. It was obvious he was only trying to put her off. I don’t get why he’d do that.”

“Lycans are more territorial than any other preternatural species,” said Wynter. “Our lycan neighbors will feel they have a minor claim to us five, what with us living so close to them. That in and of itself will make them act a little territorial at times, not to mention protective.”

“Wait, *that’s* why Diego made a move on me?” asked Anabel.

“No, I’m sure he likes you,” said Wynter. “But I also think he acted fast because he felt a little proprietary and didn’t want others to beat him to it.” She looked at Xavier. “I think another reason Elias interfered is that lycans hate vamps. He wouldn’t want ‘the enemy’ touching any of us.”

“That’s his problem,” said Xavier. “He has no right to make it mine.”

“Agreed. I’ll have a chat with him if he doesn’t let up.”

“No need, I can deal with him just fine.”

Wynter narrowed her eyes. “You’re *not* killing him.”

“We all have the right to cut toxic people from our lives.”

“That doesn’t mean ending their existence. Besides, he’s not a toxic influence; he just annoyed you.”

“Well, I don’t like him.”

“*Still* not a reason to end his existence. No, I’m done discussing it. Let’s move on and talk about something else. *Any* subject will do.”

Delilah raised her hand. “I have a question. Do you think there’ll be a repeat of what happened with you and Cain?”

There was no denying that staying clear of the Ancient would be for the best, but Wynter knew herself well enough to know that ... “If he made another move, I probably wouldn’t resist.”

The kitchen door slowly opened, and then Hattie shuffled inside, muttering something under her breath.

Anabel frowned. “Something wrong?”

“I can’t find my copy of *Fifty Shades*,” replied Hattie, sitting on the only empty chair at the table. “It has to be here somewhere.”

“I thought you preferred the movie anyway,” said Anabel.

“Only because that Jamie actor is a dish.” A dreamy smile took over Hattie’s face. “I would *love* to meet him, you know.”

“You would?”

“Oh yes, I’d love to talk to him.”

“About what?”

Hattie hesitated. “Well, I don’t know, I’d just love to talk to him. Wouldn’t you?”

Anabel’s nose wrinkled. “No, not really.”

“Why not?” demanded Hattie, seeming offended on his behalf.

“I don’t even like talking to people I *do* know. I have absolutely no desire to strike up a conversation with a perfect stranger.”

“He’s not a stranger. You know who he is.”

“I know his name and his occupation. I also know that the guy who used to sell me herbs was called Horatio.”

Xavier snickered and chugged down the last of his coffee. “She makes a good point, Hattie. Which doesn’t happen often.” Ignoring Anabel’s scowl, he cocked his head and said, “I can hear voices outside. Seems like people are already gathering at the gate. We ready to open our shop, people?”

There was a round of yeses, and then everyone got moving.

The day went well. More potions were sold, more bespelled cosmetics were purchased, and more baked goods flew off the metaphorical shelves.

Xavier's custom also picked up, and Wynter had plenty of people appear with weaponry.

Since many customers paid in trade, the fridge and kitchen cupboards were soon packed with food. Bags of toiletries, household accessories, and clothing were also handed over.

At the end of the workday, Wynter and her crew ate dinner and, like yesterday, distributed the 'goods' they'd been given in trade. They then set up a corner altar in the living room, adding a number of items such as an athame, candles, a bell, and a small cauldron.

They also added a few touches to their front yard, including a welcome mat and some hanging baskets overflowing with fern. Following that, they worked as a team to add some live plants to the backyard for Delilah and Anabel's concoctions. There was mint, lavender, foxglove, and heather but to name a few.

Looking forward to trying her new green-tea scented shower gel, Wynter was soon stood under the hot spray in her private bathroom. Her thoughts—just as they'd annoyingly often done throughout the day—strayed to Cain; strayed to what they'd shared in the mist.

Christ, she'd *never* been fucked like that. And she wasn't only talking about the whole soul-gasm part of the night. The proprietary way he'd touched her, the forceful thrusts with which he'd taken her, the punishing grip on her ass, the words he'd spoken in that goddamn sex voice ... The bastard had ruined her, just as he'd promised he would.

As the memories flickered through her mind, she found her hand drifting down her body. Her eyelids drifted shut as she touched herself—rubbing her clit, stroking her slit, circling the entrance of her pussy. She dipped her fingers inside ... or tried to. She couldn't. *Couldn't*. Like there was a barrier there or something. One she couldn't internally feel, but one that nonetheless stopped her fingers from sliding inside.

Realization hit her, and her mouth dropped open. *That motherfucker.*

\*

Cain was deep in discussion with one of his aides when a knock came at the door of the solar room. "Yes?" he called out.

Maxim entered. "You said I was only to disturb you if there was an emergency or if a particular visitor arrived. In this instance, it is the latter.

What would you like me to do?”

Cain felt his lips hitch up. This could be fun. “Send her in.”

After Maxim left, Cain dismissed his other aide and then draped one arm over the back of the sofa as he waited impatiently for his witch to appear. His creature reared up, eager to see her.

Maxim soon escorted her into the room. To Cain’s disappointment, her poker face was firmly in place. He doubted it would be too hard to crack the mask, though.

“Leave us,” he told his aide, who then nodded and walked out.

Her chin inched up. “I think there’s something you forgot to tell me,” she said, her voice carefully even.

Cain pursed his lips. “No, I don’t believe so.” He was terribly impressed when she didn’t so much as narrow her eyes. Letting his gaze roam over her, he said, “You’re wearing too many clothes. Take them off. I didn’t get to strip you bare last night. I want to see every inch of you. Show me.”

“Or you could explain what the hell you did to me.”

“I did a lot of things to you,” he reminded her, pitching his voice low and deep. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“You know *exactly* what I’m talking about.”

Cain arched a brow. “I do?”

“Yeah, you do.”

“There are just so many things you could be referring to. At least give me a hint.”

Finally, the poker face crumbled. Her stunning eyes flared, and that edible mouth tightened. More, she pinned him with one of her trademark hunter stares that thickened his blood and enticed his inner creature.

She set her hands on her hips. “You’re gonna play dumb now? Really?”

Smiling, he stood. “No. I just want to hear you tell me how you came to discover what I’d done.” He covered the ground between them in three fluid strides. “Did you try to get yourself off? Hmm?” It couldn’t have been that someone else did it. After he’d publicly made his interest in her so abundantly clear, no one would have dared touch her that way.

She folded her arms. “Tell me what exactly you did.”

“Simply ensured that the only person whose tongue, fingers, and cock you can take inside you are mine.”

Her lips parted. “Seriously? You *seriously* did that?”

“Yes, I did.”



“And you don’t think that’s wrong, not to mention messed up?”

“No. No, I don’t.”

“Jesus, you’re on dope, aren’t you? There’s no other way you’d pull a stunt like this and think it was acceptable.”

He tipped his head to the side. “I strike you as someone who cares what’s acceptable?”

“After this, no, no, you don’t. You need to undo what you did.”

“Why?”

Her brows snapped together. “What do you mean why? Because it’s not normal.”

“To you, maybe not.” He lightly tapped her cheek with his finger. “But don’t judge me by the standards of mortals, Wynter.” In truth, what he’d done was perfectly normal for his kind when they were possessive. But there was no way he could tell her that.

“And how would *you* feel if ... you know what, scrap that. Something tells me that empathy isn’t your thing. But come on, Cain, not only did you insert some kind of barrier inside me, you didn’t even think to tell me. Why not? Why, *knowing* it would make me even more pissed about the situation, did you decide to leave me to find out on my own?”

“Truthfully?” Cain hooked his arm around her waist and pulled her flush against him. “Because fucking with your pretty little head makes me hard.” And while pressed firmly against him, she was able to feel the evidence of that.

Long moments went by as she simply stared at him. “You know, someone mentioned you were a mental sadist. I thought they were joking.”

“No, ‘mental sadist’ fits. And you’re still wearing too many clothes. I told you, I want them off.”

“What *I* want is for you to undo what you did.”

He smoothed one hand down her back and palmed her ass. “I don’t think it bothers you quite as much as you’d like me to believe it does. A part of you gets off on what I’ve done; on knowing I’d go so far to make sure no one else can have you.”

“And that part of me is as mentally sadistic as you, so I discount everything it wants and feels.”

He chuckled. “You’ve surprised me yet again, little witch. I expected you to deny it. In fact—” He cut off as knuckles rapped on the door. “Yes?”

Maxim stepped inside, his expression apologetic. “Sorry to disturb you,

but Seth would like to see you. He says it's very important."

Sighing, Cain stepped away from Wynter. "I'll be back in a moment. Wait here for me. Don't leave."

"Oh, you don't have to worry that I'll go anywhere." She gave him a look that said she wouldn't be moving from that very spot until he'd done as she ordered. Something he absolutely could not do—his creature wasn't ready to let her go yet; it would take the matter into its own hands if Cain refused to ensure it had what it wanted.

Putting the matter aside for now, Cain crossed to his aide. "Where is my brother?"

"The manor," replied Maxim. "He said you'll find him in the main parlor."

Cain headed upstairs to his chamber and over to the life-size mirror. He splayed his hand on the glass, and it instantly turned to rippling black water. He stepped through it and, utterly dry, stepped out of an identical mirror in one of the manor's bedrooms.

He made his way downstairs and into the main parlor, not bothering to first knock on the door.

Sitting on one of the sofas with his aide at his back, Seth tipped his chin at Cain. "Hello, brother. I'll be with you shortly. Although you're welcome to stay and hear their story." He gestured at the two men seated on the opposite sofa. "This here is Ed and Artie. They're bounty hunters."

Not yet sure why Seth was acting as though he hadn't called for him to come, Cain chose to play along. "Is that so? And just what would they be doing here?"

"Me and Ed were hired by people from Aeon," the one who had to be Artie said. "They sent us after a witch. They want her brought back alive."

"We've been on her trail for a while," said Ed. "We caught up to her once. She killed two of our group. And I mean *eviscerated* them. She got better at covering her tracks after that, but we've been at this a long time. We managed to track her down."

Cain looked from one male to the other. "I'm guessing you believe she's here."

"We do," Ed confirmed. "It makes sense that she'd come here. You offer sanctuary to people on the run."

"If you know we offer sanctuary to such people," began Seth, "you must also know we don't give them up."

Artie gave a slow nod. "We do know that. But we figured if we explained

that the Aeons want her, you might be inclined to hand her over. I mean, they were once your people until ...” *Until you lost to them in a war*, he didn’t add but left implied.

Seth looked at Cain. “Her name is ...” Trailing off, he cut his gaze to Artie. “What did you say it was again?”

“Wynter Dellavale,” the bounty hunter replied.

Everything inside Cain went very still, including his monster. He didn’t allow his expression to alter, not yet certain he wanted the hunters to be aware that she was a resident here.

Now understanding why Seth had called for him, Cain asked, “Why do the Aeons want her?”

“We don’t know,” said Ed. “They didn’t say. At first, they wanted her dead. But that changed. They didn’t explain why.”

“I got the impression they want her badly,” Artie added. “Look, we asked to speak with an Ancient because we know better than to touch the property of one without first seeking permission.”

Cain raised a brow. “Did you believe that wish would be granted?”

Artie sighed. “I heard that Ancients sometimes grant that permission, depending on the circumstances.”

“We do indeed. As for this particular circumstance ...” The way Cain saw it, he had two choices. Deny she was here, or make it clear that she was under his protection and that any hunters who came for her would die—that would make the price on her head invalid. People from Aeon might come for her, but that would be something he’d welcome.

Cain chose the latter option. “This is what you’re going to do. You’re going to leave Devil’s Cradle. You’re going to spread the word that Wynter Dellavale is in my service and under my protection; that I will kill anyone who tries cashing in on the bounty. And, no matter what the people of Aeon offer you, you will cease trying to capture her. You may, however, pass on her location to them. If they want her, they’ll have to come get her.”

Artie nodded. “We’ll pass on that message.”

Once Seth’s aide guided them out of the parlor, Cain turned to his brother. “Azazel’s source informed him that a witch was recently exiled from Aeon. I hadn’t suspected it was Wynter—she came here as part of a coven. Although, to be fair, she never once claimed they were a coven.” In fact, she’d repeatedly told him that they weren’t. “The others made that claim.”

Seth twisted his mouth. “Why do you think the Aeons want her?”

“We won’t know unless we ask her. She’s currently in my Keep, so I suggest we do exactly that.”

They’d taken no more than three steps out of the room when they saw Azazel heading their way. The Ancient frowned. “There a problem?”

“We’ll explain on the way,” Cain told him.

\*

Wynter handed the broadsword back to Maxim, who studied its brand-spanking new runes with utter fascination.

“And this enchantment will work on anyone the blade slices?” he asked.

“Yes, including you, so be careful,” she advised. “You wouldn’t *truly* be itching all over, but you’d think that you were, so you’d scratch and scratch and scratch—it’s not only distracting, it’s maddening. But it will stop after twenty minutes or so.”

“That’s ... I’m impressed. Very.” He carefully sheathed his sword. “Thank you, Wynter.”

“No, thank *you*,” she said as he handed her payment.

She’d no sooner stuffed the cash in her pocket than a gentle breeze swirled around her ankles and traveled up her legs, fairly humming with warning. It wasn’t a warning of danger, though. More like a heads-up that she needed to be prepared.

The solar room door opened, and Cain stalked inside. He wasn’t alone. Seth and Azazel followed him into the room. And as all three men honed in on her, their expressions hard and intense, she suspected that at least *one* of her secrets were out.

*Hell.*

Maxim briefly greeted them before breezing out of the solar and abandoning her.

Cain stepped toward her, his bottomless eyes settled on her with a mind-melting focus that—even right then, despite the circumstances—did *far* too interesting things to her hormones. “Wynter, this is Azazel and my brother, Seth.”

Azazel squinted. “The Priestess of the Bloodrose Coven, right?” It felt like a trick question.

“No. My crew says that shit to wind me up.” She returned her gaze to Cain. “Well, I see you’re busy, so I’ll get going.”

“There’s no rush,” he said, his voice smooth and casual, yet there was a firmness there that insisted she stay. “You might be interested to know why I was called away just now.”

“Oh?”

“Bounty hunters requested an audience with an Ancient. They’re looking for someone in particular.”

Her insides seized. “Bounty hunters usually are.”

“In this case, they’re seeking a witch. A witch by the name of Wynter Dellavale. You. And they’re seeking you on behalf of the people of Aeon.”

“Yeah, so?”

He blinked. “You failed to mention that they wanted you when you came here looking for sanctuary.”

“You said you weren’t interested in what brought me or my crew here,” she reminded him. “Are you going to hand me over to the bounty hunters?”

He gave her a pointed look. “You and I have a verbal contract, remember?”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

He closed the small space between them, pinning her gaze with his own. “I sent them away, Wynter. I will send away anyone who comes for you, or I will kill them—one or the other.” He stared at her like she was a puzzle he was desperate to solve. “Tell us why the Aeons want you.”

It wasn’t a request; it was a demand. And considering the Aeons might very well bring trouble to their door, she supposed it was only fair that the Ancients understood the situation. Not that she’d tell them *everything*. But then, they didn’t need to know *everything*.

“They exiled me,” she said.

“I know that much. But why?”

“My old coven lives in the town. Occasionally, people are ‘chosen’ to live among and directly serve the Aeons in the city below. In the opinion of the newly appointed Priestess, Esther, I was a weakness in the coven that would prevent them from being chosen, so they wanted me gone.”

“Why did they consider you a weakness?” asked Azazel.

“Because my magick is dark,” she replied. “Impure. Unworthy. Tainted. Or, at least, that’s how they see it.”

Azazel’s brow lifted. “You don’t?”

“No,” she said. “Whether or not magick is bad depends on the intentions of the user.”

He inclined his head. “True enough. I heard a witch was exiled but that the keeper who was meant to escort her to the border instead ran off with her. Was he killed by people on your trail?”

Just remembering that little shit stain made her nostrils flare. “Wagner didn’t attempt to escort me to the border. The Aeons claim they steal the memories of exiled people, put them to sleep, and then have someone drive them out of there. I learned something when I was exiled. I learned that, in fact, they paralyze you with power so that you’re easy for keepers to toss over the falls. The exiled are never truly banished. They’re killed.”

“But you escaped,” said Cain.

“I escaped. And Wagner got what was coming to him in the process.”

Cain’s eyes drifted over her face. “Why do the Aeons want you so badly? It cannot possibly be merely because you murdered a keeper and fled.”

She moved to a display table on which a potted plant sat. Wynter dug a finger into the soil and injected a thread of magick into it. Within mere seconds, the plant wilted, dried up, and decayed until it was utterly unsalvageable.

Cain regarded her with renewed interest. “You’re the cause of the rot.”

She slowly nodded. “I’m the cause of the rot.”



## Chapter Nine

**S**hock. It was an emotion that Cain hadn't felt in a truly long time. So long, in fact, he almost hadn't recognized the feeling when it crashed into him.

There hadn't been even a millisecond where he had considered that Wynter might be responsible for the current fuckery going on at Aeon. He hadn't even been sure anything *was* truly going on there.

Cain found himself staring at her again, conceding to himself that he'd sincerely underestimated her. Oh, he'd known she was powerful. He'd known she was essentially an alpha playing at being an omega. But he wouldn't have guessed she could wield *that* level of power. No one would think it to look at her.

Seth scratched his head. "Don't take this the wrong way, Wynter, but how could one little witch infect the land that way?"

"I didn't infect it, I cursed it," she said. "There are ways to undo a curse, of course. But the methods are very intricate. You can't undo one by simply combating the *results*. The people of Aeon are no doubt trying to tackle the decay because they haven't yet realized the root of the problem. That's why curses are often so successful—people don't always immediately suspect that that's what they're dealing with, and so they don't take the right steps to counteract it."

She made the whole thing sound simple. Like hexing protected land was easy enough. It wasn't. Not at all. But then, maybe it wasn't as difficult for those who possessed dark magick.

Cain twisted his mouth. "So once the residents of Aeon realize it's a curse

and treat it as such, they'll be able to undo it?"

She nodded.

"And to undo that, they'll have to end your life, right?" asked Azazel. "You wanted to cause destruction, and so only your own destruction will undo it. That's why witches rarely cast such curses, from what I heard."

"The cost is often considered too high, yes," she said.

"Not that I'm judging, because I think this is all fucking brilliant," Azazel went on, "but why retaliate to this extent? I know they essentially betrayed you on every level, but for you to be prepared to die just to get revenge ..."

Her eyes dulled, but then her expression shuttered ... as if she'd severed whatever connection she felt to the emotions rolling through her. "When I was a child, they exiled my mother. Or so I thought until the day they did the same to me, and I realized she was dead."

"Why did they exile her?" asked Seth.

She linked her fingers. "I died. Then I came back. The Aeons don't take kindly to the use of forbidden magick."

Azazel propped his hip against the wall. "How did you die?"

She looked down, her tongue poking the inside of her cheek. "When I was ten, two teenage boys lured me into the woods where they then paralyzed me with magick so they could have a little sadistic fun. They pissed on me. Spat in my eyes. Shoved sharp little stones up my nose. Tried making me choke on dirt. Stabbed me multiple times. Burned the soles of my feet with magick. Sliced my throat but then, bored of waiting for me to die, jammed the knife into the side of my throat."

Cain ground his teeth as anger bubbled up inside him. She'd recounted the incident so matter-of-factly, but her words were laced with the helplessness she'd felt back then. There was also a pure predatory rage there—it was subtle, but he heard it. So did his creature, which was at this very moment utterly enthralled by her.

She swallowed. "I felt *everything*, but I couldn't move. Couldn't scream. Couldn't cry out for help. So being paralyzed by power yet again made the 'exile' so much worse. Especially since the keeper intended to dismember me on behalf of the angry families of the boys who were executed after what they did to me—oh, *and* he meant to gouge out one of my eyes for them to have as a souvenir. To put it simply, I was in a blind fury."

"Anyone would have been." Cain crossed to her, unable to do anything else when she looked so very alone. "It would be safe to conclude that the



Aeons believe you're behind the blight and intend to force you to fix it. They probably didn't suspect you at first, since it wouldn't initially seem like a magickal attack. But when the blight kept unnaturally spreading, they no doubt concluded that it had to be you who'd caused it, and now they want you to unravel what they will believe is a spell."

"That would explain why they went from wanting you dead to wanting you alive," Seth said to her.

Wynter's brow creased. "You didn't ask the bounty hunters?"

"We did," said Seth. "They don't know why the Aeons want you."

She eyed Cain closely. "It's possible that more hunters will come for me."

"It's unlikely, since I insisted that it be publicly known that you're in my service—people are highly reluctant to harm the property of an Ancient. It's a death sentence."

"I doubt that will stop residents of Aeon from coming for me, though—they'll be acting on orders from the Aeons; they won't dare ignore said orders. Hell, you may even be visited by the Aeons themselves. If you're not prepared to go up against them to keep me safe, I can understand that, but I'll need to leave."

She wasn't going anywhere. His creature would never allow it, even if Cain would. He put his face closer to hers. "I told you I wouldn't give you up. I meant it."

"But can you speak for the other Ancients when you say that?"

"Oh, they won't do the Aeons any favors. We loathe them even more than you do. The Aeons know that. So I doubt they would come for you *personally*. At least not initially. But they may send representatives."

Pausing, Cain took a moment to study her face. "I see you're skeptical that we'd protect you. I can understand why. I'll be honest, it's not *all* about you or our verbal contract. The fact is ... *nothing* would please me and the other Ancients more than for Aeon to be uninhabitable. That was once our home, and they banished us much as they did you. For as long as you're alive, their land will continue to waste away, and their people will continue to fall ill. For those reasons alone, we will never let them harm you."

She glanced from him to Seth to Azazel. "You all want revenge, too."

Cain nodded. "And together, we'll get it."

"One question," Azazel said to her, raising his finger. "Will the curse only effect the surface of the town?"

"I can't say for sure, but it's possible that the city below will also suffer."

A grin spread across Azazel's face. "Best news I've heard in a long time. The other Ancients will be just as pleased to hear it."

The four of them talked a little while longer but then, tossing Cain a look that said they'd at some point revisit the reason she'd originally come to the Keep, Wynter left.

As the solar room door closed behind her, Azazel smiled. "I like that girl."

"You like what she did to Aeon," Seth corrected.

"Same thing." Azazel shook his head. "She really has no clue just how valuable she is to us. For the first time, we have something the Aeons want. We have a way to lure them here; a way to drag them into our path so we can kill them."

Cain nodded. "And in doing so, we'll finally destroy our cage."

"We need to tell the others," said Seth.

"We do." So Cain called them to the Keep, and soon every Ancient was sprawled around the solar. He brought them all up to speed, watching as they went from bored to enlivened.

Grinning, Dantalion said, "You know what I love most about this? The Aeons actually brought this on themselves. *They* exiled her. *They* sent hunters after her. *They* drove her here, serving the key to our freedom to us on a silver platter."

"Oh, the irony." Lilith's mouth curved. "It almost feels like fate or some higher power had a hand in this, doesn't it?"

"Or this is some trick," said Ishtar, her voice clipped. "She could be working for them. Could be a spy."

Lilith frowned. "That doesn't even make sense."

"She lived at Aeon for years; she was one of its people," said Ishtar. "She could *still* be one of them."

Seth shook his head. "I felt her hatred for the residents there. It all but hummed in the air. Plus, the Aeons long ago ceased attempting to plant spies here. They got tired of us always sniffing them out and sending the bodies back in pieces—they hated giving us those victories. Wynter is no spy."

"No, she's not," said Cain. "She's someone who needs to be protected at all costs—for her sake, and for ours."

Dantalion nodded and then sliced his gaze to a sulky-looking Ishtar. "If your ego is so fragile that you cannot bring yourself to protect a woman Cain fucked, you at least need to keep your distance from her."

Ishtar's face flamed. "Did I say I would hurt her? No. I merely said she

could be a spy. I do not trust her.”

“You don’t *want* to trust her,” Azazel corrected. “You want her to be a villain to justify your distaste for her. Fine. But leave her be.”

Ishtar shot Cain a petulant look. “If I were you, I would stop sleeping with her. You’ll only end up hurting her, and we do not need the ‘key to our freedom’, as Dantalion called her, turning against us.”

Cain almost rolled his eyes. “I’ll take that on board.”

He had no intention whatsoever of keeping his hands off Wynter. His creature would put up a protest if he did. It currently regarded her as something it owned—how long that would last, Cain wasn’t sure. Probably only a few days. A week at most, because the monster didn’t prize her. It had never prized any of the women it very briefly considered its own. It had only ‘claimed’ them in its way because it didn’t do well at sharing.

In that sense, it could definitely be said that the creature was as selfish as they came. But the fact was ... it wasn’t built to ‘care.’ Or treasure. Or protect. It was cold-blooded. Cruel. Insidious. And it was built to kill.

“How long do you think it will be before people from Aeon come to our doorstep?” asked Seth.

“Not long,” predicted Dantalion. “The Aeons will send others in their place. They won’t come here unless they absolutely have to.”

“There is no saying that the Aeons will come at all,” said Ishtar. “They will most likely continue sending others her way.”

“Which is why it is imperative that we ensure she is protected,” Lilith pointed out. “And we will.”

A short time later, after the conversation came to an end, the Ancients began to trickle out of the solar.

Lingering, Seth said, “I take it you’re no longer planning to Rest sometime soon.”

“Definitely not,” replied Cain.

Seth rubbed at his nape. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of the others; I was worried Ishtar would twist my words. Don’t take this the wrong way, but there’s something not quite right about Wynter. Not in a negative sense, it’s just ... I can’t explain it. To be fair, though, I’ve never before met someone who has an undead soul and possesses dark magick. It could simply be that.”

It could be. But truthfully, Cain wasn’t so sure. He’d suspected from the very beginning that there was much more to Wynter than there appeared to

be. That suspicion had only grown. And while he didn't usually care to know the secrets of others, he was nothing close to indifferent where she was concerned.

He had no right to demand she part with her secrets when he was unable to part with his own. He could certainly try to figure it all out for himself, though. Yes, he could watch, observe, and study her. He'd solve the mystery of little Miss Dellavale eventually.

He'd also keep fucking her until he was no longer so greedy for everything she had to give.

Although his monster's possessiveness would fade fast, the creature nonetheless wouldn't object to Cain having her in his bed—it didn't particularly care how Cain chose to entertain himself. But until the possessiveness was gone, there was no way for him to undo what he'd done on his creature's behalf. And how the fuck could he explain that to her when he couldn't even admit to having a monster inside him?

\*

Wynter was adjusting the position of her workbench when she sensed someone enter the shed the next day. Turning, she found that there were *two* someones.

*Well, if it isn't the berserkers.*

"What brings you here?" Seeing that they weren't holding weapons, she added, "You're clearly not potential customers."

Grouch folded his arms. "We're here to make you a proposition."

"A proposition?" she echoed.

"We were wary of hiring you when you first came to us," Annette told her. "Trusting strangers ain't our thing. Now that you've been in the city a few days, we've been able to see that you're no asshole. You're also good at what you do. We can agree to give you a chance."

Wynter looked from one berserker to the other. "A chance to what?"

"Work for us," said Grouch. "On a trial basis at first. We're talking minimum wage, but I'd say that's more than what you're earning per day right now."

Then he really had *no* idea how much custom she got. She might have been touched by the offer ... if he and his daughter weren't acting as if they were doing Wynter some grand, charitable favor for which she should get

down on her knees and give thanks. They were very clearly expecting her to pounce on their offer and snap up this amazing opportunity.

She gave them a polite smile. “Thanks, but I’m good as I am.”

Grouch stared at her for a long moment. Then he puffed up his chest, his brows snapping together. “You’re not serious.”

“Uh, I really am.”

Annette perched her hands on her hips. “We’re the best blacksmiths in this town.”

“So I’ve heard,” said Wynter. “You must be super proud.”

“People come to us all the time looking for work,” Annette added.

“I’d imagine they do,” said Wynter. “Everyone wants to work with the best.”

“Except you? What, you’re bitter that we didn’t hire you before?”

“Bitter? Not at all. I was disappointed initially, but I’m now glad you turned me down. If you hadn’t, I might not have started this shop with my crew. It’s doing pretty well.”

Grouch glowered. “You’re cutting into our profits.”

Wynter shrugged. “That’s just business. *You* cut into the profits of the other blacksmiths, but I’m guessing you’re fine with it.”

His nostrils flaring, he snapped his mouth shut.

“Look, I understand your issue,” said Wynter. “People aren’t so bothered about going to the best blacksmith or purchasing the best weapons, when they can buy something cheap and have it enchanted to improve it. They also don’t need to buy a new weapon in order to have a different enchantment—I can change runes at any time. All this affects your business, I know.”

“But I warned you that you’d lose custom. You didn’t listen to me. You laughed at me, insulted me, pointed a sword at me. And then you lied that I was going to hex your shop so that I’d get in trouble with Cain. All that considered, did you really think I’d jump at your offer? Really?”

“So you *are* bitter,” said Annette.

Wynter shook her head. “It’s not bitterness. I simply have no reason to like you. I don’t want to work for you. I don’t want to work for anyone. Like I said, I’m good as I am. But thanks anyway. I appreciate the offer.” Not really, but whatever.

Annette’s face hardened. “You’ll regret this.”

Wynter pursed her lips. “I don’t see how.”

“People think you’re all badass right now,” said Annette. “They’re

forgetting what else dark magick can do. I'll be happy to remind them."

"Well, I wouldn't dream of getting in the way of your happiness, so ..."

Annette's mouth tightened. "There's something else you're not considering. We're not the only business owners who aren't too fond of your little shop. Together, the group of us can cause you some serious aggravation."

"That would be a very big mistake," said a new voice.

Everyone momentarily froze, and then the rapidly paling berserkers spun to face the newcomer.

Annette took a step backwards and nervously wiped her hands on her thighs. "Cain, we ... I mean, I—"

"No excuses, no lies." He took a slow, aggressive step toward the berserkers. "Now listen to me very carefully. Every person in this shed wears my mark. That alone should be enough reason for you to watch out for each other. I see that it isn't. So let me be very clear—if you make any trouble for Wynter, her coven, or her shop, you will pay for that in blood. Nobody fucks with what's mine and escapes punishment. Is that understood?"

"Yes," Grouch immediately blurted out while his daughter nodded.

"Good." Cain carelessly waved a hand. "Now get out of my sight."

The berserkers gave him a wide berth as they scurried around him and out of the shed.

Cain closed the door, his gaze fixed on Wynter. All the intensity in those unfathomable eyes hit her in her core.

"Pay for that in blood?" she repeated. "You don't think that's a little excessive? I mean, it's not like they threatened to kill me or anything."

"No, but they would have played games with you." He stalked toward her. "The only person who gets to mess with your head is me."

She felt her brow furrow. "I don't even know what to do with that comment." She didn't know what to do with him *in general*. "You're like no one I've ever met before."

He trailed his fingertip from the hollow beneath her ear all the way down her throat. "I could say the same to you. I'm not easy to intrigue. I'm even harder to shock. You managed to do both."

"Hmm, well, I appreciate you coming all the way here to take away that barrier thing."

"You think that's why I'm here?" he asked, his mouth kicking up in amusement. *Amusement.*

She felt her lips flatten. “It *should* be why you’re here. I want whatever you put inside me gone.”

“I’m only guarding what’s mine. Is that so bad?”

“Since when am I yours?” And since when did her body get all tingly over the M word?

“Since I decided.” He bit her lip before she could bark out a retort of any kind. “The barrier, as you call it, will fade on its own within a few days. Now, the reason I came here was to tell you not to make any plans for after tonight’s celebration. You’ll be coming home with me.”

Bold bastard. “Oh, I will?”

“You will. Because you want to.”

“So very sure of that, aren’t you?”

“We can pretend I’m wrong, if you’d like. But you don’t strike me as a game player, or as a person who has an issue with reaching out to take what they want.”

Ordinarily, no, she didn’t have such an issue. Nor did she play games. Life was too short for that shit—something she’d learned early. But this was ... oh, who the hell was she kidding? Certainly not herself. The truth was that she had no intention of resisting him, whether it would be wise or not.

He stroked a hand down her hair. “I want to fuck you in my bed. I want you to break for me again.” He dipped his head and stared deep into her eyes. “You want the same thing. And so you’ll come home with me later, won’t you?”

Sniffing, she lifted an imperious brow. “I’ll expect more than one orgasm.”

One of his sexy-as-shit smiles surfaced. “I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”



## Chapter Ten

“I prefer the seats we had last time,” said Hattie as they waited for the celebration to begin. “They were comfier.”

Anabel sighed. “They were exactly the same, simply in a different section of the arena. You’re just moody because you had to come away from your book.”

“The hero was about to declare his love for the heroine. It was about damn time. He hesitated for too long. How hard is it to admit that you love someone?” Hattie patted her hair. “I said it to all my husbands.”

Anabel’s brow puckered. “But did you actually mean it? I only ask because, well, you killed them. In cold blood.”

“I warned them I don’t handle betrayal well.”

“I don’t think they knew that meant you’d poison them.”

“They did seem surprised when they were dying.”

Beside Wynter, Xavier rolled his eyes before leaning toward her. “Cain is staring at you again,” he said. “He’s not the only one who’s been sliding glances your way. Except she’s not so much glancing as glaring.”

Wynter felt her mouth flatten. “If you’re referring to Ishtar then, yeah, I’m aware.”

“I heard some whispers that she’s been trying to seduce both Cain *and* Seth ever since she woke from her Rest,” said Xavier.

Ignoring the way her gut twisted in what suspiciously felt like jealousy, Wynter frowned. “Is she imagining some kind of triad or something?”

He shrugged. “Actually, I thought maybe she had her eye firmly on one of



them and was hoping that flirting with their brother would spur them to make a move on her. But it might be that she has her heart set on a triad. She seems like a person who'd get off big time on having two men worship her like that."

"She probably *could* have that kind of relationship. I've seen enough guys eat her up with their eyes." Cain wasn't one of them, though.

"But she doesn't seem to want the easily attainable ones. I suppose if you've lived as long as she has, you'd need challenges to keep the boredom at bay. And you'd *have* to keep the boredom at bay unless you wanted to go stir crazy."

Wynter nodded. Merely an hour of boredom could drive her insane. Eons of it would fuck with her mind for sure.

"How do you feel about the Ancients all knowing you were exiled from Aeon?"

"Now that I know for sure that they won't side with the Aeons, I'm not too worried about it. But ... I feel like there's something they're not telling me."

"Really? About what?"

"I don't know. I really don't. It's just ... you should have seen the way Azazel's eyes lit up when I told them everything. Seth seemed just as revved about how badly the Aeons want me. I don't think I've ever seen any Ancient or Aeon look like that. They're not easily moved by anything."

"How did Cain react?"

"He was a little more introspective than the other two, but I sensed some extreme satisfaction wafting from him. They're all loving that the Aeons want something they have."

Xavier's brows dipped. "There's a lot of bad blood between the two camps, right? Maybe it's simply that."

"Maybe," conceded Wynter, recalling Cain explaining their craving for revenge.

"What are you two whispering about?" demanded Anabel.

"Your weird foot fetish," replied Wynter, straight-faced.

Hattie frowned at the blonde. "You have a foot fetish?"

Anabel jerked back. "What? Ew, no."

Xavier chuckled.

Just then, Delilah plopped into the seat that she'd earlier vacated in order to use the bathroom. "Seems like I got here just in time," she said as Ishtar stood.

Like the previous night, the Ancient thanked everyone for coming and all that jazz. She also passed on her gratitude to Azazel for organizing this particular celebration, though said gratitude was stiffly spoken—something that seemed to amuse him. Wynter got the sense that the two Ancients didn't get along so well.

In no time at all, the action began. And it *was* action. Azazel had arranged for Olympic-like games to take place in the performance space. All were dangerous and death-defying, especially the crazy-ass chariot races. A lot of gasping and cursing came from the spectators.

During the interval, food and drinks were given out. Wynter barely tasted her meal, far too conscious of how closely she was being watched by both Cain and Ishtar. The other Ancients often looked Wynter's way as well ... as if it wasn't rude to idly observe someone like they were a damn zoo animal in a cage.

Finally, the interval was over. A lone male waltzed into the performance space. She'd never met him before, but there was something familiar about him.

"Does anyone know who that is?" she asked.

"His name is Bowen, he's one of Azazel's aides," replied Delilah. "He's a berserker."

And then it clicked. "He's *got* to be related to Grouch." Wynter would bet good money on it. "The resemblance is there."

Delilah's brow furrowed. "Grouch as in the smithy who pissed you off earlier?"

"Yeah, that Grouch."

"I *did* hear that he followed some of his relatives to Devil's Cradle. They didn't all seek refuge here at the same time."

"That would explain why he's in Azazel's service while Grouch and Annette are in Cain's." Wynter stilled as a rumble of power split through the air.

In the performance space, a portion of the floor shimmered and rippled. The sand dispersed, and a grating sound rang through the arena as a stone platform rose to the surface. Bordered by rope, it resembled a boxing ring.

Using a microphone, Bowen addressed the spectators as he said, "Now for our next event ... This is the battle square. As you can no doubt see, there is magick embedded in the stone. It is spelled so that any injuries people receive while within the square will immediately heal. But the wounds will not *feel*

healed to whoever receives them. More, the injuries will not *look* healed. In fact, they will seem so real and will hurt the ‘injured’ so much that it will play tricks on their mind. They will believe they are wounded, bleeding, weakening—maybe even dying.”

Well, how delightful was that.

“The ropes are also spelled,” he went on. “They contain any magick, energy, or power that’s released within the square.” He flicked his hand, and then a rack of swords came into view. They were all pretty basic—long, straight blades attached to a hilt. “So ... do we have any volunteers?”

It was almost amusing how quickly people snapped up the opportunity to engage in a fight. No one particularly cared who their opponent was—they just wanted the release that came with violence.

The brawls probably shouldn’t have been so entertaining, but they were. Especially whenever one of the fighters was someone who’d laughed when she asked for a job—then Wynter became *really* invested in the duels.

Pretty much everyone was disappointed when the stone platform returned to the sand. But then the weirdest thing happened. Power again rose in the air, and then a lengthy ditch appeared, stretching from one end of the performance space to the other. It was surrounded by ropes, just like the battle square.

“This here is the gauntlet,” Bowen announced. “Like the square, it is spelled so that injuries immediately heal but don’t *seem* healed. This time, we’re not looking for volunteers. The participating groups will be chosen at random.”

He paused as another male strode toward him holding a glass bowl. “The names of every pack, lair, nest, coven, etc. is inside this bowl. For whichever groups are chosen, the objective is for them to battle their way through the gauntlet. This will not be easy, since soldiers will soon fill the ditch. They will not be real soldiers, but they will look real, and they will move to kill.

“Any participants who ‘die’ will be spat out of the gauntlet while the remainder of their group continues to fight. Participants may shift shape, use weapons, fight with magick, use any preternatural ability, or even adopt a combination of all. Whichever group finishes the gauntlet in the fastest time will receive a cash prize.”

Bowen dipped his hand into the bowl and pulled out a small, folded piece of paper. He then read out the name of a mage conclave. A demon lair was called out next. Then a fey court, and last but not least ... “The Bloodrose

Coven.”

*Motherfucker.*

Wynter exchanged solemn glances with her crew. Wonderful. Just wonderful.

Dutifully, they slid out of their row and began to make their way to the performance space.

Delilah sidled up to her. “Seems awful convenient that our coven was chosen when Bowen’s related to a person who said you’d regret not taking the job they offered you.”

Behind them, Xavier made a sound of agreement. “I’m thinking this is fixed.”

“Cain threatened they’d pay if they fucked with me,” said Wynter.

“Yeah, but berserkers are spiteful bastards,” Delilah reminded her. “They don’t know how to back down. And this isn’t something that can be pinned on them, is it? Seems totally random. *Seems.*”

Finally, they all reached the performance space. At this point, several aides had joined Bowen. It was Maxim who indicated where Wynter and her crew would stand.

“This is your fault,” she said to Delilah.

Frowning, Delilah put her hand to her chest. “How is it mine?”

“They couldn’t have done this if you hadn’t declared us a coven.” Wynter felt Cain’s eyes on her, but she didn’t look up. She was *all* business right then. This was about her and the people under her protection, no one else.

The other participants all looked eager as hell to get going. They also seemed tremendously cocky, certain they had this in the bag.

The Shaman of the mage conclave gave Xavier a look of false sympathy. “You really should have taken us up on our offer and joined our conclave.”

“I prefer to be on winning side,” said Xavier, his voice even.

The fey Lord grinned. “Oh, now that’s cute.”

The Shaman shot the Lord a derisive look. “*You* lot have no chance of coming out on top either.”

“Neither of your little tribes do,” the demon Prime cut in. He didn’t even *look* at Wynter or her crew, as if he’d discounted them as no threat.

Anabel turned to her, her mouth tight. “We can’t allow any of those groups to win this.” If there was one thing she disliked, it was being dismissed. Probably because she was fucking brilliant. “I know you wanted us all to keep a low profile, but we won’t be doing ourselves any favors if we let these

people believe they're right to underestimate us."

"I agree," said Xavier. "Respect is everything in a place like this. Fear? Even better."

Delilah nodded. "It'll mean people are less likely to bother us, and so you won't be forced to demonstrate how powerful you are to keep us safe."

"Which would be for the best," Hattie added.

Wynter sighed, knowing they were right. "Okay, we can give it our all. Mostly. I can't let out my ... you know." Her monster couldn't be unleashed here and now.

Understanding, the others nodded.

"I know you're all about me sticking to the right-hand path," Xavier said to her, "but you can't get mad when I use magick to—"

"I won't," Wynter assured him, anticipating what he'd say. She cut her gaze to Anabel. "You're *sure* you want to be part of this fight? It will mean you'll have to take a mental backseat for a while."

"I know," the blonde assured her. "It's fine. Clearly these people here need to see that we're not easy targets."

Delilah leaned into her. "*And* you want Diego to see that you're badass."

Anabel frowned. "I'm not badass, I'm just the reincarnation of—"

"Whatever," Delilah interrupted, her hand up. "He'll be wowed, trust me."

"Bloodrose Coven, you're up first!" Bowen called out.

Of course they were.

Wynter led the way as they crossed to the berserker, who looked *far* too entertained at the moment.

Delilah promptly shifted into a sleek black cat, her pretty gold nail polish still intact. Bowen snickered at the dainty sight of her, and she shot him a look so cold Wynter could swear the air temperature cooled just a little.

Maxim appeared and cleared his throat, his brow creased in concern. "Um ... are you sure you want to do this, Hattie?"

The old woman patted his hand. "Don't you worry about me, dear. I'll be just fine." She shifted into a crow and then settled on his shoulder. He froze, looking adorably unsure what to do all of a sudden. Much like Delilah, she hadn't needed to strip off her clothes because she wasn't an actual shifter; it was her magick that forced the change.

Xavier conjured his rapier bone sword and swiped it through the air.

"What bone is that?" asked Maxim.

Xavier smirked. "Angel bone. This baby could cut through dragon scales

like butter.”

Wynter turned to Anabel, who’d conjured her broadsword. “You ready?”

The blonde nodded, standing tall. “Ready.”

Wynter put her mouth near the blonde’s ear and quietly sang the few select words that would call to the alleged part of her soul that liked to come out and play. “Mary, Mary, please come out.”

Anabel did a slow blink, and then her eyes ... they were the same pale blue, but now a hint of madness swirled in their depths. Her posture lost its stiffness, and she gazed around with avid interest, no doubt planning to stir some shit.

Wynter put a hand on her shoulder. “Stab to kill.”

“They’ll all fall,” Anabel/Mary promised.

Anticipation thrumming through her blood, Wynter called to her own sword. It appeared in her hand, dark and shiny.

Bowen gave it a long look, surprised. “You may step into the ditch. Note that the gauntlet will not end until every one of you has crossed the finish line ... assuming any of you will reach it. Remember, those that ‘die’ will be spat out.” He jumped when Hattie squawked in his face, and a round of laughs came from the spectators.

Wynter exchanged determined looks with her crew. They each slid under the ropes and hopped down into the ditch. *Whoa*. She felt the power in the ground beneath her. The slight vibration purred against the soles of her shoes.

Her monster stirred, not quite sure it liked the situation. She tried communicating that all was fine and that this was a mere game. But the intensity of the foreign power unnerved it. A subtle breeze came, carrying a hint of assurance that eventually made her monster settle.

That was when the soldiers appeared.

There were dozens of them up ahead. Some held swords while others raised a hand that glowed with magick.

“Begin!” yelled Bowen.

The soldiers swarmed them *mega* fast.

Wynter and Xavier both whipped up their swords and parried the blow that came their way. Delilah lunged, shifting from a domestic cat to a huge monstrous feline and knocking a soldier down, digging her iron claws into his chest. Hattie raked her talons on the face of another soldier, making him stagger backwards and crash into his compatriots. Anabel/Mary ... well, she just laughed like a loon and beheaded the nearest soldier.

The five of them battled their way through the gauntlet. Wynter, Xavier, and Anabel/Mary sliced, fainted, parried, ducked, and twisted. They moved fast. Fluid. Smooth. Flowed with the fight. Like it was a dance.

At the same time, the crow and cat pounced and bit and raked at the soldiers like savages. The two animals dodged swords, fists, and feet. While the cat also needed to evade any magickal blows, the crow had no such need. Any such hits bounced right off her and rebounded back at her attacker—Hattie negated magick with her very being whenever she was in her crow form.

Wynter impaled one soldier on her sword while Xavier slit the throat of another. The men collapsed to the floor. He knelt and slammed his hands on their stomachs as he began to chant. Their backs arched, their eyes flew open, and then they were up ... running at the soldiers.

Her body balanced and her muscles loose, Wynter fought on. Like Xavier and Anabel/Mary, she also lashed out with her magick—dazing, burning, whipping, or knocking people down. Of course, she was careful not to go full throttle. She couldn't slam her foot down on the magickal pedal here and now.

The air whistled as the swords slashed through it again and again. Blades clanged. Voices cursed. Magick crackled. The cat roared. The crow shrieked and flapped its wings.

Wynter hissed as a blade caught her side. Jesus *fuck*. She didn't make the mistake of angrily lunging and thrusting her sword. She didn't need to anyway—he drew back as the crow dipped down and stabbed an eyeball with her beak, yanking it right out of the socket.

His cry of agony died an abrupt death as Anabel/Mary disemboweled him. The woman was in her element as she hacked through the soldiers, giggling and dancing and high-fiving thin air. Her newest victim, like most of the others, was soon back on his feet courtesy of Xavier and then joined their rapidly growing army.

It wasn't long before Wynter and her crew were approaching the finish line. Which was a goddamn relief, because the throbbing wound in her side was deep, and the blood loss was *not* helping matters.

The sight of the finish line seemed to fuel the others, because they charged with renewed vigor. The soldiers backed up under the pressure of the assault. One by one, they went down until only a single soldier remained. He hit the ground hard as Delilah landed on his chest with a roar. Wynter brought down

her sword and sliced off his head ... before promptly kicking it out of the ditch. It sailed through the air and landed at Bowen's feet, splattering the sand with blood. The head then winked out of existence.

Pure silence fell as everyone simply stared at Wynter and her crew. Then came the applause.

Panting and sweating, she turned to the others and said, "Let's get out of this goddamn ditch."

"Yeah, let's." Xavier severed whatever connection he had to the soldiers he'd raised from the dead, and they fell to the floor like sacks of spuds.

The moment she slid out from under the ropes, her wounds disappeared, her pain faded, and the blood and mess cleared from her skin and clothing. She glanced at the others, realizing it was the same for them ... and that one of them was missing.

Wynter looked down into the ditch, sighing. Anabel/Mary had put the hilt of her sword to a dead soldier's mouth as if it were a microphone and was singing, "Man down, man down, man down."

Calling out 'Anabel' earned her no response, so Wynter shouted, "Mary, leave him."

The blonde's head snapped up. She looked about to object but then pouted. "Fine." She casually hacked off a soldier's leg as she made her way out of the ditch.

Back in her human form, Delilah smiled at her and said, "Night, night, Mary."

The key phrase made the blonde pout again. "No fair." Her blue eyes cleared so that they were once more normal, and Anabel went stiff as a board. "Is it over?" she asked, glancing around her.

"It's over," said Hattie, now human.

Anabel bit her lower lip. "She didn't drink anyone's blood again, did she? I don't taste any."

Xavier shook his head. "No, she didn't do it this time."

Hattie smiled. "That was fun. Haven't plucked eyes out in years. Nice to know I've still got it."

Wynter 'sent' her sword back to the cottage, and the others did the same with their weapons. Together, they all strode back to the start line of the gauntlet, sure to make eye-contact with the other participants.

Delilah smirked at them. "And that's how it's done."

The demon Prime looked at Wynter, his mouth curved. "Nice to know



you're not a dainty, fragile princess who leaves the bulk of the fight to her knights."

Wynter gave him a bright smile. "Hope I can say the same for you."

He only laughed.

All interest, the Shaman tried catching Xavier's eyes. "Impressive, um ..."  
He winced. "I'm sorry, what's your name again?"

"Seamus," Xavier said in an Irish accent, managing to look sincerely affronted that his 'name' had been forgotten. "Now feck off."

Inwardly shaking her head, Wynter met Bowen's shocked gaze head-on. "You know, there's a reason berserkers are low in number these days. It's that you all have a seriously bad habit of judging people by their appearance. It means you don't always see the danger coming. Which is bad, really. Even fucking rats sense danger coming."

His face darkened. "I—"

"Need to *really* rethink your idea to use me and my crew as 'entertainment' like we're a fucking joke," Wynter finished. "That's all."  
With that, she headed back to their spot.

Maxim stood there, fighting a grin. "Quite the dark horses, aren't you?"

Hattie beamed. "Indeed. And I'll be damn surprised if the other groups beat our time, because I know we were fast."

Wondering what she'd see, Wynter let herself look up and meet Cain's gaze. There was no shock. There was *pure* heat. Oh, she was gonna get fucked tonight all right.

\*

The breath left Wynter's lungs as her back hit the wall. Then Cain's mouth was on hers, devouring her as his body caged hers. The man had wasted no time in getting her upstairs to his bedchamber when they arrived at the Keep, and now he was wasting no time in stripping her. Aggressively. Like having anything concealing her skin from him somehow offended him.

Her tee went first, then her bra. He swooped down and latched onto a nipple, suckling hard, while his hands tackled her fly. With a growl, he shoved down her jeans and panties, and she kicked them aside.

Planting his hand either side of her head, he pulled back a little and raked his gaze over her. Slowly. Thoroughly. As if it was his right. "Nice," he said, his eyes tracing one of the rune tattoos on her abdomen. She had many such

tattoos here and there.

“Thanks. Now do me.”

Holding her gaze, he closed his hand around her breast, blatantly proprietary. A darkness rippled behind his eyes ... almost as if something else looked out at her for the briefest moment. Which had to be her imagination—

She hissed at the pinch to her nipple, the small pain shooting straight to her clit.

“You liked that,” he sensed. “Good. Because tonight, you’re gonna hurt for me a little.”

She had no idea what that meant.

He effortlessly lifted her and carried her to the four poster bed. The chamber carried a hint of ‘old.’ Tapestries hung on the walls. Candles were scattered here and there. Long, draping curtains were positioned just right.

He lay her on the mattress. “Don’t move.” He shed his clothes. His body ... shit, it was a fucking masterpiece. A little too perfect. There was much hard, sleek, perfectly defined muscle to be seen. And Jesus, his tattoos were impressive. There were so many. Symbols, totems, runes, codes, and ancient writings that she didn’t understand.

The perfect V of his hips was another *tick* in his ‘hot’ column. As was the thick oh-so long cock that she badly wanted to take for a ride again. It stood loud and proud and rock-hard, tapping his belly.

He knelt between her legs and pushed them wide apart. “Such a pretty pussy you have.” He snaked his hands down her inner thighs and brushed his thumbs over her folds. “Sit up for me.”

Um ... okay. She did as he asked, curious.

“Give me your hand. The one that wears my mark.”

She held it out to him, surprised it wasn’t trembling with the anticipation thrumming through her.

He took it and held it up, his eyes tracing the brand. She was about to ask why a snake was threaded through the triangle that sat within the C, but then he spoke.

“I like seeing my mark on you.” He licked along the C, and Wynter nearly jumped out of her fucking skin. She stared at him, her eyes wide. Because that tongue ... she felt it licking her slit, warm and wet.

“Let’s get you nice and slick, shall we?” He traced the C again.

Once more, she felt a tongue swipe between her folds. The sensation was

so much more intense than a physical touch, as if she was ten times more sensitive than usual. And oh God, it was amazing.

Wynter slapped her free hand on the mattress to support herself as his tongue did wicked, wicked things over and over and over. Honestly, she was so swept away by sensation she could have forgotten he was there if the bastard didn't begin taunting her with words between licks.

"I could do this anytime, anywhere," he rumbled. "Whether we were alone or surrounded by people."

She gasped as he lashed a particular spot—it was like a wet flick to her clit. He licked at the center of the mark over the little triangle, and she almost came off the fucking bed. It was like he'd stabbed his tongue deep inside her—something he did again and again, until she was so desperate to come she'd have done anything he asked. *Anything*. So it was terribly fortunate that the only thing he told her to do was come. Oh, she could do that.

Her head fell back as her orgasm washed over her, heating her skin and causing her inner muscles to ripple around mere air. Fuck, she needed to be filled. Badly.

Cain released her hand and slipped his finger deep into her pussy. "Soaking wet." He withdrew the digit and sucked it clean. "Lie back. Move your hair away from your face, I want nothing obstructing my view. That's it."

Staying on his knees, he gripped her thighs, raised her hips and tilted them to line up his cock with her entrance. "Come when you want." He thrust hard, *forcing* his way deep, stretching her without mercy.

She'd barely had a moment to register the sting when a warm, electric wave of pleasure washed over her soul, wrenching at her body so her back bowed almost violently. It was different this time. Held an edge. It was like when her scalp prickled from having her hair pulled, or like the burn from a hand coming down sharply on her ass—the pain complemented the pleasure and gave it a dark, addictive feel. The sensation came again, *so fucking intense*, and she cried out.

"Shh, you can take it." He pulled back his hips and then slammed his cock home just as he sent another wave of pleasure/pain sweeping over her soul. "That's it, hurt for me."

Cain began powering into her hard and deep, just as he'd been aching to do since he'd watched her in that gauntlet. There was something very feral about Wynter Dellavale when she fought, and that appealed to him on a fiercely

sexual level that was entirely primitive. Just the same, the predatory elegance with which she'd moved had intensified his monster's need to *own* her.

Driven by a similar insanely intense need to possess her, Cain took her with thrusts of his cock and strokes to her soul. He wanted her fucking addicted to him. To *this*. Wanted her to need him like she'd never needed anyone else. Wanted her to come back to him again and again, unable to help herself.

So he fucked and wrecked and dominated her—overwhelming her body and soul. He wanted her mind as well, greedy for every part of her. She was becoming an obsession and he knew it, but fuck if he could do anything about it.

She came hard, fracturing right before his eyes, so beautiful she gripped his gut. Not done with her yet, he kept going; kept brushing her soul with pleasure/pain while brutally hammering into her pussy. And then he sensed another orgasm building fast.

He growled. “That’s it, break for me.”

She screamed, her spine snapping straight, her inner muscles clenching his cock, her eyes wet with tears.

Cain groaned, slamming harder and faster. “Love it when you cry.” He shoved deep and came so hard his vision went black for a second.

She was trembling beneath him, her eyes shut, her lips parted. He draped himself over her and brushed away a tear with his thumb. She didn't move. Didn't respond when he feathered soft kisses down the side of her face that he often found his gaze drifting to. And he quickly realized she'd passed out.

Cain felt his mouth curve. She'd be annoyed about that tomorrow, but he had no intention of waking her. Instead, he rolled onto his side and drew her close, surprised when he sensed that his creature planned to stay awake and watch over her.



# Chapter Eleven

Azazel leaned back against the wall of the solar room the next morning as he said, “Her story checks out. My source confirmed what she told us about her past, her mother, and why both were exiled.”

Cain turned away from the window overlooking his garden. “You thought she was lying?”

“I expect everyone to lie to me, because I lie to everyone else. *Our kind* live a lie.” Azazel frowned, pensive. “Plus, she has this unfamiliar vibe about her. I don’t think she’s all witch. Maybe she’s a hybrid of some kind. She never mentioned her father. It could be that he isn’t a witch. My source isn’t sure who he is, only that he never came to Aeon with her old coven.”

“Do the Aeons suspect she’s responsible for the land’s deterioration?”

“Yes, though they don’t know how.”

“Did you tell your source there’s a curse at work?” If so, Cain would be pissed.

“No. That’s a need-to-know thing. He doesn’t need to know.” Azazel tipped his head to the side. “So, you took her home with you last night.”

“Yes, and I’d like to get back to her before she wakes up and disappears, so are we done?”

Blinking, Azazel pushed away from the wall. “Wait, she’s still here?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“My bedchamber.”

Azazel squinted. “As in your personal chamber, or one of the rooms you

use for women you bring home?”

“The first,” Cain carelessly replied, going for aloof.

“Don’t act like that’s nothing, Cain. Our monsters don’t easily accept other people in their den. *Especially* for an overnight stay. Your creature didn’t fight you on it?”

“It likes having her where it can see her. Which is more about control than anything else. It wants to be able to see for itself that no other man is near her.”

“So it’s possessive of her?”

“It insisted on me plugging her.”

Azazel’s lips parted. “You’re serious?”

“It isn’t prepared to share her. If I hadn’t done what it wanted, it would have done the deed itself. Then it probably would have ended up killing her, though not necessarily on purpose.”

“Does she know she’s been plugged?”

“She believes it’s simply a barrier. Obviously, I can’t explain the situation to her.”

Azazel puffed out a breath. “I don’t even know what to say. I can’t relate at the fuck all to your situation. I know our monsters are territorial by nature, but mine has never wanted me to plug anyone. Is this normal for you?”

Far from it. “There have been times when mine has wanted me to plug other women, but it’s never insisted on it before. So the most it has done is sulk for an hour when I refused to act on what it wanted. It’s never been prepared to take the matter into its own hands before. I don’t know what it is about her that has it acting out of character.”

“It’s not the only one acting out of character. As far as I know, you’ve only allowed one other woman to enter your personal chamber—that was Ishtar. That didn’t end well. And I don’t just mean your relationship with her.”

No, he meant that Cain’s creature had grown to feel so much distaste for her that it had hated having a den she’d ‘soiled.’ That was how the monster had seen it. Cain had eventually had to switch chambers.

“If your creature decides it wants to keep Wynter—”

“It won’t,” said Cain. “In a few days, it’ll be bored of her.”

“But if it isn’t, if it *does* want to keep her ...”

“She’s fucked,” Cain finished with a sigh.

Azazel gave a slow nod. “Yeah, she’s fucked.”

\*

Walking through the stone corridors of the Keep, Wynter shook her head at herself. God, she'd actually passed out after sex. Like some kind of swooning maiden. How embarrassing.

Cain, being a person who seemed amused by other people's discomfort, would for sure find her embarrassment hilarious. As such, she'd been kind of relieved when she woke to find he was gone.

After she'd dragged on her clothes, she'd exited the chamber to find Maxim waiting outside. He'd informed her that Cain was in a meeting with another Ancient. She wondered if it was Ishtar but then shoved the matter out of her mind. It wasn't Wynter's business.

Cain apparently also hoped she'd wait for him to return. Nu-uh. She had shit to do. And the more time she spent around that beautiful bastard, the more threatened she felt as a woman. Because with the power he could wield over her body and soul—bringing her a pleasure that no other man ever had or ever could—he'd set up a craving in her.

After thanking Maxim for escorting her to the exit, she left the Keep and headed home.

She walked into the living room to find Delilah organizing her for-sale cosmetics near the window.

Taking in the sight of Wynter, Delilah smiled. "Well, well, well, *someone* looks awfully well fucked. Had a good night, Priestess?"

Wynter shot her a droll look. "Don't call me that."

Snickering, Delilah glanced toward the kitchen. "You got those potions ready yet, Anabel? Customers will be coming soon."

"I'm almost done!" Anabel shouted.

Delilah snorted. "You said that half an hour ago."

"You can't rush genius!"

Rolling her eyes, Delilah turned back to Wynter. "Quick warning, Anabel's all in a tizzy."

Wynter frowned. "Why?"

"Diego sent her flowers. He doesn't seem to have realized why Anabel switched from a Nervous Nelly to a bloodthirsty bitch in the gauntlet, but it would seem he's happy to roll with it. She isn't sure how to handle the attention or acceptance, though. Given Cain all but dragged you out of the arena while giving you sex eyes, I'm pretty confident in assuming that he

wasn't put off by your vicious performance last night."

"Very good guess. In fact, he seemed to get off on it."

"I got that impression." Delilah sobered a little. "Think he'd be able to handle what you are?"

"He'd handle it. It's *the way* he'd handle it that's the problem."

"He doesn't strike me as a person who's easily fazed."

"It's not that I think he'll fear me, Del. I'm not even sure it's an emotion he *can* feel. But he'll want me dead all the same. Every single one of the Ancients will. At the very least, they'd toss me out of Devil's Cradle."

Delilah stood up a little straighter. "If they did, you wouldn't be heading off alone. We'd go with you."

"I wouldn't ask any of you to—"

"We'd go with you," she repeated, her voice hard. "Would you stay here if one of us was kicked out?"

"Fuck, no."

"Then you get it. Now let's—*Hattie*, you're not supposed to be reading right now, we've got stuff to do," Delilah called out, looking toward the kitchen yet again.

"I'm not reading," came Hattie's reply.

Delilah's lips thinned. "Woman, I can see you looking down at an open book."

"I'm just admiring the font."

"You're talking out of your ass is what you're doing," Wynter cut in, turning to look at her.

"Speaking of asses, there's an anal sex scene in here," said Hattie. "Why would he tell her to push out as he pushes in? That's risky business. I mean, she could fart."

Wynter closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, I can't have this conversation. Stop laughing, Del, it ain't funny. Now I have just enough time to go shower and change, I'll be back soon."

The day seemed to drag on, though Wynter couldn't explain why. It wasn't like it was a *bad* day. Plenty of customers came and went, and some products were so high in demand that Delilah had to take orders.

As usual, they were tired by the end of the workday. Hattie, though, was more chipper than usual as they ate a late dinner. A knock at the door had her hazel eyes going wide with excitement. "Oh, this could be him," she said, standing.



“Him? Who’s him?” asked Wynter. “And why do you look all happy and flushed?”

“Hattie has a ‘gentleman caller,’” explained Xavier, smiling.

“A fellow witch,” she added, patting her hair.

“Don’t worry, he’s not trying to lure her away from us or anything,” Xavier told Wynter. “He’d simply like to get to know her better.”

There was no ‘simply’ when they were dealing with someone who handled betrayal and heartache by whipping up poisonous teas. “Just don’t marry him, Hattie. That’s all I ask.” Providing there was no walk down the aisle, the guy should be safe.

Hattie waved that away and hurried out of the kitchen, humming to herself. When she returned, she didn’t have a strange male at her side. No, it was Maxim.

Wynter blinked. “Oh, hey, Maxim.”

His expression serious, he said, “Cain would like you to join him at the manor. Your old coven is here.”

*Well, fuck me sideways.*

\*

Standing in the grand foyer with Azazel, Cain turned as he heard two sets of footfalls heading their way. And there was his witch. She looked remarkably calm and casual, given the situation. In fact, she seemed more interested in the décor than why she’d been called to the mansion. Which was probably why Maxim kept casting her curious glances.

Her eyes met Cain’s and ... no, there was still nothing there to suggest that she was feeling anything besides blasé. If he hadn’t known how much the Moonstar coven had fucked her over, he might have bought her indifferent act. His creature, too, wasn’t so convinced that she was fine—it knew exactly how good she was at showing people only what she wanted them to see.

“Right on time, little Priestess,” said Cain, resisting the urge to touch her—that could wait.

She nodded at both him and Azazel. “Maxim says my old coven is here.” She glanced around. “What room are they in?”

“They’re outside,” Cain told her. “After what they did to you, they’re not welcome here. They were told to wait at the gates. I will go out there first to talk with them. You and Azazel will follow soon after.”

She stared at him for a long moment, looking as though she might object, but then she briefly inclined her head. “All right.”

“So careful to keep your expression neutral,” he said. “I hope you don’t have it in your head that I’m about to make a deal with these people. I’ve assured you that I will protect you. I meant it.”

Not giving her a chance to respond, Cain stalked out of the manor and down the driveway. The iron gates swung open with a faint creak, but he didn’t step out of them. None of the dozen witches moved forward. They stood very still, eyeing him warily.

Finally, the woman in the center gave him a placid smile, her lips trembling slightly. “Good evening. My name is Esther, Priestess of—”

“Yes, I heard,” he said, sure to sound bored. “What do you want?”

She slowly inhaled, clasping her hands in front of her. “There is a rumor that a stray member of my coven is under your correction. I have come to take her home, where she belongs.”

“Have you now?”

“Her name is Wynter Dellavale. I have it on good authority that she is here. If you would be so kind as to summon her—”

“No one would ever describe me as kind.”

Someone from the slowly gathering crowd snickered, drawing the attention of the coven. These witches weren’t the first people to come searching for an outcast, and they wouldn’t be the last. The residents often enjoyed watching such people be turned away just as they were once turned away by those who mattered to them.

“What do you want with her?” Cain asked.

“To take her home, as I said,” replied Esther. “She is ours.”

Was she *fuck*. “Yours?” The word almost came out on a growl—a sound that would have come from Cain’s creature. It really didn’t like hearing another refer to Wynter as theirs. Like him, it wanted this bitch gone. “You didn’t seem to feel that way when you chose to cast her out of your coven.”

Esther licked her lips. “That was a mistake. We will make it up to her.”

“Hmm now, see, this is my problem ... I don’t believe you. I don’t believe you give a whisper of a shit about Wynter. Of course, I don’t expect you to admit that to someone whose protection she is under—it would be unwise of you, to say the least. What I do expect is for you to leave here without drama.”

“But—”

“The bounty hunters *did* pass on my message to the Aeons, yes?”

Esther cleared her throat. “Yes. They claimed she is now your property. Your kind protects what belongs to them—I know that. But you have no real idea of who she is or what she is capable of. If you did, you would not be so eager to keep her at Devil’s Cradle.”

“I know everything I need to know.”

“But Wynter is the source of that information, and she cannot be called a reliable source.” Esther sniffed. “I’m sure she told you that her magick is tainted because she was killed as a child. That is a lie. Her death was an accident. She was not tortured as she claims. She invented that lie so that she would not be held responsible for what she did to the boys who accidentally ended her life. Ten years old, and she murdered two teenage boys. Hacked their bodies with that dark magick of hers.”

“Sounds like my kind of girl,” said Cain, hiding his surprise at the latter revelation. There was every chance that the Priestess was lying, of course. She’d certainly lied when claiming that Wynter’s death had been an accident—he’d heard the note of deceit in her voice. But that note had been absent during her latter claim. He needed to have a talk with his little witch for sure. “I’m pretty sure I’d have done worse.”

Esther’s face tightened. “Her magick isn’t merely dark, it is death itself. She has ruined the land at Aeon. You think she will not do the same to your town?”

“Since I don’t intend to exile her as the Aeons did, no, I don’t think she’ll make any such attempt.” Cain heaved a bored sigh. “I’d say we’re done here.”

“Protecting her would be a mistake,” Esther blurted out.

He narrowed his eyes. “Now that almost sounded like a threat.”

She swallowed, her eyes flickering nervously. “The Aeons asked me to pass on a message.”

“This ought to be good,” he muttered.

“They wish me to remind you that they gave you mercy all those years ago. They could have killed you; they didn’t. You owe them for that, they said.”

Anger coursed through him and put a rock in his gut. “Owe them?” he echoed, his tone silky smooth. “Do you hear that, Azazel? We owe them.”

The porch floorboards creaked and then ... “Yeah, I heard.”

Esther’s eyes flew to something behind Cain. “Ah, there you are. It is time

to come home, Wynter.”

“Aeon isn’t my home,” Wynter said, no inflection in her voice, as she and Azazel moved to flank Cain.

Esther’s eyes flared. “It will be no one’s home if you do not fix what you have done.”

Wynter snorted. “You can’t tell me that the big, bad Aeons are struggling to handle a little environmental erosion, surely.”

She scanned the sea of faces, taking in the hard expressions, marveling at how—despite all they’d done—it still hurt that they’d so easily banded against her. But then, she’d been an outsider to them since she was ten years old. It was now simply official. Rafe’s absence did lessen the sting slightly.

She cocked her head. “Did you know that the exiled are killed before they can even reach the border?”

Surprise rippled across many faces, including that of Esther.

“Ah, you didn’t. Well, let me tell you ... there’s no memory-wipe process. They’re paralyzed and then thrown over the falls.”

“That is a lie,” Esther insisted.

“No, it’s not. The banished die.”

“If that were true, you would not be alive.”

“If it wasn’t true, I’d have no memories. But I do. I live because I managed to escape Wagner.” And then ... well, she was pretty sure her monster ate most if not all of him, but that was a whole other story. That same monster was currently watching Esther closely, entertaining the many—and very creative—ways it would make her suffer.

Esther shook her head, dismissing Wynter’s claims with ease, and said, “I have no time for this. I do not know what you did with that death magick of yours, but you need to come home and reverse whatever spell you cast.”

Wynter pursed her lips. “Yeah, nah.”

“You *will* return to Aeon, and you will do so *immediately*.”

“It’s like you’ve forgotten that you’re not my Priestess anymore. Weird.”

“Wynter—”

“The only way I’m leaving Devil’s Cradle is if I have no choice but to go. And the only person who can force me to leave is Cain.” Feeling like a cold fist was wrapped tight around her heart, Wynter met his dark, currently unreadable gaze. “Do you want me gone?” If he said yes, he was so dead.

His brow inched up, imperious. “You and I have a deal, remember?” He cut his eyes back to Esther. “Wynter stays here.”

And the cold fist released her heart.

The Priestess gritted her teeth. “The Aeons—”

“—are not who you think they are,” Cain told her. “Notice that they didn’t come here themselves. This is a dangerous place. You are their people. But they insisted on *you* facing the danger, not them.”

“This is unhallowed ground,” said Esther. “They cannot step foot on it.”

Cain felt his lips twitch. “Is that what they told you?”

Azazel chuckled. “Such story spinners.”

Cain dismissively flicked a hand and half-turned away from the coven. “Return to your rotting home. Tell the Aeons that Wynter will remain here.”

“You cannot possibly be willing to risk their wrath over this,” Esther insisted. “She is a mere witch. No one important. Her magick is impure, twisted—”

“More powerful than yours, which I suspect is your real problem with Wynter,” Cain finished.

Esther’s mouth snapped shut. For a moment. “I implore you to reconsider —”

“No imploring,” said Azazel. “This is tedious enough as it is.”

Oh, Wynter couldn’t have agreed more.

When the Priestess again went to protest, Cain clipped, “No, we are done. You will leave, or you will die. The choice is yours.”

Esther clenched her fists. “She will ruin your town. She—”

“Leave, or die,” Cain ordered.

Wynter crossed her metaphorical fingers that the bitch would be dumb enough to push him. But, her cheeks flushing, Esther pivoted on her heel and stalked away with her coven members in tow. *No such luck.*

The crowd who’d gathered smirked and poked at the witches, spouting taunting comments like, “That’s it, run along.”

Cain glanced from her to Azazel and then tipped his chin toward the manor. In silence, they headed inside.

Back in the foyer, Azazel turned to her. “Your old coven is a joke.”

“You won’t get an argument from me,” said Wynter.

Looking deep into those quicksilver eyes, Cain tilted his head as he asked, “Was what Esther claimed about the teenagers true?”

Not even a flicker of emotion crossed Wynter’s face. “That they accidentally took my life? No. That I took theirs? Yes. I did mention that they were executed.”

“You didn’t say that you were the one who performed the executions,” Cain pointed out. It made him wonder what else she’d left out of her story.

“People always give me weird looks when they learn what happened to the boys,” said Wynter. “And hey, I get it. But I don’t like it. Surely there’s stuff that you two haven’t publicly shared because you know others will react in a way you won’t like.”

Unease tingled its way down Cain’s spine. “What makes you think that?”

“You and the Aeons are all super secretive,” she reminded him. “You let people draw their own conclusions, and you don’t bother to confirm or deny any theories. It stands to reason that you simply feel some things are better left unsaid. And no, I’m not asking for clarification on that.” She paused. “I would, however, like to know if you have any idea of who the Aeons might send next.”

What she wanted was to change the subject, Cain thought. And he had to admit she was smooth at easing a conversation away from one topic and onto another. He wouldn’t call her on it now, though. Not when he sensed that the scene outside hadn’t been quite as easy for her as she’d like him to believe.

“I doubt they’ll insist your old coven returns,” he said. “But someone will come. Keepers, perhaps. The Aeons will only come if it’s a last resort.”

Wynter poked the inside of her cheek with her tongue. “Is there an Aeon who you’d hesitate to hurt? That might be who they’ll send.”

Cain exchanged a look with Azazel. “There’s one, but they wouldn’t send her.”

“Why not?” asked Wynter.

“Because they prefer to keep she and I apart,” replied Cain. “And they would expect me to keep her here, which wouldn’t suit them.”

Wynter’s brow puckered for the *briefest* moment. “An ex of yours?”

“My mother.”

Wynter slanted her head. “But she sided against you in the war, right?”

“It wasn’t quite as simple as that.”

She parted her lips as if to question him further, but whatever she saw on his face made her instead choose to hold back her words.

Azazel turned to Cain, claimed he had somewhere to be, and then excused himself.

Finally, Cain crossed to Wynter and allowed himself to touch her. He smoothed her hair over her shoulder and palmed the side of her neck. “It was hard for you. That scene.”

She averted her gaze. “It shouldn’t have been. It’s not like I thought they cared about me or anything. I already knew I meant nothing to them.”

“But you were hardly going to enjoy having a reminder of that, were you?”

“I suppose not,” she muttered. “Can we talk about something other than those assholes?”

Since he would much prefer to see the strain gone from her face, he didn’t push. “We can talk about how you were gone when I returned to my chamber this morning. I didn’t like it.” He bit her lip in punishment, and her pupils dilated. “You knew I wanted you to wait for me.”

“I would have been late for work if I’d stayed.”

He cupped her hips. “I would have made it worth it.”

Her mouth curved. “Probably, but I’m not going to allow you and your magickal cock to blind me.”

“Magickal?”

“I have responsibilities that I take seriously. And I know better than to give you your own way all the time in any case.”

Cain slid his hands up her back. “If I had my own way when it comes to you, you would be tied to my bed all day every day, ready for whenever I want you.”

“No, I really don’t think you would. I mean, it would be pretty hard for me to use the bathroom, and I don’t think you’d want me making a mess of your bed.”

“Hmm, maybe I would instead put you in chains, then. Chains long enough that you could make it to the bathroom.”

She frowned. “I don’t like how serious you look right now. I gotta say, it’s kind of freaking me out.”

“I doubt many things truly freak you out, little witch.” He kissed her softly, teasingly. “Come home with me.”

“Hmm, what’ll happen if I do?”

“I’ll make it worth your while in orgasms.”

“And soul-gasms?”

He felt his mouth quirk at the terminology. “Those, too.”

She splayed her hands on his chest. “All right, I’m in.”



# Chapter Twelve

Returning to the Keep after having a long meeting with Seth a few days later, Cain was met at the front entrance by Maxim. The aide informed him of a minor issue that had cropped up in his absence, adding, “Also, Ishtar arrived while you were with your brother. I explained that you might be a while, but she insisted on waiting for you. She is in the solar room.”

Cain felt the corners of his eyes tighten. For the most part, she’d given him the cold shoulder since he first got involved with Wynter. Apparently that phase was over, but he didn’t mistake that for Ishtar having shaken off her ‘funk,’ as Azazel called it. She pettily clung to the slightest of insults. To Ishtar, that he’d be sleeping with Wynter when he could instead be sharing a bed with her was an insult.

“Thank you, Maxim,” he said.

Cain headed for the solar, intent on getting this over with before Wynter arrived. As per usual, she would turn up at some point within the next half hour. He wondered if Ishtar was aware of that; wondered if the Ancient hoped to annoy his witch by being present when she arrived. It was the kind of childish thing that Ishtar was apt to do.

Entering the solar, he found her sitting on the sofa, casually dressed, her legs tucked underneath her, her face a mask of uncertainty. He held back a frown, wondering at her game. And this *was* a game. Ishtar never showed vulnerability unless it suited her agenda. She certainly didn’t dress in a simple get-up of jeans and a tee—that was more Wynter’s style. He inwardly sighed, sincerely tired of the never-ending plays that Ishtar made.



“Does anyone in your service have the ability to resurface a person’s lost memories?” she asked without bothering to greet him, as if too unsettled to waste time on formalities. “Since waking, I have noticed that there are many holes in my memories. As if they were suppressed during my Rest. I have already spoken with the other Ancients. They all said they know of no one who can help me.”

His creature huffed at the feigned urgency in her voice. “If any in my service are capable of it, they haven’t admitted to it,” Cain replied simply. “But then, I don’t ask about people’s abilities.”

Her hand fisted. “There has to be someone who can assist me with this.”

“You haven’t been awake long. You need to give it time.”

“But my memories should feel less foggy at this point.” She stared out of the window, exhaling a wistful sigh. “I wonder if Inanna will have the same problem. We will have to wake her soon, won’t we?”

“Lilith plans to do it tonight.”

Ishtar’s gaze snapped to his, blazing. “And no one thought to tell me? Inanna is my *sister*.”

“Lilith went to your Keep yesterday to speak to you,” he calmly reminded her. “One of your aides told her that you were not receiving guests.” If he had to guess, he’d say that Ishtar had been sulking after feeling slighted by the, in her opinion, ‘boring’ celebration Lilith threw for her that included poetry recitals and theatrical entertainment.

“She could have returned at another time to deliver her message.”

Like Lilith had nothing better to do than chase after her? “She was no doubt waiting for you to contact her at your earliest convenience to ask what she’d wished to speak with you about.”

Ishtar pulled a face. “Stop being so reasonable. There was a time you were never reasonable. We had such fun in those days,” she added, injecting a sultry note into her voice. “But then you changed. Fired all manner of dramatic demands at me.”

“Only you would think that someone was being dramatic by demanding to be treated as an equal.”

Her mouth firmed. “You are not exactly in a position to judge. Your current toy is hardly your equal. I doubt you treat her as such.” Ishtar examined her nails. “She fought well in the gauntlet. For a witch. I do hope she will partake in other such celebratory activities.”

Cain went very still. “Do not even think to bring her into your games and

put her in harm's way. I will not allow it. The other Ancients will not allow it. She is to be protected.”

“So you say, yet you do not protect her from you or your monster,” Ishtar sniped. “She is in danger every moment she is with you simply because you are what you are. Still, you keep her as your toy. That tells me you care nothing for her.” She sniffed, a triumphant glint in her gaze. “Does she know that?”

Cain refrained from rolling his eyes at how eager she was to believe that Wynter meant nothing to him. “Why don't you ask what you really want to ask? I may answer. I may not.”

Ishtar straightened her legs and planted her feet on the floor. “Is it true that she sleeps in your personal chamber when she is here?”

For fuck's sake. Did the woman really have nothing better to do than monitor his private life as best as she could? “I will not discuss the finer details of what is between myself and Wynter.”

Ishtar barked a harsh laugh. “You think there is something *between* you? She doesn't even know you, Cain. You will have shown her only parts of you.”

That wasn't something he could deny. It also wasn't something that he intended to confirm. The matter simply wasn't Ishtar's business.

“If she were to learn the truth, if she were to learn about your monster, she would leave you.”

Said monster narrowed its eyes, in complete disagreement. That was the thing about the creature. It had no real sense of self-awareness. It didn't see itself *as* a monster.

It also didn't seem any less possessive of Wynter. Yet.

“You know I am right, Cain. She would *never* accept the real you. She would never look past your secrets. So I hope your creature is as bored of her as I suspect it must be. Because if not and she chooses to leave you before you end things first, it *will* kill her for the insult.”

“You judge my monster by the standards of your own. Mine does not possess an ego that, much like yours, cannot handle criticism, rejection, or abandonment.”

Her face hardened, her fingers digging into the armrest. “You can be such a bastard.”

“I can.”

“But you are only being so testy right now because you know I am not

wrong.” Ishtar regally rose to her feet. “The witch would not accept you as you truly are, Cain. You are fooling yourself if you believe differently.” With that, she stormed out of the room, leaving him alone with his thoughts ... and those thoughts didn’t take his mind anywhere good.

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Adjusting her tee, Wynter was just about to say her goodbyes to her crew when a fist pounded on the front door of the cottage. Feeling her brows snap together, she walked into the living room. “Who the hell is that?”

Glancing out of the window, Xavier replied, “Uh, there’s a bunch of demons in the front yard. One of them looks *seriously* pissed, and I think he might be holding a fireball in his hand. Could be hellfire,” he mused, uncaring.

Her face solemn, Anabel sank further into the sofa and put a hand to her chest. “So this is how we die.”

Wynter rolled her eyes.

“Delilah, get out here *now!*” a voice from outside bellowed.

They all looked through the archway that led into the kitchen. Delilah was currently muttering to herself while peppering ingredients into the steaming cauldron.

“Del!” Wynter called out. “We need you in here!”

Delilah cursed but hurried into the room. “What’s wrong? Make it quick.”

“Did you get on the wrong side of any demons lately?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Why?”

A fist once more pounded on the door.

Wynter sighed. “Hattie, keep an eye on the cauldron.”

But the woman who was curled up in the armchair didn’t even look up from her book.

“I’ll do it,” volunteered Anabel.

Wynter pointed at Delilah. “You come with me.” She led the other witch to the front door and opened it wide, revealing eight males who were also local demons. The furious-looking one holding a fire ball had a bandage on his cheek.

“Is there a problem?” Wynter asked.

“Yeah.” He jabbed a finger in Delilah’s direction. “*Her.*”

Delilah put a hand on her hip. “What about me?”

“All I asked for was a potion to make my girl’s tits bigger,” he said, his nostrils flaring. “You told me to pour it on her breasts and lick off any excess liquid. I did. Only it didn’t work, and shit got *fucked up*.”

Delilah folded her arms. “I warned you there might be side effects.”

“Woman, I grew a third nipple. *On my face*.” He tore off the bandage and, yep, there it was.

“You can hardly notice it.”

Wynter glanced over her shoulder at a smirking Xavier. “Get me a reversal potion, please.”

“Sure thing,” he chuckled.

Wynter shot her an ‘I *know* I told you not to sell any karma potions’ look, but Delilah was too busy arguing with the demon to notice. It was a wonder she hadn’t gotten herself killed long before now.

Xavier reappeared, his eyes still bright with laughter. “Here.”

“Thanks.” Wynter took the vial and offered it to the demon. “Drink that. The nipple will vanish.”

He jerked back, his hands raised. “You think I’m gonna drink anything else *she* made?”

“Actually, this is one of Anabel’s brews. It’s just a reversal potion. Look, take it or don’t. The nipple will probably go away by itself in a few days anyway. So if you’re happy to wait that long ...”

His lips thinning, he snatched the vial and downed the contents; the effect was pretty much immediate. He looked at his lair members. “Has it gone?”

They all nodded or answered in the affirmative.

He rounded on Delilah. “That shit was—”

“Unfortunate,” Wynter cut in. “I’m guessing you didn’t tell your girl what the potion was meant to do.”

He averted his gaze briefly. “Well, no.”

“And that right there is the problem. Performing such magick on someone without their knowledge can backfire. Delilah *did* warn you there could be a price, correct?”

“Yes, but she didn’t mention anything about third nipples.”

“No one ever really knows what the cost will be. Look, I get why you’re upset, but you’re not at all blameless here. The potion wouldn’t have backfired on you if you’d been honest with your girlfriend.”

He sighed. “You realize I’ll forever be known as the guy who once had a nipple on his face?”

“Another thing which is unfortunate,” she said, hoping her words overrode Xavier’s snicker. “In future, whether you purchase a potion like this from here or somewhere else, be upfront with the person you want the potion to work on. We said the same to a woman who was looking for a cock-lengthening brew—”

“You make cock-lengthening brews?” he asked, all his hostility slipping away.

“Me? No. But Delilah does.”

“They only work for a few hours,” Delilah told him. “It’s kind of like Viagra, only it changes the size of your dick as well as enhances your libido for a short period.”

He and his lair exchanged intrigued looks before he turned back to Delilah. “How much *are* these brews?”

Wynter inwardly snorted. *Men*. Figuring all was now well, she shot Delilah a ‘We’ll talk about this later’ look and then turned to Xavier. “I’ll leave you guys to handle this.”

“We got it,” he vowed, smiling. “You go see Cain.”

That was the plan. It had become a routine—she worked, she ate with her crew, and then she spent the night in Cain’s bed. Each time a voice in her head taunted that she was in danger of growing attached to the Ancient, Wynter pointedly ignored it.

Reaching the Keep, she greeted the aide at the entrance, who then escorted her upstairs to Cain’s chamber. She found him standing near the window, sipping amber liquid from a tumbler.

“Sorry, I’m late,” she said. “Had to avert a crisis.” The hairs on her neck stood on end when his eyes met hers, utterly vacant. “What’s wrong?”

He very slowly angled his head. “Why would you think something is wrong?” he asked, his voice flat.

“Because I’m not stupid.” It was easy to tell that all the shutters were down right now. Still, she raised her hands and said, “We don’t have to talk about it.” She had no right to push him to share things with her, given that she wouldn’t return the favor if he ever pushed too hard. “Just don’t insult my intelligence by expecting me to believe you’re not working through something in your head right now.”

He let out a low hum. “What was the crisis you mentioned?” he asked, though he didn’t sound particularly interested.

She plonked herself on a bulky chair. “To cut a long story short, Delilah

pissed off a demon. He and a bunch of his lair turned up at the cottage looking for her. All is well, nothing happened; they were buying more potions when I left.”

His gaze returned to the window. “It must be strange for demons to have to coexist with an entity that differs from them in many ways. There would surely be a struggle to find balance.”

Her skin tingled, because there was something about the way he’d spoken ... as if he was fishing for something. Testing her, even. “I guess.”

“Have you ever been around a demon when their inner entity surfaced and took control?”

“Quite a few times since coming here, yes. They’re intrigued by dark magick. They like to ask questions about runes.”

Cain’s eyes bore into hers. “And you answer? As if they are a being in their own right?”

“Of course. They *are* a being in their own right. Just because something is the epitome of inhuman doesn’t mean it should be feared or loathed or seen as ‘less.’ It’s simply different. I’ll only have a problem with such a being if it means me harm. Otherwise, I’m all about ‘live and let live.’”

There was a flicker of ... something in the depths of his dark eyes, and then a warmth steadily filled them. “Come here.”

That bedroom tone made her pulse spike. “I like this chair. It’s comfortable.”

“But it can’t make you scream with pleasure.”

“You do make a good point.”

He set his glass down on the window shelf. “Come here.”

Huffing, she pushed out of the chair. “It really is a good thing for you that you’re a master orgasm deliverer,” she began as she crossed to him, “or the whole demanding routine would *not* work for you.”

His hands slid up her sides, over her breasts, and up to cup her neck. His eyes drifted over her face, glimmering with heat but also something else. Something she couldn’t quite name.

Once more, her skin prickled. “Is this where you tell me we’re done?” she asked.

“I should, for your sake. I’ll never be good for you.” It wasn’t said with self-loathing. It was a mere statement of fact.

“Okay, let’s be clear on something. I don’t need someone to be good for me. *I* take care of me. I’m pretty good at it, actually. What I really don’t need

is someone giving me the brush off with a modified version of ‘it’s not you, it’s me.’ If you want this to be over, well, it’s not like it’ll be a shock. I figured you’d get bored fast.”

“So did I, but I’m not bored. Nor do I want you to go anywhere. I simply wish to be transparent about this one thing—having me in your life will not make it better. That really is the most I can say.”

Wynter had never thought he would be a positive contribution to her world ... mostly because she hadn’t expected him to be *any* kind of contribution. She would have originally thought that he’d have turned her away by now. She wasn’t sure what to make of the fact that he hadn’t. “Okay.”

He dipped his head. “Never say you weren’t warned.” Then his mouth was on hers, feasting and consuming. Not taking her over, but *demanding* her participation; *demanding* she give as good as she got—which she did. He ended the kiss with a nip to her lip. “Make me one promise.”

“What?”

“If there ever comes a time that you’re so afraid of me you want to run, *don’t* run.”

She blinked. He’d said it as if running would be the absolute worst thing she could do in such a situation. Like it was a matter of life or death. Which confused the shit out of her. But then, so did many of the things he said.

Unable to imagine herself ever being so scared of him that she’d flee—something she generally never did in the face of danger—she nodded. “Okay, I promise.”

His hand squeezed her nape. “Keep that promise.” And then he was devouring her mouth again.

Soon, they were both naked and he was pinning her to the bed as he fucked her into the mattress. He took her hard and fast, pleasuring her soul and her body at the same time.

Afterwards, he drew her close. They talked a little about mundane things before finally drifting off.

A whispered voice came to her while she slept, coaxing her to follow. Wynter refused, burrowing deeper into the warm arms that held her. But the voice kept on whispering, kept insisting that she follow. She frowned, intent on ignoring it. Cold fingers ghosted over her face, demanding her attention but patient for a response.

More whispers, more coaxing, more cold fingers.

She clung to Cain, wanting to stay exactly where she was.

“Wynter!”

Again, she frowned. That was not a whisper, nor was it spoken by the same voice.

“Wynter, stop!”

Why were they yelling? Why was *Cain* yelling?

Fingers snapped around her upper arm, and she flipped her eyes open. Her breath caught. *The fuck?* She wasn't in bed anymore. She wasn't even in his chamber.

She knew that statue. Knew that bog-like pond. Knew the twisting path she stood on.

She was in Cain's garden, and the man in question was staring down at her.

“Wynter, what in the fuck are you doing out here?”

She blinked hard, shivering at the cool air. “I-I don't know.” Licking her lips, she glanced around, her stomach twisting when she caught sight of lots of narrow, wriggly dudes on the ground.

He dragged in a ragged breath. “Listen to me, Wynter. You cannot come out here alone. Ever. It isn't safe.”

“I didn't do it on purpose.” She rubbed at her brow. “I must have been sleepwalking.”

He heaved a sigh and curled an arm around her shoulders. “Let's get back inside.”

She caught a glimpse of something just before she turned. A small temple of some sort. Maybe. She really didn't care because, hello, wriggly dudes with fangs.

She let Cain lead her back to the Keep, wishing the stone floor wasn't so damn cold beneath her bare feet. And then she remembered the voice that had come to her in her sleep. Remembered that it had wanted to show her something but hadn't been clear on what.

No, it had only been a dream. She'd been sleepwalking. She'd *definitely* been sleepwalking.





# Chapter Thirteen

As he, Seth, and Azazel waited in Inanna's drawing room the next afternoon for the other Ancients—including Inanna herself, who'd been woken by both Lilith and Ishtar—to arrive, Cain told the two males of the incident last night.

Azazel leaned forward in his seat. "She what?"

Cain lifted his brows. "I really need to repeat myself?"

"Yeah. Yeah, you do. Because she should be dead."

Cain flexed his fingers before splaying his hand on the sofa's armrest. "I'm aware of that." It was his creature, having woken from a light doze, who'd alerted him that she was gone. "When I realized she was in the garden, I expected to find her swarmed by so many snakes I'd barely see her." And he'd felt something he hadn't felt in a long time—panic.

"None of them harmed her?"

"No, not one of them even so much as touched her. Nor did they hiss in warning or get in her way. They just slithered along the path either side of her. If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought they were following her to protect her."

At the other end of the sofa, Seth shrugged. "Maybe they somehow sensed she was yours. They wouldn't harm anything that belongs to you. They *might* even go so far as to protect it."

Azazel's eyes narrowed. "You're sure she was sleepwalking?"

Cain felt his brow furrow. "What else would she have been doing out there?"

“I don’t know,” replied Azazel. “But you’ve got to admit it’s weird that she’d go to the one place she’d find uncomfortable truths if she knew where to look. So I’m asking, are you certain she was sleepwalking?”

Cain thought back to last night. “She was moving like someone in a daze. Slow and awkward, not with purposeful strides. She only snapped out of it when I touched her, and then she looked freaked out. Wynter’s got an amazing poker-face, but I don’t think she was faking. She went pale. Started trembling. She seemed disoriented and confused.”

Seth scratched at the side of his neck. “You don’t think ... No, there was no way he would have called out to a random witch even if he *was* awake.”

“He isn’t awake. I’d sense it if he was.” Cain ran his tongue over the front of his teeth. “She’s been to the garden before. She likes it. She isn’t fussed by the snakes. It’s not strange that she’d go sleepwalking to a place she likes. But you know what *is* strange?”

Azazel gave him a pointed look. “A lot of things are strange lately.”

“Exactly,” said Cain. “And it all started with Wynter’s appearance. Yet, Demetria didn’t see her coming. Nor did she foresee the appearance of Wynter’s old coven, or that the Aeons would suddenly turn their attention our way. In fact, she’s had no visions whatsoever since shortly before Wynter came here.”

Seth blinked. “None?”

Cain shook his head. “Demetria came to me the day after Wynter moved here. She said that for a few days she’d had a gut feeling that something was coming, but that no vision had accompanied the feeling. I had another brief conversation with Demetria earlier. She still isn’t having visions, and she still feels that she’s being blocked.”

Seth frowned. “Wynter can’t be responsible for that.”

“No,” agreed Cain. “She’s powerful, but she couldn’t block any attempts that a deity might make to contact their Favored. Demetria maintains it is a ‘presence’ that is causing the interference.”

Azazel’s head twitched to the side. “What kind of presence?”

“She isn’t sure,” said Cain.

Azazel rubbed at his jaw. “A deity could do it.”

“We’d sense the presence of a deity,” said Seth.

“Only if they wanted us to.”

“True enough,” allowed Seth. “But why *wouldn’t* they want us to?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Azazel twisted his mouth, resettling his

gaze on Cain. “I’m guessing you’ve had a good, long look at Wynter’s body naked?”

“Every inch,” Cain confirmed.

“She has no marks to declare that she’s Favored by a deity?” asked Azazel.

Cain shook his head. “We wouldn’t need to see a mark to know a deity had their eye on her. The Favored are easy to recognize. They’re all the same. Arrogant. Overconfident. Superior. You’d think they were deities themselves the way they act. That isn’t Wynter.”

“No, it’s not.” Seth stretched his legs out in front of him. “I don’t know her, but you can tell a lot about a person by the way *others* treat them. Each member of her coven seems to respect and care for her. They see her as their Priestess, even if she doesn’t. They’d follow her anywhere.”

“I haven’t spent much time around them,” said Cain. “Maxim has, however. He told me that they’re more like a family—dysfunctional though it might be. There’s no hierarchy, no politics, no power struggles. Wynter is more of a guiding, protective force than a leader demanding respect and obedience. The others might not be entirely sane, but she gives them room to be who they are.”

“A person like that would make a good consort,” Seth chipped in ever so casually. “Don’t even try to tell me you haven’t considered it.”

Cain didn’t object to having done so, because it would have been a lie. The idea of making her his consort had wormed its way into his head and seemed intent on staying there. He’d tried ignoring it, but it pushed for mental space often.

He’d never claimed someone as his consort before. He’d never been possessive enough of a woman to care to. Likewise, though his monster had taken a shine to certain females over the years, it had never had any solid interest in a woman. Until now.

“Seth’s right,” said Azazel. “You thought your creature would grow tired of her. But she’s still sleeping in your personal chamber, which tells me you were wrong. Is it even beginning to lose interest in her?”

Cain pulled in a breath through his nose. “No. But that doesn’t mean it won’t at some point.”

“It doesn’t mean it will.” Seth paused. “I don’t think you’re at risk of losing interest in her either. Around Wynter, you’re different. As if she takes up so much of your focus that it doesn’t leave room for any dark shit to come along and sweep you under.”

Azazel nodded. “I’m guessing the black moods have stopped taking you, because you seem more ... balanced. Positive, even. And I know that’ll be partly because our freedom seems close. But it’s not *all* about that. She’s good for you. So keep her.” He said it as though she was a wallet he’d found and liked the look of.

Cain arched a brow. “Even though *I’m* not good for *her*?”

“Even though,” said Azazel.

Cain briefly tipped his head to the side. “I did warn her I’m not.”

“And?”

“And she didn’t seem bothered by it.” Which hadn’t whatsoever surprised his monster—the creature didn’t believe she had reason to be bothered, since it considered his and Cain’s secrets to not truly be so bad. For the creature, it was simply their nature.

“So keep her,” Azazel repeated. “Or at least give it some serious consideration.”

Seth opened his mouth to speak, but then they heard voices coming.

Moments later, Lilith and Dantalion arrived. They briefly greeted Cain, Azazel, and Seth before returning to their conversation about whether humans served any real purpose. Shortly after that, Inanna and Ishtar entered, linking arms and smiling brightly at each other. Inanna was literally the only person Ishtar truly loved.

The sisters shared the same cornflower-blue eyes, pale blonde hair—though Inanna’s was straight rather than curled like Ishtar’s—and highly feminine air. But Inanna carried herself with a regal grace unlike her sister, whose every move was sensual and aimed to seduce.

Each person greeted Inanna and welcomed her back.

“How do you feel?” Seth asked her as they all took seats around the room.

“Like I woke too early, but I could not have woken to better news,” she replied. “If there is to be a war, I wish to be part of it.” Her gaze slid to Cain. “Tell me about the witch. I understand you have spent much time with her.”

There were many things he could say about Wynter. But he didn’t want the other Ancients to know her as well as he did. He didn’t wish to share her in even such a basic way. “What is it you wish to know?”

“Mostly, I want to be assured that she will not flee in terror if war breaks out.”

“It’s not in her nature to flee. It’s in her nature to avenge.” Cain loved that. “She harbors a deep hatred for the people of Aeon—so much so that she’s

prepared to pay the cost of the dark curse she placed upon the land.”

“Yes, but Priestesses are generally happy to step back and have others do their dirty work.”

“If you ask Wynter, she will tell you that she isn’t a Priestess. She has no interest in a position of authority, only in protecting and guiding her ‘crew,’ as she refers to them. The coven is more like a family, which is as it should be. They are a tight group, and they fight like a well-oiled machine, but not so much with technique as with sheer ruthlessness.”

Azazel nodded. “They went through the gauntlet, and they completed it in under a minute—beating every past and present record. Their focus wasn’t to get to that finish line, or even to beat the times of others. They were *enjoying* what they did, and they kept moving forward so fast because they were eager to make the next kill.”

Inanna’s mouth curved. “I think I could like these people.”

“From what I have heard and seen, they’re not the sanest of individuals,” said Dantalion. “But then, neither are we.” He paused. “I agree with Cain. Wynter isn’t someone who would flee. If anything, she would run toward a war. She would want blood. And her coven would be right behind her.”

“Just because they were confident during the gauntlet does not mean they would be so confident on a battlefield,” said Ishtar, her voice clipped. “The two circumstances are very different. During the gauntlet, they had the comfort of knowing they would not truly die.”

Lilith let out a tired sigh. “Must you let your personal feelings about Wynter’s involvement with Cain color your opinions about her?”

Ishtar’s back snapped straight. “I have no feelings about their ‘involvement’ one way or the other.”

“Of course you don’t,” said Lilith dryly. “My mistake.”

“I merely think that—”

“Ishtar,” Inanna cut in. She said no more. She simply looked at her sister, her eyes soft. But whatever silent message she passed on made Ishtar leave the room in a huff. Inanna was more of a maternal figure than a sisterly one. But then, they *had* been born a hundred years apart.

Inanna exhaled heavily. “I sometimes wonder how different she would be if our father had not made her feel so insignificant growing up. I wonder if she would have been happier in herself; if her own sense of self-worth would not only come from what others think of her; if total adoration would not be the only thing that made her feel complete.”

“Not even pure adoration makes her feel complete for long, though,” said Seth. “The effect is only ever temporary.”

“Yes. It saddens me that my sister will never really know true happiness.” Inanna returned her gaze to Cain. “Your witch will need to watch her back. In Ishtar’s mind, you have chosen someone else over her. It reminds her too much of our father’s rejection of her. He truly was a bastard,” Inanna added in a low mutter. “I have warned her not to do anything stupid. We need Wynter alive, unharmed, and on our side. She assured me she would not do anything to risk changing any of that. But her fragile ego can often overrule her good sense.”

Cain felt his face harden. “I’d advise you to ensure that she doesn’t let that happen. Because if she harms Wynter, she will pay. And we both know how badly I could hurt her.”

Inanna studied him closely. “The witch is not simply a bedmate to you.” She gave a slow nod. “I will keep a close eye on Ishtar, but you should still keep a close watch on Wynter.” She pushed to her feet. “Now I wish to get a few things done before the celebration tonight. You arranged it, Seth, correct?”

“I did,” Seth confirmed.

She smiled. “Then I know it will not be tedious. Oh, and please do not throw any celebrations for me,” she said, addressing every Ancient. “I know it is tradition, but I would much rather save it for when we are finally free of our cage and the Aeons are dead. Just the thought warms my black heart. They will regret what they did, but not quite as much as they will regret not ending our existence—that was the worst mistake they ever made.”

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“Can I kill him?”

Wynter sighed at Xavier. “No.”

“Why not? He’d deserve it. You reap what you sow in this world.”

“Explain how Elias could possibly deserve it. Without lying.”

“So, what, you think it’s fine that he keeps pestering me to have a threesome with him and his boyfriend?”

“I wouldn’t say he’s pestering you. I’d say he’s so amused by how much his first offer annoyed and flustered you that he now keeps repeating his offer to mess with you. That’s not a criminal activity.”

Huffing, Xavier looked down at the arena's performance space, which was beginning to fill with entertainers now that the interval was over. "You're not even really listening to me."

"Of course I am," she told him. "But we've been over this. You can't kill a person simply because you don't like them. It's not a reason for someone to die."

"You choose to focus too much on logic."

"Well, aren't I strange," she said, her voice dry. She raised a hand when he went to argue. "No, you're not allowed to kill him. He's in the service of an Ancient, remember? They'll never permit you to end his life over such a trivial reason. Your request would only succeed in pissing off Elias's boyfriend and pack. And let's be honest, you don't actually dislike him. You're attracted to him and unhappy about it. For you, this situation is a very weird version of 'you only hit the one you love' thing."

Xavier glared at her. "I don't love him."

"No, but you're into him. Reluctantly. That's what this is all about."

"I'm not into him. He's a dick. He said I was a 'naughty little liar' and needed a Daddy to keep me in line."

"You *are* a bad little liar, and you *do* need someone to keep you in line."

"Again, you're choosing to focus on logic." He raised a finger. "And excuse me, I need no one. Except you, Delilah, Anabel, and Hattie."

"It's good to expand your circle."

Sitting on Wynter's other side, Delilah leaned in with a frown. "What're we talking about?"

"I want to kill Elias," Xavier declared. "Wynter says I can't."

Delilah's brow creased. "What's wrong with Elias?"

"He annoys the hell out of me," said Xavier. "He keeps coming to my tent for 'readings.' But then all he does is grill me. I had to tell him about my past just to get him off my back. Though I didn't tell him much except for how I originally came from Montana and that my parents were ranchers."

"You were born in Chicago," said Wynter. "And your parents were both teachers."

"I didn't say I told him *the truth* about my past."

Delilah rolled her eyes. "At least you're aware that you're bullshitting."

Yeah, that was the thing about Xavier. Unlike many chronic liars, he didn't believe his own tales. He didn't invent fictional pasts to avoid speaking of something painful. He didn't present different faces to different people

because he was uncomfortable with who he truly was. Nope, it was simply his way of keeping people at arm's-length. The world tended not to trust liars or attempt to bond with them. That suited Xavier just fine.

When he *did* let people in, though, he wasn't a half-assed friend. He was loyal and protective and accepting.

Sensual music began to play as the performers resumed their show. Acrobats, dancers, jugglers, and illusionists showed off their talent, but it was no circus-like performance. Nope. There was a BDSM undertone to the whole thing. Artists dressed in leather or PVC. Whips, canes, handcuffs, and crops were mingled into the routines. It should have been weird, but it was actually quite fun and creative.

"You know," began Delilah, "given that the rumor-mill says Seth isn't fond of Ishtar, I figured he'd throw a celebration she'd be bored by. But look at her, she's *loving* this. So is that woman I'm guessing is the sister who rose from her Rest yesterday."

Wynter had noticed the new face. The woman was just as pretty as her irritating sister. Though the siblings were similar in looks, they each possessed a different 'air.' Ishtar came across as sultry whereas Inanna was more poised.

"Yeah," began Wynter, "I'm getting the sense that Ishtar respects talent, even if she doesn't necessarily respect people in general." She certainly liked seeing her sister happy and entertained. Ishtar seemingly wasn't quite as one-dimensional as she might come across.

"Plus, there's a sexual theme going on here," Delilah went on. "It could be interpreted as Seth flirting with her in a roundabout way."

"I'd agree, but look at how enthralled most people in this arena are."

Delilah glanced around. "Huh. He did this for the masses."

"That would be my guess," said Wynter. "Throwing something boring as a dig at Ishtar would have made everything about her. To me, this says he doesn't care enough about their past to bother with digs."

Delilah pursed her lips. "I never thought of it like that, but yeah, I see it now."

Feeling eyes on her, Wynter looked to see Cain staring right at her, his usual promise of sex glittering in his eyes. That easily, a jolt of need surged through her. It was like his ability to touch her all the way down to her soul—something nothing else had been able to truly do since before she died—had trained her very being to respond to him. Sometimes, it felt like her body



*knew* he was the only thing that would ever make her feel that way; sometimes felt like it would always crave him.

“So ... how long are you going to ban me from selling karma potions?” asked Delilah.

Wynter looked at her. “Oh, for, like, ever.”

“Why do you have to overreact?”

“I’m overreacting by wanting you to avoid activities that would put your life in jeopardy?” Wynter slammed up a hand. “No, I’m not going over all this again.” She’d already reamed Delilah’s ass over it this morning.

“Acting as conduits for karma is what my family has always done—all the way back to Annis.”

“Who was a child killer and cannibal, so forgive me if I don’t condone the ‘path’ she put your family line on. And let’s be honest, none of you are truly interested in acting on behalf of karma. No, you all use that excuse to justify the crap you do to people.”

“That’s not true.”

Wynter lifted her shoulders. “True or not, the situation we have here remains the same—you cannot keep selling those potions if you want to live a long life. The demon could have *killed* you, Del.”

“But instead, he bought cock-lengthening potions. His girl sent me flowers for teaching him a lesson *and* improving her sex life. I provide a service to the community.”

“Service my ass. And it might have worked out all right this time, but if there’s a next time, you might not be so lucky. Plus, as you’re already well aware, I’d rather we didn’t make enemies here.”

“Says the Priestess who pissed off berserkers, made a bitchy Ancient all green-eyed, and kicked a severed head at Azazel’s aide.”

“I’m not a Priestess.”

“That’s what you’re gonna focus on right now? Really?”

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Standing at the foot of his bed later that evening, Cain watched his cock disappear into Wynter’s mouth again and again, riveted by the sight in a way he couldn’t explain. Seeing her soft lips stretched tight around his shaft ... it did something to him. Brought out a primitive satisfaction in him every single time.

The pleasure went beyond mere physical stimulation, because this wasn't just a convenient mouth. The woman propped up on her hands and knees on his bed wasn't simply a convenient body. Wynter was ... more.

He tangled his fist in her hair as a dark wave of possessiveness rose up inside him. It was *too* dark. Dangerous. Unstable, even. But he did nothing to fight it.

She sucked harder, faster, and a growl rattled his chest.

"That fucking mouth," he gritted out. "My fucking mouth."

Her eyes snapped to his, glazed over with a hunger that gripped his balls.

"Hand," he demanded, holding out his own. "The one wearing my mark."

She hesitated, unsure.

"I won't let you fall. You know better than to think I would."

Careful not to lose her balance, she lifted one hand and gave it to him.

"I didn't tell you to stop sucking, did I?"

She shot him a narrow-eyed look but went back to sliding her lips up and down his shaft.

He pushed at the center of her palm, knowing it'd feel like he'd plunged his thumb into her pussy, and felt her breathing stutter around his cock. He did nothing other than that. He didn't want to make her come yet. He just wanted her to feel him everywhere. If he could have given her that same sensation in her ass, he would have.

She kept taking him in and out of her mouth, instinctively trying to throw her hips at the 'thumb' filling her, as if desperately needing the friction. Still, he didn't give it to her. He kept on enjoying the feel and sight of her swallowing him down again and again ... until he fucking had to be inside her.

"Enough." Tightening his fist in her hair, he wrenched her head back and swept his thumb over her swollen lower lip. "Don't know what I love more. Seeing you suck me off, or feeling you do it. I could watch you swallow my dick for hours. But right now"—he tugged on her hair, urging her up to her knees and guiding her closer—"I want to bury my cock so deep inside you you'll never get it out."

Cain kissed her, licking his tongue inside her mouth, swallowing her little moan. He tapped her delectable ass and released her hair. "Turn around. I want you on your hands and knees again."

More than ready to be fucked, Wynter didn't hesitate to do as he'd asked. She arched into the hand that stroked its way from her nape to the base of her

spine. That same hand dipped a finger inside her.

“Ready for me. Good.”

She felt her lips part as the broad head of his cock slid inside her. Pleasure danced along her soul, as electric and consuming as ever ... but the touch was light. More like fingertips than a hand. It came again, and again, and again. The bliss was immense—making her body sing and ache for more—but each touch was too soft. Too slow ... much like the cock lazily making its way into her pussy.

After another fluttering sweep of soul-deep pleasure, he was finally buried inside her to the hilt. And then he began to thrust. Gently. Carefully. So sluggishly it was agonizing. The waves of pleasure he delivered to her soul were just the same. Every featherlight wave was as amazing as it was *frustrating*.

Soon she was trembling, whimpering, dazed with sheer *want*. “Cain,” she croaked.

“What do you want? Tell me, pretty witch.”

She swallowed. “To break.”

“Hmm, and how do you want me to touch your soul? Like this?” He sent out a firm wave of pure spine-tingling pleasure. “Or like this?” The second wave was a crackly charge of dark bliss that held a sting—and there was no hiding that her body responded more intensely to that.

He let out a low, velvety chuckle. “You like it when it hurts.” Then he was slamming into her. Hard. Fast. Deep. Ruling and ruining her, just as he always did.

She floated, out of her mind with pleasure/pain as he subjected her to an overload of sensation. The drag and thrust of his cock, the bite of his fingertips, the slap of his balls, the surge after surge of darkly decadent pleasure to her soul that electrified her nerve-endings ... It all flooded her body with endorphins and *totaled* her control so that she was an absolute slave to the moment.

Still pounding into her, Cain curled his body over hers and splayed one hand around her neck while the other gripped her hip a little too tight. He growled low into her ear, squeezing her throat. “I want my fingerprints all over you. I want them imprinted on your bones. I want them stamped on your fucking soul.”

Another squeeze to her throat, and she shuddered as her orgasm came hurtling toward her.

“Look at me.”

She twisted her head and met a pair of menacingly dark eyes just as her release *whipped* through her very being like a lightning rod, striking her from the inside out.

He groaned, his cock swelling. “Those fucking tears.” He rammed harder into her pussy, bit into her shoulder, and exploded while her inner muscles milked him dry.

Finally, her orgasm faded, and she blinked away yet more tears as her breaths sawed in and out of her lungs. Jesus, he’d kill her one day.

“If I killed you, I wouldn’t be able to fuck you anymore. People tend to frown on stuff like that.”

Wynter snorted. She hadn’t realized she’d spoken aloud. “Since when do you care what people do or don’t frown upon?”

“Since never. But don’t worry, your corpse would be safe with me. Necrophilia isn’t my thing.”

“That is a comfort.”

“I had hoped it would be.”

She let out yet another snort.

Once they’d both cleaned up in the bathroom, he helped her slip on one of his shirts and began to button it for her. This had become a ‘thing.’ Unlike him, Wynter didn’t like to sleep naked. He didn’t complain purely because she didn’t fuss over his preference for her to wear either his tees or shirts for bed.

“Do you always insist on this?” she asked.

He briefly looked up from the button he was closing. “What?”

“That whoever sleeps in your bed also wears your stuff at the time?”

He drifted his gaze over her face. “No. I don’t usually fuck women in my chamber, let alone put them in my clothes.”

She blinked. “Oh.” She wanted to ask why she was the exception, but that felt too much like fishing for compliments. And he’d only expect the same honesty in return—Wynter often fumbled when it came to talking about ‘feelings.’ But she could give him something. “Well, um, I don’t usually sleep in other guys’ beds or wear their tees or shirts.”

Satisfaction glittered in his eyes. “So we’re even.”

“Yeah. Yeah, we are.”



# Chapter Fourteen

Setting down her chopsticks, Wynter briefly squeezed her eyes shut, hoping none of the other patrons were paying any attention to their conversation. “Hattie, can we talk about this later? Or maybe, like, never?”

Hattie let out a *pfft* sound. “Don’t be all prudish, just tell me what it means. If I’m going to get back in the saddle again, I should know these things.”

Xavier’s mouth slowly curved into a wicked grin. “George is gonna get lucky, is he?” he asked, referring to the old woman’s ‘gentleman caller.’

“At some point, yes.” Hattie notched up her chin, looking mighty pleased with herself. “He’s a very nice man, and he’s not past his prime yet. I don’t want to embarrass myself by looking confused when he makes suggestions in bed.”

Wynter massaged her temple. “I really don’t think he’ll suggest a spit roast.”

Hattie’s brow creased. “Why not?”

Jesus Christ, she was gonna have to say it, wasn’t she? “It would mean he’s also suggesting that you include a third party.”

“Oh, I see. So would be it two men and one woman, or one man and two women?”

Wynter took a swig from her glass of water. “The first.”

“I think I can guess where each man would position himself. Does the ‘spit’ part mean she’s not supposed to swallow? I don’t know why you’re groaning at me, Wynter, it’s a perfectly logical query.”

“I hate to interrupt your *wacked* conversation but can we please leave

soon?” Rubbing at her upper arms, Anabel glanced around the restaurant. Located on the surface of Devil’s Cradle, it served supremely good ethnic food and was highly popular. “There are too many people here.”

Hattie lifted her glass. “We said we’d come out and get some D, remember?”

Anabel did a double-take. “Dick?”

“Vitamin D.” Hattie pointed at the sky. “From the sun.”

“It’s seven p.m.; the sun has set.” Anabel again scanned the room, paranoid. “We *really* should go home. I’m telling you, we’re not safe.” She started clawing at her nape. “I can feel—”

Delilah pointed her chopsticks at the blonde. “Do *not* start harping on about death’s breath again. I’d tell you to get a handle on your neurosis, but I don’t see that ever being possible.”

Anabel scowled. “I’m not neurotic.”

“You believe death pants on your goddamn neck.”

“Because it does!” Anabel looked at Xavier. “*You* believe me, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” he assured her. “Now come on, girls, we’re supposed to be relaxing. Chilling. Celebrating how good things are going for us right now.” A charming smile graced his lips as a member of staff appeared to swipe the empty glasses. He looked at her nametag. “Mona,” he drawled in a deeply Southern accent. “Pretty name. I’m Colton—” He cut off as a male hand landed on his shoulder.

“You telling lies again, boy?” asked Elias, amused.

Stiffening, Xavier twisted slightly in his chair to toss a glare at the Alpha standing behind him. “Don’t call me ‘boy.’”

“Your infractions are building up,” Elias told him, lowering his voice. He bent and put his mouth to Xavier’s ear. “But that’s okay. Daddy won’t mind paddling that ass.”

Xavier stared at him like he was crazy. “You get high a lot, don’t you? It explains so much.”

Elias let out a rumbly chuckle, squeezed Xavier’s shoulder, shot Wynter a subtle wink, and then stalked off with some of his pack members.

Xavier met Wynter’s gaze. “Can I kill him now?”

Stifling a smile, she said, “He’s just trying to unnerve you, stop letting him.”

Hattie patted her chin. “I wonder if he’s any good with a paddle. Do you think he really is a Daddy Dom? He doesn’t strike me as the type to be

interested in age-play.”

“What do you know about age-play?” Delilah asked her.

“I read about it.” Hattie sipped at her water. “I find the lifestyle fascinating. I can see the appeal in it.”

Delilah tipped her head to the side. “You’re thinking about being George’s Little, are you?”

Hattie adjusted her blouse. “If he’s partial to it, well, a person should try everything at least once. And, given my age, I’ll be in diapers soon anyway.”

“I tried the Little thing once,” said Xavier.

Delilah lifted her brows. “Really?”

“No, not really,” he replied.

She flapped her arms. “Then why say it?”

“Maybe your annoyance fills the empty spots inside me.”

“People, can we go back to relaxing, please?” Wynter cut in.

It really shouldn’t have been so difficult to do that, but with Anabel panicking, Delilah and Xavier bickering, and Hattie asking Wynter one uncomfortable question after another ... yeah, there was no ‘chill’ vibe at the table at all.

Wynter excused herself and headed to the restroom. She was just finished doing her business in a stall when an otherworldly breeze fluttered over her skin, humming with warning. She tensed, her pulse—

The stall door flew open, and a burst of magick—thick, cloggy, *dirty*—backhanded her. Pain exploded in her cheekbone, her vision swam, and the world spun around her. Oh, she was gonna hurl.

Her monster’s head snapped up, and it would have taken control if that otherworldly breeze hadn’t returned, ushering it to bide its time.

Dazed, Wynter would have fallen if strong hands hadn’t caught her. Then she was being hauled out of the stall. A familiar male voice spoke to her. No, hissed words at her. She couldn’t understand them. Couldn’t focus. Couldn’t really think.

She felt completely disconnected from the situation as the male huddled her against him like they were a couple, supporting her weight while walking out of the restroom and over to the side exit. She didn’t *want* to walk alongside him, but her legs moved without direction. She didn’t *want* to stay silent as he led her out of the door, but no words escaped her when she parted her lips.

Outside, he lifted her into a van and roughly dumped her on the vehicle

floor before leaping into the van. Laying on her side, she saw someone further down the alley staring at her, looking stunned. *Grouch.*

Hope spiked in her chest, clearing away some of the fog in her mind. A smug little smirk twisted his mouth, and then he casually strolled through the side door of the nearby pub.

*That motherfucker.*

“Go!” ordered a voice, slamming the sliding door of the van closed, and then the driver peeled out of there.

Again, her monster went to rise in a fury. Again, the breeze urged it to wait.

*Fuck waiting.*

Wynter ground her teeth, anger coursing through her. Her ‘daze’ was wearing off now. She knew who’d taken her. Knew she was gonna rip off his cock and—

Hands rolled her onto her front, making her face scrape along the rough floor. *Ow.* Cuffs were snapped onto her wrists, and she felt power buzz against her skin. They were bespelled to keep her from using her magick, she realized. *Fuck.*

Again, hands roughly dragged and shoved until, finally, she found herself plopped on her ass with her back pressed against the side of the van.

Squatted in front of her, the male who’d snatched her smiled. “Hello again, Wynter.”

Blanking her expression, she stared at the man who looked so much like one of the boys who put her through hell. “Phineas.”

Her monster stirred once more, impatient to act. She didn’t really have a choice but to release it at some point. She couldn’t use her magick, so there was only one way she was getting out of this situation. The monster would easily escape the cuffs. But it wouldn’t move until the deity gave it Her permission.

“Your old coven thought you’d be hard to capture,” he said, cocky. “Can’t imagine why.”

Darkness fell over them, and she knew they were now driving through the tunnel that led out of the town. She stilled as she heard the rumbling of more engines and the screeching of tires.

“Those three vehicles you’re hearing aren’t driven by people coming to save you,” said Phineas. “Nah, they’re filled with people from Aeon. Each vehicle will head off in a different direction, which means anyone who tries



saving your ass will have four trails to follow.”

Clever. Didn't matter, though. It was really all for nothing. Because neither he nor the driver would live much longer.

“People will realize you're gone soon, but they won't find it so easy to track you. *We're* going off-road and taking a little detour that'll make it simple to lose whoever might follow. We've been driving around these parts for days familiarizing ourselves with the territory.”

Pausing, he cocked his head. “You're remarkably calm for someone who'll be delivered to the Aeons soon. They are pissed at you. Were you this calm when you killed my boy?”

“I don't remember.”

“You think I believe you were really in some kind of shock-induced trance?” He sneered, his eyes blazing. “You killed him in cold blood.”

Her monster most likely did—Wynter truly wasn't sure how it all went down. “That's kind of what he and his buddy did to me.”

“And what does that matter? You're *nothing*. A mere witch from a weak-ass coven. You can't be easy prey and expect predators to not come sniffing around. That ain't how it works. My son ... he was meant for great things. You took his future from him.”

“He got overpowered by a ten year old girl, Phineas. Not so sure you can claim he was meant for greatness.”

The mage clenched his fist and raised it, but he didn't slam it into her jaw as she'd expected. No, he just snickered like she was too pathetic to be worth the blow. “It was your dark magick that overpowered him. Not you.”

“It wasn't dark until he did what he did. When you think about it, he instrumented his own destruction.”

He squinted. “I'm going to enjoy watching you die. That'll have to wait a little while, though. The Aeons need you to fix your mess first.”

“They can't even combat a little soil erosion, huh?”

“It's not mere soil erosion. And only dark magick can fight dark magick. The Aeons' power is too pure to counteract it.”

She let out a scornful chuckle. “Now if it were true that their power is pure, said power would actually be the perfect antidote for the decay, wouldn't it? The Aeons aren't truly so lily-white on any level. But you've already figured that much out for yourself, haven't you? You knew Wagner would toss me over the falls.”

“What did you do to him?”

“I’m not entirely sure what exactly happened to him. I just know he’s dead.” She stilled as a breeze touched her face in what felt like a ‘right, you can reign fresh hell on the fuckers now’ message. “He never had a chance to do your dirty work, if that’s what you’re wondering,” she added, feeling her monster very slowly slink to the surface as it prepared itself to lunge.

“That’s all right. I don’t mind doing it myself. I won’t be dipping my dick in you—not inside the woman who killed my son. But everything else? Yes, I’ll enjoy doing ...” He trailed off, his lips parting as black inky ribbons began to crawl over her eyes. “What in the hell?”

“You shouldn’t have come for me, Phineas. You see, this thing that lives inside me ... it *loathes* you. It always has. I managed to hold it back over the years, but only because I promised that it could one day tear you apart if the time was ever right. This moment, well, this feels kind of right. And I’d be a twat if I went back on my promise so, yeah, you and your friend are now gonna die.” Her vision went black.

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“I want to be able to shift,” said the male sitting opposite Cain in the parlor’s manor. “My dragon ... I feel it inside me. I hate that it’s trapped. I want to be able to shift.”

Cain inwardly sighed. The majority of the time, those wanting to sell their soul requested something reasonable. Cliché, but reasonable—fame, fortune, power. But then there were those who really hadn’t thought the situation through; who hadn’t considered the downsides to having their desire granted. The male in front of him was one of those people.

“You have no real idea what you’re asking,” Cain told him. “Draconian mages were stripped of their ability to shift because they were too destructive. Once they turned dragon, the mage stayed in that form and lost their humanity.”

“I don’t believe that. It’s just a story told to scare us. Dragon shifters—”

“Are different. You’re a mage with the suppressed capability to shift. You do not have a separate entity inside you, whatever you might think. It is the *bestial magick* that is trapped. It has no personality, no wants, no likes, no dislikes. It is simply power. Once unleashed, it would destroy who you are. You would *become* a beast.”

He licked his lips. “You’re wrong. Look, I don’t even care what will

happen. It's my risk to take. I am offering my soul to you in payment."

"You haven't asked what exactly that would entail. It's not a small price to pay."

"It doesn't matter, I—"

The door sharply opened, and Maxim stepped inside, his expression grim. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Sire, but it's Wynter."

Cain was out of his seat in an instant, assuring himself with one touch to her soul that she was in fact alive. Stalking out of the room, he clipped, "Tell me."

"She disappeared from the ethnic restaurant above ground," Maxim explained. "An unfamiliar black van was seen speeding out of town, so people are concluding that she was taken. Her coven are in pursuit, but they're on foot; they asked someone to pass on the message to you. More of the townspeople have joined the search—"

Cain didn't wait to hear more. He used the enhanced speed of his kind to rush out of the manor, through the town, and up to the invisible border a short distance away from the tunnel that would take him out of town ... if only he could fucking get to it.

Vehicle after vehicle drove through the tunnel fast. He knew the people inside them would search for Wynter. Meanwhile, all he could do was stand in that very spot. It was as far as he could go. Literally.

Anger rumbled through Cain like a thunderstorm, and his hands balled into tight fists. Wynter was gone. Taken. And there wasn't a single fucking thing he could personally do to bring her back. *Nothing.*

His creature went ballistic, thrashing inside him, wanting out; wanting to hunt and track and annihilate whoever took her. It took everything Cain had to contain the monster.

Azazel materialized at his side, his jaw hard as granite. "I heard what happened. She'll be found, Cain. Whoever kidnapped her won't get far with her. They don't know this land like our people do, they'll be caught."

Cain didn't speak. Couldn't. A roar had built in his chest. He knew it would escape him if he opened his mouth.

"She's not dead, right?" Azazel asked.

Cain only shook his head.

"Thought as much. In my opinion, her kidnapper won't kill her. If that was their intention, they would have done it there and then rather than snatch her."

But that brought Cain no comfort, because it meant they likely planned to take her to the Aeons, and those fuckers *would* eventually kill her if they got their hands on her. Azazel knew that as well as Cain did. If someone didn't get to her before—

Movement caught his eye. He watched as Delilah and Xavier walked out of the tunnel, their faces hard as stone.

"I didn't say it was your fault," Delilah said to him.

"Well, it feels like you're tossing the blame at my feet," clipped Xavier.

"That's not what I'm doing, I'm just saying I was distracted by you and Elias having yet another snarky encounter—that's on me. I should have been more alert. We *all* should have been. Instead, Hattie yanked out a small paperback and got lost in the story, and Anabel started having a meltdown like—"

"Hey, I warned you we weren't safe, but you wouldn't listen," ranted Anabel, walking out of the shadows of the tunnel ... with a crow on her head and Wynter at her side.

Relief slammed into Cain, making him draw in a sharp breath. Then he frowned. She was covered in blood spatter, brain matter, and all manner of things. She should have looked a mess; should have seemed sheepish and awkward when she laid eyes on him. But no, she somehow managed to look regal as a queen.

"Hate motherfucking mages," spat Xavier.

"I hate them more when they're smart." Delilah looked from Cain to Azazel. "Bastards came in four vehicles and took off in different directions to confuse anyone who might follow. Hattie here flew around until she spotted a van that had crashed into a tree and then she led us to it. Wynter had already taken care of shit by then."

Wynter gave Cain a half smile ... like she hadn't just been kidnapped and evidently engaged in a battle of some sort. There were no cuts on her, no bruises, not a single injury. His creature settled slightly, but it wouldn't be happy until she was in their den.

Azazel cleared his throat, staring at her. "I think you have bone fragment in your hair."

Utterly dignified, Wynter swiped blood-soaked bangs away from her face. "It is highly possible." She went to walk past them.

Cain slid into her path. "What happened, Wynter? Who took you? And where the fuck are they?"

“Mages from Aeon came for me,” she said. “They’re probably dead by now.”

“Probably dead? Why probably?”

She went to answer, but then the crow plucked brain matter from her shoulder and spat it on the ground. She offered the bird a smile of thanks and then both of them went to town on the bits of gore, dumping them on the ground.

“Long story,” Delilah answered on Wynter’s behalf. “She set them on fire.”

Azazel blinked. “That wasn’t a long story at all.”

“It was more that Wynter set the van on fire while the mages were inside it,” Anabel explained. “So, yeah, they’re most likely goners at this point. The screaming *was* dying down as we left the scene.”

“I still say we should have waited for them to take their last breaths,” said Xavier.

Wynter rolled her eyes. “Only because you wanted to reanimate their bodies.”

“And that would have been so terrible?” he asked.

“No,” replied Wynter. “But you would have made them chase Anabel at some point. You always reach *that point*.”

“She likes to feel death’s breath on her neck.”

Anabel whirled on him. “I don’t *like* to feel it, I just do. It’s a curse.”

“It’s a fucking delusion,” he said.

She gasped. “You said you believed me.”

“I lied. That’s what I do.”



# Chapter Fifteen

Wynter loved her crew. She did. And one of the things she loved most about them was that they could so quickly move on from an ‘incident.’ There was no clinging to panic. No insistence on dwelling on what *could* have happened. No letting such things get them down or spoil their day.

Another thing she loved? They were sneaky as hell.

Take now, for example. Oh, the little disputes they were having were genuine enough. But they were having them here and now for one reason only—to distract the two Ancients who no doubt had the kind of questions hovering on the tip of their tongue that Wynter wouldn’t want to answer.

It was working.

Cain and Azazel were staring at the four oddly, as if her being covered in blood and gore was now a secondary matter. Yeah, she really did adore her crew.

Needing a shower in a major way, she proposed they all head home and began to walk. It looked like Cain might resume his line of questioning, but then Hattie shifted and—promptly back to acting like a frail old lady who could use a little help keeping steady as she walked—asked him if anal fisting was truly a thing because she just didn’t see how an entire hand could fit up *anyone’s* asshole. She wanted to know if he’d done it, if he’d been on the receiving end of it, if he’d tried ‘back door fun’ of any kind.

Wynter subtly exchanged an amused look with Delilah. God, Hattie was an absolute hoot.

There did come a point where Cain managed to break away from the

conversation, but Xavier quickly distracted him with a childhood story that was most likely pure bullshit.

Azazel ... well, he didn't really require distractions. He was too focused on Anabel, undoubtedly wondering how someone so clearly nervous of the world around her could have performed so ruthlessly in the gauntlet.

They'd kept that whole thing about her supposedly being the reincarnation of Bloody Mary to themselves—Anabel rarely shared that little titbit with others.

Finally, they arrived at the manor. Her crew continued waving their crazy flag as they strolled through the building, took a downward ride in the elevator, and headed for their cottage. But when Wynter went to turn down the street that led to her home, Cain's hand slipped around her upper arm.

"Come," he said, trying to lead her toward the Keep.

"I need to shower and change."

"You can do that at my home," he said, a determined set to his jaw that told Wynter her time to evade his questions was over.

"I have no clothes there."

His eyes heated. "You won't need any."

He couldn't possibly be thinking about sex right now. She was a godawful mess. But then, Cain was turned on by the strangest shit.

"Anabel can pack a bag of your things for me to drop off at the Keep," said Azazel. "Can't you, Anabel?"

The blonde slid him a wide-eyed look. "Why are you talking to me? I don't like it."

His lips hitched up. "Now you're just hurting my feelings. That's mean. It's all right, though. I like mean."

"Then Delilah is your girl."

Delilah frowned. "Hey."

"Well, it's true, karma potion extraordinaire." Anabel pivoted on her heel and made a beeline for the cottage. The others followed, including Azazel.

Resigned, Wynter inwardly sighed as Cain guided her to the Keep.

Standing at the entrance, Maxim gave her an odd look as he took her in her appearance. "I'm hoping none of that blood is yours, Priestess."

"Not mine," she confirmed. "And seriously, call me Wynter."

He grunted. "It's good to see that you're back and well."

"Thank you," she said.

Soon, she and Cain arrived at his chamber. He pulled her straight into the

attached bathroom and, carefully peeling her tee from her body, asked, “What exactly happened tonight? Don’t think I didn’t notice that your coven—”

“Crew,” she corrected, kicking off her sneakers.

He sighed. “It’s a coven, Wynter. Call it what it is.”

“We’re not having this conversation.”

“That’s fine, since we need to talk about the mages anyway.” He unclipped her bra and dropped it on the floor near her tee. “Your *coven* did their best to keep me distracted so I wouldn’t question you. I’m guessing they were worried you’d lose your emotional cool if you had to recount everything and so, knowing you wouldn’t want to get upset in public, they bought you some time.”

Wynter felt bad letting him believe that, but telling him the full truth wasn’t an option. Still, she’d give him as much detail of what occurred as she could. She didn’t want to lie to him any more than she absolutely had to.

“The event wasn’t that traumatic,” she said, shoving down her jeans and panties. “I was at the ethnic restaurant. A mage dragged me out of the bathroom, into the side alley, and then shoved me into a van.” She peeled off her socks. “I was a little dazed because he’d hit me with some *real* dirty magick, so I didn’t get a chance to fight.”

Naked, she paused as Cain stripped off his own clothes because, yeah, that body could scatter anyone’s thoughts. “The only other person in the vehicle was the driver. They both must have stupidly been convinced that I wasn’t strong enough to overcome their magick, because the chattiest of the two was cocky as hell. I pretended I was as weak and helpless as they thought. Bided my time. As soon as an opportunity came, I made my move.” More specifically, she’d freed her monster.

Together, she and Cain got rid of the last of the gore from her hair so the bits wouldn’t clog the drain. He then turned on the hot spray of the shower and ushered her into the stall. Joining her, he said, “You didn’t simply execute them, though. You used your magick to hack them into pieces and then let them burn. Why?”

“I didn’t want a quick death for them.” Apparently, neither had her monster, since it had torn into them without actually killing them. “Remember the boys that took it upon themselves to end my life when I was a kid?”

“How could I fucking forget?” He soaped her down, not in the least fazed by the blood.



“Their families made my life hell for years. They’d been pushing to have me exiled since I was a kid. You might remember I told you that the keeper who should have tossed me over the falls was asked by the father of one of the boys to make me suffer first.”

Cain nodded. “He wanted the keeper to gouge out of one of your eyes.”

“Yes. Phineas also wanted him to rape and dismember me.”

His jaw hard, Cain squirted shampoo onto his hand. “Fucker.”

“Phineas was one of the mages who came for me tonight. With the exception of rape, he planned to carry out the other deeds once the Aeons were done with me. In his view, his son hadn’t done a damn thing wrong—I was nothing, my death was nothing. He wanted me to suffer.” She shrugged. “I decided to return the favor.”

“I’m glad you did,” he said, washing her blood-matted hair, still not a tiny bit queasy. “He deserved worse.”

Her monster was rather satisfied with that comment. Though it thought of him as part of Wynter’s circle, she couldn’t go as far as to say it liked Cain or cared to have his approval. But it did like hearing a compliment from a fellow predator. At that moment, it was close to dozing off, relaxed now that it had had its fun.

“The Aeons haven’t yet realized there’s a curse at work,” she said. “According to Phineas, they believe they’re struggling to fight the blight because only dark magick can counter dark magick.”

Cain snorted. “They know that it isn’t true. They simply don’t want others believing they’re weak.”

“I figured that.”

Once they were done showering, Cain turned off the spray and stepped out of the stall. As he wrapped a soft towel around her, he asked, “What aren’t you telling me?”

Oh, plenty of things. None of which she could share. Bar one. “There is something else.”

“What?”

“Grouch saw me get taken. It turns out he didn’t alert my crew or anyone else. He just waltzed into the Irish pub like he didn’t have a care in the world.”

Cain’s eyes darkened to flint as rage all but pulsed in the air. A towel curled around his hips, he stalked out of the bathroom.

She followed, watching as he crossed to the internal phone.

He snatched it from the wall, pressed a button on the pad, and said, “Bring Grouch to the Keep. He may still be in the Irish pub above ground. If not, search for him until you find him. You know where to put him.”

Fury coursing through him, Cain set down the phone. Twice the emotion had gripped him tonight, and he was struggling to let it pass. He wasn’t used to feeling such a depth of extreme emotion. It left him edgy and tense. A crawling sensation kept sweeping over his skin. Skin that felt too tight.

It didn’t fucking help that he knew Wynter was lying by omission.

He ground his teeth and rolled his shoulders. Turning to her, he found her standing very still, watching him closely. He crossed to her, drilling his gaze into hers, as if he might see something in the depths of her eyes that would give him answers.

“When I asked what you aren’t telling me, I meant about yourself. But you knew that, didn’t you?” He lowered his face to hers. “I’m not so easily sidetracked.”

“You’ll never tell me what skeletons are in your closet, Cain,” she said, calm and nonjudgmental. “Why should I tell you about mine?”

All right, she had a point there. Which he intended to ignore on the basis that he didn’t like it. “I want to know you. I want to know everything there is to know about you.” He tapped her temple. “I want to know what goes on up here.” He couldn’t even explain where this insane urge to have explored every part of her—inside and out—came from.

“Right back at you. We’re in the same boat here.”

“Are we really?”

She tipped her head to the side. “You don’t think so?”

“No, I don’t. I’m renowned for my jealousy issues, though I was never actually jealous of Abel—that story was pure bullshit. But I don’t like to share. It’s not because I’m a possessive individual by nature. I’m simply selfish that way.” Always had been. “With you, though, it’s more than a mere refusal to share you. I want you to belong to me so completely that I own your every fucking thought.”

He couldn’t even say why. He couldn’t explain it to himself, let alone her. He wouldn’t have thought he was capable of experiencing that depth and intensity of possessiveness. He wasn’t sure how he felt about the fact that he could. “Unless you can say the same, no, we’re not in the same boat.”

She sighed, giving him a look that said he wasn’t very bright. “Cain, why do you think I’ve never given you shit for boldly and publicly marking your

territory with just your gaze alone? Did you think it's because I'm a pushover? If so, you're wrong. The reason I didn't gripe about it is because I know that no one will touch you if they know you're involved with someone—they're aware you'd take it as an insult to both you *and* me. An insult that you would never tolerate."

Cain felt his eyes narrow. He hadn't thought she was in any way a pushover—far from it. He'd presumed that she'd decided to simply let his behavior fly over her head. In actual fact, his little witch had let it alone purely because it suited her.

"I've never been openly territorial of you because I really do expect you to at some point announce that you're bored and ready to move on," she said. "Really, it would be better for me to end it before you do—the whole thing will sting a lot less that way. But I haven't. I keep coming back here. Back to you. That should tell you something."

"You don't want us to be done, despite my warnings? Despite what you might have heard or assumed about me?"

"No, I don't want us to be done."

A dark satisfaction settled into his bones. But ... "You shouldn't have said that."

Her brow furrowed. "Why not?"

Because his creature—liking her comment a little too much and, arrogant as the monster was, feeling that it was really only to be expected—would hold her to that.

He was saved from having to answer by the knock at the door. Opening it, he found one of his aides holding a bag of Wynter's possessions. Cain handed it to her, and they both quickly dressed. It was as she was dragging a brush through her wet hair that Maxim called using the internal phone line to declare that Grouch was in custody.

Cain turned to Wynter, intending to ask her to wait here, but she spoke before he had the chance.

"I want to be there while you deal with him."

His entire system rebelled at that. "No, Wynter, you don't."

She flicked up an imperious brow, dropping the easygoing act she pulled off so well. "Don't tell me what I do or don't want. Don't presume to know what I can and can't handle. I'm quite aware you're not going to simply slap him on the wrist. Have I ever given you reason to think I'd wish to spare someone who wronged me?"

Far from it. Her vengeful streak ran as deep as his own. “Then come. Observe. You should know what you’re getting yourself into when it comes to me. If you don’t like what you see, well, that’s understandable. But you’re not going anywhere, Wynter, so don’t bother to run. I would just drag you back.”

“You realize I’m not a doll or object that you can move around as you please, right? That I have a mind and free will and all that jazz?”

“I do realize that,” he began as they started to make their way to the dungeon. “It’s inconvenient at times, because it would be easier if I was in control of your every move.”

She stared at him for a beat. “You’re not even joking, are you?”

“No.” He liked things a certain way, and he insisted on it being the case. But Wynter? She might come across as reasonably compliant, but he’d quickly learned that she followed her own rules, and he wasn’t entirely sure what they were. She often made decisions he wouldn’t have seen coming, or reacted in ways he wouldn’t have expected.

Sometimes, it seemed to him as if she was on a path. As if she was focused on a goal he couldn’t see.

Finally arriving at the door that led to the dungeon, Cain pushed it open. They descended the stairs, their footsteps echoing slightly. It wasn’t often that he had prisoners here, because it wasn’t often that anyone would dare anger him to such an extent. Which disappointed his creature, in all honesty, because it had a sadistic streak a mile wide. Not that Cain could judge.

Spotting Maxim standing outside a cell up ahead, Cain strode purposely along the narrow passageway with Wynter at his side, their heels scraping the stone floor as they passed several small cells and secure pits.

The candles within the lanterns flickered, casting shadows over the plentiful torture equipment—spiked beds, racks, iron maidens. There was also an array of torture instruments, such as barbed whips and rusted hooks. The scents of iron, stone, and rust laced the stale air.

He slid Wynter a sideways glance. She was taking everything in, but she didn’t look appalled or apprehensive. Then again, she was wearing that damn poker face, so he had no real clue what was going on in her head.

Reaching Maxim, Cain nodded at the aide and then turned to the cell. His captive stood very still, his wrists cuffed by long chains that were attached to the cell’s cracked, stone wall. The berserker had his chin held high and his jaw set, but fear flickered like the flame of a candle in his eyes.

Cain slid open the cell door and strolled inside. “Well, this brings back memories, doesn’t it? You’ve been here once before. You assured me that you wouldn’t displease me again. And yet, here we are.”

Grouch fired a nervous look at Wynter, who remained outside the cell. “Cain, I don’t know what she told you—”

“Yes, you do,” said Cain. “You’re very aware of why you’re here. What I really am struggling to understand ... is why you would ignore that someone had taken what belongs to me. You may not like Wynter, but you know she’s mine. Not merely in my service, but a woman I have a claim to.”

“You knew I’d be beyond pissed that she was taken. Yet, you did nothing to help her. Nor did you alert anyone of what you saw. Now why would you want me to be pissed, Grouch?”

“I-I didn’t know she was being kidnapped. The guy wasn’t carrying her or dragging her. She was walking at his side, and she wasn’t calling out for help.”

Anger whipped through Wynter and shot to her extremities. “You *knew* something was wrong. You saw him dump me on the floor of the van. And you smirked like a smug piece of shit.”

“*Smiled*. It was just a smile,” he insisted.

Maxim grunted. “Yes, because you’re so known for smiling.”

Cain took a step toward the berserker, who snapped his mouth shut. “What don’t I like? Tell me.”

Grouch swallowed. “Lies or excuses.”

“Lies and excuses. And yet, you fed me both last time you were here. You’re doing it again right now when you’re already in enough trouble as it is.” Cain slanted his head. “Does that really seem wise to you?”

Wynter almost shivered at the menace threaded through each syllable. Her Ancient could be damn scary when he wanted to be. She would genuinely hate to be on the end of that piercing, murderous glare.

Her monster was now wide awake, riveted by the action playing out in front of it, fairly salivating with anticipation as it waited for the berserker to be punished.

“Give me some honesty, Grouch,” said Cain. “Show me you have *some* sense of self-preservation.”

Grouch squeezed his eyes shut. “I didn’t think you’d really care if she disappeared. She’s just a woman who warms your bed.”

“There you go again with the lies. You weren’t thinking of whether or not

I'd care. You were thinking about how her disappearance would suit *you* and your business. I warned you that if you made any trouble for Wynter, you'd pay for it in blood. She was in danger, and you did nothing. Which is even worse than if you'd tried sabotaging her business. You *knew* that. But you didn't care. Isn't that right?"

After a long moment, Grouch nodded. "Y-yes. I should have done something to help her or told someone what I saw," he conceded, his voice low. "Staying quiet was a shitty thing to do."

"Wynter might have died at the hands of her kidnappers. I'd say 'shitty' is an absolute understatement. Wouldn't you?"

"I would." Grouch glanced at her, sweat now beading his brow. "I'm sorry."

Wynter inwardly snorted. There was no *real* sincerity in that apology. Only stark fear.

"You're saying all the right things, Grouch. But I don't know if I believe you." Cain flicked his aide a glance. "What about you, Maxim?"

Arms folded, the gargoyle replied, "I think he's simply telling you what he thinks you want to hear."

Cain hummed. "So do I."

As did Wynter.

"It doesn't make any difference either way, really," said Cain. "Because the thing is ... I don't want to hear that you're sorry, Grouch. I don't want to hear an honest confession. I just want to hear you scream."

Grouch sucked in a breath as his back arched like a bow. Then he screamed. Like *really* screamed—the sound rang with pain and terror. As if someone was flaying the skin from his bones and pouring acid over the wounds.

*Holy shit.*

He dropped to his knees so hard she'd be surprised if he hadn't shattered his kneecaps. Still making those bloodcurdling wails, he keeled over, his face scrunched up tight. She'd honestly never seen anyone look like they were in this much agony.

Cain was assaulting his soul, she knew. She was well aware of how pleasurable his touch could be when he reached out to her soul. Although she'd known that he could also cause her terrible pain, it wasn't really until now that she'd properly considered just how intensely unbearable any pain he delivered would be.

Ever so casually, Cain raised his hand and closed it tight.

The screams cut off, and Grouch began to choke. His teary eyes wide, he wheezed. Grabbed at his throat. Tried sucking in air.

He stared at Cain with a plea in his eyes ... and the immortal stared back at him, his gaze implacable—there was no anger there, no hint of temper, no glint of annoyance. And that made the whole thing so much more disturbing. Yet, she felt no pity for the berserker. He hadn't cared about what could have happened to her, so why should she give a damn what happened to him?

Finally, Cain uncurled his hand. Grouch collapsed to the ground, coughing and sucking in huge gulps of air.

"He's going to faint if he keeps breathing like that," said Maxim, somewhat dispassionate.

Cain pursed his lips. "Most likely." He narrowed his eyes. "I won't tell you not to fuck up like this again, Grouch. I don't need to. Because you'll never have the chance to repeat your mistake. No one who targets something that belongs to me ever does." He waved a dismissive hand. "Throw him in the snake pit."

Whistling, Maxim freed Grouch from the chains, fisted the back of the berserker's shirt, and then hauled him out of the cell and along the passageway.

Wynter managed not to tense when Cain's dark eyes slammed on her. She stayed very still and held his gaze steadily. She never ever let herself forget that she was in the company of an apex predator. But sometimes ... sometimes she failed to remember that him having access to her soul meant she was so very vulnerable to him.

His lips twitched. "Ah, there's that hunter stare yet again," he said, amusement lacing the words. "I find that I like it." He crossed to her, standing oh so close. "I'd never hurt you, pretty witch." Sobering, he added, "Still ... you'll never be utterly safe with me."

She swallowed. "I don't know what that means. But I do know I'm not looking for someone to wrap me up in cotton wool and keep me safe and protected, so there's that."

Plus, as few things could truly kill her, there was some part of Wynter that perversely liked being around a creature that was a true danger to her. It made her feel more alive. Which was probably twisted, but there it was. Hell, they were both twisted, really. What a pair they made.



# Chapter Sixteen

The cottage was rarely ever quiet. Especially in the morning when they were usually getting ready to open their homerun shop. But today was their day off. And since Delilah was in the bath, Hattie and Xavier were shopping, and Anabel was experimenting with potions in her bedroom, Wynter found herself alone in the kitchen and ... yeah, the silence was almost eerie.

Still, it was kind of nice to be able to sit at the table drinking tea and be alone with her thoughts. So her mouth tightened when there was a gentle knock on the front door.

Wynter pushed away from the table, crossed the living area, and pulled open the door. She tensed as she took in the astonishingly beautiful blonde standing on her doorstep with a female aide at her side. *What in the hell ... ?*

Ishtar gave her a soft, practiced smile. "Good morning, I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Wynter highly doubted the woman would care if she was. The words were polite but empty.

"We've never officially met, have we?"

Careful to keep her expression neutral, Wynter said, "No, we haven't."

"I am Ishtar."

"Wynter."

She peered over Wynter's shoulder. "I do hope you don't rudely intend to leave me standing on the doorstep."

The Ancient wanted to enter her home? The same Ancient who'd glared at her several times? *Not funny, universe. Not funny.*



Unable to turn the woman away without insulting her, Wynter stepped aside and invited her to enter.

Ishtar instructed her aide to remain outside and then slowly strolled through the door and into the living area. She glanced around, unimpressed. “I sometimes forget how small these houses are. It must be frightfully inconvenient to have so little space. Why, you couldn’t swing a cat in here.”

Wynter really wouldn’t want to swing a cat *anywhere*, but whatever. Her inner monster tilted its head, studying the visitor. It didn’t want her in its domain. Didn’t trust her near Wynter. But it remained calm, not getting the sense that the woman meant her physical harm. At least not today.

“Can I get you a drink? Tea? Coffee?” Cyanide?

“No, thank you.” Ishtar gingerly sat on the armchair, her brow creasing in concern. “I heard about the attempted kidnapping. It must have been quite an upsetting experience for you.”

Wynter sank onto the sofa. “You could say that.” It wouldn’t be true, but it could be said.

“You know people will keep coming on behalf of the Aeons, don’t you? It will be never-ending. I am aware that Cain and the other Ancients believe that one of the Aeons will eventually come here. I am more of the opinion that they will continue sending others to do their dirty work. But if they do come here, you will need to be ready for what happens next.”

“What does that mean?”

Ishtar smoothed a non-existent wrinkle out of her long, flowing skirt. “I know you are involved with Cain. I can see why you would be drawn to him at a time when your life is in such peril. He is, after all, more than a match for the people who would do you harm.” She paused. “This is the first time we have ever had something that they want. And so, it is the first time we are in a position to barter with them for what we want. I cannot elaborate on that. Not without the full support of the other Ancients, and they would never grant it to me. What I mean to say ... is that you should brace yourself for what will feel like a betrayal.”

Wynter’s insides seized. “A betrayal?”

“I am sure it is easy to believe that you matter to Cain. He is good at making a woman believe that—it is something I know from experience. He is a master manipulator, which I can admit I admire. The people around him who are of use to him ... they are simply pieces on his chessboard. He moves them to wherever he wants them. Each move he himself makes is practiced.

Cunning. Calculated.

“And you ... *you* he wishes to keep close, because you may gain him what he wants. As such, that is where he placed you on his board. If the Aeons offer him what he seeks in exchange for you, he *will* make that trade.”

Wynter barely stopped her eyes from narrowing. Was Cain good at manipulation? She believed so. Would he use people however he pleased? Undoubtedly, since he didn't see many as relevant. But would he trade Wynter for something he wanted? *That* she didn't know. What she did know was that she couldn't trust this woman's intentions for even a second.

From her peripheral vision, Wynter sensed Delilah silently descend the stairs but didn't look her way. “Why are you telling me this?” she asked Ishtar.

“As I said, I know from experience how good he is at making a woman believe she means something to him. I bought it. I wish someone had warned me to keep my guard up. Then I would have been ready for that moment when he kicked me completely off his chessboard. That is the thing with Cain. He constantly replaces his pawns, because he tires of them so quickly.” She paused at a bang upstairs.

Wynter inwardly sighed. Anabel and her fucking experiments. Wynter just hoped the woman hadn't set herself on fire again.

“Each new game comes with new pawns,” Ishtar went on. “Right now, he is playing a game with the Aeons. Like it or not, you are a key piece on his board right now. But once you have served your purpose, he will kick you off it too.”

Quite possibly. Wynter wasn't under the impression that she was important to Cain. He was possessive of her and seemed intent on keeping her around, but it didn't automatically follow that he felt any deeper emotions for her. She'd never allowed herself to think differently.

Still, she wasn't convinced he'd so callously set her aside. Or maybe she simply didn't want to consider it. “You really believe he'll hand me over to the Aeons if they make him the right offer?”

Ishtar gave her a sympathetic smile. “Darling girl, he has tunnel vision where this particular matter is concerned. They betrayed us all, but they have also deprived Cain of something his entire life. *Someone*, I should say. For a millennia, his whole focus has been on retrieving what should never have been taken from him. He has known you, what, a few weeks? Do you think he would truly turn down the opportunity to obtain what he's sought for so

long *just* to ensure your safety? Especially when you are mortal and will die soon enough in any case?"

"What do you suggest I do?"

"There is nothing you really can do. Cain will not give you space. He will not move you to another square on his chessboard until he is ready. And there is no way to ensure he doesn't trade you if the opportunity arises. You would have no way to fight him.

"None of the other Ancients—not even myself—would wish to stand against him to help you. We want him to have what he seeks. Seth, though ... Seth may help you. He has a good heart, unlike the rest of us. He would empathize with your situation. He is also the one person who Cain would not harm, so if Seth gave you sanctuary at his Keep, you would be free of Cain's clutches."

So, what, she wanted Wynter to pit one brother off against the other? Was that it? Or was it just a simple case that Ishtar wanted her away from Cain and figured that Seth was the one person who could keep them apart without there being any bloodshed?

Ugh, Wynter didn't have the patience for this. Deciding the best way to get the Ancient to leave would be to let her think this 'play' she was making had worked, Wynter said, "I suppose it's worth a shot."

Triumph very briefly flashed in Ishtar's eyes. Again, she gave Wynter a gentle smile. "All you can do is try. And you should. This is your life at stake. I know Cain is contracted to not give you up to anyone who may come for you, but there are loopholes. All he would have to do is return the rights to your soul, and he would no longer be obliged to do anything to protect you. Until then, he will indeed keep you safe. But only because you are of use to him."

Maybe, maybe not. But wanting this conversation over with, Wynter continued to play the part of the crushed female. "It's so hard to accept that he had me so fooled. He said so many sweet things to me. And he always insisted on me sleeping in his bed at night."

A hardness slid into Ishtar's expression at the latter comment, but it quickly melted away. "Of course he did. As I said, he wishes to keep you close."

Wynter groaned. "I feel so stupid."

"You are not stupid, dear girl. He is simply a very accomplished liar who reads people well. He senses what they'll need to hear, and he tells them

those very things.” Seemingly satisfied that her work was done, Ishtar rose. “Now I must go. I am sure I will see you at the festivities tonight. Do enjoy yourself. And best of luck with Seth. If anyone can keep you safe from Cain, it is him.” The Ancient then breezed out of the cottage.

Delilah stepped into the doorway of the living area. “What in the world was that?”

“A play of some kind,” Wynter replied. “Whether or not she’s telling the truth about Cain being willing to hand me over to the Aeons at a later date, I don’t know. But she did *not* come here out of any concern for me, so why else tell me all that?”

Delilah leaned against the doorjamb. “To shake any faith you might have in Cain? To make you distance yourself from him?”

“But *why*, though? I know she wants Cain, but she can’t possibly view me as a true threat. She sees me as a mere mortal—weak, naïve, easily manipulated. She thinks *nothing* of mortals.”

“Exactly. To her, you’re nothing. And yet, you have him; she doesn’t. That stabs her ego. It’s all about how *she* feels.”

“I guess. Still, this doesn’t add up to me. I mean, she put a whole lot of effort into trying to make me believe that Cain will one day betray me. Why warn me, when she’d surely be finding it amusing that I’m being played? Why shorten her fun? Why not prefer to wait for the day where I get to see for myself that I’m nothing to him so she can laugh at my expense?”

Delilah frowned. “Maybe you’re wrong in believing she doesn’t see you as a threat. Something about your relationship with Cain unsettled her enough to inspire her uppity ass to come all the way here and sow some seeds of distrust.” She paused. “Are you going to tell him about her impromptu visit?”

“Probably not. He wouldn’t like it. I don’t want the Ancients arguing among themselves at a time when their enemies could potentially arrive.”

“You don’t want to ask Cain about it? You don’t want to find out if just maybe there *is* something they’ll offer him in trade?”

“You think he’d really be upfront about it if there was?”

“I guess not, but it’s worth asking. We need to know, Wyn. We need to be sure these people will truly keep you safe.”

Wynter leaned forward in her seat. “You’re now thinking it might be good for us to just cut and run.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Maybe that’s what she intended. Maybe that was the purpose of her little

visit.”

Delilah squinted. “Huh. Maybe.”

“Look, I’m not going to dash out of here in a blind panic. For all we know, the Aeons have people watching Devil’s Cradle. If I get the sense—or an otherworldly warning—that we need to leave, then that’s what we’ll do. At the moment, I’m not feeling that. And I have to consider that Ishtar could simply be playing mind games.”

“Do you trust Cain to keep you safe?”

“At all costs? No. I don’t trust that *any* of the Ancients will. But there is a strong chance that they’ll back me, even though it would only be to piss off the Aeons.”

“And if they don’t back you?”

Wynter felt her face harden. “I’ll wreak the kind of havoc they’ll have never seen coming.”

\*

Okay, so she hadn’t expected this when she walked into the arena. People weren’t ushered into the spectator area. They were guided to the performance space, which had been made into a makeshift gambling area. There were blackjack tables, roulette wheels, craps tables, and roped-off poker games. There were also several stalls scattered around featuring carnival games such as Hoopla, Basketball, Ball and Bucket Toss, and Tin Can Alley. The battle square was once more exposed, and the people surrounding it took bets as others went head to head in the square.

The combination should have been weird, but it worked. There was something for everyone.

Hattie glanced around, excited. “All that’s missing are male pole dancers. That would make my night complete.”

Xavier snickered. “I don’t think George would like watching you ogle other men. But hey, there’s apparently gonna be some kind of Vegas-like show after everyone’s eaten, so maybe they’ll have some male strippers.”

“We won’t have to stay long, will we?” Anabel held her arms close to her sides. “It’s bad enough that the place is packed with people. All the bunnies are making it hard to take a step without crushing something. And why are they wearing top hats? It’s just weird.”

Wynter turned to her with a sigh. “See, this is why we ask you not to

experiment on yourself. There are no bunnies. Or top hats. You're hallucinating again."

A line dented Anabel's brow. "But they look so real. Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am that Bruce Willis was not hanging out in our cottage earlier talking to you about herbs, despite what you insisted." That had been a weird half hour.

"He seemed so real." Anabel looked at her bare arms. "Just like this hideous rash."

"Oh no, that's real."

She stomped her foot. "Dammit."

Delilah gently elbowed the blonde. "Hey, on the upside, I don't think Diego will wanna touch you tonight."

Anabel brightened. "That's a good point. He'll give me space for sure." Her eyes narrowed in thought. "In fact ... " She let out an experimental cough loud enough to make a few people turn. Spotting the rash covering her face, neck, and arms, they understandably took a step back. Many preternaturals were immune to viruses, but not all.

She kept coughing and sniffing, clearly delighted that the crowd parted like the red sea. "I should really do this more often. I can't believe I didn't think of it before."

Delilah frowned. "You'd *willingly* look hideous just so people would give you a wide berth?"

Anabel sniffed. "Unlike you, I do not care what others think of my appearance. I reject vanity in all its forms."

Wynter sighed. "If you convince people you have a rash, they're going to worry that it's contagious, and then they won't come to our shop anymore."

Anabel looked at her for a long moment. "Xavier's right, you really do choose to focus too much on logic."

He smiled at the blonde. "*Thank* you."

Anabel looked off to the side, her mouth curving. "Ah, that's cute."

"What?" he asked.

"The pony."

He cleared his throat. "Not real."

"Shit."

"Ooh, I see George." Hattie pulled a little spray bottle out of her purse, squirted some of the contents into her mouth, and then dropped the small canister back into the bag. "I'll catch up with you lot later." And off she

went.

Xavier rubbed his hands. "All right, let's go waste our money."

Wandering from table to table and stall to stall, they pretty much did exactly that. Eventually, they made their way to the battle square, where they managed to win back a lot of the cash they'd lost, since they were pretty good at predicting which fighter would come out on top.

At one point, hands clamped on Wynter's hips, and a mouth grazed her temple. "Thought I might find you over here, little witch."

She smiled, her body perking up in all the best places. Although her earlier conversation with Ishtar had filled her with doubts, Wynter had chosen to shake them off. He'd given her no reason to believe he was using her, and she wasn't going to let Ishtar poison what they had unless, or until, proof of such a claim appeared. "I figured you'd be playing poker with the other Ancients or something."

"One game was enough." Cain hummed. "What a view."

Realizing he was looking at her cleavage, she rolled her eyes. *Typical boy.*

He nipped her earlobe. "Now I'm remembering the time I thrust my cock between your breasts until I came all over them," he whispered.

She swallowed at the memory, her hormones getting all stirred up. "You're mean to do this to me here."

He let out a wicked chuckle and, curling his arm around her waist, moved to her side. "Who did you place your money on?"

"The lamia. And I'm glad. She's totally wiping the floor with the vampire." The lamia continued to do exactly that, and victory was very soon hers. The crowd's winnings were handed out. Wynter happily accepted hers and pocketed the cash.

Just then, another Ancient sidled up to them and nodded. "Cain, Wynter."

"Hey, Azazel," she greeted simply.

His gaze cut to Anabel, and his brow creased. "What's with the rash?"

"I'm allergic to crowds." The blonde tilted her head. "Why are you wearing a tin foil hat?"

Xavier leaned into her. "Not real," he muttered.

She closed her eyes. "Dammit."

Delilah nudged Wynter, chuckling. "Get a look at Hattie staring at George's ass while he's tossing hoops at the bottles. I don't know how to feel about the fact that her sex life is currently better than mine."

"And mine," added Xavier.

“Only because you’re set on fighting Elias and his boyfriend,” Delilah pointed out. “A threesome would spice things up for sure.”

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “You know as well as I do that Elias is just messing with me.”

“That doesn’t mean he wouldn’t gladly fuck you.”

Anabel’s face softened, her eyes landing on her shoulder. “Aw, how beautiful. I love butterflies.” She began uttering soft, non-intelligible sounds to the flying insect that only she could see. But then her brow puckered, and she glanced up at Xavier. “It’s not real, is it?”

“Oh no, it’s real,” he assured her.

A sigh of relief slipped out of Anabel, and she smiled brightly. “Good. For a second there, I was worried I was embarrassing myself cooing over thin air.” Shaking her head at herself, as if she’d been dumb to doubt her eyes, she went back to freaking serenading a non-existent butterfly.

Wynter shot Xavier a hard look, but before she could order the lying bastard to tell her the truth, Delilah leaned into Wynter and whispered, “We need to teach her a lesson or she’s not gonna stop carelessly sampling her wares.”

That was true enough.

Azazel turned to Wynter. “What is happening?” he asked quietly, glancing briefly at Anabel, who was putting her fingers to her shoulder and trying to coax the ‘butterfly’ to walk onto her hand.

“She experiments on herself with her potions,” Wynter explained, her voice low. “There are often temporary after-effects. Hence the rash and hallucinations.”

“And the edginess around people?”

“No, she’s always like that.” Feeling eyes on her, Wynter looked to see Ishtar staring at her. The Ancient looked from her to Cain, clearly confused. Wynter shrugged in a ‘I’m just weak where he’s concerned’ gesture. It was better to keep up the naïve act.

Cain squeezed her hip. “We’re leaving now.”

She frowned. “We are? But there’s a show coming up. And the usual feast.”

“I know.” He picked up her hand. “I’ll feed you at the Keep, and I’ll be sure to entertain you.” He licked at the mark on her palm.

Her breath snagged in her throat as an invisible tongue swiped between her folds. “Bastard.”



His gaze was lit with both humor and need. “I could make you come in front of all these people, if you’d prefer.” He jabbed his tongue into the center of her palm.

She jumped, feeling as if the aforementioned tongue had sank into her pussy. “No, I damn well wouldn’t.”

“Then you’d better come with me, hadn’t you?”

Anabel’s head shot up, and she let out a sad sigh. “Ah, it’s gone.” Her eyes flitted from person to person, taking in their expressions. Whatever she saw made her face darken. She whirled on the male at her side. “*Xavier.*”

He bust a gut laughing, the shit.



# Chapter Seventeen

Cain snapped awake, his creature urgently shoving at his consciousness. He splayed a hand on the mattress beside him, finding only empty space.

Wynter was gone again.

Lifting his head, he looked toward the adjoined bathroom and called out her name. No response. *Fuck.*

Cain swiftly yanked on a pair of sweatpants and rushed out of the chamber. He'd locked the gates to his garden in case she did any more sleepwalking, so at least he didn't need to worry that she'd go traipsing through it again. On the off-chance that she'd headed there, he made his way to the first floor of the Keep and strode out of the rear doors. He exhaled heavily as he spotted her near the gates dressed in only his shirt. She was swaying slightly toward them, gently touching the iron bars with her forehead.

He moved to her side and looked at her face. She was staring straight ahead, her gaze unfocused.

Taking her arm, he gently turned her to face him, but she tried turning back to the gates. He had no idea why she kept coming here whenever she went sleepwalking, but he didn't like it. It made him feel far too uneasy.

She dug in her heels when he tried leading her away. The move was weak but determined.

He gripped her chin. "Wynter? Wynter?"

She blinked rapidly, and then the vacant glint faded from her eyes. She glanced around, her brows dipping. "What am I ... shit, I did it again?"

He nodded, slipping his arm around her shoulders. "Come on." He guided her back into the Keep and up to his chamber. Flicking the lock, he asked, "Were you dreaming about anything in particular?"

"Not that I can recall." She sat on the edge of the bed. "Did I say or do anything?"

He shook his head, walking toward her. "You just kept rocking back and forth on your heels, nudging the gates with your forehead. If they weren't secured shut with a padlock, you probably would have wandered through the garden again." And on this occasion, she might have been hurt. Sure, the snakes hadn't bothered her last time, but that could have been a one-off. "Sleepwalking isn't normal for you?"

She shook her head. "Listen, I can stop staying over if this is weirding you out too much."

Stood between her legs, Cain leaned over her, silently urging her to lay back. He placed a hand either side of her head and nuzzled her neck. "I like having you here."

"Does it make that much of a difference, considering we're both asleep?"

He straightened and smoothed his hands up her thighs, shoving up the shirt he'd put on her, baring her pussy to his view. Dancing his fingertips over her folds, he said, "I don't want you sleeping anywhere else."

She raised herself onto her elbows, her expression blank. "You don't trust me not to spend my nights with other men?"

Pausing in stroking her folds, he arched a brow. "Did I say that?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"Do I believe you'd let another man touch you, let alone sleep in your bed? No."

Placated, Wynter relaxed and glanced down at his hand. "Then do continue." Because things had been moving in a direction she very much liked.

The corner of his mouth kicked up. "I'd rather do this."

A hot lash of pain-edged bliss *struck* her soul like a flogger, making her jump with a gasp. "Fuck." He did it again. And again. And again. Until every part of her felt so *charged* it was like static flames skipped along her over-sensitized skin.

"Yes, take it for me," he said, flicking open the buttons on the shirt she wore.

Her back bowed as she was hit by yet another sharp lash to her soul. It was

like being whipped by pleasure/pain. Sometimes the strikes were heavy and held a real bite. Others were more like the slap of a hand and left a stinging sensation in their wake.

He started off slow, but the tempo soon began to build, ramping up the tension coiling in her muscles. Jesus, her heart was *pounding*. Her breaths—so quick and shallow—repeatedly caught in her throat as lash after lash of darkly decadent sensation thrashed her very being.

Parting her now unbuttoned shirt, he said, “I think I’ll leave this on you. I like fucking you while you’re wearing my shirt.”

A groan mixed with a sob as his hands closed over her breasts. She arched into his touch, her nipples so tight they hurt. Her pussy felt even more sensitive. Her clit pulsed, and her inner muscles contracted almost painfully. “Fuck me.”

Dark eyes blazed into hers. “Not yet. I want you out of your mind with need.”

She would have told him she was already there, but her thoughts scattered as soon as the ‘whipping’ recommenced.

More lashes, more pain, more pleasure.

Drowning in sensation, she felt ... floaty. Weightless. Adrift. It was only his hands on her body that kept her aware of the physical world.

Her body gave up any pretense of belonging to her. In that moment, Cain truly owned it. Ruled it. Manipulated it to his liking. But then ... didn’t he always? It was impossible to hold some part of herself back when she felt him literally *everywhere*.

“No one else could ever make you feel this good,” he said, swiping the head of his dick through her folds and rubbing at her clit. “No one.”

A hot, quivering bundle of sexual frustration, she stared up at him, wishing she could brand him cocky. But it wasn’t arrogance; it was pure fact. “And you like that, don’t you?” He was just enough of an asshole to find satisfaction in knowing that any man who might come after him would fail to measure up.

“Yes, I very much do,” he easily admitted, his tone as dark as his gaze.

She lifted her hips to meet the broad tip of his cock, but he didn’t push it inside her. “*Fuck me.*” Another electric lash to her soul had her all but bucking off the bed. “Cain, seriously.” Her voice broke. Dammit, she was close to crying.

Draping himself over her once more, he licked at the corner of her mouth.

“You’re so desperate for my cock you’d do anything I asked right now, wouldn’t you?” The question was rhetorical.

She couldn’t even claim he was wrong, which would have been mortifying if there was any room in her system for anything but raw need. Her breath caught as he began to slowly sink inside her pussy, stretching her, stroking over hypersensitive nerve-endings.

He put his mouth to her ear. “I’m going to use you now. Brutally. Coldly. Like you’re nothing but a toy. My favorite toy, but still just a thing that’s here for my convenience. A thing that’s sole purpose is to make me feel good. And you know what, baby? You’re gonna get off on it.”

Then he was moving inside her. No, *pounding*. Fucking in and out of her pussy as pitilessly as he’d promised, focused only on chasing his own orgasm.

He was so detached, so distant, so coolly remote ... like she truly had no purpose in his mind other than to make him come. At the same time, though, he once more thrashed her soul with lashes of darkly carnal sensations. So even as she felt utterly used and objectified, she knew he wasn’t really so uncaring of her own pleasure.

“Do not come. I get to come first. Then you. Hmm, your pussy just rippled around my cock. You like it when I give you orders.”

It was impossible to fight a blush right then. “No, I don’t.”

“Such a little liar.” He thrust his hand into her hair and fisted it tight enough to make her scalp sting. “Little liars get punished.”

She expected a spank of pain to her soul. Instead, it was a series of soft, velvety *flicks* of sensation. *Exquisite* sensation. But too featherlight to be anything but a tease. She shook her head, too desperate to come to bear more of that.

“Let’s try this again.”

“I liked it, okay! Now stop acting as if you even care that I lied. You’re just being cruel because you can.”

“Of course I am. I like fucking with your head.” He kept callously ramming his cock deep, animalistic in the primitive, dispassionate way he sought his own release. “Such a pretty toy.”

Another hot lash to her soul, quickly followed by another and another. She couldn’t take anymore. She truly couldn’t. “Cain,” she whimpered, tears pooling in her eyes.

He groaned, slamming into her even harder, fisting her hair even tighter.

His cock swelled as he said, “You come when I’m done.” He pounded once, twice, three times. Then exploded. He kept on thrusting through his orgasm, filling her with one hot splash after another. “Now you.”

A supernova wave of pure bliss swept over her soul ... and she shattered. Screaming, shaking, scratching his back. The orgasm tore her to shreds, violent and blinding.

Finally, she sagged.

Fighting to catch his breath, Cain looked down at the trembling pile of pure sated woman beneath him. He thumbed away her tears and pressed a kiss to her jaw.

“Why do you like it when I cry?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“One, I’m a sadistic bastard. Two, I like knowing you were so wrecked by pleasure that you simply couldn’t take it.”

His monster relished that they had that power over her; that they could reduce her to this. Relished that, strong though she may be in so many ways, she was vulnerable to them.

“I’m not keen on the way you’re looking at me right now.”

He slanted his head. “How am I looking at you?”

“Like ... like a predator who’s just taken down prey and feeling very pleased with itself. I’m no one’s prey.”

He bit back a smile. “I’ll bear that in mind.” To beings as powerful as him, everything and everyone was potential prey.

She sniffed. “Yeah, you do that.”

Cain felt his mouth quirk. He still couldn’t say what it was about her that had him so fucking obsessed with her. He couldn’t understand why she brought out so many primitive instincts in him. He wasn’t sure anyone had ever held his attention the way she did.

With other women, he’d gotten bored fast. Especially in bed. It wasn’t a slight to them, he was simply so fucking jaded that everything—including sex—held a mundane edge.

With Wynter, it was different. Instead of tiring of the feel, scent, and taste of her, he only wanted more. He liked learning more and more about what got her off. Liked introducing her to new things and sensations. Liked the thought of eventually knowing her body better than anyone else ever had.

Realizing she’d fallen asleep, Cain smiled. She didn’t once stir as he moved them further up the mattress and pulled the coverlet over them. His creature settled in, prepared to stay awake and watch over her, so Cain let

himself drift off.

It felt like no more than an hour later when he woke to a gentle knock on the door. Light had crept around the edges of the curtains, so he knew it was morning.

As he'd expected, Maxim was on the other side of the door. The aide passed Cain a tray filled with food for both him and Wynter, as per usual. Maxim also relayed a surprising piece of news that made Cain lift his brows. His little witch had failed to pass on that herself.

He thanked the aide and then closed the door. Once he'd set the tray on the table, he turned to the bed to see that Wynter was beginning to wake.

She groaned. "No, it can't be morning." She tried dragging the coverlet over her head, but the move was too lazy to work.

"It's morning. And I have a question for you."

She opened one eye. "Is it sex related?"

"No."

"Then it can wait." Her eyelid fell closed.

His lips twitched. "Maxim told me a little something just now." All he got in response was a disinterested hum. "I have to say, I'm confused as to why I had to hear this from him instead of you. Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Yes, but it's sex related, so it has nothing to do with your question and you won't want to hear about it."

Actually, he did want to hear about it and ... *Little minx*. He yanked the coverlet off her and spanked her ass. "That's for trying to distract me."

Yelping, she pouted at him. "It's not like it worked. You didn't need to slap me *that* hard."

"I know, but I wanted to."

She muttered something, but he only made out the word 'sadistic.'

He folded his arms. "Apparently, one of Ishtar's aides was seen standing in your front yard yesterday."

Wynter's eyes slid to the side. She sighed. "She did in fact grace me with her presence, as you've no doubt guessed."

Annoyance tightened his muscles. "And you hadn't planned to tell me?"

"I didn't want to cause trouble between you and the other Ancients. You all need to be on the same page right now, not fighting amongst yourselves. Plus, she didn't do anything major. She didn't threaten me, she wasn't rude, she wasn't even remotely unfriendly."

“What *did* she do? I noticed her watching us last night with an odd look on her face. Like she was struggling to understand what she was seeing. What kind of game did she attempt to play with you?”

“A game where she insisted *you’re* the one playing a game with me.” Wynter sat up in bed, his shirt parting slightly to reveal a strip of her front. “In short, she encouraged me not to trust you. She said you’re keeping me close only because I might be of use to you, and that you’d give me up to the Aeons if they offered the right incentive. She also encouraged me to go to Seth for sanctuary.”

*Son of a bitch.* “What did you say?”

“I pretended to believe her and said I’d think about going to your brother. Look, I don’t fully trust you. I can’t, just as you can’t *possibly* fully trust me—we know too little about each other. But I don’t believe you’re playing me. If it turns out I’m wrong, well, I’m wrong. Then I’ll hurt you.”

“You’re not wrong. And no, we can’t invest true trust in each other when we have so many secrets between us. But you can trust that I won’t betray you. Nor would I hand you over to the Aeons.” Even if he was willing, his monster would never stand for it. “I will, however, deal with Ishtar.”

“Don’t do it on my account. I really can’t take what she said personally when she doesn’t even *know* me. She has it in her head that I’m this silly, naïve little girl who’s totally taken in by you.”

Cain felt his eyes narrow. “You like that she’s put you in a box and believes she has you all figured out, because it means she won’t look closer. You don’t like people to look too close, do you, Wynter?”

“Neither do you.”

That was something he couldn’t argue with.

“What would have happened if I’d run to Seth?” she asked, tipping her head to one side. “I couldn’t quite understand why Ishtar was encouraging me to do it.”

Cain reached out and dragged Wynter close so that she knelt in front of him, her front pressed to his. “For me, it would have been a little like history repeating itself. When I lived at Aeon, there was a woman I briefly dated, though we termed it courting back then. Abel had a ‘thing’ for her, though he didn’t seem much interested in acting on it until I began courting her.”

“I’ve only met him a couple of times, but I have to say, I really don’t like him. Especially since he exiled my mother.”

Cain gave her a comforting squeeze. “He’s an asshole that way. You’re not



alone in so thoroughly disliking him.”

Wynter settled her palms on the twin columns of his back. “So, what happened with you and the woman?”

“After she and I had an argument during which she declared we were done, she ran straight to Abel for comfort. I’m sure he expected me to confront him and demand he hand her over. After all, she and I had argued many times but reconciled. It wasn’t a stretch to think that I might wish to reconcile with her yet again. But I didn’t confront him, which I suspect is why he initially took her as his consort; he’d hoped to provoke me.”

“Consort,” she echoed. “Do you mean Lailah?”

“Yes, it was her. As you know, I’m a jealous bastard. But I felt none in that situation for two reasons. One, I’d tired of her dramatics. Two, I’m very unforgiving. The fact that she’d hoped to play me off against a brother I had no love for was something I could never have overlooked, so I didn’t care where she was, what she was doing, or who she was doing it with.

“I can very easily cut someone out of my life if they wrong or betray me. It’s like they were never part of it to begin with. Ishtar no doubt remembers the incident. She remembers how easily I turned away from Lailah and how I refused to later reconcile with her.”

Realization flashed on Wynter’s face. “So by telling me to run to Seth, she was hoping you’d then turn away from me in much the same way as you turned away from Lailah.”

That would be Cain’s guess. It wouldn’t have worked, though. He’d have headed to Seth’s Keep and dragged Wynter back to his own. And Seth, being nothing like Abel, would have helped Cain in easing Wynter’s concerns rather than attempt to keep them apart.

“Sneaky, isn’t she?”

“It’s one of her many traits,” said Cain.

“Well, thank you for telling me that story. You didn’t have to. And just so you know, I’d never play one brother off against the other like that.”

“I know. You are nothing like Lailah. In fact, you are unlike any woman I’ve ever met. You’re a singular creature, Wynter. And very much all mine.” Cain slipped one hand between them to possessively cup her breast. “It’s a shame you can’t wear my shirt to work.”

She snorted. “Counting the amount of times you’ve touched me in public, I’d say it’s already pretty clear to the people here that you consider me off-limits to anyone but you.”

That didn't feel like enough, though. Nothing did. Maybe because so many things had been taken from him that his hold on her always felt precarious. Like she could slip through his fingers at any moment. There was really only one way to guarantee he could *always* keep her with him, but she'd never go for it.

His monster didn't believe that, though. It didn't see why she'd object to staying with them forever. Or why Cain would worry that she'd leave them if she learned the truth. Again, it was that lack of self-awareness at work.

"You're frowning all of a sudden," she said. "What's wrong?"

What was wrong? Nothing. Except that she'd so wholly and unknowingly snagged the interest of a creature that would absolutely terrify her.

Sometimes, Cain felt that Wynter nonetheless *could* truly accept him and the truth of what he was. Other times ... other times he remembered he wasn't that fucking fortunate.

He could very easily turn his back on someone who rejected him, but he wasn't sure he could so effortlessly do that with Wynter. And that left him only one choice—never let her learn just what she shared a bed with.



## Chapter Eighteen

Doing a languid stretch, Wynter glanced at the shelf on the shed wall. She was almost all out of reversal potions. Again. Well, it had been a long day, and she'd had a tricky customer who'd asked her to edit the runes on his dagger four times before he'd been satisfied with the results.

She'd originally thought that people's interest in enchanting weapons would decrease once the novelty of it wore off. But she still had a steady stream of customers. Some even came with cutlery or jewelry. And once the shapeshifting beings learned that she could also put runes on claws, some had come seeking such a service.

The rest of her crew were doing just as well. Xavier, being such an expert at divination, had plenty of regular clients who liked to have weekly readings. Many people stopped by of a morning to pick up baked goods from Hattie. Anabel's potions practically flew off the shelves on a daily basis, since she had such a massive selection. And Delilah's cosmetics remained highly popular—particularly her gift sets.

In sum, their homerun shop was still doing well. Which still supremely irritated many of the local businesses. Some had had the downright gall to attempt to replicate both Anabel and Delilah's brews, though they'd had little success.

Still, both females were furious that others would try to steal their ideas and products. It had taken Wynter a good fifteen minutes to talk the nutcases out of cooking up their own improved versions of Molotov cocktails for Xavier—who'd happily volunteered his services—to sling through their

windows ... all while Hattie walked around demanding to know who'd hidden her copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey* because she still hadn't yet located it.

Wynter had managed to distract them by relaying Cain's response to Ishtar's visit. Delilah had crowed about being right that Ishtar's actions were motivated by both her hurt ego and how threatened she felt by Wynter's involvement with Cain. The crew felt uneasy on hearing that he hadn't addressed the claim Ishtar made that the Aeons had something he wanted. Wynter hadn't felt too great about it either, but *she* skirted shit all the time to preserve her own secrets, so she had no right to press him.

Her stomach rumbling, Wynter grabbed her empty mug and set of keys. It was time to lock up and—

An otherworldly breeze slammed into her body, vibrating with urgency and a warning of danger. She heard a heel scuff the floor a mere millisecond before pain lanced through her back and chest. Sucking in a sharp breath, she glanced down. Shock and panic zipped up her spine. *No*. *No*, that was *not* a sword sticking out of her body.

Except it was.

And it had penetrated her heart.

A hiss sounded in her ear. "That's for my father, you *bitch*."

Agony scraped Wynter's insides like a serrated blade as the sword withdrew from her body. A hand roughly shoved her to the floor, and she was too damn weak to even throw out her hands to catch her weight. Her heartbeat pulsed in her ears—slow, erratic, faint.

Footfalls sounded, and then a male spat out a curse. "Annette, what have you done?"

*Bowen*.

"I did what I had to do," the woman claimed.

Wynter's heart stuttered to a stop, and darkness swallowed her.

\*

Cain kept his expression blank as Ishtar swanned into Seth's drawing room with an overly bright smile on her face. Well, of course she was smiling, and of course said smile held a hint of smugness. Given that Seth had invited her here, she probably thought that his brother had 'come round' and wanted to revisit old times. She'd soon be disabused of that theory, because he was just

as pissed as Cain about the shit she'd pulled with Wynter.

"Seth, darling," she all but sang. Her step faltered when she noticed Cain standing in front of the fireplace, but then her smile widened. "Well, hello, you. I get to have quality time with both brothers. How lovely." She elegantly lowered herself to the spot on the sofa beside Seth, her brow wrinkling at the hard look he wore. "Whatever has gotten into you?"

"Tell me something, Ishtar," said Cain, "did you really think that urging Wynter to run to Seth to seek refuge from me would work?"

Ishtar's smile melted away. "She told you, I see." The Ancient spoke as if Wynter was a petty child who ran off to tell tall tales to her parents.

"She chose to fairly give me the chance to speak in my own defense," said Cain, purposely vague. Any conversations he had with Wynter weren't Ishtar's business.

The Ancient's upper lip quivered. "And you fooled her into believing she matters to you."

Cain took a menacing step forward. "I told you to leave her be."

"You also insisted that she was under the protection of every Ancient. That therefore includes me. I did what was fair and just. You know that well. Or do you have it in your head that she doesn't deserve to be protected *from* you? From how you are toying with her affections to keep her close?"

"Don't claim you did anything but act in your own selfish, petty interests. You care nothing for Wynter's feelings. What is 'fair' to her has no relevance to you. You would not give a damn if I was 'toying with her affections.' Which I'm not."

Ishtar flapped a dismissive hand. "Anyone can see that you are using her. Except for her, apparently—she stupidly trusts your word. Well, if you are looking for an apology from me, you will not get one. Twist my actions if you must, but I did what I thought was right."

"Right for who?" Seth cut in. "You, I'm guessing. You certainly didn't do right by Cain or Wynter. And don't for one moment think we'll truly believe otherwise. Cain's not twisting your actions. *You* are. But then, I suspected you would. Gaslighting is something you seem to enjoy."

"Do not cast me into the role of 'villain,'" she said, her tone tart. "Pretend to care about the witch's itty bitty feelings if you wish. But if you truly did care, you would be hesitant about using her as bait to lure the Aeons here. You would be second-guessing your decision. You're not, though, are you? No. Face it, we are *all* using her to get what we want. She will realize that

eventually, Cain. Then she will turn on you.”

Wynter had been right, he realized. Ishtar viewed her as a silly, naïve girl. She didn’t see that his little witch was as ruthless as they were. She didn’t see that Wynter would find some satisfaction in being the bait that lured the Aeons to their death, considering they’d blessed the execution of her mother.

Oh, Wynter might not be so pleased that no one had shared this with her. But if there was one person who understood the need for secrets, it was her—she had plenty of her own. She wouldn’t turn on him for holding certain things back from her.

“Does it not bother you that you’re a person who’d find so much satisfaction in seeing Cain suffer in any way?” Seth asked Ishtar. “You weren’t always so wrapped up in your own feelings that those of others rarely mattered to you. You’ve changed over time. You lost pieces of yourself somewhere along the way.”

Ishtar’s eyes glimmered with annoyance. “You like to think you are so much better than the rest of us, don’t you?”

Seth’s expression tightened. “Do not insinuate that my being different means I am not a true part of the circle. And do not think you can change the subject so easily, or that Cain and I don’t have a right to our anger.”

“You are both being dramatic and you know it.”

“Dramatic? You urged Wynter to not only run from him but to run to *me*. You didn’t care that it might have caused trouble between myself and Cain. You didn’t care how it would have made him feel. You didn’t care about anything but soothing your wounded ego. You want Wynter to reject him just as he rejected you. How much of a hypocrite does that make you, given you reject people all the time? You never care how those men feel about it. You’d never believe they have a right to be angry with you for turning them away.”

“*Mortals*, I turn *mortals* away,” she specified. “I made the mistake of getting a little too attached to one of them once-upon-a-time, as you may recall. I offered him immortality. He refused, and so I lost him. I had to watch him grow old with another. I will not put myself in that position again.”

“On the surface, it sounds like a tragic love story in which you were an innocent victim,” said Seth. “Maybe you did love him in your way. But if so, it was a selfish love. You hadn’t offered to make him your consort. You wouldn’t even consent to exclusivity. You expected him to be faithful to you, but you wouldn’t offer him that same loyalty. The main reason you wanted him was that he was so desired by everyone in the city. You treated him

poorly, like a mere shiny bauble, and you know it.”

She looked from Seth to Cain, sneering. “As if either of *you* are better in how you treat your bedpartners. Neither of you agreed to exclusivity when I requested it.”

“Because you wouldn’t agree for that to be a two-way street,” Seth reminded her. “I wasn’t interested in offering you more commitment than you would offer me. I suspect the same applied with you and Cain. But I won’t ask him for clarification on that because, again, you’re simply trying to change the subject.”

“No, this topic is very much related to Wynter.” She glared at Cain, her chin jutting out. “You may treat her well, but you do it for the wrong reasons—to appease her, to keep her sweet, to give her a false picture of yourself.”

“If you truly believed I held so little regard for her, you wouldn’t care about my involvement with her,” said Cain. “You see that she matters to me, and you don’t like it.”

Ishtar shook her head. “You may have fooled *her* into believing she is important to you, but you will not make *me* believe that.”

“I don’t care what you do or don’t believe.” Cain took yet another step closer to her. “All I want is to make one thing perfectly clear.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m to stay away from the witch, I suppose.”

A growl built in Cain’s throat. “Do not cross me on this, Ishtar. You will not hurt what’s mine; I absolutely forbid it.”

She pinned him with a furious glare. “What’s *yours*?”

“Yes, mine. Wynter belongs to me.”

“Your monster—”

“Would wipe your existence from this planet if you took her from it,” he finished, his tone clipped. “I am not fucking around here, Ishtar. She is off-limits to you in every respect.”

Her eyes hardened to stone. “Is that so?”

“Yes, it is. No more games, no more visits to her house, no more making this about you. I won’t allow it. Work through whatever shit is going on in your head, and move on. If you don’t, if you ever again try to fuck with her, I will return the favor. You know I don’t make empty threats. Focus on your own life and stay out of mine.”

Her face red, she slowly stood, the image of composure. She sauntered to the door and swung it open, but then her gaze flicked back to Cain. “Such a shame that mortals have a short lifespan, isn’t it? Oh, I’m sure it feels long to

them. But, really, their lives are over in a blink. You won't keep her for long, Cain. You won't want to. She appeals to you now, but it will not last. She will soon show signs of age that repulse you."

Seth exhaled heavily. "Ishtar—"

Ignoring him, she continued speaking to Cain. "I will not kill her because I need her alive if I am to get what I seek. But something will kill her eventually. Age, illness, an accident, an attack. Mortals are so fragile. Any number of things can erase them from this world, and it can happen at any moment. So be braced to lose her, because you will. And you will not get her back. An undead soul can return to a body only once. After that, it is game over. They never come back again."

\*

*Fuuuuck, that hurt.*

Wynter hated dying. She really did. It never hurt any less. Temporarily landing in the netherworld wasn't much fun either—there was nothing pleasant about that place. But on returning, she'd always find that any wounds she'd suffered were healed. It always took a few minutes for her strength to fully return, though.

"What are you even doing here, Bowen?" a voice hissed. Ah, dear Annette. And she had company, it would seem.

Wynter had to give it to the woman, she'd taken her by surprise. It wasn't the first time Wynter had been impaled on a sword, but it was the first time someone had done it from behind.

"I saw you sneak out of the house with a damn sword," began Bowen, "I had a feeling you were coming here."

Remaining still while her body regained strength, Wynter lifted her eyelids just enough to peek at the berserkers who stood a few feet away. If it wasn't for the subtle breeze dancing over her skin in caution, her inner monster would have lunged at the little fuckers and ripped them apart by now.

Bowen thrust a hand through his hair. "You'll be the number one suspect when she's found dead. Dammit, Annette, you're smarter than this."

Wynter would have to disagree.

Annette's hand flexed around the hilt of her bloodstained sword. "My father is *dead*."

"And, what ... you thought this would change that?" Bowen sniped.



“He deserved vengeance.”

“So you plan to kill Cain as well?”

“You know I can’t do that. But I can kill the little bitch who snitched on my dad and had him thrown *into a pit of snakes*, so I did.”

Bowen looked at her like she was insane. “And you think Cain will let this go? You think you won’t meet the same end?”

She snorted. “Like I’m dumb enough to stick around. I moved my car from the warehouse and left it outside the tunnel that leads to Devil’s Cradle. A bag of my stuff is in the trunk.”

“At least you have *some* plan in your head, even if it is pointless.”

“Pointless?”

“Annette, you killed the property of an Ancient without permission,” he said slowly, as if talking to a child. “That leads to death every single time. You will be hunted for the rest of your days. Someone will eventually find you and drag you back here.”

She gave her head a dismissive shake. “I know how to lie low.”

“Doesn’t matter. Your days are now officially numbered.” He swore. “I can’t believe you did this. You think this is what your father would have wanted? Really?”

She snapped her mouth shut and then shrugged. “What’s done is done.”

Groaning, he dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. “If Cain ever realizes I let you go, not even my being Azazel’s aide will save my ass.”

She tensed, her grip on her sword tightening. “Are you thinking of turning me in?”

He dropped his hands to his sides. “No, of course not. You’re my damn niece. But you have officially fucked us both.”

“He’s right, you know,” Wynter cut in, pushing to her feet, a little dizzy but otherwise fine.

Both berserkers gawked at her.

Annette’s gaze dipped to the massive bloodstain on Wynter’s tee. “You ... there’s no way you ... I killed you, I know I did.”

“Yeah, you did.” Wynter cricked her neck. “I tend not to stay dead.”

The assholes continued to quite simply stare at her, as if struggling to process the situation. Annette’s hands soon began to tremble, and the color started to leave Bowen’s face. Understandable, really. Even in the world of preternaturals, beings that didn’t *stay dead* were considered fucking weird. Unnatural. Generally unwelcome.

Swallowing hard, Bowen backed toward the door.

A wind thick with rage swept around the room, slamming the shed door shut.

Wynter smiled at him. “I wouldn’t bother trying to run. She won’t let you leave.”

Annette raised her sword and prepared herself to lunge. Wynter didn’t get a chance to intervene. The hilt glowed red, and a sizzling sound filled the room. Annette dropped the weapon to the floor with a loud cry, shaking her blistering hand. A low, dark, otherworldly laugh bounced off the walls.

Bowen’s fearful gaze darted around the shed. “What was ... who ... ” He squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his fists. “What the fuck is happening here?”

Annette licked her lips, plastering herself against the wall behind her. “You need to let us go.”

Wynter pursed her lips. “No, I really don’t.”

“You can’t kill us,” Bowen insisted. “If you do, you’ll die—the Ancients who own the rights to our souls will see to that.”

“Oh, I’m not planning to kill you,” said Wynter. “But I need you both gone from here. I mean, I can’t have you telling people that I came back to life. It’s not the sort of thing people are comfortable hearing.”

“We won’t tell anybody, we swear,” Bowen vowed, and his niece nodded frantically.

Wynter grimaced. “The thing is ... you’re not exactly people whose word will mean shit to me. One of you killed me, and the other had no issues with abetting my killer. Plus, well, I’m feeling a little vengeful right now. The cool thing is I don’t need to *kill* you to send you to the netherworld. I can open a path to that dimension and trap you both there for as long as I like. You’ll be wandering through it with no chance of rebirth because you won’t be truly dead.”

Bowen blanched but shook his head. “You’re lying.”

“Nope.” Wynter smiled. “An interesting thing about the netherworld ... is that its timeline isn’t parallel or even in sync with that of this dimension. A minute here can be like a *month* there, or even a year, or maybe a millisecond. Fascinating, right?”

Annette began to shake, scratching at the wall behind her.

“It ain’t a nice place. All cold air and dark mists. It’s almost impossible to see anything, but you can *hear* everything. Screams. Snarls. Growls. Roars.

There's so much fear and pain. It's all about beating souls down as part of the purification process; breaking them and then building them back up to cleanse the soul of sin, making them fit to be reborn.

"Now, as you both won't *actually* be dead, you might be spared the pain—I really can't be sure. I *can* be sure that, in any event, the experience will be worse than whatever the Ancients might have put you through. That makes me feel better about what you two fucks just did."

Bowen's breaths began coming hard and fast. "You're lying, you can't really do that, you can't—"

The floor beneath them darkened and began to ripple like black water.

Annette whimpered. "No."

"Uh, *yeah*," said Wynter. "I'd tell you to just be glad I'm not going to kill you. But, as I think you've figured out, there really are worse things than death."

They sank into the water like hands had yanked them down, along with Annette's sword. Then the floor returned to normal.

Wynter exhaled heavily. Well, that had been unpleasant. And now it was time for damage control.

She left the shed and walked through the back door of the cottage. Anabel looked up from her cauldron and muttered a quick hey. Slicing vegetables, Hattie tossed Wynter an absent smile. At the table, both Delilah and Xavier offered her a brief nod.

Seconds later, they all froze. And then everyone's eyes snapped to her bloodstained tee.

"I need a rejuvenating potion, and one of your special bleach brews," Wynter said to a gaping Anabel.

"What in the world *happened*?" demanded Delilah.

Wynter lifted her shoulders. "I died. Again. Now, about those potions ..."

Everyone started talking at once, firing questions at Wynter. She told them how Annette had attacked her from behind and stabbed right through her heart ... at which point Hattie snatched the largest knife from the block and demanded, "Where's the little bitch?"

Wynter cleared her throat. "Um, the netherworld." Silence fell. "Well, I couldn't let them go blabbing, but I also couldn't kill them—"

"Wait, them?" interrupted Xavier.

"Oh, Bowen was here, too," Wynter explained. "He wasn't in on it, but he witnessed what happened and planned to do nothing about it. He intended to

help her escape and cover for her. Look, I'm feeling super dizzy, and I have evidence to clean up, so can we maybe get—thank you, Anabel.”

Wynter drank the rejuvenating brew while her crew cursed the berserkers to hell and back. Then, gratefully taking the cleansing potion from Anabel, Wynter returned to the shed and tossed the majority of it over both the pool of blood and the footprints left by both berserkers. Once the floor was completely clear, she dripped the last of the potion onto her tee. The rip remained, but the bloodstain vanished.

“People are going to notice they're missing,” said Hattie as she and the others entered.

Wynter sighed. “I know. Sticking them in the netherworld was probably shitty, but I didn't know where else to hide them. And like I said, I couldn't kill them. This way, if Cain touches her soul or Azazel touches Bowen's, the Ancients will sense that they're alive.”

“Which means no one will suspect foul play and, as such, not come knocking on our front door,” said Xavier.

Wynter nodded. “Exactly. Annette actually packed a bag and had a car ready. She told Bowen she left it outside the tunnel. Maybe I could drive it off a cliff or something.”

“I'll take care of that,” said Delilah. “I can sneak out of the town as a cat. No one will spot me. People might assume that Bowen left with her.”

“Possibly,” said Wynter.

Glancing around, Anabel shuddered. “I can feel the rage in here. Your deity was pissed, huh? I'm surprised your monster didn't surface and go AWOL.”

“The deity stayed its hand,” Wynter explained.

Each time she felt herself dying, she wondered if it would be the one time that she didn't come back. But it was always as if something spat her back out of the netherworld. She'd appear there long enough to feel the mists brush her soul, hear broken screams, and catch a glimpse of this or that ... and then she'd be back.

Was there anything that could kill her for good? Wynter really didn't know. She suspected that the Ancients could. They'd at the very least try if they learned what she strove so hard to hide. Which was one of the reasons why being around Cain so much wasn't smart. It was like flirting with death, in a way. She couldn't help herself, though. Or maybe she just didn't want to.

He drew her back to him so effortlessly, and it wasn't simply about sex. It

was as if the darkness in him spoke to her own. Attracted it, even. It was hard to explain. But when she'd been involved with other males, she'd always felt like she didn't 'fit' with them. Felt that they were lightyears apart in terms of what sort of people they were.

Cain, though ... he was someone who truly knew about darkness. Someone who understood how vengeance could be such a driving force. Someone who made her *feel*. Really feel.

Fucked up though it might seem, she actually felt comfortable around him on some level. He was dangerous, yes, but so was she. He was capable of extreme cruelty, yes, but again so was she.

If anyone could understand her, if anyone could take her as she was, it would be him. And that was sort of comforting. So it was a real fucking shame that there might come a day when he actively tried to kill her.



# Chapter Nineteen

Striding up the path toward Wynter's cottage, Cain nodded at the lycans in the neighboring yard. Ever since the first night she'd slept in his bed, she hadn't slept anywhere else. She'd come to him every evening after dinner, and she'd eaten breakfast with him each morning before heading home. So when she hadn't turned up as usual that evening, he'd thought about sending Maxim to bring her to the Keep. But then Cain had reconsidered it, because summoning her felt ... wrong. She wasn't a mere resident, she was his. So he'd made his way to her home to find out the reason for the delay.

He knocked on the door, which swung open moments later to reveal Xavier.

"Is Wynter here?" Cain asked.

He nodded, stepped away from the door, and indicated for Cain to follow him inside. Strolling through the living area, Cain noticed a black cat curled up on a footstool near the fire. A cat with hot pink nail polish on her claws and what looked like gold mascara on her whiskers. She opened one eye, regarded him carefully, and then shut said eye.

Walking into the kitchen, Cain found Wynter sat at the table, her head resting on the surface, her eyes closed. He frowned, not liking how pale and drained she looked. His creature stilled, just as uneasy. They'd never once seen her look fragile before.

Ishtar's words from earlier rushed back to Cain ...

*Something will kill her eventually. Age, illness, an accident, an attack.*

Wynter had had a broken sleep the night before, so maybe it had simply

taken its toll.

“She drifted off while eating,” Xavier told him, switching a kettle on to boil, utterly at ease with turning his back on an Ancient—something people generally avoided doing. In fact, whenever Cain entered a house, its inhabitants usually became tense and wary and either stared at the floor or watched his every move. Anabel and Hattie? They gave him a single nod and then went back to their conversation.

Pointing at an open book, Hattie looked at Anabel. “All I’m saying is that, realistically, her cervix would be in ruins if she had a harem that large. Especially when one of them is an alien with an overgrown appendage.”

Anabel briefly glanced away from a cauldron. “You’re concerned about realism when you’re reading a book about ETs with giant penises?”

“My first husband, bless his soul, was hung like a bull. My cervix took a *thrashing* during that marriage. If he’d been part of a harem, well, I can tell you right now that my ovaries would have been scrambled eggs. Anyway, back to my question—”

“No, not back to the question. We should forget about the question. We should *always* forget about your questions.”

“I just want to know if it’s some sort of kink I’m failing to understand.” Hattie switched her gaze to Cain. “You’re male, maybe you can help. Do you know why a man would decide to give a woman a facial during sex? I mean, all us ladies like using a rejuvenating mask now and then, but during intimate moments? No, I can’t see the appeal in it.”

Grabbing what looked like homemade tea balls out of a cupboard, Xavier snickered. “It’s a euphemism.”

Hattie’s nose wrinkled. “For what?”

He stifled a smile. “It’s when a man ... offloads on a woman’s face.”

Hattie gaped in horror. “He *pees* on her?”

“Yes.”

Anabel’s head snapped up. “No, it—Xavier, don’t be an asshole.”

Feeling his lips twitch, Cain took a seat at the table. He didn’t think he’d ever met a group of people who were so different who yet fit together so well. Turning his attention to his witch, he glided his fingertips over her scalp. It was a few moments before her eyelids fluttered open.

Finally, she righted her head and blinked up at him. “Oh. You’re here.” There was no unwelcoming note in her voice, just pure confusion.

“You didn’t come to me like you usually do,” he said. “I came to see what

was keeping you. I didn't expect to find you asleep."

She rubbed at her eyes and sat up. "I didn't mean to doze off."

"You look tired. And drained. And too pale for my liking."

"Flatterer." Wynter sighed. "Anabel, you're supposed to be using the test bowl," she called out without even looking in the direction of the blonde.

Anabel froze with a large wooden spoon halfway to her mouth. "I am. I did. A little something is missing. It's easier to tell what it is if I taste it."

Xavier gave the blonde a droll look. "It's also harder to keep pieces of your sanity if you keep using yourself as a trial subject."

Anabel rolled her eyes but dripped the potion into a bowl and tossed in some crushed herbs. A waft of blue smoke hit her in the face, and she cursed like a sailor between coughs.

Xavier walked to the table and set a steaming mug of tea in front of Wynter. "Here, this will perk you up."

She smiled at him, lifting the cup. "Thanks."

He slid his gaze to Cain. "She needs to get plenty of rest tonight."

Cain was impressed. Not even in the face of an Ancient did the male fail to speak up for his Priestess. Cain liked that. She deserved such a depth of loyalty. "I'll make sure she does."

Xavier gave a nod of satisfaction and then crossed to another cupboard, where he began pulling out jars.

Wynter glanced around. "Where's Delilah?"

"Chatting with Annis," replied Xavier.

Cain felt his brows knit. "Annis?"

"She's a descendant of the Black Annis," Wynter told him.

Cain blinked. "As in the witch version of the bogeyman?"

Wynter nodded. "Yup. Delilah goes into meditative states where she communicates with Annis. The ability to do so allegedly runs in the family."

"It doesn't concern you that your coven member is in contact with a highly sinister entity that was a literal scourge upon the Earth?"

"We're not a coven."

Cain felt his lips tip up. "Trust you to concentrate on that part of the question."

"We're very much a coven, no matter what you say," Xavier cut in before taking a bite of a sandwich.

Wynter frowned. "What are you making? That brown stuff looks like shit."

"It's a Snickers sandwich," said Xavier.



She slanted her head. “A, what?”

“You’ve never had one?” Xavier lifted a hand. “Oh, it will change your life. Put chocolate spread on one slice of bread, lather peanut butter spread on the other slice, and then slap them both together.”

“Is there anything you won’t put on a sandwich?”

“Not really. Now stop stalling and drink the tea. I know those mixes taste awful, but they work.”

“I will, I will, just give me a sec.”

As a yawn cracked her jaw, Cain swept her hair away from her face. “If you’re too tired to traipse all the way to the Keep, we can stay here tonight, if you’d like.”

There was a loud bang, and then a cloud of thick green smoke burst out of Anabel’s bowl. “Motherfucker,” the blonde cursed, waving her hand.

Wynter’s eyelid twitched. “Your place works,” she said to Cain. “I just need to throw some of my stuff in a bag.”

“I’ll come with you,” he told her. “I want to see your room.”

Her brow pinched. “Why?”

“Because.”

She shrugged and then knocked back some of the tea. Tea she almost promptly spat out. “Jesus, it tastes like cat food.”

“You’ve eaten cat food?”

“I’m not good at turning down dares.”

He gave her a wolfish smile. “I’ll bear that in mind.”

She forcibly chugged down her tea, grimacing and shuddering. Finally done, she led Cain upstairs and into her bedroom. The space might not have an altar or pentagrams, but the décor clearly stated ‘a witch lives here.’

“A lot of the stuff was given to us in trade,” Wynter told him, noticing he was scanning the space. “The room was pretty basic originally.” She put the back of her hand to her mouth as another yawn escaped her.

“I don’t like that you seem so exhausted.”

She blinked, her mouth curved. “Well, then maybe you shouldn’t have fucked me in the middle of the night. Don’t worry, the tea will kick in fast. Then it’ll be like I’ve been downing energy drinks.”

He watched as she pulled underwear out of her drawer. Another time, he might have rifled through her collection just to tease her. But his mood ... it wasn’t good. What Ishtar had said kept playing on his mind. Mortals *were* so very fragile. It *would* be all too easy for him to lose Wynter. And if he didn’t

manage to convince her to give up her mortality in order to stay with him, he'd lose her eventually. Maybe to death, or maybe even to a man who could give her what he couldn't—a family, normality, the promise of safety.

His creature would likely only give her up if she outright rejected it—the monster would be too pissed at her to want to keep her. But Cain couldn't tell her it even existed, which meant there'd be no rejection. And so the creature would continue to view her as belonging to it.

If another man touched her, it would want him dead. It would insist that Cain killed him, and Cain knew he was cruel enough to do it. He'd done much worse things over the years, and he'd tortured people for far less.

There was only one way he could grant her immortality—she'd have to agree to sell him her soul in return. He'd have to convince her to do it somehow. He just wasn't sure how yet.

"I spoke with Ishtar about the little visit she paid you," he said as Wynter packed her bag. "She won't be back here."

"Okay, good."

He narrowed his eyes at the skepticism in her tone. "You think I'm wrong?"

She hesitated, as if choosing her words carefully. "I think some people are a law unto themselves."

"I won't deny she's that. Nor can I claim that she hesitates to push people too hard—it would be a downright lie. But I made it clear that you're mine."

"That might have made things worse, if she's the jealous type. Plus, I'm not so sure she'd take your possessiveness seriously. In her mind, I'm a mere mortal who can't possibly have any real relevance to you. So, in my view, is there a chance she might ignore your warning and keep being a sneaky game-playing bitch? Yes."

Of course Wynter would think that. She had no idea just how serious his declaration would be taken by the other Ancients. "I don't believe she'll dare bother you again. She has plenty of reasons to heed me. And, to put it simply, she won't view you as worth being tortured for."

Wynter did a double-take. "You'd torture her if she kept on bugging me?"

"Yes."

"That's a little melodramatic, don't you think?"

"No."

Her brow creased, and then she nodded. "Oh, I see. It's not really about me, it's the principle of the thing. If she disrespects your wishes, she has to

pay for it.”

“That woman has disrespected my wishes more times than I can count. I’ve never bothered using any form of violence to repay her for the insult, because I’ve never managed to drum up enough emotional energy to care all that much about anything she does or doesn’t do. But you ... I won’t have her play games with you.”

“Only you get to fuck with my head, huh?”

“Exactly.”

She chuckled and zipped up her duffel. “Did you always have that little weird sadistic streak, or does it come from being alive so long that it twists you in some ways?”

“Twists?” He settled his hands on her hips and drew her close. “You see immortality as a negative thing?”

“No, I think it would depend on the individual. It might suit some but not others.”

“And would it suit you?” he asked, careful to keep his tone casual.

She pursed her lips. “I don’t know. I’m not sure if I’d like who I’d eventually become. I mean, there have been several times throughout my life when something was important to me but, somewhere along the line, it lost its significance—maybe because I changed, grew bored of it, or took it for granted. If I was immortal, that would happen to me over and over and over. I wonder if there’d come a point when I wouldn’t truly value anything anymore.”

In that case, she didn’t see herself clearly. “It’s true that immortals change repeatedly, and so things that once mattered eventually no longer do. That’s why it’s important that an immortal is able to change and adapt—something I doubt you’d struggle with. If they become too rigid and unbending, they’ll eventually grow to hate their life. Although some things cease to matter, it isn’t a case that you come to value nothing at all.”

“What kind of things do you yourself value?”

“Honesty. Loyalty. Strength. Honor. I see all those things in you.” He gently flicked her hair over her shoulder, exposing her neck so he could kiss a path down her throat. “You wouldn’t lose those qualities if you were immortal. They’re too embedded in who you are. Sort of like your soul’s foundation blocks. Everything you are is built on top of them.” He scraped his teeth over her pulse, his stomach clenching at her little gasp. “Hmm, I think I should fuck you here before we leave.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.” He backed her into the bed. “Every time you walk into this room, I want you to remember what I did to you right here on this bed. I want you to remember that you’re mine.”

She snorted. “Like you ever let me forget. Now get your cock out and do me. I can feel my energy coming back, so it’s gonna be hard for me to sleep tonight unless you can fuck the energy right back out of me.”

He felt his mouth kick up. “That’s a challenge I’m happy to accept.”

\*

“You know, I had it in my head that it’d be good to come to the surface for some fresh air,” Delilah said, as they all wandered around the plaza the following evening. “But the air weirdly feels fresher in the underground city.”

“It really does,” agreed Wynter. Still, it was nice to occasionally stroll around the surface and have a little change of scenery. The main reason she insisted on it now and then, though, was that it was good for Anabel to leave the house. Her natural anxiety only worsened if she confined herself inside four walls for too long. And since the blonde currently needed to top up on supplies, Wynter had proposed a shopping trip.

As usual, Anabel was as edgy and hypervigilant as a soldier in a warzone. But rather than walk slowly and hesitantly, she moved with speed and purpose, clearly determined to get the whole thing over with so she could go home.

Wynter asked her, “What else is on the list?”

“We’ve bought everything other than the bottle of wine I need,” said Anabel, who put all kinds of stuff into her potions so that they didn’t taste disgusting.

Hattie gestured up ahead. “There’s a liquor store over here.”

“Excellent,” said Anabel, who then led the way to the shop.

Inside, the blonde grabbed a grocery basket and wandered down the first aisle, scanning the various bottles that filled the floor-to-ceiling racks. Wynter and the others trailed behind her, acting as mules to carry whatever bottles she selected.

At one point, Xavier shoved the two he was holding at Delilah and then strolled over to a very pretty assistant who’d just descended a sliding ladder.

“I do not think we have met,” he said, his accent now distinctly Italian. He held out his hand. “Alessandro.”

Flushing, the girl shook it. “Posy.”

He grinned. “An unusual name, is it not?”

Wynter shook her head and turned away.

“So,” began Delilah, eyeing her with a smirk, “I heard a few thuds and moans while I was meditating yesterday. Sounded like you and Cain had a whole lot of fun christening your bed. He strikes me as a man who’s good with his hands. Am I right? I’m right, aren’t I?”

He used every tool in his sexual arsenal exceptionally well, not merely his hands, but Wynter wasn’t one to kiss and tell. “You’ll just have to use your imagination.”

“Oh, I do. Believe me. Any woman with a pulse would. But I need some details.”

“No, you don’t. You’re simply being nosy.”

“And you’re simply being mean by giving me nothing.”

Hattie gently nudged Wynter. “Why are you being so secretive? I never took you for a prude.”

Wynter frowned. “I’m not a prude. I merely don’t like to blab all about my sex life.”

“Whyever not?” asked Hattie. “I do it all the time.”

“And we often wish you didn’t.”

Delilah chuckled. “You do sometimes overshare, Hattie.”

The old woman sniffed. “When you reach my age you don’t bother minding your words. Too much effort. I’ve never really had a problem talking openly about sex, though. Nobody should. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about. One of my husbands, Herb, blushed every time I mentioned sex. He was boring in bed. But not in *other* women’s beds—well, metaphorical beds. He usually had sex with them in his car. His excuse for cheating on me was that a man had to treat his wife like a lady and save his darker urges for prostitutes.”

Delilah snorted. “Darker urges are the most fun.”

Hattie let out a cackle. “I can’t argue there. I’d have been happy to entertain those urges of his if he’d only given me the option.”

“How did you find out he was cheating on you?”

“Same way I found out about my other husbands. I followed him in my crow form. Not one of them noticed. Not even Herb when I shit on his head.”

Anabel turned to them. "Right, I'm done."

They all headed to the checkout desk, where Xavier caught up to them. Apparently in a gracious mood, he grabbed all four bags. As they left the store, he waved a little slip of paper and gave them a smug smile. "I got myself a date."

"As Xavier or *Alessandro*?" asked Hattie, trying and failing to replicate the accent he'd used when introducing himself to the assistant.

"Alessandro, of course. Playing the role of Italian stallion is always fun." He slid the paper into his back pocket. "I have some Italian blood in my heritage."

Delilah's brows lifted. "You do?"

"Nope, not even a little," he replied.

She flapped her arms. "Then why say it?"

"Maybe your indignation makes me feel energized."

The two bickered as they all left the plaza and began a leisurely walk to the manor. Wynter's step faltered as a light breeze fluttered over her skin, alerting her to ... something. Instinct made her glance at a wooded area not too far away.

Delilah nudged her with her elbow. "You okay?"

Wynter slowed to a halt. "Yes. And no."

"What does that mean?" asked Anabel.

"It means that someone—maybe even multiple someones—is hiding in those trees over there," said Wynter, rolling her shoulders. "I say we go find out why."

\*

Cain looked up from his plate as Azazel breezed into the dining room, his brow furrowed. Anyone else might have been sheepish about interrupting someone's dinner, but not Azazel. The Ancient had zero time for manners unless it suited him.

"Something wrong?" asked Cain.

"Wrong?" Azazel rubbed at his nape. "I'm not yet sure. But I'm certainly confused."

"About?"

"One of my aides, Bowen, is missing. No one has seen him since yesterday. I sent people to find him. One thought that maybe he was keeping

Annette company, since both berserkers would be grieving her father, so he went to her house in search of him. Bowen wasn't there. Neither was she, and many of her possessions are gone."

Lowering his cutlery to his mostly empty plate, Cain poked the inside of his cheek with his tongue. "I knew she hadn't opened the blacksmith's shop today. I thought she was merely taking time off work to grieve." He lightly touched her soul. "She's definitely not dead. I feel her. But the connection is ... weak."

Azazel nodded, taking the seat opposite. "My link to Bowen is just as weak. As if something is dulling it. I don't know what could possibly do that. In any case, it seems as though she not only left, she took him with her. His belongings aren't missing, but it could be that he caught her leaving and impulsively decided to go with her, or maybe he wasn't bothered about any of the shit he's left behind. Aside from the rights to his soul that I own, of course."

"The usual reason for a resident to sneakily leave is very simply that they did something they shouldn't have."

Azazel hummed. "Maybe Annette messed up somehow, or maybe after Grouch died she was scared she'd be next. Scared that you might decide to slit the throat of anyone who ever pissed Wynter off. Didn't you say that Annette and Grouch once threatened to ruin her business?"

Cain nodded. "I made it very clear that—"

A knock came at the door.

"Yes?" Cain called out.

Maxim stepped inside. "Sire, Dantalion sent an envoy with a message. Two male witches apparently appeared outside the gates of the manor. One claimed they needed to speak with both you and Wynter."

Cain felt the muscles in his arms and shoulders bunch. "Is that a fact? Who?"

"I'm not sure, he allegedly wouldn't say more than that," Maxim replied. "Dantalion granted them entry and placed them in the blue parlor. He thought you might like to be the one to question them."

The Ancient was right to presume so.

"It has to be people from Aeon, right?" asked Azazel.

"That would be my guess," said Cain. "Maxim, I need you to bring Wynter to the Keep. I'm not sure where exactly she is, but I have to consider that the male witches didn't come here alone; that they could be a distraction. If so,

others will no doubt look for her. They'll jump at the chance to take her."

Maxim gave a curt nod. "I will find her."

"Also send some people to search the town for strangers. If any are found, detain them. They'll be permitted to leave providing they attack no one."

"Understood, Sire."

Satisfied, Cain made his way upstairs.

Following him, Azazel asked, "Did Wynter ever mention a male witch to you?"

"No." If either of the visitors turned out to be an ex-boyfriend of hers, they wouldn't be getting anywhere near her. Especially when it was highly likely that both males were here on behalf of the Aeons or, at the very least, her old coven.

Cain and Azazel used the chamber's mirror to quickly transport themselves to the manor. They then made their way to what had been branded the blue parlor due to the teal painted walls.

Dantalion sat at the piano, his fingers gliding deftly over the keys, playing "The Music of the Night" from *Phantom of the Opera*. He didn't stop when Cain entered. He barely even looked up, apparently already bored of the situation. His aide stood behind him, silent and still.

Cain settled his attention on the two men sitting stiffly on the sofa. They couldn't have been more opposite in terms of appearance. One was broad, dark, and heavily muscled. The other was lean and gangly with pale blond hair. "Just who might you both be?"

The burlier of the two met his gaze steadily, much like Wynter herself often did. "My name is Rafe," he replied. "This here is Griff. As you may have guessed, we were sent here by the Aeons." The man didn't seem at all happy about it.

Azazel walked behind the sofa. "For what purpose?"

Rafe didn't glance over his shoulder at the Ancient. "They want me to try to 'reason with Wynter' and appeal for her to come home."

Cain went very still. "Neither of you will be speaking with Wynter, and she will not be leaving with you either. She stays here."

"I figured you'd say that," said Rafe, seeming relieved. "I warned them you probably would, but they insisted that I ask. They thought maybe she'd agree to see me."

"Why you?"

"Aside from her mother and grandmother, I'm the only person in the coven



who gave a damn about her. She was like a niece to me. So they sent me as a friendly face.”

“Without an entourage?”

“We didn’t request to be accompanied by one,” said Rafe. “We were teleported to a spot just beyond the border. I don’t believe others were teleported here after us, but I can’t be sure. The Aeons would veto telling me such a thing as they wouldn’t trust that I’d keep a promise not to warn Wynter.”

“Well, now that we’ve established that you won’t be granted an audience with *her*, tell me why you also asked to speak with me.”

“Lailah wishes to have a one-to-one talk with you using Griff—he is a conduit.”

The piano music abruptly cut off.

Cain barely refrained from lifting his brows in surprise at Rafe’s declaration. Conduits were rare these days. They could provide a psychic space that allowed people in various locations to communicate. “Is that so?”

Griff swallowed nervously. “She’s already there waiting.”

Cain had guessed as much, considering she’d had to have touched Griff in order to project her consciousness to the psychic space.

“She said to tell you that you’ll want to hear what she has to say,” Griff added.

“Hmm.” Cain gave both Azazel and Dantalion a brief look that warned them to pull him out of the conversation if need be, because what better way to take Cain off-guard than to drag his consciousness into a psychic space where he’d be oblivious to what went on outside of it?

Griff held out his hand, his fingers splayed. Cain pressed his fingertips to those of Griff, and then his surroundings altered in a flash.



# Chapter Twenty

Taking cover behind a cluster of trees, Wynter skimmed her gaze along the men stood around the clearing. She counted eleven, in total. There were all tall, armed, and powerfully built.

“Do you recognize any of them?” whispered Delilah.

“Yup,” Wynter replied, her voice just as low. “They’re keepers from Aeon.” Even if she hadn’t known each face, she’d have identified their origins by the distinctive insignia on their swords—most of which also sported runes, courtesy of her magick. Her monster easily recognized the men too and, not a fan of how they’d treated Wynter over the years, it was not at all happy about their presence.

Anabel sidled closer, hugging herself and biting her lip. “Keepers are like enforcers, right?”

“They’re mostly executioners,” said Wynter. “But they’ll also act as enforcers, messengers, or bodyguards—whatever the Aeons want them to be.”

“So minions, basically,” Anabel surmised.

“Assholes, too. Especially the one with the crew cut and the scraggly beard. He used to harass the hell out of my mom. He acted like a real prick toward her when she refused to date him.” Fort had also flashed Wynter several seriously creepy smiles over recent years, commenting on how she looked so much like Davina.

Xavier licked the front of his teeth. “It’s a pretty small force, so I doubt they’re here for war.”

Wynter's thoughts exactly. "The Aeons won't have sent them here to start a battle. It would be senseless. Such a low number would never survive it."

"Oh, what a spectacular behind," Hattie whispered, ogling a keeper who'd bent over to wipe his boot.

Delilah gently bumped the old woman's shoulder with her own. "Not sure if you're paying attention to the conversation we're having here, but these are very bad men."

"Oh, I know," said Hattie with a small wave of her hand. "I do love a bad boy, though. Admit it, we all do."

Delilah frowned. "Not goddamn executioners, Hattie."

Xavier raised his hand for silence. "And we have yet another keeper, apparently."

It would seem so, because a burly male who Wynter also recognized stalked into the clearing. She felt the corners of her eyes tighten. "Cletus," she bit out.

Xavier's brows met. "I'm getting the feeling I should loathe Cletus. Why should I loathe him?"

"He likes to take from women what they don't want to give," she fudged.

Fort turned to fully face Cletus. "Well?"

"No sign of Wynter anywhere," replied Cletus. "I told you it'd be a waste of time. The Ancients will be keeping her in their underground city."

Fort rubbed at his bearded jaw. "Did you find a way to get down there?"

Cletus shook his head. "I'm not even sure where the entrance is."

Fort's brother and fellow asshole, Milos, propped his fists on his hips. "We could try and pay off a local to lure her out here to us."

Fort dismissed that idea with a puff of sound. "They won't do us any favors. Not for any amount of money. It's best that we lay low and remain undetected."

"We don't have to say we're from Aeon," said Milos. "We could claim to be bounty hunters or something."

"A lot of people here are probably on the run, so I doubt hunters would be welcome in a place like this." Fort scratched at his head. "Lailah did warn us it wouldn't be easy to find Wynter, so I don't think we need to worry that she'll lose her mind if we return without her. Not as long as we're successful at mapping out the town as best we can. She said she wants the location of every nook, every cranny, every blind spot."

Delilah softly cursed. "The Aeons are preparing to invade the town, huh?"

“Looks like it,” said Wynter, listening as Fort barked orders to each of the keepers. “And these bastards are gonna simplify it for them. I can’t say I’m down with that.”

Xavier looked at her, his eyes bright. “Can we kill them?”

“It’s that or let them run back home with information that we don’t want the Aeons to possess so, yeah, we can kill them,” said Wynter.

He flashed her a slow grin and conjured his sword. “Just what I wanted to hear.”

Looking similarly pleased, Hattie and Delilah shifted into their animal forms. The crow settled on top of the monstrous cat, who flexed its iron claws. Both women could also fight with magick, but they preferred using their animal forms since it meant that their senses, reflexes, strength, and speed were enhanced.

Wynter lifted a brow at Anabel. “Are you joining the fight or waiting here?”

A sword materialized in the blonde’s hand, which answered the question.

Wynter called to her own blade and then placed her mouth near Anabel’s ear. “Mary, Mary, please come out,” she quietly sang.

The blonde’s demeanor changed in an instant, switching from nervous to eager as her eyes took on that familiar not-so-sane light.

“No drinking blood,” Wynter told her.

Anabel/Mary nodded, a feral smile splitting her lips. “Understood.”

Conscious that she couldn’t allow her monster free rein right now, Wynter silently assured it that the keepers would die, relieved when it didn’t push for supremacy.

“Fort’s mine,” Wynter told her crew. “Okay ... now.” Pumped full of anticipation, she rushed out of the woods with the others at her heels.

Taken off-guard, it took the keepers a moment to react. But, highly trained as they were, they sprung to attention fast and raised their weapons.

She made a swift beeline for Fort, but freaking Cletus came at her from another angle, forcing her to turn to him. She blocked the sword that swung her way, and their blades clanged.

Sneering, he danced backwards. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Clearly not hard enough,” she said. “I found you first.”

They parried and thrust over and over. She didn’t need to worry about the Ancients or townspeople watching her fight, so she didn’t check her speed; didn’t hold back magickly or otherwise. He staggered backwards under the

pressure, unprepared for the rigor with which she flew at him. He fell on his butt, and she wasted no time in skewering him with her sword.

Milos came into view and sent balls of blue light sailing at her—one clipped her shoulder, the other smashed into her chest. Pretty they might be, but they also hit like a goddamn hammer, bruising her for sure.

She retaliated with her own magick, hurling dark smoky spiked orbs right at his fucking head—orbs he annoyingly managed to evade. Swords raised, they went at each other. They ducked and twisted and deflected, cursing and snarling.

Around her, her crew battled hard. Dead keepers were up and running, fighting the live keepers. Roars, cries, grunts, squawks, the clashing of steel, and the insanity-laced giggles of Anabel/Mary filled the air.

Wynter hissed as Milos's blade stabbed her smarting shoulder. His brows snapped together when the runes had no effect on her. Yeah, well, there was something he didn't know, and she saw no need to educate him about it.

Although a wet warmth pooled on her skin and soaked her tee, she didn't look at the wound. She kept swiping out with her sword, aiming for every weak spot, ensuring her every strike was precise.

He twisted his hips and kicked out at her stomach. Missed. Growled. Charged.

She ducked and came up on his side, thrusting her sword deep. He stumbled, his lips parting in both shock and pain, and then dropped to his knees. She swung her sword, beheading him ... and smirked at Fort as she did so.

Screaming in fury at the death of his brother, Fort yanked his blade out of a reanimated keeper. He didn't look good. At all. Sweat beaded his forehead, and his tee sported several scarlet stains.

He rushed Wynter with another loud cry of anger, his nostrils flaring when she parried the blow. "You *bitch*," he said. "I'm going to enjoy this. I didn't get the privilege of tossing your thou-art-holier-than-thou mother over the falls. I'll pay that bitch back by impaling her daughter on my blade, and I'll avenge my brother in the doing of it."

Anger flooded her at the mention of her mother, but Wynter kept it in check. "You were honestly surprised she rejected you? Come on, Fort, you make ogres look good."

He lunged with a roar. His blows were precise and powerful. The tall bastard had a long reach, and he used it well. Sadly.

Knowing to go for his exposed legs, Wynter swung her hips and slammed the flat of her foot on his thigh, loving his subsequent grunt. The piece of shit waved his arm, sending a gust of magick at her. The weight of it sent her skidding back several feet, but she managed not to fall. Liking the surprise flickering in his eyes, she grinned and then lashed out with her magick.

Growling as deep welts sizzled to life on his face and neck, he retaliated with a swipe of his sword. She blocked it, and then they were at it again.

Around them, chaos raged on. But she could sense that the numbers of keepers had dropped. And beneath the sound of Anabel/ Mary singing “Mighty Morphin Power Rangers”—whatever the fuck that was about—the distinctive noises of battle had dimmed.

Wind came at her again, belting her in the face and stealing her breath. She stayed on her feet, but it meant throwing out her arms to—

Pain blazed along her chest as the sword sliced through cloth and skin. “Motherfucker.” His taunting laugh only fueled her anger. She struck at him with magick, and he cursed as whips of dark power zapped their way along the ground and crashed into him.

The bastard rallied fast and rushed her again, thrusting and parrying, his breathing rapid and shallow. He was running out of steam, and they both knew it. Maybe that was why he began to strike out wildly, desperately, like death itself was hot on his heels.

Well, it was.

When the opening she was waiting for finally came, she kicked out at his knee with a snarl. His leg buckled slightly, and she took advantage. Lunging forward, she thrust the sword deep into his gut, twisted it sharply, and then withdrew it. After a moment, he slumped to his front, dead. *Boom.*

Wynter glanced at her crew. Delilah and Hattie were back in their human forms, and both had suffered only minor wounds. Xavier looked like he’d been attacked by an alley cat, so he’d likely been hit with skinwalker magick or something.

Anabel/Mary was lying among the corpses that were sprawled on the grass with their eyes open wide and their clothes soaked with blood. She wasn’t dead herself. She wasn’t even severely injured. But she’d linked her fingers through that of a dead keeper and was chatting to him like they were a smitten, stargazing couple. But she snapped to alertness and sprung to her feet at the sound of people racing through the woods.

Tensing, Wynter spun to face the new threat. Not more keepers, she

quickly realized. Nope, these were residents of the town—including Maxim. And as they took in the scene before them, their lips parted in surprise.

Wynter cleared her throat. “Don’t mind us, we were just leaving.”

\*

There was nothing pleasant nor unpleasant about the psychic space Cain found himself in. It was merely a rectangular room that was all white paint and gleaming white floor tiles. There were only two chairs. Lailah sat in one, her posture regal, her smile placid.

His creature eyed her with distaste. Even before she’d played a part in imprisoning Cain, it had never liked her. It saw only weakness when it looked at her. A hypocrite. A backstabber. A person who would do anything—fuck over anyone—to obtain what she wanted and get where she wanted to be.

In that sense, she and Abel deserved each other. Like often called to like, didn’t it?

“I wasn’t so sure you would agree to speak with me,” she said, her voice soft. “We were once friends but, well, that was a long time ago.”

Cain strode toward the empty chair that was positioned opposite her own. “A friend wouldn’t have done any of the things you did, so I’d say that was the wrong choice of word.”

Her smile dimmed. “You left us no choice when it came to the banishment.”

Annoyance spiked through him. “Do not pin the blame for your actions on me. Own them. Or don’t. But do not use me as your scapegoat.”

Her eyes briefly slid to the side, and she rested her clasped hands on her lap. “I did not ask to speak with you so we could rehash the past. The present is my concern, and it should also be yours. This woman you have given sanctuary to ... She is not what you think. Her old Priestess, Esther, told you that the land of Aeon is perishing, yes?”

Sitting, he gave a slow nod. “She did.”

“Nothing has been able to fight the blight. It continues to spread like a cancer. More, our people are continuing to fall ill. If it wasn’t for our healers, I suspect that many would be dead.”

Cain said nothing. He simply stared at her, keeping his face blank.

“My people managed to find someone who, like Wynter Dellavale, was brought back from the afterlife using forbidden magick. He examined the

decay. He verified that, as we'd come to suspect, the land has been cursed."

Cain forced himself not to tense.

"We had hoped that the male witch would unravel the hex for us. He was not able to, however." She paused. "He said that his power was no match for it. That each attempt to snap the threads of the curse achieved only in stretching them—they bounced back into place like elastic every time."

Impressive. Unheard of—at least for Cain—but impressive.

"I asked how that could possibly be. He said that it wasn't simply dark magick at work. But he had no clue exactly what else *is* at work. He was certain of one thing, though. Her life-force is not tied to the curse. Her death would therefore not be enough to undo it."

Cain was so taken off-guard that he must have betrayed his surprise in some way, because Lailah nodded and said, "Yes, I think we now see what has become clear to me and the other Aeons—Whoever you are harboring is not merely a witch."

"You're only just figuring this out?" Cain had sensed that early on. He just had no actual clue what exactly Wynter was. "That was always your problem, Lailah. You never viewed mortals as a threat, so you paid no real attention to them."

Her mouth tightened for a mere moment. "When I exiled her, she warned me that there would be consequences. It was such a casual warning. Very matter-of-fact."

"And I'm sure you dismissed it."

"Having never demonstrated any great displays of power, she'd never given me any reason to assume I should heed her. It wasn't until it became clear that she is not a simple witch that I recalled how something else happened that day. There was a disturbance in the air that felt ... strange. Wrong. Alien. I cannot explain or adequately describe it."

"And you dismissed that as well," he guessed.

"I did," she admitted through gritted teeth. "Perhaps I was right to do so. Perhaps it was nothing. But perhaps it wasn't. What I am certain of is this: She broke my hold on her mind and body in order to fight one of our keepers and free herself. That is no easy thing. I do not know what exactly Wynter is, but if she was able to hex a place such as Aeon so thoroughly without tying her own life-force to that curse, we have to ask ourselves ... What else can she do?"

That was indeed an excellent question. At this point, Cain had a great



many questions for his oh-so secretive witch. “It seems that she might be more interesting to have around than I initially thought.”

“Don’t be a fool, Cain. If she can be a threat to Aeon, she can be a threat to Devil’s Cradle. Perhaps even to you.”

“You don’t really believe the latter, but you’re hoping I will. Why? What is it that you want?”

Her face hardened. “I would have thought that was obvious. I want you to surrender her to us. Return your rights to her soul, withdraw your protection. Send her back to Aeon with the conduit and her old coven member.”

“Essentially, you wish me to do you a favor? No, Lailah, I’m not feeling motivated to do that.”

“It would be in your best interests as well as ours. Wynter is a power we don’t understand.”

“You and the other Aeons are all about destroying what you don’t understand,” he said, his voice hardening. “If something doesn’t fit neatly in a box, if you’re not so sure you can effortlessly kill it, you reach the conclusion that it must therefore be eradicated.”

She swallowed. “As I said before, I didn’t request to speak with you so that we could revisit the past—”

“But there are so many parallels, aren’t there? Curses, mysteries, secrets, deaths.”

The fingers on her lap flexed. “Aeon was once your home. Would you truly see it rot away?”

He gave a casual, unbothered shrug. “I don’t really see how it’s my business.”

“How can you not care that you have given sanctuary to someone who is clearly a dark power?”

“I’ve been described as a dark power plenty of times. Maybe you’ve forgotten, Lailah, but Devil’s Cradle goes by another name—the Home of Monsters. What better place for her to live?”

“She knows there is bad history between the Aeons and the Ancients. She is using you. Relying on you to keep her safe. Depending on you to fight at her side if a battle ever began.”

“Considering war again, are you?” Cain truly did hope so.

Lailah’s eyelids dropped slightly. “She must be made to undo what she has done, or Aeon will be no more.”

“You can relocate. It’s not so hard. We all did it. It wasn’t our choice, just

as it won't be yours. And we weren't too pleased about it, just as you won't be. But sometimes things simply don't play out as we'd like them to."

"Is that what this is about for you? Revenge?"

"Of course."

She drew in a breath through her nose, and then her face softened into an expression she'd often worn in front of him many years ago. "Cain, please, think of—"

"Switched tactics quickly, didn't you? Don't bother playing that card, Lailah. I stopped giving a shit about you long ago."

She winced. "I didn't choose Abel over you, if that's what you think. It wasn't like that. I chose him because I couldn't be with you. Your creature would never have accepted me. It didn't like or trust me."

"And you later proved that it was right not to. Is this why I'm talking to only you rather than all four ruling Aeons? You all thought that I'd be more likely to agree to cooperate if there was a 'friendly face?'" Much like they'd thought sending a 'friendly face' to Wynter might help their cause. "Let me be very clear. This conversation was a waste of your time. I won't hand Wynter over to you."

Lailah's mouth went flat. "Perhaps we can come to an arrangement."

"No."

"Don't be so quick to disagree. You have not heard my offer yet." She seemed utterly convinced he'd fall all over himself to accept it. "Give us Wynter, and we will give you Eve in exchange."

"No."

Lailah's face went slack, and her eyes widened. "No?" she spluttered. "But she is your mother. You spent years demanding to see her."

"According to Adam, she didn't want to see me." Cain knew that wasn't true, though.

Lailah looked as if she might admit as much, but then she coughed. "That has changed in recent years. Eve misses both you and Seth. I know your brother would very much like to have her at his side. Let's not pretend you don't wish to make the trade. I know you do. You simply don't want to back down so easily."

"There will be no trade." He planned to retrieve his mother himself once he was free. "There is only one thing—one—that I want from you and the other Aeons. You already know what that is."

She averted her gaze. "We cannot grant you your freedom."

He hadn't thought for a moment that they would. Because they *knew* that he and the other Ancients would wreak vengeance. "Then we have nothing further to discuss."

"We have unless you want war. You would be foolish to take us on. You were powerful once, but being contained has weakened you all over time. None of you would stand a chance against any Aeon, let alone a group of them and whatever army they brought. Don't put us in this position, Cain. Don't force our hand. We have left you in peace."

He barely held back a snarl. "You left us in a cage. You hoped it would send us stir crazy and that we'd destroy each other. You left us to rot. Tell me why the fuck I shouldn't do the same to your precious land."

She inched up her chin. "Then you leave us no choice."

"There you go again pinning the blame for your actions on me. If you instigate a war, it will be your choice. It will also be your mistake. But then, you're good at making those, aren't you?" Without waiting for a response, he returned his consciousness to his body.

Cain blinked twice, bringing the room into focus. No one had left, and Maxim was now in the room. Cain flicked the males from Aeon a look and then told his aide, "Show them out."

Rafe slowly stood. "Will you truly protect Wynter? I know you're powerful. But will you eventually get tired of people coming for her? Will you one day give her up just to get the Aeons off your back? They'll kill her if you do. Maybe not right away, but eventually. And they'll make it hurt."

"Wynter isn't going anywhere," Cain told him. "And those bastards won't ever get their hands on her."

Rafe nodded, satisfied. "Tell her I said to take care of herself, and that I'm sorry I wasn't able to protect her from Esther's plans." He allowed Maxim to lead both him and Griff out of the room.

Dantalion dismissed his own aide and then turned back to Cain. "What did Lailah say?"

"Exactly what I thought she'd say," replied Cain. "She asked that I surrender Wynter to the custody of the Aeons."

Azazel's brows snapped together. "Why would she believe you would do that?"

"Apparently, given the destruction that Wynter has caused, I should consider her a danger to all of us and to our land."

Dantalion rolled his eyes. "Lailah is foolish if she thought that you'd be so

easily manipulated. What else did she say?”

*Her life-force is not tied to the curse. Her death would therefore not be enough to undo it.*

Cain wouldn't mention that yet. He needed to speak to Wynter about it first. “She offered to give me Eve if we handed over Wynter in return.”

Azazel frowned. “She actually thought you'd trade her for Eve? Seriously?”

“That makes no sense,” said Dantalion. “Nor does her attempt to cajole you into handing over the witch. Why would we give up the only thing that will lure them here?”

“The Aeons apparently have it in their heads that we've weakened in power over the centuries—I chose not to correct her on that,” said Cain. “They also believe we wouldn't want them to come here; that we'd feel we wouldn't stand a chance against them. In Lailah's eyes, I am simply being stubborn and spiteful. She has no idea that in threatening war she gave us exactly what we want.”

Dantalion stilled. “So they will come?”

“They will have to,” said Cain. “Their keepers won't stand a chance against us alone; they need the aid of Aeons if they are to kill us to get to Wynter.”

A look of grim satisfaction came over Azazel's face. “Who exactly do you think will come? They won't all lead the army here.”

“At least one of the ruling Aeons will have to lead them, but I doubt it will be Adam,” said Dantalion. “He only gets his hands dirty if he absolutely has to. Abel is much the same, but he will at the very least send Lailah to do the deed for him. If so, Saul will be here even if only to protect her. She is most likely the only person he cares for.”

Cain nodded. “They always did like fighting beside one another.” The siblings were close, much like Abel and Seth had once been—and that was another reason Cain doubted that Abel would come. The Aeon wouldn't want to have a direct hand in Seth's death, because it was Cain who Abel held responsible for Seth's ‘betrayal.’

Dantalion rubbed at his chin. “We need to call a meeting with the other Ancients and inform them what happened here. I'm happy to hold it at my Keep.”

Cain and Azazel both nodded their assent.

When Maxim returned to the room moments later to inform Cain that the

witches were being escorted out of town, Cain asked him, “Is Wynter at the Keep?”

Maxim grimaced. “Probably not, though she assured me that she would head there soon.”

Cain stiffened. “Why are you pulling that face?”

The aide cleared his throat. “I found her, like you asked. She and her coven were in the woods near the lake.” Maxim tugged at his collar. “They, um ... they were standing over the dead bodies of several keepers from Aeon. Apparently they stumbled upon them.”

Anger spiked through Cain, tightening his muscles and clenching his jaw.

Dantalion growled. “They dared send keepers here?”

“Was she hurt?” asked Cain.

“She had no lethal wounds,” replied Maxim, “though, if the stains on her tee were anything to go by, her left shoulder and chest suffered bad injuries. She swore they would all be healed by Anabel’s potions. Wynter also said she would meet you at the Keep once she’d showered and changed.”

Azazel rubbed at his jaw. “Do you think Rafe and Griff knew that others had been sent?”

Cain shook his head, silently cursing the Aeons to hell and back.

“You’re certain all the keepers are dead?” asked Azazel. “It would have been nice to have one or two to play with.”

“Oh, they are definitely dead,” Maxim told him.

Cain drew in a breath through his nose. “It’s almost as if danger finds that coven wherever they go.”

“Or as if Wynter’s a magnet for it.” Dantalion shrugged at Cain. “After all, she attracts you. You’re probably the biggest danger there is.”

That wasn’t something that could be denied.

# Chapter Twenty-One



Entering his chamber a short while later, Cain found Wynter curled up on a chair reading a tattered paperback—casual, relaxed, at ease ... like she hadn't earlier engaged in a battle.

Her head snapped up as she sensed him, no lines of stress on her face, no lingering anger at having fought for her life. "You're looking very fierce right now," she said, her brows lowering.

He was feeling fierce. Closing the distance between them, he said, "Stand."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but she slowly set her book down on the bulky armrest and then just as slowly pushed out of her chair.

"I hear you ran into some keepers in the woods," said Cain, unable to keep the thread of ire out of his voice. He peeled off her tee and examined both her left shoulder and her chest. Whatever wounds she'd earlier sported were gone. The skin was completely unmarred.

"My injuries weren't too bad. Nothing Anabel's brews couldn't fix."

Cain's back teeth locked at the easy way she'd dismissed the wounds. "Yes, *this time*. Next time you might not be so lucky."

She frowned. "It wasn't luck. It was skill. And I'm not sure why you're mad at me, but shake it off. It's not like I *want* keepers on my ass. Or like I took on a whole squadron of them by myself. I had backup, and there weren't many to take down."

Irritation buzzed through Cain. He slid his hand up her chest to collar her throat while bunching his free hand in the hair at the back of her head. "Don't make light of this. Don't act as if the incident was a minor issue. An attack on

you will *always* be far from minor to me, no matter how much backup you have.” He paused, his nostrils flaring. “That’s twice now I’ve been notified that you were targeted while I was none the wiser.”

Her frown smoothing out, she played her fingers through his hair. “The protective routine shouldn’t make me all tingly, should it?”

A ribbon of amusement unfurled inside him. “You know, most people get nervous when I’m pissed off.”

“Most people don’t have my perverse libido.”

He let out a long breath and shook his head, releasing her. “The keepers weren’t the only ‘visitors’ we had from Aeon today. Two males also came, though the parties seem to have traveled here separately. One was sent to convince you to come home—a male witch by the name of Rafe.”

Her face brightened. “*Rafe* is here?”

A black jealousy threatened to rear up inside Cain, and his creature coiled as every muscle tightened. “This man means something to you?”

“Not in *that way*,” she said with a shudder. “He’s like family. I owe how well-trained I am to him. In which case, I also owe him my life ten times over. You didn’t kill him, did you?”

“No, purely because I sensed that he didn’t want you to return to Aeon. He asked me to tell you to take care of yourself, and to pass on an apology for his failure to alter Esther’s plans.”

“What? That’s dumb, I don’t hold him responsible.”

“He seems to feel that he could have done more for you. I sent him and his conduit friend home. But not before I had a talk with Lailah via the conduit.”

Wynter’s eyes sharpened. “Interesting. What did you and Lailah talk about?”

“Several things. Mostly you. The Aeons have worked out that a curse is at the source of the environmental degradation.”

“I figured they would eventually.”

Cain studied her face carefully as he expanded, “Someone whose magick is dark like yours told them that your death wouldn’t be enough to undo it; that more than dark magick weaved it.”

Wynter didn’t betray her emotions with even a *flicker* of a micro-expression. It was as impressive as it was frustrating.

“You said that only your destruction would end it.”

“Uh, no, *Azazel* said that. Or presumed it, I should say. I simply never corrected him. And before you ride my ass about lying by omission, bear in

mind that it will only make you a hypocrite—you do the omission thing, like, *all* the time.”

Cain snapped his mouth shut. “If Azazel had *asked* if your life-force was tied to the hex, would you have answered him truthfully?”

“No, because he would have asked how it was otherwise possible for a mere witch to afflict protected land with such a curse.”

“I’d already sensed that you aren’t a mere witch.” If she was surprised that he’d already reached that conclusion, she didn’t show it. “What exactly are you?”

“What exactly are you?”

“I asked first.”

“I’ll answer if you will.”

He sighed, having already expected that would be her response. Nothing could be easy with this woman. “I don’t like that I had to find out the truth about this from *Lailah*. I don’t like that there’s so much about you I don’t know.”

Her expression went blank. “Does this mean you’re done? That you want to end it?”

Cain frowned. “Fuck, no.” He caught her face with his hands. “It will take time for you to trust me with all you hold inside—I know that. The same applies to me. But we’ll get there eventually. Until then, well, I suspect neither of us are going to like the gaps in our knowledge of the other. I can complain about it even as I accept it.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “All right. Did Lailah say anything else?”

Sliding his hands from Wynter’s face to her neck, he replied, “She’s finally worked out that you’re not an everyday witch. She seems to feel that I should find you a ‘concern.’ A danger to Devil’s Cradle. A ‘dark power’ that I can’t afford to trust.”

“And do you see me that way?”

He hiked up a brow. “Do you truly think I do?”

“No, but ... I don’t know, you’re just looking at me differently right now. I’ve had people turn on me before because I don’t fit the mold.”

*Same here, baby.* “The Aeons don’t like that they don’t fully understand you. Nor do they like that they can’t explain why you can do the things you do. For them, that’s reason enough to want you dead. They have no real tolerance for things that are ‘different.’” He settled his hands on her shoulders and gave them a little squeeze. “I’m not them, Wynter.”



She gave a slow nod, a long breath slipping out of her.

“You warned Lailah that there would be consequences when she exiled you?”

“Yes.”

“She said there was a foreign disturbance in the air that day.”

“So she merely wanted to chat with you?”

Cain lowered his face to hers. “She wanted me to hand you over. I refused. So she then offered me something in exchange for you. I essentially told her to go fuck herself. Which means there’ll be war.”

“And that pleases you, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” He cocked his head. “Just how many things are you hiding from me?”

She licked her lower lip. “Probably not as many as you’re hiding from me.”

Probably not.

“When the Aeons come, I want to be part of the battle.”

Cain almost barked a humorless laugh. “That isn’t going to happen.”

Her spine straightened. “Excuse me?”

“Wynter, I know you’re powerful. I know you can fight with both sword and magick. But you wouldn’t stand a chance against an Aeon.”

“I’m not saying I’d go challenge one. But they won’t come alone. They’ll bring a massive force. I can be part of handling said force.”

“You need to stay down here in the city, where you’ll be safe.”

She did a slow blink. “Please tell me you’re joking. As you now know, my death won’t undo the curse—”

“You say that like it therefore wouldn’t matter if you ceased to exist. It would matter to me, Wynter. It would matter a fuck of a lot.”

“I get it. I wouldn’t want you to die either. But ask you to sit this fight out? No, I wouldn’t do that. Don’t ask it of me. I won’t stay home twiddling my fingers while others battle a bunch of assholes that I brought to their town.”

“You realize that every single one of their army will be ordered to take you? *You* will be their focus, Wynter. They’ll kill whoever they need to kill just to get to you. And we both know you’d die before you let them take you. Why risk yourself that way?”

Her brow creased. “Why do you sound offended that I would?”

His lips flattening, he pulled her toward him using his grip on her shoulders, closing the small gap between them. “I want you to *want* to live,

Wynter. I want you to value enough what we have that you'd at least want to live so we can see where this goes."

"So by being part of the battle, *you* don't value this? Is that what you're saying?"

He ground his teeth. "No."

"It's no different for me, so don't twist what I'm saying. You're uber powerful, sure. But you'll be up against beings that can actually kill you. Your life will be at risk. I don't hear you offering to stay home." She perched her hands on her hips. "Why, in your mind, should you get to face them but I don't? What did they do to you that makes your grudge so much more important than mine?"

He stared at her, touching his incisor with the tip of his tongue. "I will trust you with the answer to that ... if you first tell me one thing honestly."

She folded her arms. "Go on."

He had a thousand questions he would love to fire at her, but she'd refuse to answer any that she wouldn't consider worth the trade of truths. In her position, he'd do same. So he settled on asking, "Who is your father? *What* is he?"

She blinked. "I don't actually know who he is. I never met him, and my mother didn't say much about him."

"Why not?"

"She was *not* a fan of his. All she ever said was that he was a witch and that I was better off not knowing him. She promised to tell me more when I was 'old enough to hear it,' but she didn't get that chance. I asked my grandmother and other members of the coven about him. Apparently, he was a one-night stand. When she told him she was pregnant, he wanted nothing to do with us. Davina didn't want to tell me that when I was so young, she worried it would hurt me."

That didn't explain *anything* for Cain. He didn't see how someone who wasn't a born hybrid could be so different from an average witch.

"Now it's your turn," she said. "Yes, I know my response didn't whatsoever satisfy you, but I did as you asked and answered your question. Now you need to live up to your end of the bargain."

Heaving a sigh, Cain sank into the armchair and patted his thighs. "Sit."

She straddled him and rested her hands on his shoulders.

He smoothed one hand up her back. "What do you know about the war that went on between the Ancients and the Aeons?"

She pursed her lips. “Not much. The Aeons were pretty vague about it. They just said a war broke out, your side lost, and they ‘mercifully’ let seven of you leave and make a home elsewhere.”

The word ‘mercifully’ made his creature growl. “They lied. They didn’t allow the survivors to live out of mercy, Wynter. It was supposed to be a punishment. A cruel one at that. We didn’t settle here to make a new home. They put us here. We cannot leave the boundaries. It’s essentially a cage.”

Her jaw went slack. “Wow. I just thought you all preferred to stick to your little corner of the world.”

“We probably would—the Earth as a whole doesn’t hold much interest for us. We may be stuck in Devil’s Cradle, but we have ways of peeking at the outside world and we’re not impressed by what we’ve seen of it. Plus, we’re not roamers, and we prefer to live in groups. But we still don’t wish to be trapped.” He ghosted his fingertips over her nape. “The Aeons believed we’d lose our minds and kill each other. They underestimated us. They’ve continued to do that for a long time.” And more fool them.

“Your only way to get revenge is to make them step on your land ... except there was never a reason for them to come here,” she mused.

Cain nodded. “Until now.”

Wynter stared at him, biting her lip. Damn, this explained so much—how easily he’d promised to keep her safe, how unbothered he’d been by the prospect of the Aeons coming for her, how eager he and the other Ancients were for war.

He toyed with her hair. “Four Aeons were responsible for caging us. Only their deaths will open that cage.”

“What four?”

“The ruling Aeons. Adam, Abel, Lailah, and Lailah’s brother Saul.”

“So they’re more powerful than you and the other Ancients combined?” She wouldn’t have thought so.

“No. We can’t dismantle the cage ourselves, because they used our blood to enforce the power they used to construct the prison—essentially making us our own captors.”

“Blood magick works a little like that. If you fuel the spell with the victim’s blood, the victim can’t undo it. They might as well have put the spell on themselves.”

Cain swept a fingertip over her lower lip. “Lailah wronged you when she essentially sentenced you to death, just as Abel wronged your mother when

he did the same to her. It is only natural that you would crave vengeance. But not even you can argue that my craving for vengeance runs far deeper than yours.”

Hell no, she couldn't. Which was mega frustrating. She'd always known there was bad blood between the Ancients and the Aeons, but she hadn't expected his beef with them to be so profound. “I can't argue that, no,” she admitted. “I won't try to. But I still intend to be part of the battle, Cain.” She braced herself for an outburst, but he steadily stared back at her.

Finally, he shrugged. “If you're so determined, fine.”

Oh, now that was way too easy. “I don't like how cooperative you're suddenly being. It's weird.” She couldn't help but get the feeling that he'd come to some decision in his head that he didn't care to share. “If you're thinking of locking me in a room on the day of the battle, don't.”

His brows lifted, and he pursed his lips in thought. “That's not a bad idea. You probably shouldn't have put it in my head.”

“I mean it, Cain.”

“I see that.” He deftly flicked open the catch at the front of her bra. “Now tell me more about the incident in the woods.”

“Hoping to distract me now, are you?”

“The conversation is getting us nowhere. It seems better to simply move on.” He slid the cups of her bra aside and filled his hands with her breasts. “Or better yet ... we can forget talking.” Warm and firm, his palms squeezed and plumped.

Maybe she should have insisted that they remain on topic, but what was the point? They weren't going to agree on the matter. And, well, this was *way* more fun. So she gave into the moment—arching into his touch, digging her nails into his shoulders, moaning as he nipped and licked at her mouth but didn't kiss her. *Asshole*.

Cain curled an arm around her waist and lifted her so that her breasts were level with his mouth. He latched onto her nipple and, mother of God, he sucked hard. So hard her inner muscles clenched and a pulse of pleasure shot to her clit.

Wynter thrust her fingers through his hair and scraped his scalp with her nails. He growled around her nipple, and the slight delicious vibration shocked a gasp out of her.

“Undo your shorts, I want you naked,” said Cain, shedding her bra while kissing his way to her other nipple. And then the taut bud was in his mouth

and, *hell*, the man had some serious game in the bedroom.

She undid her fly and pushed at her shorts and panties. It was Cain who gripped the waistbands and tugged them down to help her shuck off the clothes. Then she was naked. And hot. And damp. And more than ready for whatever soul-deep pleasure he had in mind.

“Cain,” she breathed.

“You’re going to ride me. You’re going to fuck yourself on my cock while I watch. And you’re not going to come until I allow it. Understood?”

Why that revved her engines instead of switching them off, she really couldn’t say. She also didn’t care to question it. “Yes.”

“So very cooperative in bed.” He cupped her pussy, blatantly possessive. “It is a shame you’re not so cooperative outside of it.”

“You’d get bored of me if I was.”

Cain nearly barked a laugh at that ridiculous statement. “I could never find you boring, little witch. You fucking fascinate me even as you drive me insane with your secrets and stubbornness.” He slipped one finger between her folds and dipped it inside her, a growl vibrating his chest. “Wet and ready for me.”

Aching to be inside her, Cain tore open his fly, freed his cock, and then casually splayed his hands on the armrests. “Remember, you don’t come until I allow it.” Maddened by her refusal to sit out the fight, he needed this from her; needed to exert what control over her he could.

Wynter muttered something beneath her breath, but all he made out was “high-handed.” She positioned herself above his cock and wasted no time in lowering herself over him. Her lips parting, she dug her fingertips into his shoulders as she slowly bore down until, finally, she’d taken every inch.

He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling his face smooth out. “Yeah, that’s what I needed. That sweet pussy swallowing my cock.”

She set a fast rhythm as she rode him hard. He didn’t touch her. Didn’t kiss her. Didn’t pleasure her soul. He just watched her, occasionally urging her on, as she impaled herself on him over and over.

Feeling her inner muscles, he shot her a look of warning. “Not yet.”

Sparks of anger flared in her eyes, but she held back her release.

“That’s a good girl.”

Mentally cursing him, she sank down on his cock again and again, so damn wet it was almost embarrassing. Every slice of his dick through her body built the tension inside her. Every whispered and often filthy praise was

like a flick to her clit. Every look of carnal promise speared her womb, reminding her what was coming. It became harder and harder to stave off the release edging her way, and she was soon squeezing her eyes shut against the struggle.

“You did good, little witch. Now you can come.”

She sucked in a breath as an avalanche of pleasure tumbled along her soul, electrifying her from the inside out. Her eyes snapped open, and her pace faltered. God, the level of sensation ... There might as well have been thousands of tongues, mouths, teeth, fingers, and hands all over her. And her orgasm stole over her in a blind rush.

“My turn.” Cain clamped his hands around her hips and began slamming her on his cock. He then pretty much flayed her soul with euphoria. He kept switching it up—a wave of pure bliss, a stroke of pleasure/pain, dark lashes of sensation.

Her lungs burned for air. Her heart pounded furiously in her chest. Her nerve-endings were on fire, sensitive to even the air itself.

Her mind became all fuzzy and foggy ... until she felt disconnected from her body yet felt every single physical touch so much more acutely.

She wouldn't last. She couldn't. Wynter didn't even get the chance to warn Cain—her orgasm swallowed her whole. She burst, broke, imploded, screamed.

She was distantly aware of his fingertips biting into her hips as he slammed her harder onto his dick while punching up his hips to meet each downward thrust. A soft curse escaped him as the first hot rope of his come splashed her inner walls. His shaft throbbed and swelled as he fucked his orgasm into her body.

She slumped forward, panting like a damn racehorse. “I swear, giving up partial rights to my soul was worth it just for the soul-gasms.”

Feeling his lips twitch, Cain swept a hand up her sleek back. “And to think I almost had Dantalion cover for me that day you came to the mansion looking for residency.”

She lifted her head to meet his gaze. “You did?”

Cain nodded. “My mood was ... not good. I was tempted to retreat my garden for a few hours. If I had, it would have been him you made a deal with.” Cain twisted his mouth. “It would not have been easy to convince him to give me his rights to your soul, but I'd have somehow managed it.”

Her brows snapped together. “Wait, *give* them to you?”

Cain felt this brow arch. “You think I’d have allowed anyone else to own any rights to any part of you?”

Sitting up straighter, she gave her head a little shake. “I mean, how could he have given them to you?”

“Ancients can trade souls, or even the partial rights we hold to them. Dantalion doesn’t have an undead soul in his collection, so he wouldn’t have parted with half of yours easily no matter what person in my service I offered him in exchange.”

“Wouldn’t I have had some say in the matter?”

“No, because once you give up that half of your soul, you no longer have a say in what happens to it.”

“You never mentioned that before.”

“I figured it was obvious.” Cain used his thumb to smooth away the line that furrowed her brow. “Don’t worry, sweet witch, I’d never give away my rights to your soul. They will never belong to anyone but me.”

She swallowed. “Even if this thing we have ends?”

“Even then. But it won’t end. I won’t let it. I thought I made that clear.”

“You did,” said Wynter, putting a placatory hand on his chest, not liking how his expression had hardened. “It’s not that I doubt your honesty. It’s just that, well, things don’t always work out the way we want them to.” It was a lesson she’d learned early.

“But sometimes they do. And this will.”

He said it so simply, so resolutely, it made her chest ache. Though she believed he meant every word, she couldn’t quite conjure up enough faith to also believe that her secrets would change nothing between them. “I hope you’re right.”

“I am. So often that it’s irritating, according to Seth.” His eyes flitted over her face, warm and intent. “Too beautiful for words.”

“That was a nice thing to say. You’re quite the looker, too. For an old guy.”

Humor lit his eyes. “An old guy?”

“Well, you *do* predate the Bible.”

“As does your soul. It has led many lives. And no, I cannot tell you about them—I have no access to such details. But I have enough knowledge of souls to sense that yours is very old.”

“You’re doing it again.”

“What?”

“Using that weird tone when you talk about my soul. Like it’s a shiny toy.”

His lips quirking, Cain pressed a kiss to her neck. “I do enjoy playing with it. You enjoy it just as much. I’m planning to play with it some more while we shower.”

Her body stirred. “I look forward to it. But I gotta warn you ... it won’t matter how many more monumental orgasms you give me tonight, or how sweet and complimentary you keep being, I’m still gonna be on the proverbial battlefield.”

His hand gently delved into her hair and combed his fingers through it. “Understood,” he said, sounding oh so agreeable.

She bit back a snort. She didn’t doubt for a single moment that he’d try to keep her out of harm’s way. Wynter wasn’t too worried about it, though, because he had no way of truly confining her anywhere. He simply didn’t know it yet.



## Chapter Twenty-Two



Bracing her elbows on the dining table, Wynter rubbed her temples. “Xavier, I can’t keep doing this with you.”

“You wouldn’t have to if you’d only shove logic aside for a minute,” he said, leaning forward in his seat. “In the grand scheme of things, what does it really matter if an Alpha lycan goes ‘missing?’”

Wynter dropped her hands to the table. “It will matter to his pack. A lot.”

“Or they’ll be thrilled that someone else gets the chance to be Alpha. Did you ever think of that? I could be doing them a favor.”

“A favor?” echoed Delilah in a mocking tone. “Really?” Stood at the stove with Anabel as they worked on a new batch of a particular potion, Delilah shook her head and gave him her back.

“Yes, really,” clipped Xavier.

Wynter sighed. Getting through to the guy could sometimes be a trial. “As I’ve said before *several times*, whatever Ancient has rights to Elias’s soul wouldn’t be happy if anything happened to him. The Ancients don’t take kindly to anyone screwing with their ‘property.’”

He snorted. “That didn’t stop you from trapping two berserkers in the netherworld.”

Yeah, well, they weren’t talking about Wynter.

“Ooh, we could toss Elias in there, too,” he suggested, his eyes brightening.

“I only dumped Annette and Bowen there because they would otherwise have blabbed my secrets.” Well, *that* and she’d wanted them to suffer some. “This situation you have with Elias is very different.”

“He ruined my date, Wynter. He told her I’d lied about my name—”

“Well, you did.”

“—that I wasn’t really Italian—”

“Well, you’re not.”

“—and that I was a chronic liar whose word couldn’t be trusted.”

“You honestly disagree with that assessment?”

Xavier’s mouth flattened. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

She reached across the table and put her hand over his. “I’m *always* on your side. You’re one of the best people I know, even if you do mix fact and fiction often. But you can’t kill someone just because they annoy you.”

“Why? I used to do it all the time.”

“And that’s why you have a price on your head. Look, I get that growing up practicing the dark arts means you still struggle with ethics at times. But if you truly mean to follow the right-hand path, you can’t take detours from it whenever it suits you. If it’s a life or death situation, fine. But this is not. You have to learn to handle mundane shit without resorting to acts like murder.”

Shuffling past the table, Hattie paused long enough to say, “She’s right, darlin’. Various people will wrong or upset you many times in your life. Killing them isn’t the answer.”

Xavier cast her look of disbelief. “Says the woman who poisoned each of her husbands.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” asked Hattie, her brow wrinkling.

“It has *everything* to do with it,” he insisted.

Hattie huffed and continued walking toward the living room. “You’re just trying to shift the focus of the conversation onto me. I’m wise to your tricks, boy.”

Cutting his gaze back to Wynter, he jabbed his thumb in the old woman’s direction. “So it’s okay to you that *she* killed in situations that weren’t matters of self-defense?”

“No, it’s not,” replied Wynter. “But she did all that *before* becoming part of our crew—”

“Coven.”

“—so I’m not holding her responsible for any of it, much like I don’t hold the rest of you responsible for what you did in the past. It’s the present and the future that count.”

Anabel gave a little clap. “Well said.”

Delilah raised her index finger. “Apart from when you referred to us as a crew. We’re a coven. Get with the program already.”

“Why do you have—?” Wynter cut off on hearing a knock at the front door. Sighing, she got to her feet. “I’ll see who it is.” On the other side of the door, she found one of the local dragon shifters. And he looked the image of devastation. “Jesus, is everything okay?” Wynter asked him.

He sniffled. “No. I need to speak with Delilah.”

Her scalp prickled with unease. Praying this situation wasn’t what she thought it was, Wynter said, “Um, okay. Del, you have a visitor!”

Moments later, Delilah appeared at her side and tipped her chin at the shifter. “Oh, hey.”

“*Oh. Hey?*” He shook his head. “What did you do to me?”

Delilah blinked. “Excuse me?”

“That potion you gave me ... All I wanted was my mate to be a little less butch.”

Wynter closed her eyes. Oh, dear God.

“I did what you said—I swilled it in my mouth and then kissed her. The next thing I know, it’s like I’ve been downing estrogen pills.”

Delilah gave him a haughty look. “I warned you there might be side effects.”

“Side effects? I’ve lost ten pounds, I’m growing boobs, my voice is getting all high, and I can’t stop crying.” His voice broke.

“Sounds rough. How awful for you.”

“It *has* been rough.” He wafted his hands as his eyes teared up. “I need this to be over.”

Wynter slammed her gaze on Delilah. “I cannot believe you.”

The woman gave her a look that was *all* innocence.

Anabel appeared and handed Wynter a reversal potion. “Here.”

Taking it gratefully, Wynter held it out to the dragon shifter.

“Thank you,” he all but sobbed. He knocked back the potion and closed his eyes. When he opened them again a few moments later, they were blazing with anger. He pointed a finger at Delilah. “You—”

“Will *happily* tell your mate that you not only find her ‘too manly’ for you but you actually asked for a potion to change her,” said Delilah. “Would you like that?”

Panic rippled across his face.

Wynter held up a hand. “Look, I’m sorry for what happened to you. I truly

am. But if you hadn't tried using magick on your mate without her knowledge, you wouldn't have suffered any side effects. Delilah informed you it wouldn't be a good idea, correct?"

He stiffly and reluctantly inclined his head. "Correct."

"But you took a chance. You paid the price. It's truly that simple. Now, I figure you've suffered enough, so I see no reason why your mate has to learn about this ... so long as you walk away right now without insisting on making Delilah pay."

He averted his gaze, and moments of silence went by. Finally, he grunted. "Fine. But don't ever expect more custom from me." With that, he barged down the path and exited the yard, slamming the gate closed behind him.

Shutting the front door, Wynter whirled on Delilah. "You did it again? Seriously? I told you not to sell any more of those damn potions."

Delilah frowned. "Can I help it that karma chooses to flow through me to do its work?"

Wynter snorted. "Karma hasn't chosen you to do *shit*. This has nothing to do with balancing the scales of justice—"

"It is *absolutely* about justice. My family follows the teachings of Annis. I know you don't think much of her because of some of her ... darker deeds, but she was strong and powerful and ballsy and beautiful."

Anabel frowned. "Didn't she have one eye, crooked teeth, and bluish skin?"

Delilah stared at the blonde for a long moment. "Beautiful on the *inside*."

Wynter scrubbed a hand down her face. "Look, I understand that you want to respect and honor the teachings of your ancestors—I don't like it, given one of them ate children, but I get it. However, what you're doing isn't okay, Del."

"You can't tell me that dude didn't deserve what happened to him. He talked like destiny had short-changed him by giving him a mate that wasn't very feminine."

"Which makes him an asshole, sure," Wynter allowed. "But he's an asshole who could *kill* you—that's my issue. Dragons can exhale fire."

Anabel let out a low whistle. "Wow, talk about death's breath—"

"No, I don't have the patience for your neurosis right now," snapped Del, whipping up her hand.

"I don't *have* a neurosis!"

"That's right. You have *several*."

Wynter swiped a hand through the air. “Both of you stop. Now listen to me, Del. I need you to stop selling those potions here. We’re not on the move anymore. We’re here to stay, and there are a whole lot of dangerous people in this place. Stop tempting them to kill you. God, between you and Xavier, it’ll be a sheer miracle if our crew isn’t wiped out at some point.”

“Not crew, co—”

“And I’m done.” Wynter went up to her room, packed an overnight bag, and then returned downstairs. “I’m heading out. Try not to do anything stupid while I’m gone.”

Delilah saluted her. “Sure thing, Priestess.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Cain must *rock* in bed for you to stay with him every night.” Delilah grinned. “I’ll bet he fucks like an animal. I’m right, aren’t I? Come on, Wyn, be a sweetie and give us some details.”

“Like I’ve told you before, you’ll just have to use your imagination. Now I’m going. Behave. All of you.”

Delilah blew her a kiss. “Later, Priestess.”

“Stop it.”

\*

Gathered in Cain’s ledger room, he and the other Ancients spent hours discussing battle plans, bouncing ideas back and forth until they finally settled on a particular course of action. It would involve every resident of Devil’s Cradle. Most would be part of the battle. Others would be responsible for guarding the elevator that descended to the underground city in the unlikely event that any invaders managed to enter the mansion.

If the Aeons had the ability to collapse the town and crush the city below it, they would definitely do so. But the land above and below was too well-protected by power, just as Aeon itself was. As such, the Aeons would likely order their troops to do the next best thing—overrun the town like ants, search for the entrance to the city, and destroy both.

They’d fail.

The Ancients would make sure of it.

“We each need to pass on our plans to those in our service, ensuring they all know in advance exactly where they need to be and what they need to be doing when the Aeons finally make their move,” said Cain.

He planned to convince Wynter to stay in the city and guard the lowest level of the elevator. How, he wasn't yet sure. His witch was a warrior right down to the bone.

Seth nodded. "We should not delay in that. The Aeons could strike at any time."

Ishtar sniffed. "I hope they do it soon. I tire of waiting."

Dantalion leaned back in his seat. "I predict that a great many of their troops will be mercenaries. After all, the Aeons will need to feel sure that they have large enough numbers to take on our population, but they're hardly likely to risk a large number of their *own* population even if they are certain of success."

"I agree." Azazel folded his arms. "More and more people in our service are arriving. They're prepared to fight alongside us, even if they don't much like it."

That was the thing about selling your soul. If the Ancient who owned it called on you for anything, you had no choice but to obey. But that wasn't something that the Ancients advertised, and any in their service were ordered to keep it quiet. As such, the Aeons wouldn't be prepared for outsiders to come and join the battle.

The Ancients hadn't called on *all* their people. Why? When they won the war—and they would—some invaders would scuttle back to Aeon with tales of what happened. The Ancients didn't want their enemies to know just how large a force they could build, or the Aeons who came to avenge the dead would bring an army big enough to overwhelm them.

"The healers need to be placed sporadically around the town during the battle," said Inanna. "They will not be asked to be fight, they can remain hidden, but they will need to be of help to any injured residents."

"Where will your new pet witch be?" Ishtar asked Cain. "Tucked up somewhere safe, I suppose." She tittered.

Unwilling to grant her the angry reaction she hoped for, Cain merely gave her a blank look and said, "You don't need to know my plans for Wynter. She's not your concern."

Ishtar stiffened. "On the contrary, she is the concern of every person in this room."

Inanna sighed at her sister. "Let us not do this."

"Do what?" Ishtar shrugged one shoulder, all innocence. "I asked a simple question."

Cain fired her a bored glance. “You asked a question you knew I wouldn’t answer, and you did it so you’d have an excuse to whine and moan and complain.”

Seth offered him a look of commiseration. “I suspect she’s still sulking over what you said to her at my Keep.”

“I am *not* sulking or whining or anything else,” Ishtar upheld.

Lilith lifted her hands. “Can we please stop arguing amongst ourselves? It’s not unusual at meetings, no, but any conflict between us right now is a weakness we can’t afford.”

Ishtar sniffed. “I am merely curious as to where Cain intends to place the witch.”

“There’s no reason for you to know where Wynter will be,” he said.

“Oh, I see. You think I will send someone to kill her.” Ishtar lifted her chin. “I prefer to do my own dirty work, as you well know. But I can understand why you would nonetheless take precautions. As I pointed out the other day, mortals are so very fragile. You will need to constantly take measures to ensure she is safe from the dangers of the world. I would personally find it both boring and tiring. It would be like supervising a child.”

Cain only stared at her, keeping his expression blank.

Her mouth tightened in annoyance. “I wonder ... has it occurred to you that she might have wangled her way into your bed so that you would protect her this way? In your position, I would have to ask myself if she was in fact using me. Even someone like you can be played. Just ask Azazel. Not even he was exempt from that.”

Azazel’s eyes flared. “Don’t go there, Ishtar,” he warned, his tone dark. “Not unless you want me to strike back.”

“So sensitive,” she mocked. “And there is nothing for you to strike back with in this matter. No man has ever played me.”

“Sure they have,” said Azazel, a cruel smirk touching his mouth. “They do it all the time. You think men *really* want to shower you with the unreasonable amount of attention they give you? You think it’s pure adoration that makes them go that far? No, it’s that they know you need that from them. They’re doing what they have to do to worm their way into your bed. They simply want to get laid. That’s why the attention eases off over time, Ishtar. Once they’ve had their fun, they cease making an effort.”

Predictably, she lashed out with a small blast of pure power. Azazel sidestepped it easily with a snicker, the door behind him unexpectedly

opened ... and the power wacked the person in the doorway.

Cain watched as Wynter sucked in a pained breath when the power punched into her body, roughly arching her spine until it cracked, and causing fine fractures to spiderweb across her flesh. Her mouth opened in a silent scream, every muscle tensing, every vein cording ... and then she collapsed to the floor. She lay there, her eyes open, unseeing. Vacant. Lifeless.

Behind her, Maxim leaned over her and touched her pulse. Swallowing, he looked up at Cain and shook his head.

Shock gripped Cain by the throat, scattering his thoughts, leaving him unable to process what had just happened. But then the monster inside him reared up in a blinding rage, driving the shock from his mind. Reality slammed into him like a fist to his gut and—that fast—a savage, explosive fury whipped through him, pulling his lips back in a snarl.

Blanching, Ishtar stared at him, shaking her head. “Cain, I didn’t mean it. I didn’t know she was here. I didn’t kill her on purpose, I swear.”

Inanna stepped in front of her sister. “It was an accident, Cain. The blast wasn’t meant for the witch.”

No, it wasn’t. And yes, Ishtar had aimed for Azazel—who’d have no more than flinched at the impact. But the bitch was *gloating*. Cain could sense it. So could his monster, who wanted *out*, wanted to kill. Cain’s skin rippled as the change began to—

“Ow,” muttered Wynter.

He slammed his gaze on her, shock once more stealing his breath as she awkwardly sat upright. His monster stilled, not understanding what it was they were seeing.

At her side, Maxim gawked at her, looking lost.

Wynter’s gaze went straight to Ishtar and narrowed dangerously. But that wasn’t what made Cain’s stomach drop. It was the black trails that began to slink over her eyeballs.

Wynter blinked rapidly and took a deep centering breath. And another. And another. Finally, the black ribbons gone from her eyes, she shot Ishtar a put-out look while pushing to her feet. “Well, that was uncalled for.”

Cain could only stare at her. He might have wondered if Maxim had been wrong; if he’d mistakenly missed that her pulse was still beating. But the mark that had appeared on the side of her face told him a different story. It was one he’d recognize fucking anywhere. A metallic blue snake in the shape



of an S, its mouth open wide near the corner of her eye.

The mark of Kali.

If the deity felt that the death of a witch was an injustice, Kali occasionally sent the witch back long enough to get their revenge. To aid them with that, She placed the soul of one of Her many netherworld creatures *inside* the witch's body—together, the two wreaked vengeance on those who'd caused the injustice.

Cain slowly crossed to Wynter, so many things now making sense. And yet, *nothing* made sense. Not really.

She met his gaze as steadily as always—no uncertainty, no nerves, no sheepishness despite the situation. Cain couldn't help but admire that.

He slanted his head. "How? How can you be ... you? Revenants aren't even really people."

They didn't sleep. They weren't sane. They didn't have a heartbeat. They were literally undead witches that acted as a temporary vessel for something monstrous. Wynter might have an undead soul, but her body wasn't a walking corpse.

Lilith looked from Wynter to Cain. "You knew nothing of this?" she asked him.

"No." And he hated that he'd made the discovery *this way*. That it hadn't been a case of Wynter trusting him with her secret. That he'd had to watch her fucking die. "When did Kali make you a revenant?"

"When I was ten," Wynter replied. "And yet you still live?" Ishtar shook her head, scoffing, "Impossible. Absolutely impossible."

"Evidently not," said Dantalion, staring at Wynter with renewed interest. "You saw her monster try to surface, Ishtar. We all did."

Cain squinted at Wynter. "So it was Kali who brought you back after those boys killed you."

Wynter nodded.

Seth frowned. "You said your mother brought you back."

Wynter cut her gaze to him. "No, I said she was accused of, and exiled for, bringing me back using forbidden magick. I never said she actually did it."

Thinking back, Cain realized she was right. She'd let them make their own conclusions. And they had, not bothering to question her further.

"It was your monster who eviscerated your murderers," Azazel guessed, to which she nodded. "If your death was avenged, how is it that you're still here? It is only a need for vengeance that tethers a revenant's soul to this

realm. After they attain it, both the witch and the monster return to the netherworld.”

“All I know is that there’s something Kali wants me to do for Her,” Wynter told him. “She never said what. Or when. Or anything else. Only that I’d ‘one day know.’ She’s never bothered to expand on that.”

Even as Cain heard the ring of truth in Wynter’s voice, he couldn’t understand how she could be in the dark about so many things. But then, all things considered, it wasn’t really all that unbelievable. He’d encountered deities before. They were cryptic beings who were so secretive they made the Ancients seem like open books. They’d think nothing of keeping even one of their Favored ignorant of any facts they didn’t wish them to be aware of—and they’d see no real wrong in that.

Seth wandered closer, tracing her mark with his eyes. “How do you hide it? Why would you? And why would Kali allow it?”

“I don’t conceal the mark; *She* does,” Wynter replied. “And no, before you ask, I have no clue why. She makes it visible occasionally, when it seems to suit whatever purposes She has.”

Cain’s monster pressed more firmly against his skin, thoroughly enthralled by the mystery of their witch. “I’ve never seen you eat flesh or drink blood.”

“Yeah, I don’t do that,” she said.

Azazel eyed her curiously. “How can the entity inside you survive without it?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know; it just can.”

Inanna folded her arms. “Why didn’t you tell us what you are?”

“You know why,” said Wynter. “You’re all at the top of the power food chain. You don’t have natural predators. You’re not used to having people around you that could be a danger to you. Revenants can kill anything.”

Why yes, they could. In truth, they could do many, *many* things—cause diseases, plagues, blight, misfortune, and physical defects but to name a few. They could also curse absolutely anything or anyone.

“That’s why no one can fight the curse you placed on Aeon,” Dantalion realized. “Does anyone there know what you are?”

Wynter shook her head. “Kali told me I mustn’t tell, so I didn’t.”

Ishtar’s eyes narrowed. “She didn’t want us to know the truth either?”

“She said She’d reveal to you all that I was one of her Favored *if* She felt it necessary,” Wynter told her. “It would appear that She felt it necessary.”

“She *talks* to you?” Ishtar asked Wynter, her tone doubtful.

“Sometimes,” Wynter replied.

“And what is it that She says to you?”

Wynter’s expression shuttered. “Nothing you need to know.”

Ishtar’s face hardened. “I would have to disagree.”

“Disagree all you want. I don’t owe you explanations, and I won’t give you any.”

“You should if you wish to stay here. You cannot expect us to allow you to live among us when we do not fully understand what you are.”

Wynter snorted. “That’s rich coming from an Ancient. Everyone in Devil’s Cradle is expected to accept that there are things we can’t know about all of you.”

“You are not an Ancient, so that rule does not apply to you. You will tell us what we want to know.”

“Enough, Ishtar,” Cain cut in, his rage still on a low simmer inside him.

Ishtar sliced her gaze to him. “You cannot tell me you are happy for her to hold back from us. We are due an explanation.”

“She *has* explained,” he pointed out. “It is not her fault that she does not possess all the answers.”

“She knows more than what she says.”

“Perhaps. But if Kali has ordered her to keep such things to herself, no amount of pressuring her will achieve anything.” Not only would Wynter stand firm out of loyalty, but the deity would interfere as She saw fit. “Other than annoy Kali, that is.”

Azazel nodded, staring at Ishtar. “And considering you’ve pissed Her off enough by killing one of Her Favored, I’d say that bitching at Wynter wouldn’t be the best idea.”

Ishtar frowned at him. “You are not concerned about what you’ve learned here?” She searched every face. “It bothers no one here that we have a revenant among us?”

“It was a shock, of course,” said Seth. “A huge shock. It is not every day you meet a revenant, and I hadn’t thought it was possible for one to be so ... different. But I don’t feel a need to be concerned, no. Her being a revenant doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t negatively impact me. And the situation we have with the Aeons remains the same. It is them I intend to focus on. You should do the same.”

“But, as she herself proclaimed, a revenant can kill anything,” Ishtar reminded him. “Even us.”

“Yes,” he allowed, “but just because she *can* hurt us doesn’t mean she *intends* to. Wynter is not our enemy.”

“You don’t know that. The Aeons could have sent her here.”

“If she meant to kill us, she would have attempted it already.”

“Agreed,” Lilith interjected. “Wynter has had plenty of opportunities to end Cain’s life, I’m sure, given they sleep in the same bed. Yet, he remains unharmed. She has made no overt moves on the rest of us either.”

Ishtar’s lips flattened. “You cannot tell me it is fine with you that she insists on being so mysterious.”

“I see no need to hold her accountable for not being able to answer our questions,” said Lilith. “Whether it’s because she has no answers or because Kali forbids her from sharing certain things, the fact of the matter remains the same—it is out of Wynter’s hands.”

Ishtar’s gaze danced from face to face, narrowing as it settled on Azazel. “You are uneasy with this.”

Azazel sighed. “I am. I don’t like that Kali seems to be working off-script and keeping the whys of that to Herself. But ... do I care that Wynter’s a revenant? No. Do I believe she’s here on behalf of the Aeons? No. Do I see the point in getting het up about any of this? No.”

Letting out a little growl, Ishtar whirled to face her sister. “Tell me at least *you* have concerns.”

Inanna rubbed at her wrist. “I admit, I am not comfortable with how little we understand of Wynter. But it is senseless to hold what she is against her. And if we did that, it would make us too much like the Aeons themselves, who do not like or accept what they struggle to understand.”

“Hear, hear,” said Dantalion before moving his gaze to Ishtar. “And if your ego wasn’t still smarting due to Wynter sharing Cain’s bed, you would not stoop to their level. No, don’t try claiming that this isn’t about your ego. Most everything you do or say is about your ego. Let this moment here and now be an exception. If you would only look at the situation from my point of view, you would see we have reason to be pleased that there is a revenant among us.”

“*Pleased?*” Ishtar echoed, her eyes bulging.

“It would seem that Kali has given us a weapon,” said Dantalion. “We deserve our revenge, do we not? Nothing delivers vengeance quite like a revenant.”

“Wynter isn’t a weapon,” Cain said to him, his voice hard.

His mouth curving, Dantalion raised his hands in a gesture of peace that had no real sincerity in it.

As it occurred to Cain that Wynter had been remarkably quiet for the past few minutes, he looked at her. Her arms folded, she was idly rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet, the image of bored ... even as that hunter stare tracked every person in the room.

Needing to be alone with her right now, Cain flicked his arm. "Everyone out. Except you," he said to Wynter. "You stay."

Ishtar gaped. "You cannot be serious. You still want her close after all you have just learned?"

His nostrils flaring, Cain stalked toward the bitch, liking the unease that flashed in her eyes. "You should be much nicer to Wynter. It is only the fact that she lives that means *you* live. If her death had been intentional, I would have destroyed you on the spot. Not even Inanna could have saved you."

Inanna gently pulled on her sister's arm. "Let us go. Now, before you do or say anything else that could well get you killed."

One by one, the Ancients filed out of the office.

Pinning Maxim with a look, Cain said, "You will say nothing of what you saw and heard here."

The aide nodded. "Understood, Sire." He gave Wynter a quick dip of the chin and then closed the door, giving her and Cain privacy.

She puffed out a breath. "That could have gone better." She let her arms fall to her sides. "Look, I'll understand if you're a little freaked out by all this. I admit, it's a lot to take in and—"

Cain delved his hands into her hair and pressed his forehead to hers. "I thought you were gone. It all happened so fast. You were fine, and then you weren't. Just like that. It took me a few seconds to process it. That delay in my response is the only reason Ishtar lives. She had struck out at Azazel and hit you accidentally. But that didn't matter to me right then. I couldn't think beyond the fact that you were dead." A revenant. His woman was a revenant. Who kept coming back to life. "Not much about you makes any sense."

"Tell me about it," she muttered.

"You truly don't know what Kali wants you to do for Her?"

"Truly. She didn't even tell me that much until I turned eighteen. Before then, I thought maybe I had a certain amount of lives. Like a cat. Because I came back to life after accidentally drowning when I was fourteen."

"You haven't pushed Kali for answers?"

“I asked Her for clarification once or twice, but She blew me off each time. I haven’t bugged Her to tell me because it would only irritate Her. I’d rather not inspire Kali to get Herself a new sort-of-revenant who won’t ask questions.”

Cain studied her face closely. “There are some things you’re not telling me, aren’t there?”

“At Her insistence, yes. I have no choice in that.”

Fucking deities. “Does your coven know what you are? And no, don’t call them a crew.”

Wynter rolled her eyes. “They know. They saw my monster in action when I was taken by the same bounty hunters that caught them.”

“You freed them, and they chose to stay with you,” he guessed.

“Yes. A seemingly bad idea, really. But none of them have a strong sense of self-preservation, which I’m sure has not escaped your notice.”

No, it hadn’t. “I caught a glimpse of your monster when you woke just now. I wonder what Kali put inside you. Nothing harmless, I’d imagine. Did it kill the keeper who was told to execute you?”

“Yup. I don’t know exactly what it did to him, though. It’s like I black out whenever the monster takes over. I can only try to piece together what happened.”

“Guessing games are no fun.” Cain knew that well—he’d been playing them since he first met her. “You’ve kept many, many things from me, little witch.” He pressed a kiss to her throat. And another. And another. He scraped his teeth over her pulse, wanting to feel it beat against his mouth. “Hypocrite though it makes me, I find myself wanting to spank you for it.” He palmed her ass and gave it a squeeze.

She blinked. “Are you ... are you thinking about sex right now?”

He felt his mouth curve. “Do I find it strangely arousing that you could kill me if you so wished? Yes, I do.” As did his monster. And they both needed to remind themselves that she was here, alive. “So I’d say it’s time that I fucked you.”

She gaped at him. “You can’t honestly be serious.”

“Oh, I’m very serious.”

“But ... you’re supposed to be weirded out. Freaked. Put-off by the fact that I’m not even really alive—at least not in a natural way.”

Cain almost snorted. She might be a revenant, but he was a *far* worse creature. In any case ... “Nothing about you could put me off.”

Her mouth bopped open and closed. She put her hands to her head. “I have no clue what to say to you right now.”

He cupped her jaw. “Did you want me to be ‘freaked,’ as you put it?”

“Of course not.”

“Then all is good.” He took her mouth, swallowing anything else she might have said. “Get naked. Now.”

Giving him a look that called him crazy, she nonetheless began to strip. “You need help. Like professional help.”

“I warned you that you’d one day want to run from me. You told me it wouldn’t happen. If you truly believe that there’s nothing I could tell you about myself that would make you no longer want me, why can’t the same apply to me when it comes to you?”

She stilled, her expression pensive.

“You don’t have the same faith in me that you have in yourself?”

“It’s not that, it’s ... ugh, you know what? Fine. If you say you’re not freaked, I believe you. But I still say you need professional help.”

“Noted. Now you’re still not naked. Let’s fix that.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three



Silence fell in the cottage the next morning after Wynter dropped the “Unfortunately, the Ancients now know what I am” bomb on her crew. Sprawled around the living area, they shifted uncomfortably and exchanged glances.

“It goes without saying that this isn’t good,” said Anabel.

“I had no choice but to come clean. There was no way I could pretend I hadn’t just died, or any way for me to hide Kali’s mark.” Cradling her cup with both hands, Wynter sipped at her tea. “I told myself when we first came here that I’d be able to keep the truth from the Ancients, but I knew deep down that they would likely find out sooner or later.”

“I suspected they would too, but I was all for ‘later.’” Anabel nervously rubbed at her shoulder. “At least we now know that an Ancient can’t *permanently* kill you—I know you worried they could.”

“I don’t know for certain that they can’t. Ishtar’s strike wasn’t meant to be fatal. It was more like a swat. An Ancient would have no more than winced. I freaking died. If one—or all of them combined—really put their back into it, they might well manage to wipe me out for good.”

Hattie flicked her hand. “They’d be fools to harm one of Kali’s Favored.”

“That Ishtar woman is a *complete* fool,” said Delilah. “I can totally see her doing something so stupid.”

“Yeah, she’s one spiteful little bitch,” said Xavier, idly shuffling his tarot cards. He glanced at Wynter. “I’ll bet she felt all smug when her power killed you. It meant you were not only dead but that she could cry ‘accident.’”

“I think she was more furious that I came back from death than she was



that I'm a not a mere witch. Although it will undoubtedly gall her that she can't brand me weak any longer." Wynter took another sip of her tea. "She pounced on my being a revenant, trying to use it to turn the others against me."

"Did it work?" asked Anabel.

"Not with Cain," replied Wynter. "It didn't seem to work with the rest either. They don't like that they have so many unanswered questions, but they don't seem to view me as a potential enemy. Still, I doubt they'll like being around me much."

Anabel nodded. "They don't have an 'edge' around you the way they do others; they can't say and do whatever they like to you with no fear of repercussions because you can actually kill them. They won't be used to that. It'll annoy them, if nothing else."

"They're mostly focused on the upcoming battle with the Aeons. My worry is that when the war has passed and they can give my being a revenant more mental space, they might suddenly share Ishtar's apparent concerns."

"They might," mused Xavier. "But if it looks like they're going to turn on you, we'll go before they have a chance to act on it. At the moment, I don't think there's a risk that they'll attempt to kill you. They need you to lure the Aeons here."

"Not necessarily," said Anabel. "Wynter has already succeeded in luring them here—it won't be long before they make their move. The Ancients don't need her alive at this point. It's not like they'd have to *prove* to the Aeons that she's safe and well."

Xavier pointed a finger at the blonde. "Now that's true. I didn't think of that."

Neither had Wynter. Hence the cold fingertips that trailed down her spine.

He cut his gaze to her. "Now that they know you're a revenant, they'll also know that your life-force isn't tied to the curse. They literally have no real reason to *want* you to live unless of course they don't object to your existence."

"Not true," Hattie objected. "Kali is an excellent deterrent. She would never stand for anyone hurting one of Her Favored. They know that well. I doubt even the Ancients would want to take on a deity. I'm not all that worried—Cain wouldn't allow any of the others to do Wynter harm. He's firmly ensnared."

Wynter frowned. "Ensnared?"

“Hooked. Enthralled. Bewitched.” Hattie gave a firm nod. “He’ll keep you safe. Or you’ll kill him. One or the other. I’m leaning toward the first, though.”

“I do agree that Cain wouldn’t be party to anything that harmed you,” Anabel told Wynter. “I don’t know what he feels for you, but I do think he wouldn’t turn on you. I also think he’d likely protect you from the other Ancients if necessary. Maybe that will be enough to stay their hands.”

Delilah crossed one leg over the other. “We only have that comfort if Cain *truly* took the whole revenant thing as well as he seemed to. Do you think he did, Wyn?”

Considering he’d fucked Wynter on his dining table like he hadn’t seen her in decades ... “Yeah, I do. I have no doubt he’s a very accomplished liar, considering he’s been keeping secrets for most of his life—and he’s lived a very, very, *very* long life. But if he’d been creeped out or disgusted by what I am, I would have picked up on it. My monster would have sensed it, too.”

Xavier’s brows snapped together. “Why would Cain be disgusted?”

“Well, I *am* a revenant.”

“But not a typical revenant,” said Xavier, setting his tarot cards on the coffee table. “It’s not like he’s been banging a walking corpse. The only thing about you that’s truly undead is your soul, and he already knew about that.”

“True, but I’m not *naturally* alive. Kali’s power brought me back, and it keeps me here. So it wouldn’t have surprised me if he’d been a little freaked. He was more bothered by the fact that I’d died right there in front of him.”

“Like I said, he’s ensnared,” said Hattie. “And I’ll bet he’s encountered far stranger things in his life than a revenant who’s not a regular revenant—it would likely take a lot more than that to spook him. Which is a relief, since he has access to your soul and could cause you some serious pain.”

Oh, indeed. Wynter would like to *think* that he would never hurt her, but she liked to think a lot of things. Such as that her crew would start valuing their own safety instead of constantly risking it.

She zeroed in on Hattie. “Speaking of pain ... are you *sure* your eyes aren’t sore? They’re seriously bloodshot, and I don’t think it’s just because of the damn joint you smoked earlier.”

Hattie waved away her concern. “They’re fine. Really. I was up all night finishing a book, that’s all. I couldn’t put it down; it was a real page-turner. I wasn’t crazy about the dolphin shifters, though.” Her face scrunched up in distaste. “Dolphins are nasty creatures.”

Delilah blinked. “Nasty?”

Hattie nodded. “They act all sweet and friendly, but they’re sociopaths down to their fins.”

“Kind of like you, then,” said Delilah.

Hattie’s brow wrinkled. “I don’t have fins.”

“But you *are* sociopathic.”

“That doesn’t make me a *sociopath*. I feel empathy. Love. Remorse. I have a conscience.”

Delilah arched up a brow. “The same conscience that saw no reason why you shouldn’t kill any of your husbands?”

“They were crimes of passion.”

“They were incidences of premeditated murder.”

“Their *betrayals* were premeditated. They had full-blown affairs, every one of them.” Hattie put a hand to her chest. “Broke my heart, they did.”

“You know, most women in that situation just get divorced.”

“I don’t believe in divorce, it’s a sin.”

Delilah shook her head and mouthed, “Wow.” She pushed to her feet. “And on that note, we’d better moving. We have a shop to open.”

The day was both as busy and as normal as any other day. So it took Wynter by surprise when Cain strolled into her bedroom that evening while she was packing her duffel for yet another night at his Keep. He’d only ever turned up at the cottage once before, and that had been to find out why she was late. A quick look at her quirky wall-clock told her she wasn’t running late tonight.

“Oh, hey.”

“Such a gushing reception,” he teased as he crossed to her, calm and predatory and far too sexy for her damn liking.

She snorted. “I’m not one to gush.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed.” He planted a soft kiss on her mouth and swept his hands up her arms. “I was passing your street. I decided to stop by.”

She narrowed her eyes, skeptical. He never simply *stopped by*. And, considering how busy he was, she wouldn’t have expected him to ever take the time to do so.

A sneaking suspicion slithered through her mind. “You came here to check that I wasn’t packing all my stuff to hightail it out of Devil’s Cradle, didn’t you?”

After a brief moment, he inclined his head. “It occurred to me that you

might prefer to leave now that your secret has been exposed to myself and the other Ancients.” He twirled a strand of her hair around his finger. “Of course, I would have had to stop you.”

Wynter fought a smile. He wouldn’t find it so easy to detain her, but she’d let him think otherwise. “If I snuck off like that, I would have been leaving partial rights to my soul behind.”

“You wouldn’t be the first. People have done such a thing before. Mostly if they broke a rule and didn’t wish to be held responsible for it. In fact, Bowen and Annette left without notice only recently—Azazel and I suspect they might have committed some crime. You’ve not noticed their absence?” Whatever he saw on her face made him squint. “What is it?” he asked.

Damn, this news probably wouldn’t wash down well. “They didn’t actually leave willingly.” Far from it. “See, Annette killed me,” she blurted out.

His brows snapped together. “Excuse me?”

“She came to the shed where I work and skewered me from behind with a sword.”

His eyes flared, and his mouth set into a hard line. “Did she now? When?”

“Not long after you killed her father. Bowen rushed in, saw what happened, and talked of covering for her and ... well, I didn’t like it much. So when I woke up, I dealt with them.”

“I can still feel her soul; she’s not dead.”

“No, I, uh ...” Wynter rubbed at her earlobe. “I kind of stuck them in the netherworld.”

Taking a moment to digest those words, Cain did a slow blink. His creature stilled, surprised. “The ... the netherworld?”

“I didn’t know where else to put them,” she burst out in her defense. “I couldn’t kill them for obvious reasons. But they’d seen me rise from the dead, and I couldn’t risk that they’d go blabbing about it. They’re not exactly trustworthy people, and they wouldn’t have done me any favors.”

For long moments, Cain could only stare at her. His woman never failed to take him off-guard. Never. “How, exactly, did you put them in the netherworld?”

“I’ve been able to open a portal to it ever since I first became a revenant. I don’t know if it comes with the revenant package or it’s simply because my soul is undead and so I therefore have a connection to it.”

Of all the scenarios he’d considered when he tried making sense of why he

couldn't properly touch Annette's soul, this hadn't been one of them. His monster was thoroughly impressed by Wynter's ability. Cain, however, didn't like the thought of her having any such connection to a separate realm—it felt too much like she wasn't fully in *this* realm. “You made it look like she'd left?”

“It wasn't hard. She'd already packed up her stuff and stashed it in a car she'd parked outside of the town's boundary. It was just a matter of moving said car so it looked as if she headed off somewhere.” Wynter bit her lip. “You mad?”

“At you for what you did to protect your secrets? No. Particularly since Annette took it upon herself to end your life, forfeiting her own. But I *am* angry. Angry that she dared put her hands on you. Angry that I didn't foresee she'd do such a thing. Angry that I'm only learning of it now.” He didn't bother asking Wynter why she hadn't told him before today—the answer was obvious. “I will explain to Azazel about Bowen. He will understand; there'll be no reprisals.”

“Bowen was one of his aides,” she reminded him.

“Not a prized one. In any case, Azazel wouldn't punish you for protecting yourself. That was all you really did. And I wouldn't dare allow it if he tried, so there's that. Can you bring both berserkers back out of the netherworld?”

“Only if they haven't died there. A soul can't, obviously, but a living being can. I can go look, but it might not be so easy to find them—”

“Then leave them where they are.” Cain didn't want her roaming around that realm when he'd have no way of getting to her if need be. He didn't trust that Kali wouldn't decide to keep Her there. “I would only seek to punish them anyway. They'll suffer plenty in their present location.” He'd heard enough about the netherworld to know that there was nothing pleasant about it. “Are any other residents roaming there?”

“Nope, just them.”

“You certainly keep things interesting, little witch. Just full of surprises, aren't you?” He cocked his head. “Did anyone at Aeon ever discover your secrets and find themselves subsequently dumped in the netherworld?”

“Only one. Nobody suspected I had anything to do with his ‘disappearance,’ thankfully. Being an absolute asshole who regularly beat up women, he had a whole host of enemies. It was believed that a relative of one of those women probably killed him. The investigation into his death went nowhere, though. The Aeons didn't pursue the matter. They don't care much

what happens to the mortals there.”

“What did he do to earn that fate?”

“He stumbled upon me covered in blood and gore after I let my monster chomp down some dude who tried raping me.”

Cain felt his jaw harden as rage shot through him. “I see.”

“No one ever traced that death back to me. The guy who tried raping me was actually a keeper. Aeon ... it’s not like here. You and the other Ancients all run a tight ship. Although there are plenty of rules at Aeon and a high number of keepers to enforce them, the Aeons themselves don’t keep a close watch over ‘mortal matters.’ They don’t oversee the activities of the keepers or make sure justice is always served. The keepers exploit that and get up to all sorts of shit, confident there’ll be no repercussions.”

“So our source often says.”

Her brows lifted. “You have a spy there?”

“There isn’t much he’s able to tell us, since he has no access to the underground city, but he occasionally passes on helpful information.”

“That’s how you knew about the blight.”

“Yes. I didn’t believe it at first, or that people there could possibly be falling sick. But our source was adamant. And, according to Azazel, very afraid.”

She twisted her mouth. “How come you need a source? You once said you have ways of getting glimpses of the world outside of Devil’s Cradle. Can you not spy on Aeon that way?”

“No. The town is shielded from view by the Aeons’ power, hence why it’s never been detected by human satellites. It’s just as shielded from preternatural surveillance. Devil’s Cradle is similarly shielded by myself and the other Ancients.”

“Speaking of the Aeons ... you never told me what Lailah offered to give you in exchange for my life.”

“You didn’t ask.”

“I didn’t want to ask too many questions because it might have prompted you to do the same, and there was a lot that I wasn’t ready to tell you back then.”

He nodded, understanding, since he’d been in exactly the same boat. He still was, really. There was so much he could never tell her if he truly meant to keep her.

“But you know one of my secrets now,” she went on. “That doesn’t mean

you owe it to me to tell me any of your own, but I was hoping you could at least tell me this.”

Cain toyed with the ends of her hair. “Lailah offered to hand over Eve.”

“Your mother? She’s a captive at Aeon?”

“In a sense. She lives in comfort and is able to go about her daily life, but she has many restrictions and wouldn’t be permitted to leave. As they say, a gilded cage is still a cage.” Cain tensed when Wynter pressed herself against him, giving him a comfort that was as foreign to him as the offer of it. Forcing his muscles to relax, he curved his arms around her.

“Were you close to Eve?” she asked.

“No. I didn’t have much of a relationship with her, but that was neither her fault nor mine. It is a very long story,” he quickly added when he sensed she’d question him further on it. “One I will share with you some time. But not now.”

Wynter looked like she might press him, but then she dipped her chin. “Okay. If she’s a captive of sorts, is it because she sided with you in the war or something?”

“No. Eve’s gilded cage was created long before then. Unlike the other Aeons, she didn’t betray me or the other Ancients. She chose to stay neutral, all the while hoping everyone on both sides of the war would throw down their swords and wave a white flag.”

“Out of optimism or naïvety?”

“The latter, mostly.”

Wynter nibbled on her lower lip. “I guess I can understand why Lailah would think you’d jump at her offer.”

“I will personally retrieve Eve once I’m free, providing she wishes to come here. Given that Aeon is wasting away, I’ll be surprised if she doesn’t.”

“So this is what Ishtar meant when she said that the Aeons had something you want.”

“Yes. But I don’t believe that Ishtar truly thought I’d give you up to them in exchange for my mother or anything else. I think she simply wanted *you* to believe it might happen. Sowing seeds of distrust is a favorite game of hers.”

“I have to say, I struggle to understand what it is about Ishtar that once appealed to you. Yeah, okay, she’s beautiful. But she’s also a pain in the ass.”

He pursed his lips. “She didn’t used to be so petty and vindictive. Those qualities crept up on her during our imprisonment. But she was always a person who needed to be the dominant figure in a relationship. I was never

going to be a submissive partner. In that sense, we were each a challenge for the other. Challenges give you a reprieve from boredom.”

Wynter sniffed. “I guess.”

Cain bit back a smile at the slight note of jealousy in her voice. He didn’t think his little witch would appreciate that he liked it. “I didn’t care for her. She didn’t care for me either.”

“You sure about the latter? Because she seems intent on snagging you.”

“Ishtar has a habit of wanting what she can’t have. She pursues it because to actually obtain it would shine her ego and make her feel empowered.”

“And a part of her doesn’t like others playing with her old toys.”

“There’s a little of that, too.” Cain stroked a hand over her sleek, dark hair. “She’s no threat to what you and I have, Wynter. She never held even the slightest bit of appeal to me that you do.”

“Did you put one of those barrier things inside her?”

He shook his head, watching as some of the starch slipped from his witch’s shoulders. Once upon a time, his monster had wanted Ishtar plugged, but it hadn’t pushed Cain to do it, just as it hadn’t attempted to take the matter into its own hands. And Ishtar had hated that his creature showed no real possessiveness toward her.

“You know, you said this barrier you put in me would fade. It hasn’t.”

He smiled. “And how would you know? Tried pleasuring yourself again, did you?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Actually, no, I simply decided to check. You thoroughly see to my needs, which means I don’t have to do it myself nowadays.”

“I intend to see to them again once we get to my Keep. Or ... perhaps I could do that right here before we—” He cut off as a crash came from above them that was quickly followed by muffled feminine oaths. “What was that?”

“*Anabel, tell me you’re not testing shit on yourself again!*” Xavier yelled from downstairs.

“*I knocked over a lamp, that’s all!*” the blonde shouted.

“*You don’t have a lamp!*”

Another crash, another female curse.

“*Dammit, Anabel, don’t make me come up there!*”

“*Try it and I’ll fry you!*”

Both continued to bicker loudly until a monstrous wild-cat roar split the air.



*“Christ Almighty, can a woman not read in peace?”* griped Hattie from the neighboring room.

Wynter swiped a hand down her face. “No, I’d rather we just head to your room now. I don’t think you need to ask why.”

He felt his mouth quirk. “No, I definitely don’t.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four



“It really is a *horrible* way to die, I’m telling you,” said Anabel as she wiped down the kitchen table the following evening. “One of my worst and most traumatic experiences for sure. I still have nightmares about it.”

Delilah paused in sweeping the kitchen floor. “What did you do to upset him so much?”

Anabel did a double-take. “What?”

“You must have done *something*. What was it? Did you insult him? Tease him? Criticize him? Flip him off?”

“He was a shark, Del. I really don’t think any of those things would have bothered him all that much.”

“They don’t just savage people like that for no reason.”

“Well, *I* didn’t do anything wrong.” Anabel scrubbed the table a little harder than necessary. “I was surfing, minding my own business.”

“Likely story.”

“It’s not a story, it’s the truth.”

“Maybe he was rabid,” suggested Hattie, drying the plate Wynter had just washed. “That disease can make an animal *crazy*. ”

Wynter felt her nose wrinkle. “I don’t think sharks can catch rabies.”

“Wynter’s right, they can’t,” said Xavier, taking the dry plate from Hattie and putting it away in the cupboard. “It’s a mammalian disease.”

Delilah looked at Anabel. “Then we’re back to you provoking the shark.”

“I did *not* provoke him,” the blonde insisted. “I can’t believe you’re blaming me *for my own death*. Where’s the compassion? Where’s the sympathy? Where’s the distress you’re supposed to feel?”

“Why would I be distressed?” Delilah went back to sweeping. “I didn’t know you back then. You were a whole different person.”

Hattie glanced at Anabel. “This does explain why you wouldn’t watch *Jaws* with us at one of the motels we stayed it.”

Anabel jutted out her chin. “The flashbacks are painful, all right? I see no need to worsen it for myself by—*stop it, Del, you’re not funny!*”

But Delilah kept on humming the *Jaws* theme tune.

Wynter tossed the woman a look. “Leave her be.”

“I just wanna know what she did to the shark,” said Delilah.

Anabel slapped the cloth on the table. “I didn’t do anything!”

Xavier put away yet another plate. “Relax, *I* believe you. Now if you were Del, I’d have a different opinion, because she’s a fucking shit stirrer who could rile up even a nun. A shark would be no problem for her. She’d welcome the challenge.”

Delilah glanced at him. “Coming from a fellow shit stirrer, that was an excellent compliment.”

Anabel scowled at her. “He wasn’t complimenting you; he was pointing out that you’re wacked.”

“Aw, don’t be jealous that he likes me better. *Everyone* likes me better.” Delilah shrugged. “You’re just too neurotic for most people’s tastes, sweetie. But don’t beat yourself up about it; it’s not your fault. Actually, scrap that, it’s totally your fault, since you insist on using yourself as a test trial subject. I’m curious, did you do that during every life you led? Because it would explain a few things. Like why you’d stupidly taunt a shark.”

“*I did not taunt him.*”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Hattie cut in, “How old were you when it happened, Anabel?”

“Eighteen.” The blonde sighed. “I always die young, and I always die hard. My hope is that I’ll one day live to be a ripe old age but, given our present circumstances, I don’t believe that’ll happen in this lifetime.”

Delilah gave her a soft smile. “We’ll miss you when you’re gone, if that helps.”

Anabel fired her a glare. “It doesn’t.”

“Stop giving me hate eyes. You adore me really.”

A snort. “What’s there to adore?”

“Ooh, now that was bitchy. Is this how you behaved toward that poor shark?”

Anabel lunged at Delilah, but Xavier slid between them and ushered the blonde backwards as she growled, “*Just let me kill her, no one will care.*”

Wynter arched a brow at a grinning Delilah. “This makes you happy? Really?”

“Really,” Delilah confirmed.

God, the woman was a trial. “There are so many things wrong with you I don’t know where to begin.”

“Yeah, I hear that often,” said Delilah, sounding awful smug about it.

Done washing the dishes, Wynter wiped her hands on a kitchen towel. “Apologize to Anabel.”

Rolling her eyes, Delilah turned to the blonde. “I’m sorry I hurt your feelings.”

Anabel set her fists on her hips. “Are you actually sorry, though? Ever? About anything?”

“It’s rare, but it happens,” said Delilah. “An empty apology still has meaning, though, right?”

“No,” barked Anabel. “No, it really doesn’t.”

“Why not? It’s the thought that counts. Isn’t that how the saying goes?”

Wynter groaned. “I swear, you two could argue about anything. Like *literally* anything.”

Anabel frowned. “We’re not *that* bad.”

“You both fought over a cushion this morning. *A cushion.*” It had been exhausting watching them quibble like children. “There are two other fucking identical cushions in the same damn room.”

“Well, I had it first,” claimed Delilah ... which Anabel quickly denied, and so they began to argue yet again.

Wynter was about to break it up, but then an alarm began blaring loudly from outside. Everyone went quiet.

She’d been warned about the potential of an alarm going off sometime soon. According to Cain, there were plenty of scouts roaming the border to keep a lookout for the Aeons. Apparently, they were finally here. Or, at the very least, they were heading in the direction of the town.

Her gut rolling, Wynter swept her gaze along her crew, taking in their now-grim expressions. “You all sure you want to be part of this?”

“We’re sure,” said Anabel.

“There’s no way you’re going into any kind of battle without us,” Delilah declared.

Xavier nodded. "We went over this earlier."

"Three times," Hattie chipped in.

Wynter raised her hands. "I was just checking."

"Are you planning to release your monster at any point?" Delilah asked her.

Wynter shook her head. "No. It doesn't distinguish friend from foe, and it wouldn't stay with you four to fight at your side. I'm not down with that. We're a team."

"We're a coven," Delilah corrected. "The *Bloodrose* coven. And you're our—"

"Don't make me hurt you right now."

"So touchy."

"Whatever. Now let's get moving."

\*

No sooner had Cain heard the alarm than he and the other Ancients, as pre-agreed, met in the manor's large foyer as they waited for Maxim to appear and relay the scouts' report. Around them, townspeople made their way to the exit, but no one stopped to ask anyone for guidance. They didn't need to. The aides had already relayed the Ancients' plans well in advance, so everyone knew what they should be doing and where they were supposed to be.

It took no longer than a minute for Maxim to appear at Cain's side, his face solemn.

Cain flicked a brow. "Well?"

"A very large army was teleported to a spot just beyond the southern end of the prairie land," replied Maxim. "It took several teleportation trips before all the troops were gathered. Enough troops to successfully take us out. They are on their way here, led by a small party. A woman appears to be fronting it." He rattled off a description of her.

"Lailah," said Cain.

"Being as misogynistic as they are, neither Adam nor Abel would allow her to lead them, so I think we can safely say that they aren't here." Dantalion sighed. "Unfortunate."

"Saul will probably be with her," said Seth. "He would have no problem following her lead. He's done it in the past." Seth cut his gaze to Maxim. "They're approaching from the southern side, you said?"

The aide dipped his chin. “It would seem that they don’t intend to use the tunnel to enter the town, given that it’s located on the opposite side.”

“They would know that we will have people guarding the tunnel to make it difficult for them to invade the town,” Seth pointed out. “The only other way to enter would be to clamber over the cliffs, which we suspected they might.”

“We shall soon see if we were also right in suspecting that the Aeons will attack us from a distance rather than invade the town with their troops,” said Dantalion.

“I will be sincerely surprised if they use a different tactic,” said Cain. Lailah would be sure of her success, but she wouldn’t give the Ancients even the slightest edge. If she remained beyond the border of the prison, it would prevent the Ancients from physically getting to the Aeons.

“I suppose we had better gather on the roof and wait for the army to appear,” said Lilith.

The others murmured their agreement and followed her along the hallway. Cain lingered, needing to see Wynter one last time before the battle began. He didn’t question the impulse. Didn’t care to.

It wasn’t long before he spotted her and her coven were making their way to the exit. All looked serious and battle-ready, even Hattie ... who now moved with grace and purpose as opposed to awkwardly shuffling forward the way she usually did. Not that he hadn’t sensed that the ‘bad back’ routine was anything other than a farce.

Everything in him, including his monster, wanted to send Wynter back down below. If he’d thought it would get him anywhere, he would have done. But he’d already tried convincing her to remain underground after fucking them both raw last night. The conversation had gotten him nowhere. She’d calmly argued her right to be present for the battle and, essentially, talked him in circles.

He knew she’d be an asset. He couldn’t deny that the strategies she suggested made sense. But although she was far more powerful than he ever could have imagined, it didn’t make him feel any better about the fact that she’d be on the battlefield. She had a habit of rising from the dead, yes, but—despite how Kali seemingly had some purpose for Wynter—there was no guarantee she would always return from death.

He’d eventually relented as he knew that she’d fight with or without his blessing. And since Kali would likely free her if he attempted to keep her contained, that option was out. At least this way he would know exactly

where she'd be at all times since, between the two of them, they'd agreed on the best place for her and her coven to situate themselves throughout the battle.

When she stopped before him, Cain collared her throat and kissed her hard, uncaring of their audience. "Stay alive. If you do die, make sure you come back to me."

She nodded, a battle-thirsty spark in her eyes that called to the creature inside him and made it want to bite her. "Be careful," she said, squeezing his upper arm. "And kill any Aeons extra hard for me."

That he'd be happy to do.

He gave Maxim a look that reminded him to stay close to her at all times. The aide nodded, his expression grave. Satisfied, Cain headed upstairs and ascended the staircase that led to the rooftop terrace. The cool evening breeze fanned over his skin. Thick, inky black clouds that carried a hint of purple blanketed the sky.

The other Ancients were spread out, facing the southern cliff, waiting for their enemies to arrive. Given that the manor was the tallest building they had, it made sense to plant themselves there.

Cain moved to stand between Azazel and Seth as he took in the scene below. The townspeople were swiftly moving into position. Some would stand in full view of the invaders. Others would remain hidden until the moment came when they needed to spring.

Wynter, her coven, and Maxim soon joined the rest of the aides and positioned themselves in front of the manor. One of the reasons Cain had agreed for her to act as the Ancients' line of defense was that she would then be where he could see her at all times. From this angle, he could glimpse the side of her face—she looked focused, determined, ready. Her mark wasn't visible, and he couldn't understand why Kali would hide it.

It was a shame that Kali wouldn't involve herself more fully to protect Wynter. 'Upgrading' people in this realm and occasionally guiding them was about as involved as a deity got, even when it came to their Favored.

By the time a scout signaled that the Aeons were close, the movement below had come to a stop. Everyone was ready.

Cain flexed his fingers, welcoming the feel of the adrenaline pumping through his veins. Anticipation was a live wire inside him. An anticipation his monster shared.

So long. They had waited so long for this battle. *Too long.*

He spared a glance at the other Ancients, sensing that they were equally amped up. Killing Lailah wouldn't be enough to take down the invisible cage that held them—all four of its creators would need to die for that to happen. But ending the life of at least one of the fuckers would be a joy all on its own. More, it would be enough to draw the other ruling Aeons here.

Soon, people began to plant themselves on the top of the cliff opposite. Cain recognized the first row of people as Aeons. Most were from the second and third generations, and all had partaken in the original war. They were also evidently being used as shields for Lailah and Saul, because the siblings came up behind them along with other Aeons.

"There's got to be, what, a dozen Aeons over there?" asked Azazel, a note of eagerness in his voice that said he was relishing the thought of obliterating them all.

"It appears so," replied Cain. "The scout told Maxim that the number of troops was large enough to take on our population, but it doesn't seem that large. Perhaps some have been told to situate themselves out of sight."

"Perhaps," said Dantalion. "How good of Lailah to bring along her brother. We now get to kill two of the ruling Aeons."

"Just as we expected, they are being careful not to cross the boundary and mean to attack us from outside our prison," commented Inanna. "How very brave and noble."

Lilith sniffed. "I'm rather insulted that they would send such a small force of Aeons."

It truly *was* a small force. Of course, so many Aeons against seven Ancients probably seemed like a hopeless situation to others. But there was a reason that the Aeons had had to cheat in order to defeat Cain and his people a millennia ago—the Aeons weren't as powerful. Which was something they'd always resented.

"You forget, Lilith, that they thought we'd weaken over time," said Dantalion.

"And they were wrong," said Ishtar. "Well, shall we get this party started or what?"

Battle adrenaline pumping through his blood, Cain used power to amplify his voice as he addressed the intruders. "You should not have come here."

There was a slight shift in the crowd on the cliff, and then ... "If you had not given us cause to do so, we would not have," said Lailah, lifting her chin. "We would have left you in peace. You brought this on yourselves."



“Do you never tire of pinning the blame for your actions on us?” asked Cain.

Azazel flicked him a look. “I’m thinking, no, they don’t.”

Lailah slid her gaze to him. “I have no idea why you’re smiling, Azazel, but I shall enjoy wiping that smile from your face. Of course, it does not need to come to that. I will give you all one last chance to surrender the witch to us. Do it now.”

As if she would genuinely walk away after hauling her ass all the way here. Lailah had come for a war. And she’d get one.

“Wynter stays with us,” said Cain.

A troop hurried to Saul’s side and spoke into his ear while pointing directly at Wynter. *Motherfucker.*

Saul grinned. “I see her, sister. She’s directly in front of the manor.”

Cain’s gut clenched. He’d known that Wynter would be easily spotted from her position, but he still didn’t like her being the focus of the Aeons. His creature rumbled an uneasy sound.

Lailah skimmed her gaze along the people in front of the manor and then finally settled it on Wynter. She smiled. “Ah, there you are. You and your dark magick have caused us much trouble, young witch. Perhaps you think it was clever of you to seek refuge here. You would be wrong. Because now all the people down there with you will be forced to fight to defend themselves and their home. Some will even die. Most will, I expect. That will be on you. *But ... such deaths can be prevented if you give yourself up now.*”

“No one here will buy that you will trot along back to Aeon without a fight if you’re given what it is you seek,” Cain said to Lailah.

The female Ancient shot him a glare. “We *will* take her, Cain. If it means killing you and the other Ancients first, so be it.” Her gaze dropped back to Wynter, her mouth stretching into a taunting smile. “We do have one thing to thank you for, witch. All these lovely runes on many of our troops’ weapons. How fitting that your own magick will be used against you and your people here.”

A derisive snicker came from who might have been Xavier.

Faint flashes of red light came from several of the swords being held by the troops on the cliff. No, Cain, realized ... the *runes* had flashed red. And the people holding those weapons seemed to have no fucking clue why.

Cain glanced at Wynter just in time to see a smirk curve her mouth as she stared at Lailah.

Seth leaned toward him. “Did Wynter just ... deactivate the runes on those blades?”

“I think she did,” said Cain. “She must have a failsafe in place so that no one can use her own enchantments against her.”

“Do you think she’d planned for a day when her own people would turn their weapons on her like this?” asked Azazel.

“Maybe.” One thing was for certain: His woman was full of surprises. And as Kali’s mark gleamed to life on her face, he switched his gaze back to the intruders.

Lailah’s lips parted. Saul went stiff as a board. The other Aeons and their troops shifted nervously.

“Are you sure you wish to tangle with one of Kali’s Favored?” Lilith called out.

Lailah barked a laugh. “You cannot believe we would think that mark is real. I have seen revenants in my time. Wynter is no revenant.” She swept her gaze along the line of Ancients. “No agreement can be reached here today, I am assuming?”

None of the Ancients replied.

“Then you leave us no choice,” said Lailah, her voice grave.

Beside her, Saul gave some sort of signal, and their troops drew their weapons.

“If our town must fall, so will yours.” She lifted her hands, and the water in the river rose high in a wave. A wave she sent rushing toward the manor.

\*

Wynter felt her entire face go slack as the river—the actual motherfucking river—sailed through the air. “Holy mother of God.”

Xavier gaped. “What in the ...”

Half turning to glance at the Ancients and hoping they did *something*, Wynter automatically tensed, bracing herself to get slammed by the gulf of water.

Power blasted out of Cain’s hand and collided with the wave. The water disintegrated into mist that morphed and ... buzzed? Then it was a massive swarm of locusts, and those locusts zoomed at the people on the cliff.

Perched on Wynter’s shoulder as a crow, Hattie squawked in alarm.

“Yeah, no shit,” said Xavier.

The swarm practically fucking *engulfed* the Aeons and their troops. People cried out and stumbled around. Hell, some even went tumbling off the cliff.

“Well, now,” said Anabel/Mary, seemingly impressed.

Power lit the air directly above the swarm and cracked like a whip, causing it to disperse.

Her flushed face a mask of sheer unadulterated fury, Lailah struck with a bolt of lightning that zipped toward the Ancients.

Seth briskly repelled her strike ... and then the two camps of immortals officially went to blows. Power traveled back and forth in whips, blasts, winds, flames, and waves. Power so intense and potent that it charged the air like static.

“Damn,” Wynter murmured in awe, resting a hand on the head of the huge monstrous cat that butted her leg in what seemed like a ‘Are you seeing this shit?’ question.

Someone on the cliff yelled out an order. A battle cry went up, and troops clambered down the cliff—some in human form, some in animal form. More, other troops began pouring out of hiding and speedily followed them.

“Here they come,” said Xavier, twirling his sword by its hilt.

Tension bunching her muscles, Wynter idly flexed her grip on the hilt of her own blade, watching as the troops spilled onto the town. They weren’t hesitant or cautious about invading unknown territory. No, they were bold and aggressive and cocky, seemingly sure that they held the upper hand. They attacked buildings as they ran, apparently intending to cause as much damage as death.

None of the residents moved to stop them. Everyone stayed in place, watching, waiting, readying themselves to act.

Her monster stirred dangerously as troops charged toward the manor. It wasn’t so pleased with her plan for it to sit out the battle. In fact, it had tried to rise when Lailah pinned her attention on Wynter, but Kali had thankfully stayed its hand.

When the charging troops were no more than twenty feet away from the manor, the townspeople sprung at them from all sides. They leapt out of windows, rushed out of doors, or poured out of the forest—their aim to box in the troops and decimate them.

Wynter watched as sheer chaos unfolded up ahead of her. There were roars, growls, screams, battle cries, and the clanging of swords. Energy balls, orbs of fire, and flashes of magick lit up the darkness. Lycans and other

shapeshifting creatures galloped around, lunging at troops and tearing into them with teeth and claws. Dragons took to the air and began blasting enemies with ice-cold breaths or white-hot flames.

It wasn't a case of packs, lairs, covens, conclaves, nests, courts, and hordes fighting individually. The townspeople all fought as one, along with the people who'd been called here to fight by the Ancients who owned their souls.

"It's becoming pretty clear that the troops weren't expecting such a resistance, let alone such a well-coordinated attack," said Wynter. "They're flapping."

"Maybe they thought a population made up of so many preternatural breeds couldn't possibly fight well together, given they often fight among themselves," mused Xavier. "If so, they were wrong. And they're realizing it far too late."

That wasn't leading anyone to retreat, though. On the contrary, in fact, the troops who'd evaded the attacking townspeople were almost on her and the rest of the people lined before the manor.

Feeling charged from head to toe, Wynter lifted her sword and angled it just right, conscious of Xavier and Anabel/Mary—who each stood either side of her—doing the same. Wynter licked her lips, ready and eager. "Get ready, people." It was just as Anabel/ Mary began singing Queen's "Don't Stop Me Now" that a troop swung his sword at Wynter. She parried the blow and pitched her body forward to shove him back.

And so it began.

She twisted this way and that way as she struck at the asshole again and again. He didn't aim to kill but to incapacitate. She fought hard, refusing to give him the opening he needed. When the crow flew at his face, taking him off-guard, Wynter wasted no time in impaling him on her sword.

He'd no sooner dropped to the ground than another troop charged her, but he was swiftly taken down by the monstrous cat that made no bones about ripping out his throat.

More and more troops came forward. They knew Wynter, knew that her blade was enchanted, knew that their skin wasn't truly covered in insects. But the enchantment still distracted the fuck out of them, and she never hesitated to take advantage—slitting throats, puncturing hearts, slicing off heads.

She didn't only use her blade, she also struck out with her magick. This time, she didn't hold back power-wise. The toxic magick burned, infected,

blistered, withered, and charred as it killed. Which meant that many of Xavier's reanimated corpses looked so absolutely *hideous* it was nauseating.

"Fuck," he spat as he accidentally bumped into her.

She stumbled slightly, and the bastard dueling with her lunged forward and almost accidentally severed her head clean off her neck. She jerked back out of reach, but the tip of his sword nonetheless slashed her face. *Motherfucking ow.*

He grinned at the wound, but his expression morphed into one of horror when Anabel/Mary hacked off his extended arm with a smile. The huge cat then pounced, finishing him off, while Anabel/Mary went back to singing—choosing Elton John's "I'm Still Standing" this time as she expertly swung her sword to slice and block.

Wynter swore as an overgrown coyote pretty much flew at her. One of Xavier's corpse-friends caught it, and both beast and zombie hit the ground hard. Together, Wynter and Xavier speared the coyote before it had the chance to rise.

"Our side definitely has the upper hand," he said before then beginning to chant as he reanimated the dead coyote.

Panting, Wynter took a moment to drink in her surroundings and found that she had to agree with him. Plenty of mangled bodies were sprawled on the ground, but most were invaders from Aeon.

Not all those fighting were engaged in close-up combat. Some covens and conclaves stood off to the side and attacked with magick. Some fey attacked with elemental power while others shot arrows coated in dust that she knew caused all kinds of shit, including confusion, memory loss, lethargy, muscle pain, sensory paralysis, and—

Another troop rushed her.

"Hell." Bracing herself, she slammed up her sword. Their blades clashed again and again as they fought with all they had.

It turned out that her opponent didn't 'have' enough.

She punched her sword into his gut and viciously twisted the blade before yanking it out. He dropped like a stone, and then she saw that the Moonstar coven wasn't too far behind him.

Ho, ho, ho, how fabulous.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

A warning from Esther had the nearby troops edging away from her coven to avoid any magickal blows, providing her a clear path to Wynter. It was very wise of the troops to move. Because this would get ugly—Wynter would make sure of it. She had a score to settle.

Taking a quick scan of the witches fanned out behind Esther, Wynter noticed there was no sign of Rafe. Either he'd found some way to sit out the battle or the coven had left him behind, not trusting that he would fully back them.

“Who the fuck is this bitch glaring at you?” asked Xavier, frowning as said bitch effortlessly destroyed the puppets he sent her way.

“That would be Esther,” replied Wynter, not needing to elaborate. She'd already told her crew all about the Moonstar witches.

His eyes narrowing, Xavier twirled his sword. “I don't suppose you'll let me kill her, will you?”

“Nope, this one's mine.” Once the Priestess came to a halt several feet away, Wynter smiled at her and said, “I can't tell you how delighted I am that you're here.”

Esther jutted out her chin. “I cannot say I share that delight. I would have much preferred to never set eyes on you again.” Her gaze slid to Kali's mark and she tittered, all haughtiness. “Did you really think that anyone would be fooled by that mark on your face? Foolish girl. Kali will not be pleased that you are falsely posing as one of Her Favored.”

Wynter skimmed her gaze along each of the Moonstar coven members, sensing that none believed the mark was real. Uninterested in proving

anything to these people, she didn't respond to Esther's comment.

"You have made a series of bad decisions of late," said the Priestess. "I would advise you to break that habit, put down your sword, and come quietly."

Come quietly? "Oh, you're here to detain me?" Wynter couldn't help but smile. "You think you have it in you? Well, aren't you just adorable."

Xavier snickered.

Esther dismissed him with a glance. She hadn't paid any real attention to the cat, crow, or Anabel/Mary either. Well, underestimating people was kind of Esther's thing.

The Priestess squinted. "If you know what is good for you, Wynter, you will come without a fight."

"So you can hand me over to the Aeons? You'd really do that?" Wynter took in each face that stared back at her. "I mean, I can see why you'd stand aside while someone else captured me. You'd never go up against the Aeons even if you wanted to. But for you all to actually take it upon yourselves to do the deed, *knowing* the Aeons will put me through a serious amount of pain once they've gotten what they want from me ... That's kind of cold of you, isn't it? I was one of you once."

Some *did* look uncomfortable with the situation. They might not have particularly cared about her, but they'd cared for Agnes—handing over the woman's granddaughter to beings who were fond of sadistic torture didn't sit right with them. Having Wynter exiled had been one thing. This was another.

"You stopped being one of us a long time ago," said Esther. "You were a stain on the coven for years. You defiled our town with your filthy magick. You afflicted a plague upon our people. You incited a war between the Aeons and the Ancients. The others from Aeon have looked upon our coven with utter contempt since you left. We have been scorned. Judged. Snubbed. And all for something that wasn't our fault."

"Then you've had a taste of how I felt for years after my magick turned dark, huh?"

Esther snapped her mouth shut.

As a little breeze swirled around Wynter's legs that carried a hint of derision, she said, "Kali's not a fan of you, you know. Neither is what She put inside me." The monster kept throwing her mean-ass snarls. "It would really like to end you. And I mean *really* like it. To be truthful, I'm kind of tempted to let it, since I know for sure it would rip you apart. But *I* want to be

the one who sees you fall.”

Esther scoffed. “You will not convince me you are a revenant. Nor will I believe you are a match for me. Your magick is not pure enough to take down a Priestess, Wynter.”

“You’re not the only Priestess here,” Xavier said to her. “Wynter is ours, and I’d say she’s a fuck of a lot better at the position than you are.”

Anabel/Mary nodded while the cat and crow moved a little closer to Wynter.

Esther took in the sight of them and laughed. “A rag-tag group doesn’t make a coven.”

“A *family* makes a coven,” said Wynter. “That was why Agnes despaired of what yours had become. It is no longer a family. It is a gathering of power-hungry people. There’s no real loyalty among you. No true bonds. Hell, half of you don’t even like each other. But my coven? We’re everything you’re not.”

Xavier grinned. “You called us a coven,” he whispered. “About fucking time.”

“And you still haven’t worked out what you should have long ago learned,” Wynter went on, holding Esther’s gaze. “No magick is pure. It’s just power. *Your* magick might be able to do warm, fuzzy things like heal or create, but it can also kill. Where’s the purity in that?”

Esther pressed her lips into a thin line. “It may interest you to know that Rafe is dead. Lailah snapped his neck.”

Rage and grief blasted through Wynter, tightening every muscle. Esther smirked and, God, Wynter wanted to fuck this bitch’s shit up in the worst way. But rushing at her in anger ... no, Wynter wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t dishonor him by forgetting all he’d taught her. No, she’d avenge him by *applying* all he’d taught her—starting with boxing her rage away and focusing on getting the job done.

“It was his punishment for returning to Aeon without you,” Esther added. “In that sense, his blood is on your hands. All you had to do was return and restore the town’s health. But no. And now your precious mentor is no longer with us. Don’t despair, though; the two of you will soon be reunited. Well, perhaps not ‘soon.’ Going by just how much you enraged the Aeons, they may well torture you for a very long time before finally killing you.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen. Your little attempt to detain me will fail, as will any attempt the rest of your army makes. But don’t take my word



for it. Give it your best shot. I'm thinking it'll be fun to watch you try."

While Esther made a sad attempt at smack talk, Wynter nodded along and quietly warned her coven, "Be ready. They'll attack hard, knowing they can heal me. They'll want to kill all of you purely to spite me."

Xavier cast her a sideways glance. "Are they going to attack from afar?" he asked, his voice too low to carry to the coven.

"Yes," Wynter replied. "And so are we."

"Oh," whined Anabel/Mary. "Using magick is *boring*. I want to slice off heads."

"We're way too outnumbered to go charging at them," Wynter pointed out.

"Some might charge at us," said Xavier. "A few are armed."

"No, they're there solely to protect Esther. They'll defend her from the other townspeople so that she and the rest of their coven can concentrate on blasting *us* with magick." It wasn't a coven made up of warrior witches. Most of them relied on magick alone, and they were powerful enough to be able to defeat opponents without getting up close and personal.

Wynter had an edge here, though. She knew each of them well. Knew their strengths and weaknesses. Knew how best to take each of them down.

Esther and her coven undoubtedly thought that they could boast having the same knowledge about Wynter. In truth, they knew very little about her magick. Something they'd soon discover.

Anabel/Mary sighed and stabbed her sword into a corpse. "I'm *tired* of just standing here. And I'm thirsty—"

"No drinking blood," Wynter ordered before, so done with Esther's smack talk, calling out, "Well, shall we get this over with?"

Cutting off her words, Esther gave her a courteous smile that held a hint of maliciousness. "That would suit me fine." She hissed something at the people flanking here, and they all then began to chant.

"Here we go," said Wynter.

A glittering mist of silver magick clogged the air and rushed at her. She could feel the compulsion that throbbed within it. The bitches thought to force her to drop her sword and follow them blindly.

Wynter waved a bored hand. Her own magick slashed through the air, dark and thick, slicing through the mist and severing the spell, causing the mist to dissipate.

Esther ceased chanting, shock written all over her face. The other Moonstar witches exchanged uneasy looks.

Wynter cast them a challenging smile. “You’re gonna have to do better than that.” She blasted them with a red-hot, toxic gust of magick that whipped their faces, leaving ugly, hissing welts. “Yeah, I was right. This is going to be fun.”

\*

Adrenaline spiking through his bloodstream, Cain dodged yet another flaming spear, watching Lailah bare her teeth in frustration. Bites and stings dotted her bare flesh, and he’d bet they itched and throbbed like a mother.

Retaliating fast, he released a ball of power that exploded in the air as it neared the Aeons, the force of it making several stagger and causing minor fissures to appear in the cliff face.

The Aeons were doing exactly as he’d expected—they were repeatedly calling on the natural elements and sending out blasts of air, fire, water, and earth.

Good choice of ‘weaponry,’ really.

Such power was potent, and they were experts at wielding it. But Cain was an expert at *twisting* it. Which was something he did repeatedly. And so water became locusts. Winds became hornets. Sand became bees. Fire became tiger mosquitoes.

And he sent those little creatures right at the Aeons each time.

Witnessing the bastards squirm and wriggle and slap at themselves was nothing short of entertaining, particularly because the Aeons *knew* and hated that they looked ridiculous. Cain wasn’t simply doing it to amuse himself and his creature, though. He wanted their fury, wanted to lure them into making mistakes.

It was working.

They no longer fought like a true squadron. They were each more focused on wiping away the taunting smirk that he purposely kept on his face. And so the number of Aeons was steadily dropping. Not fast enough for Cain’s liking, though.

He would have preferred to focus on killing those shielding the siblings, but he couldn’t afford to take his attention off Lailah and Saul for long—they were attacking too hard and fast, aiming to keep the Ancients preoccupied so that their backup could spring surprises on them. It was a technique they’d used during their last war. It had worked well then.

Cain was resolute that it wouldn't work so well now.

But he'd have to first help the other Ancients tire out Lailah and Saul, which wasn't proving easy.

"Watch out for those pulsing surges of energy that Saul's throwing," said Seth, a note of pain in his voice. "They hit like a fucking sledgehammer."

"I learned that the hard way," said Cain, once more warping a cloud of sand into a swarm of bees and siccing them on the Aeons. "My thigh is still partially numb from the hit." His leg had almost buckled under the force of it. "You okay?"

"I've got a broken rib for sure," replied Seth.

A female shriek of anger preceded a crack of power that dispersed the swarm of bees. Lailah sharply waved her arm, projecting a shower of rocks, pebbles, and crystals at the Ancients.

A massive gust of power rushed out of one of the Ancients and met the 'shower,' absorbing every fragment before they could make contact with anyone. *Dantalion*, Cain suspected.

Yelling something at the troops that Cain couldn't quite hear, Saul raised his arms, palms out ... and then crackling projectiles of fire whooshed toward the Ancients so damn fast all they could do was try to dodge them.

Cain hissed loudly as one brushed his arm, burning through cloth and grating off layers of skin. "Bastard." Before he had a moment to retaliate, a large wave of ash formed into a cloud of bats—a signature move of Lilith's—and promptly flew at the Aeons. She chuckled when the immortals flapped their arms at the creatures and cried out in alarm. But that laugh turned into a harsh expletive when Saul sent yet more projectiles their way wickedly fast.

Clenching his fists, Cain readied himself to dodge the projectiles, but they didn't aim at him or the other Ancients. No, they blasted the manor. It was a pointless move, since the building was warded against any and all attacks. But, unaware of that, Saul continued to blast the manor.

Cain spared Azazel a quick glance. "Cover me while I focus on Saul."

As Saul relentlessly attacked the manor, Cain took advantage of his distraction—striking with orbs, beams, and waves of pure power.

Instead of retaliating, Saul used the element of air to 'jump' from spot to spot in an attempt to evade any 'blows' ... perhaps thinking that Cain was attacking him so hard to distract him from destroying the manor.

Again, Cain took advantage, striking repeatedly; drawing blood, slamming flesh hard enough to bruise, bombarding the Aeon with blinding pain.

With a roar, Saul locked his gaze on him. Maybe feeling forced to defend himself or maybe finally realizing that attempting to damage the manor would get him nowhere, the Aeon sent out a wave of water that swiftly turned to ice as it whooshed through the air.

Cain slammed the block of ice with enough power to knock it off-course, sending it crashing into the river below. He smirked at Saul, goading—

A female cry of outrage sounded. *Ishtar*. Familiar pulses of power then shot toward the first line of Aeons and yanked at their shadows, causing said Aeons to fall on their asses and slide toward the edge of the cliff ... exposing the two ruling Aeons they'd been shielding. A gust of Azazel's power rammed into the two siblings, knocking them down like skittles, scraping at their flesh like claws.

Saul called on air to relocate him fast while Lailah slammed her hand on the ground. Most of the fallen Aeons skidded to a halt, but a few tumbled off the cliff with cries of terror. As Lailah joined those shielding her in leaping to her feet with a snarl, Cain drank in the fear that briefly flickered across her face.

"She's finally realized that she's in deep shit," said Azazel.

Cain nodded. "Took her long enough."

Power again began whipping back and forth as the two sides went back to exchanging pitiless blows.

\*

A line of white flames thundered to life, seeming to spurt out of the ground in front of the chanting Moonstar witches. Hissing and spitting, those flames raced toward Wynter and her coven, their heat *searing*.

"Not today, Satan." Anabel/Mary tossed a glass vial on the ground, and a large billow of crimson smoke rose up in the air and put out the flames in an instant. "Lovely."

"Hattie, Delilah—go at them from the rear," ordered Wynter, her words coming fast. "Xavier, send some of your corpses to attack the coven from all angles. Let's keep their attention divided."

"You got it," he told her, crouching down to touch the nearest dead bodies.

It was as bird and feline slinked off that balls of fiery magick sailed at Wynter. She repelled them with her blade, sending them whooshing back toward the people who'd tossed them.

The two covens then went head to head.

Each blow of magick on both sides was merciless. Cloth ripped or burned. Skin tore or blistered. Blood pooled or splattered. Bones snapped or cracked. Glass shattered as Anabel/Mary tossed potion after potion that negated and blocked magickal hits.

Being attacked from all sides, the Moonstar witches had their hands too full for them all to be able to focus entirely on Wynter, Xavier, and Anabel/Mary. But neither Esther nor the witches flanking her once allowed themselves to be distracted.

Yeah, well, neither did Wynter or the coven members at her sides. They all countered the attacks with both sword and magick, pouncing on any opening to retaliate. Shelving any pain, she lashed out again and again, loving how her enemies floundered at the intensity of her magick. Meanwhile, one crimson gust after another poured out of Anabel/Mary's palms, and Xavier sent out surges of magick that reeked of death.

Above them all, power thundered through the air as the Ancients and Aeons continued trading blows. But Wynter didn't have time to follow the battle going on above her. She didn't even allow herself to think much on it. She had her own battle to focus—

Wynter swore as a wave of magick hit her so hard that the force sent her stumbling backwards. "Fucker." She struck again, sending sparks of dark magick whipping along the ground.

The Moonstar witches backpedaled, trying to avoid the snapping, crackling whips. They failed. The magick lashed their flesh, leaving open sores that gaped.

"Feel the burn," said Anabel/Mary.

Well, it was only fair. Wynter sported a fair number of wounds, courtesy of the scalding hot white orbs the other coven kept tossing at her—more of which then came flying her way. She slammed up her sword to deflect them just as Anabel/Mary threw yet another vial. It smashed a foot away from the other coven, its contents splashing their flesh. No, *corroding* their flesh.

"Acid." Wynter smiled. "Nice."

Chanting, a glaring Esther emitted another glittering mist. Wynter once more used her magick to hack through it and dissolve the spell.

Esther snarled. "Yield, Wynter. Your little group will die here if you don't."

"Looks like the ones dying are *your* people." Wynter sent out another

surge of magick. The surge swirled and morphed as it sailed toward her old coven, becoming red and black ashes that stuck to the skin of whatever witch they hit. More importantly, the ashes melted into any open wounds, wrenching cries and hisses and winces out of the witches.

Horrendous blisters soon began to pebble on the flesh of the aforementioned witches, including Esther. Those blisters burst and bled and sizzled, making the little skanks freak the fuck out.

“What in the name of ...” Esther trailed off, striking out harder, absolutely panicked. That panic only increased when she realized that an inky blackness was spreading through her veins. The other witches who were similarly affected kept glancing at their Priestess even as they fought, looking for reassurance, maybe?

Well, they’d find none.

Soon enough, as the magick began to eat at their bodies, their skin began to blacken. Sag. Peel. Decay.

Teeth fell out. Hair thinned. Lips shriveled. Muscle wasted away. Extremities withered and became stumps.

“Damn, Wyn,” said Xavier, grinning. “This is ... sickening. I love it.”

Wynter lifted her hand and paused the magick that was rotting Esther’s body before it could reach her brain. At this point, the Priestess looked both hideous and pitiful. Which was just absolutely wonderful.

Esther tried backing up, almost falling over the dead witches behind her. The coven’s number had steadily dropped until only a few were left standing, and Wynter doubted the woman had even noticed.

Wynter eyed her from head to toe. “Now your appearance matches the monster you are within. And I’d say you’ll fit in just fine with the other monsters you’ll meet where you’re going.” Wynter psychically tapped into her connection with the netherworld. The ground beneath Esther darkened and rippled like fluid. “I told you I wanted to be the one to see you *fall*, right?” Then the Priestess dropped with a scream.

\*

Cain sucked in a pained breath as a heavy, white-hot bolt of light crashed into him, burning like a firebrand. The Aeons were now fighting harder, redoubling their efforts to take down the Ancients, no longer resorting to only using elemental power. But he and the other Ancients were hitting them just

as hard and fast, giving no quarter. Hence why Cain then whipped the invaders with power, slashing their flesh and sending some sprawling to the ground ... giving Seth time to rise after being knocked off his own feet by a strike from Lailah.

Cain had sensed several of the Ancients fall at one point or another, but none were down for long from what he could tell. It was hard to be certain. Aside from Seth and Azazel—who Cain could see in his peripheral vision—he had no way to check on the others. Not without turning his attention from the Aeons, which he couldn't afford to do. But although he'd heard the occasional cry or grunt of pain, he had no sense that any of the other Ancients were badly injured.

Now that the Aeons were scared and weakened by both injuries and exhaustion, Cain and the Ancients were no longer concentrating too much on Lailah and Saul. They instead made a point of taking out the siblings' backup one by one. But each time someone shielding them fell, another Aeon was quick to replace—

Cain spat out a string of curses as razor-sharp power pierced and snipped at his flesh like scissors. "Fuckers." He launched a ball of plasma that smashed into the legs of an Aeon, exploding on impact, *destroying* said limbs. Cain's creature hummed its pleasure. Plasma was its favorite weapon, but Cain didn't often toss it, despite how deadly it was—the orbs didn't move as swiftly as others so were easily blocked.

Seth swore as spheres of blinding light zoomed through the air like bullets. "Christ, they're fast." He moved swiftly, emitting a wave of repellent power, but not fast enough to deflect every sphere.

Two wacked into Cain and, *Jesus*, they packed a punch. A punch made of iron that singed flesh like molten lava.

Another sphere must have crashed into Inanna, because she spat, "Bastards." Then she was launching power grenades at the Aeons, who scrambled to deflect them.

Cain took advantage of their distraction, forming a vortex of power that zipped toward them. Its magnetic force sucked several off the cliff but Lailah acted fast, lifting her hands, causing massive wings of white air to appear. Said wings flapped hard, destroying the spiral and hitting the Ancients with a surge of wind that almost knocked Cain clean off his feet even though he'd braced himself for impact.

No one had time to retaliate, because the Aeons struck again swiftly,

splattering the Ancients with blobs of mud. Cain hissed as the weird fucking dirt ate at his skin.

“It’s like goddamn acid,” Azazel ground out.

Worse, smoke rose from the mud, rushed up Cain’s nostrils, and entered his lungs, eating at the oxygen there like a sponge.

He stood very still as he purged the toxic smoke out of his system fast, growling as power sliced and stabbed him like a fucking immaterial blade. He assumed the other Ancients were forced to do the same ... which was most likely why Saul chose that moment to act.

Silver shockwaves *rocketed* toward the Ancients. One smacked into Azazel, sending him zooming backwards. Another hit Cain, causing him to stagger into his brother—which, inadvertently, knocked Seth out of range of a third shockwave.

Free of the effects of the mud, Cain righted himself just as Azazel returned to his side.

“Fucking hate shockwaves,” Cain heard Dantalion growl, and then pulses of near-nuclear energy crashed into several Aeons, killing two. Only one rushed to replace the living shields ... and it seemed to be right at that moment that Lailah and Saul finally realized how dramatically their numbers had dropped.

Lailah let out a cry of fury and emitted an omnidirectional wave of gas that shimmered in the air.

Cain didn’t even want to know what that gas would do. He let out a gust of darkness that formed a giant smoky hand with skeletal fingers. Said hand hit the wave and sent it ricocheting back to the Aeons, who bowled over coughing as they fought the effects of the gas.

Taking instant advantage, the Ancients attacked as one—launching missiles of glass shards, zapping bodies with electric tenacles, hurling orbs of power that cleaved and bisected whatever they touched. The latter took out the two Aeons who stood in front of Lailah ... providing a clear path to the bitch.

She screeched as a shower of glass shards buried themselves in her skin, which was exactly when Cain launched a ball of plasma that crashed into her head. Her mouth dropped open in a silent scream as she arched violently ... and her skull exploded like a bomb.

A roar of grief rumbled out of a severely injured Saul, who tried reaching for the remains of his sister but was quickly hauled off by two surviving



Aeons. The three disappeared out of sight, as did the many others on the cliff.

“Death by plasma ball to the head,” said Azazel. “I bet she never thought she’d go out that way.”

“My, my, my, the rats are all fleeing the metaphorical sinking shit fast,” Lilith observed.

Tracking her gaze, Cain noticed that the troops who’d invaded the town were retreating quickly. He wasn’t sure if someone had called the troops back or if they were taking it upon themselves to scamper after watching their leader fall, but they were sure hightailing it out of there in a hurry.

They were also being pursued by many of the residents, who were battering their numbers fast. The Ancients helped, zapping troop after troop with power. Some managed to escape, but Cain didn’t care. He wanted some to return to Aeon and relay what had happened here; wanted the other Aeons to not only be pissed but scared.

His gaze quickly sought out Wynter, scanning the line of—*there*. She was facing off against Esther ... who promptly disappeared into the ground like it was water. *The fuck?*

The rest of the Moonstar coven was quickly dispatched, at which point Wynter rolled her shoulders and blew out a breath. Either she felt the weight of his gaze or merely wanted to check on him, because she twisted to look up at the manor roof. Cain took an easy breath as he saw that she was fine. Oh, she was covered in blood spatter, minor wounds, and bruises, but she was otherwise okay.

His creature was too wound up to be settled by that. It wanted her close. Now.

Anabel started poking at Xavier’s forehead with what appeared to be a severed finger. Wynter whispered something into the ear of the blonde, who then tensed. And dropped the finger with a squeal.

“So,” began Inanna, “how long do we think it will be before more Aeons come?”

“Hopefully not long,” said Dantalion. “I’m not sure who will lead them. Maybe Saul. Maybe Abel. Maybe Adam. Maybe all of them. I believe we can be certain of one thing—whoever comes will bring a bigger army, and they’ll be better prepared for us.”

“They’ll still all die,” said Cain.

The other Ancients nodded. Because no other scenario was acceptable unless they wanted to remain caged forever.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

“Do you have any intention of freeing Esther from the netherworld at any point?”

Humming as Cain drifted his fingers through her hair, Wynter replied, “At present, no. I’d like her to suffer some, and I feel no need to go traipsing through the place in search of her. But I might later change my mind, you never know.” They’d been talking for a while as they lay in bed, exchanging stories of their personal battles during the war. “Are you sure you don’t want me to free Annette and Bowen?”

“There’s no real point. Both will be killed for committing what was effectively treason, so neither avenue involves mercy.” He stroked over her arm, where she’d earlier been wounded. Anabel’s healing brews had worked wonders, as usual, so there wasn’t a single scratch on Wynter now.

“Was it difficult to hold back your monster during the battle?” he asked.

“No, because it won’t disobey Kali—She has a great deal of influence over it. Thankfully. But it certainly wasn’t pleased that it couldn’t ‘play.’ I couldn’t have let it out, though. It would have killed anything in its path, including my own coven.”

“So you’re finally admitting it’s a coven.”

Wynter narrowed her eyes at his teasing smile. “Anyway ... how long do you think it will take to repair all the damage to the town?”

“We have a lot of people here to work on it, so hopefully not long.”

“But there’ll later be more damage, won’t there? When other Aeons come, I mean. You do think they will, right?”

“Some will come, yes. Saul will certainly be one of them as he’ll wish to

avenge his sister. Considering she was Abel's consort, he should technically want to do the same. I'm not sure if they had a tight relationship, though. People claim consorts for all sorts of reasons. It doesn't always mean that they value that person."

"Lailah and Abel never *seemed* close to me. And I heard that their relationship was an on-and-off thing that involved a lot of conflict and drama. They weren't faithful to each other either, or maybe they simply weren't exclusive—I don't really know. But if he kept reinstating her as his consort, she had to have meant something to him, right? Then again, if that was the case, he would have either been at her side tonight *or* he would have sent someone else to lead the army in her place. I wouldn't have wanted *you* to partake in a battle without me, even if I thought said battle would be easy to win."

Cain's face softened slightly. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

He squeezed the side of her neck. "Same goes. So, I'd say we can conclude that Abel didn't feel as strongly for Lailah as another person would for their consort. He might still wish to get even with us. However, he wouldn't wish to be part of a battle that would mean fighting against Seth—they were once very close. But I suppose it is worth considering that Seth fought against Abel's consort tonight, so perhaps that will be enough for Abel to turn on him. We shall have to wait and see."

"Would it bother you to go to war with Abel?"

"No. He was never really a brother to me."

Wynter worried her lower lip. "Did you really once try to kill him?"

"Yes. But that's a story for another time."

*So mysterious.* "I'll want to hear it," she cautioned.

"You will eventually."

"If you didn't kill him all those years ago, why are you known as the originator of murder?"

"Oh, people had killed others before I was born. I was by no means the first person to attempt to, or successfully commit, murder. But I was the first to target a brother. And that's the end of that story for tonight." He combed his fingers through her hair again. "Right now, you need to sleep. We both do."

Cain held her close, something he'd gotten so used to that he wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep without her right there next to him. He hadn't known

her long, no, but he'd walked the Earth long enough to be certain that what he felt for her was no temporary attraction; that what they had was worth keeping. Protecting. Nurturing.

He'd never had someone like Wynter in his life before. It was almost like she'd been designed to intrigue, attract, and enchant him. He'd be a fool to let her go ... but if he meant to keep her permanently, he'd need to one day be honest with her.

There were so many things she didn't know about him. So many things he would like to think she could accept, but he simply couldn't be sure. He did know one thing. He would only tell her when he felt sure she wasn't going anywhere; that she'd feel too attached to Cain to leave him; that she'd feel he was worth the trouble his creature would give her.

It would likely take time for her to get to that point. Cynical as he was, a part of him doubted that she really ever would. But he had to hope that part of him was wrong, because he had absolutely no idea how he'd give her up. And he didn't believe that his monster would let him anyway.

Closing his eyes, Cain forced his mind to rest. Sleep took him fairly fast, but his creature later woke him abruptly. And, sure enough, Wynter was gone again. Cain called out her name, softly cursing when he received no response. He jumped out of bed and dragged on a pair of sweatpants, making a mental note that locking the door to his chamber wouldn't be enough to keep her from wandering out of it in her sleep.

Just as he'd expected, he found her stiffly walking toward the gates to his garden. He sighed. He really had no idea what it was about the garden that—

He stopped breathing and stumbled to a halt. Because the padlock dropped to the fucking ground, and the iron gates creaked open in welcome. She hadn't even *touched* them.

*What. The. Fuck?*

Wynter walked into the garden, slow and mechanical.

"Wynter!" He hurried toward her, but instinct made him slow to a stop. This clearly wasn't a simple case of her being subconsciously drawn here in her sleep. Not if the gates had opened for her like that. Something else was at work. Something had to be leading her here somehow. He wouldn't find out what was going on if he woke her and took her back inside the Keep.

So, instead, he trailed behind her, remaining close to ensure that the snakes did her no harm. But, like the last time she came sleepwalking here, they didn't even try. They simply followed her, rustling the long grass either side

of the path. Protecting her? Drawn by her? He didn't know.

The cool artificial breeze ruffled her hair and the long tee that he'd earlier slipped on her simply because he liked the look of her in his clothes. She didn't shiver or otherwise react. Didn't jump or jerk at the sounds of crickets or the frogs croaking. She just kept moving forward.

Soon, they neared the temple. Fuck, he couldn't let her go in there. He was about to reach forward and cuff her arm with his hand, but then she stopped right at the base of the stone steps.

He sidled up to her and studied her face. She was staring up at the temple, unseeing.

"I know what you hide here."

The hairs on his arms stood on end. The words had come from her mouth, but it wasn't Wynter's voice. It was thicker. Rang with power. *Deity*.

"Kali," he greeted through gritted teeth, not bothering to bow or any such shit. Should he have showed some respect? Yes. But this being was *inside* his witch, and he didn't fucking like it. His creature was *furios*. "So it's you who keeps leading her out here."

"No. Something else draws her to this place."

He wasn't buying that. "Hmm."

Kali laughed, meeting his eyes. "I sense you do not like that I am using her body. She is more mine than she is yours, darkling."

The latter word startled him so much he could only blink. He hadn't heard it in a long time. It was an affectionate term often used to describe the children of his kind. Not that it had ever been used on him before—affection hadn't been a big part of his upbringing.

Since he hadn't been a child in a very long time, he didn't appreciate *Her* using it, but he wasn't about to rise to the deity's attempt to provoke him for fun.

"You need not worry for Wynter," said Kali. "I mean her no harm. I also mean you no harm. We have similar goals, you and I."

"Goals," he echoed. "Are you planning to use Wynter to reach those goals? Is that why you didn't make her an average revenant? Is that why you keep sending her back to this realm?"

"You will have answers to your many questions in due course, when the time is right. Now is not that time."

He narrowed his eyes. "Why are we having this conversation?"

"As I said, we have similar goals. So I will caution you to be prepared for

betrayal. It may happen, it may not, but be on the lookout for it all the same—that is all I can say on the matter.” She paused. “I will tolerate your presence in my witch’s life, but that will change if you attempt to interfere in my plans. Is that understood?”

*Tolerate* his presence? Like She had some fucking say in the matter?

“One more thing, darkling. If you prove unworthy of Wynter, if you betray or hurt her ... you will bring sheer hell upon yourself. And by that, I do not mean *I* will avenge the slight. I will not need to. Wynter will do that herself, and she will not be merciful. So heed my warning. There will not be another.”

The deity seemed to burst out of Wynter, because her eyes closed and her body fell forward. He caught Wynter’s limp form and lifted her easily. For a long moment, he stared down at her, struggling to sort through what he’d just learned from Kali, unsure if he could truly believe all She’d said—deities lied when it suited them. They only ever interfered in matters on this realm when they had their own agenda. And Kali ... she’d never been one to have productive agendas. *Fuck.*

\*

Sitting across from Cain the next morning at the small table in his chamber, Wynter felt a frown tug at her brow. “Why are you looking at me weird? You’ve been doing it all morning.”

“You were sleepwalking again last night.” He lifted his cup of coffee. “You went back to the garden.”

Wynter inwardly groaned and tossed the last of her bagel into her mouth. “Was I banging my forehead on the gates again like a weirdo?”

“No,” he replied, his face blank. “They opened for you. The padlock fell right off. And then I had a little chat with Kali.”

Wynter could only gawk at him. “What?”

“She spoke to me through you.”

*Well, fuck me sideways.* Wynter leaned forward in her seat. “What exactly did She say?” Instead of replying, he patted his lap in invitation. In a hurry to hear more, she quickly accepted said invitation.

Cain adjusted her position so that she straddled him. “On top of cautioning me to be on my best behavior where you’re concerned, Kali wanted to warn me that I may soon be betrayed.”

“Betrayed? By who?”

“She didn’t say.” He paused, smoothing his hand up Wynter’s thigh. “She was very vague in pretty much everything She said. It was very frustrating.”

“Yeah, I know how that feels,” she muttered. “She’s drip-fed me information ever since She marked me and sent me back to this realm.”

“How has that not driven you crazy?”

“I got used to it, I guess. And what can I really do about it? She’s a deity, Cain. They do what they want when they want.” Wynter clasped her hands behind his nape. “I’d rather not make Her mad by griping about it, since She could probably drag my soul back to the netherworld whenever She felt like it.”

And that bothered him far too much. He simply wasn’t sure what he could do about it yet. Cain dipped his head and pressed a suckling kiss to her throat. “I didn’t like seeing Her in your body. And I really don’t like that She feels you’re more Hers than you are mine—yeah, that was what She said.” He bit down hard enough to leave a mark on her throat. “She couldn’t be more mistaken.”

“And you couldn’t be more possessive. Which brings me neatly to a matter that I’m not good with. The barrier is still there. You said it would go by itself, but it hasn’t.”

His mouth curved. “You tried finger-fucking yourself again?”

She pointed at him. “Don’t try to wander off the subject. Why is the barrier still there? Don’t you trust me not to betray you?”

Hearing the note of hurt in her voice, Cain might have felt shitty ... if he hadn’t also sensed that she was playing him. He shot her a narrow-eyed look that made her snort. “It isn’t a sign of distrust.” He whipped the shirt off her body. “You know that. I’ve already explained why I did it.” Though he hadn’t been entirely truthful, since he couldn’t yet tell her about his creature.

“So you’re not going to remove it?”

He had no way to remove it without provoking his creature to personally replace it, but she didn’t need to know that. Holding her against him, he stood and crossed to the bed. “No.” Laying her down gently on the mattress, he bent over her to lick and nip at her neck. “It does you no harm, does it?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

“It shouldn’t be there!”

“You can bitch about it all you want, I’ve told you before, I know it

doesn't bother you as much as you'd like me to believe it does."

She huffed. "Fine." She delved her hand into his sweatpants, pulled his cock free, and fisted it tight. "Let's make this even, though, shall we?"

He raised his head as an odd vibration ran up his hardening shaft followed quickly by a strange sensation ... as if cold mesh encased his cock. "What are you doing, little witch?"

She gave him a smug grin and folded her arms just as the sensation faded away. "I cursed you."

"You did, what?"

"I cursed you so that if you trying sleeping with another woman while we're together, your dick will wither and rot. Why the fuck are you smiling?"

A number of reasons. One, no one else would ever have *dared* do such a thing. Two, he would never have seen it coming. Three, that she was so possessive of him made things more balanced. Four ... "Your vengeful streak really does run as deep as mine." *That* he really liked. "But then, it's what revenants are built for, isn't it? To avenge."

She frowned. "This isn't me being vengeful."

"Ah, I see. You're trying to turn me on."

"What? No, you weirdo. It's supposed to bother you enough that you'll remove the barrier in exchange for me removing the curse."

"There's no need for you to do that." Lifting her hips toward him, he went back to teasing her neck with his tongue and teeth. "I would never be so much as tempted to betray you, so the fact that you've cursed me ... well, it's moot."

"Moot? Are you kidding me?" She gasped when he ground his cock against her clit. "You really are *unbelievably* fucking twisted if this is revving your engines."

He hummed. "I like that you're so possessive."

"This isn't about possessiveness."

Cain sent a surge of pain/pleasure sweeping over her soul that had her arching right off the bed. "Admit it, you don't want to remove the curse. You're just as fucking insane as I am." He lashed her soul yet again. "Definitely made for me," he added, watching her nipples tighten, her skin flush, and little bumps sweep across her flesh.

He put his mouth to her ear and let out a low growl. "I'm going to wreck you again. I'm going to make you break for me." He pressed a kiss to the pulse now beating frantically in her neck. "Love it when you break."



Exploring her body with his hands, he repeatedly whipped her soul with pleasure/pain—sometimes he kept his lashings firm, sometimes he made them featherlight, constantly switching things up so she wouldn't know what to expect.

She scratched at his shoulders, her pupils blown. He knew her nerve-endings would feel raw and supersensitized. Knew her breasts would be aching, her pussy would be damp, and her body would be crying out for release.

He knelt between her thighs and hooked her legs over the crooks of his elbows. "I think it's time I put my cock where it belongs," he said, lining the broad head up with her opening. "Inside you."

He thrust hard, driving his dick deep as he lashed her soul yet again. She came apart with a scream, her inner muscles clenching and spasming. He slowly fucked her through her orgasm, sinking in and out too lazily for another release to build inside her just yet.

Cain planted one palm on the mattress beside her head. "Hand," he said when the aftershocks from her orgasm slipped away. "I want the one I marked."

She held it out to him, swallowing hard.

He cuffed her wrist and held her palm up to his mouth. Still thrusting slow and easy, he traced the C of his mark with his tongue, smiling when she jolted, knowing it would feel like his tongue had licked at her slit. He traced and flicked and danced his tongue over the C again and again, adding the occasional whip of pleasure/pain to her soul when she least expected it.

He wanted her to feel off-balance. Utterly possessed. Like her body wasn't her own but *his*. His to pleasure, rule, ruin, corrupt, play with—whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

Upping the pace of his thrusts, he kept licking at his mark while also teasing her soul. "You crave this, don't you?" he said, a growl edging into his voice. "You crave what I do to you, crave the pleasure and the pain and everything in between."

She licked her lips. "Which is what you want."

"Of course it is." If sex was the only way he could tie her to him for now, then he'd use it. "It's only fair." He dropped her hand so he could grip her thigh tight. "I crave you."

Wynter's breath stuttered as he began pounding into her body, stuffing her full again and again. More electric waves of bliss swept over her soul. The

dark pleasure nipped like teeth, scratched like nails, and burned like sharp but light slaps.

And she wanted more.

He gave it to her, showering her soul with waves and lashes and featherlight flicks all while slamming his cock hard and deep into her pussy. Raw need carved into his face, he glanced down at where their bodies were joined. “Look how well you take me.”

It was hard to keep her eyes open when this insanely good out-of-body pleasure was wracking her very being. There was so much sensation, internal and external, she had no idea how her brain could possibly compute it all. No idea how the organ hadn’t short-circuited for at least a mere moment.

Trembling and panting, she soon ended up in that space where she floated, anchored only by the scent and feel of the man dominating her body, mind, and soul. He’d warned her from the very beginning that he wanted that extent of power over her. Well, he had it. And she wondered if he knew it yet.

A mess of chemicals and tension and so much overwhelming pleasure/plain she could barely breathe with it, she dragged her nails along his back as her release slinked toward her. “Cain ...” God, she was *so close*.

He switched his angle, rubbing against her clit with each pounding thrust. “Now be a good girl and break for me.”

One abrupt lash to her soul was all it took. She choked on a scream as her orgasm snapped through her—intense, blinding, explosive. She shook and arched and cried.

Cain growled and licked at the corner of her eye. “*Fuck*.” He rode her with hard, feral digs of his thickening cock before finally exploding inside her.

When her thoughts were no longer scattered to the wind and she could finally talk again, she said, “I have to say, I’ve grown rather fond of your cock.”

A low, rumbly chuckle vibrated against her neck. “I gathered that when you possessively cursed it.”

Wynter frowned as the memory rushed back to her. It had been a spur of the moment thing, and she’d thought it would be enough to get him to remove the barrier ... because she’d forgotten for a minute that he was a total fucking nutcase. “I still can’t believe you don’t care. I mean, it’s a *curse*.”

He lifted his head, smiling. “You know ... humans often talk about the Curse of Cain. In truth, it holds a metaphorical meaning. But now? Now the term really does apply. And if anyone asks, I get to tell them that my woman

is so possessive—”

“You don’t get to tell them *anything*.”

“Are you embarrassed that you cursed my dick? Because it really doesn’t mind.”

God, he was *nuts*. She was tempted to quite simply undo the curse despite that he wasn’t going to be cooperative, but maybe he was expecting that. Maybe he was calling her bluff. Well, she wasn’t so easily manipulated. “What about the metaphorical Curse of Cain thingy, what is it?”

He hummed, flicking her nose with his. “Add it to the list of things I’ll tell you one day. And when I do, you have to remember that promise you once made me.”

“That I wouldn’t run when I realized why I’m not totally safe with you?”

He gave a slow nod. “That one.”

She couldn’t even complain that he was holding back, since she was doing the same to him. Still, she might have made a snippy comment out of frustration if it wasn’t for the grave look on his face. He truly did believe there was a high chance that she’d not only want to leave him but would literally flee. “I’m not easily spooked.”

“I know, I’m counting on that. Because I get the feeling that chaining you to the bedpost to keep you here won’t be as easy as I originally thought.”

She did a slow blink. “You really weren’t kidding when you first mentioned putting me in chains, were you?”

“Snapping an iron cuff closed around your wrists will just be so much easier than tying complicated knots.”

“I’m struggling to decide what to do with that comment. But then, I think most people would.”

He pursed his lips in thought. “Yeah, they probably would.”

“You know, we always tend to have seriously weird conversations right after sex.”

“You have likely had far stranger conversations with your coven, and probably at far stranger times.”

The thing was ... the man wasn’t wrong.

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S :)