

A woman in a dark, long-sleeved dress stands in a dark forest at night. She is holding a bow that is glowing with a bright, fiery light. The background is a dark, misty forest with a faint blue glow. The overall mood is mysterious and magical.

TWISTING THE MAGICAL FIRES

MIDLIFE
WITCHERY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRENDA TRIM

TWISTING THE MAGICAL FIRES

MIDLIFE WITCHERY BOOK



BRENDA TRIM

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*"Success is often achieved by those who don't know that failure is inevitable."
—Coco Chanel, fashion designer.*

CHAPTER 1



Fiona

“Seeing a goddess’s ashes in a pile like that looks even worse in the light of day,” I observed as Grams and I stood outside the gate to the cemetery. I was sipping a latte made with my fancy new espresso machine and munching on the fresh scones I just took out of the oven.

Grams grimaced. “I can't believe no one came to claim her and take her home. What kind of family does she have?”

My heart ached for Selene. The goddess was targeted by the god Priapus as a way to make him stronger. The insane god had Selene injected with hydra venom, one of the few substances that could kill a god or goddess. We collected Selene’s power when she passed, keeping it from Priapus. It was the least we could do. It was safely stored in a Godstone in a velvet bag in my nightstand drawer next to the Fountain of Youth, which we shrunk to miniature size.

“Selene’s family isn’t known for their caring nature, Grams. One of them tried to kill her,” I replied.

Sebastian came out then and crossed to join us. “Are you feeling guilty again, Butterfly? You jumped at every sound last night, hoping it was someone who had come to take Selene for a proper burial. It’s not happening.”

I lifted to my tiptoes and pressed my lips to Bas’s. I couldn’t help myself. He looked too good in his pajamas, his hair mussed up from sleep. “Which is why we need to take it into our own hands.”

One of Bas’s eyebrows lifted to her hairline. “What do you mean, Love?”

I wound my arm through his and started back toward the house. I needed

to get dressed for the day. “Everyone deserves to have a memorial when they pass. We can’t leave her there like that. We should make a sculpture for her. She isn’t a Shakleton, but she should have something.”

Bas smirked at me as he held the back door open for me. “You mean I should make a sculpture. What did you have in mind? My specialty is weapons. I could make her a giant broadsword. That way, if you’re ever attacked in the cemetery, you’d have a weapon nearby.”

I snorted as I set my empty mug in the sink. “Yeah, one I couldn’t pick up. With my luck, whoever made it past the wards would use it against me.”

Grams chuckled. “She has a point, Bas. Perhaps it should have something to do with Selene, like a crescent moon or chariot. Isn’t that what Thanos said her symbols are?”

“That and a bull or a torch,” Bas added. “A chariot will be challenging. I’m not an artist, but I can do a crescent moon or a torch without a problem.”

I held up my wrist where one of the marks Artemis gave me was inked. “Do you think it would be too close to Artemis’s mark to do a crescent moon? Selene was robbed of her life. This is the last thing she will ever get. It should belong solely to her.”

Bas’s expression softened as he pulled me into his arms. “It’s possible you’re overthinking about this. But I love how much you care for a stranger. It makes me want to be a better man. I’ll do a torch. You should call your girls to get their help while I work on the project.”

I beamed at the love of my life. When Bas loved, he loved hard and would do anything for you. However, if you weren’t in that category, he barely paid any attention to you. That’s not to say he would stand by and allow someone to be hurt or worse. He would step in and protect anyone. He just wouldn’t hold a funeral for you if he didn’t know you, which was understandable. I hoped he would still love me as much when my heart hardened over the years. Already, I found it easy to go against the vow I took as a nurse to do no harm. I routinely killed those attacking me or my loved ones.

Pressing my lips to his, I shook off those thoughts and grabbed my cell phone. “I’ll be down after I change. You want to help me find a place in the cemetery for her, Grams?”

“Of course. I need a bath first, though. I didn’t take one last night. I was out when my head hit the pillow,” Grams admitted.

“No problem.” I thought about how much Grams and Camille had done to

care for Selene over the few days she was at our house. I understood why she was so tired. They hadn't slept. I needed to learn how to operate on energy potions without getting jittery like they had. Much like it did with energy drinks, the potions could be dangerous to take too often.

I texted Violet and Aislinn, telling them about our plans before rummaging through my closet for some grungy attire. I didn't want to get goddess ashes on my good clothes.

"Are you trying to distract me from my task?" Bas's voice was a deep rumble and vibrated through me. It was the tone that made me tingle everywhere in anticipation. "It looks like a honey badger got ahold of those trousers."

Turning, I gave him my sultry smile as I plucked the top edge of a hole that showed off my entire thigh. "You flatter me. I'm not sure Gal Gadot could make these look good."

"I don't know who Gal Gadot is, but she has nothing on you, Butterfly. These tease me in the best way." Bas approached me and turned me around. His finger traced the top edge of the hole on the back of my right thigh. "The way these reveal the bottom curve of your arse turns me on and makes me want to take you back to bed."

When Bas looked at me or talked to me, I was the only woman in the world to him. It wasn't that he ignored beautiful women. My two best friends were freaking gorgeous. It was that I could see him acknowledge them. And a second later, I could see that for him they didn't measure up to me. Talk about a confidence booster.

I dropped my head back and pursed my lips. His kiss was hard and passionate from the moment our lips touched. I could feel his erection prod my backside. I couldn't allow myself to get lost in this man. He was my kryptonite.

With a groan, I broke away. "I'm going to take a rain check on finishing what you just started. Violet and Aislinn will be here soon, and I am going to need another cup of coffee. After we take care of Selene, we still need to figure out how to ward the property against gods. And then contact Nylah about the Fountain of Youth and the Godstone."

Bas continued looking me up and down like he was debating whether to rip my clothes off or just push my pants to my ankles. "Are you certain we don't have five minutes?"

I chuckled. "Is that all you're going to give me? I take longer than that to

have an orgasm. You've never been selfish before. Don't tell me the luster has worn off of our relationship already. I expected to get at least five years before that happened."

Bas narrowed his eyes and growled low in his throat. "I can get you to climax in under five minutes, and you well know it. I look forward to proving you wrong later." He walked into the bathroom and shut the door with a soft snick, leaving me panting after him.

"You're a cruel man, you know that?" I stalked out, trying my hardest to ignore the way his throaty chuckle made me want to beg him to prove it to me.

Downstairs, I made another latte for myself and grabbed some juice for Kalli and tea for my friends then grabbed a tray, added the scones and took it out to the wrought iron bistro table that was back out near the pond and garden. I went back in for water and was coming out when Violet arrived.

"Did you make cranberry orange scones again?" Violet asked after she and Thanos parked.

"Not this time. These are cinnamon chip." I watched as Thanos walked over to the spot where we had cremated Selene. "Is he handling this alright?" I asked Violet.

Taking a bite, Vi's gaze moved to her mate. "He's okay. It's sobering to watch someone who's supposed to be stronger than you perish like that. Did Grams get some rest?"

"She did. After being up for three straight days, she couldn't keep her eyes open. Speaking of, how the hell did she and Camille drink so many energy potions without having heart attacks? That much would have done me in."

Violet chuckled and shook her head. "You're thinking of the effect caffeine has on the body. Potions are not like energy drinks. There is no compound keeping you awake. It's a drug or substance that interacts with your heart and brain. Once the elixir starts to wane, the spell is done, and you can safely take another. I don't recommend taking two energy potions. You'll actually wear yourself out faster because your magic will automatically engage to overcome the overflow of power."

"I hadn't stopped to think about the differences between the two. If I had, I would have known the reason. It's so obvious now I feel a bit stupid for even asking. I should know this stuff by now. It's not like I'm a new witch anymore." I was embarrassed and frustrated with myself. Typically, I made

connections and saw the reasons for things within moments of wondering about something or being presented with a problem.

Violet placed a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t be hard on yourself. No one would have known that if they hadn’t tried it. Never expect yourself to know something you haven’t been taught. Could I work as a nurse in a doctor’s surgery and go into hospital and know how to do everything required just because I worked in a surgery?”

I pulled my best friend into a hug. “Thank you for always pulling my head out of my ass when I need it.”

“Me want hugs!” Kalli cried out.

Violet and I chuckled as the little girl came skipping across the drive. Argies and Aislinn were behind her. I crouched and opened my arms. Kalli flew into them, nearly knocking me on my ass.

Standing, I hugged her close. “Oh, those are the best hugs in the world.”

Kalli giggled, then placed a kiss on my cheek and reached for Violet. “Bas is in his forge making a sculpture for Selene, Argies. I can’t imagine you want to help with this part.”

Argies inclined his head. “I’ll go see if I can help.”

“Take the lager from the backseat,” Aislinn called out. “He asked if we’d be crying today and said he’d better bring liquid reinforcement for him and Bas when I told him it was possible.”

I headed for the entrance to the cemetery with my friends following. “That was wise of him. I think Grams and Camille drank everything we had in the house, and I haven’t been to the grocery. Are you guys ready for this?”

Violet and Aislinn nodded their heads. “You know I was doing research on her again last night when I couldn’t sleep?” Aislinn asked.

I cocked my head to the side. “Were you bothered by her ending, too?”

Violet and Aislinn voiced a chorus of yesses as Kalli sat down on a nearby patch of clovers covering one of the graves and watched the growing pile of Selene. “I kept thinking someone that loves her should have her, so I was trying to find who she was closest to. I didn’t find anyone in particular. Her brother, Helios, and her sister, Eos, haven’t once said a thing throughout this entire time. Everyone on Olympus heard what happened to her the second Artemis dropped her off, so I’m certain they know,” Aislinn said.

I shook my head, thinking how awful it would be to have your siblings ignore you when you were dying. “That’s why we’re doing this. Sebastian is making a sculpture to commemorate her.”

Aislinn glanced in the direction of Bas's new forge. "We should ask him to engrave a saying she was known for on the outside."

I nodded in agreement. That would be personal. "What is it?" I didn't recall seeing anything about a saying. Then again, I wasn't looking for that.

"There is no beginning. There is no end. There is only becoming," Aislinn shared.

Violet rubbed her arms. "That gave me goosebumps. It's definitely apropos for what she's been through. And it gives me a new way to look at what happened to her. She's in the process of becoming something new."

A smile spread across my face. "You're right. The Godstone is keeping her power and essence safe until she can fully transition to her next state of being. How do we move her? Using a shovel seems disrespectful."

Aislinn twirled her hand in the air, and the furthest section of ashes lifted in a miniature funnel and then floated over to a spot where there was no grave. We hadn't picked out her final resting place yet. The familiar surge in power, signaling Artemis's imminent arrival, put us all on edge.

"Do you think she's here to take Selene's ashes with her?" I whispered as we looked around.

"Why would I do that?" Artemis asked as she appeared next to Kalliopi. I could see why the goddess loved Kalli so much—the little girl's excitement over seeing Artemis melted my heart.

"Yay! Temis, you back!" Kalli cried out as she jumped up and down.

"What do you usually do with someone who dies?" I asked Artemis, sticking with the conversation. The goddess's confused expression told me everything I needed to know. She didn't do a damn thing. "Never mind. What brings you by?"

Artemis snapped her fingers, and a floating fire appeared next to her. The flames were practically white. It was difficult to see them. I took a step closer, wanting to feel them.

"Don't get any closer," Artemis warned as they floated higher.

"What is that?" I asked, then turned as I heard footsteps running in our direction. Grams was hurrying out of the house while still putting her arms through her top, and Bas and Argies came from around the house.

Artemis rolled her eyes at me. "You asked me to bring a way to keep gods and goddesses from being able to appear on your property."

"Yes, we did," Violet said. "That doesn't tell us what this is or what it does."

Grams stopped next to Violet and seemed transfixed by the flames. I had to admit it was only my desire not to piss off the goddess that kept me from fixating on them. If this would do what she said, I wanted it badly and couldn't afford to have her take it away because we had upset her.

Artemis held her hand beneath the flames and twisted her wrist. "This is the Auric Blaze. It's the most powerful magical fire in existence. It is the basis for the flames that fuel Hephaestus's forge. The Auric Blaze will keep gods and goddesses away from Pymm's Pondsides in the future. And if you connect Selene's remains to it somehow, I believe it will be like a living flame."

I looked over at Violet, who was staring at the fire. Aislinn, Argies, Bas, and Kalli were doing the same thing. "What do we do with it? Bas is making something that could hold a flame." It struck me at that second the degree to which the Fates were involved in directing what we did. It wasn't a coincidence that we'd settled on a torch for Selene.

"You need to twist the magical flames with your powers and wards. And you need to do it soon, or they can be stolen."

My jaw dropped. "Can you give us some more information? If this fire is as powerful as you say, we don't want it stolen." This seemed like one more thing we had to babysit. I was already on edge, having the Godstone and Fountain of Youth in the house. I didn't need to add anything more.

Artemis stooped and picked Kalliopi up, then stepped away from the flames. They remained floating where she'd put them. "In the process of twisting the flame with their energy, it will demolish your current wards. You will then be besieged by people trying to get to the magic. Some will mean you harm, while others will just want to be near it."

"What?" I exploded. "Bringing us this is the opposite of what we asked of you. We cannot block the gods and have every arsehole on the planet able to sneak into our house and slit our throats while we sleep."

Artemis covered Kalli's ears as she glared at me. "Don't be so dramatic, Fiona. You should watch what you say in front of Kalliopi. Talk like that will frighten her. Anyway, you asked for a solution, and I have provided one. After you manage to get the two intertwined, your wards will be more powerful than ever. There will not be a safer place. In fact, you might even want to consider moving the Hellmouth here once that is done." She released Kalli's ears and set her down.

That got through to Violet. "We can't move the Hellmouth. It's safe

where it's at. Risking the escape of demons is not worth an extra layer of protection."

Artemis waved a hand dismissively. "Suit yourself. You're welcome." The goddess's acidic tone made me wince.

"Thank you. We appreciate it," I said.

Grams crossed her arms over her chest. "Like he..." The rest of what she was going to say was cut off when Violet put her hand over Grams's mouth. There was no doubt I inherited my mouth from Grams.

"Has this already knocked out our wards? And is it drawing paranormals to it now?" I asked. "We need some time to secure the Objects of Power we have."

Artemis grew to tower over us all and snarled. "If I wanted to do everything myself, I wouldn't have bothered recruiting the three of you." The goddess cursed in ancient Greek and vanished in a shower of silver sparkles.

Kalliopi started dancing and reaching for the sparkles while Argies nudged her away from the flames, still floating in the same place where Artemis left them. "Let's hope Phoebe has information on an Auric Blaze because we aren't welcome in the *library* anymore."

We didn't have time to waste on learning as much as we could about this powerful fire. It could be emitting a beacon to everyone on this continent at that moment. We had two high-octane Objects of Power in our possession and a goddess's ashes. We couldn't afford to have even one visitor at the moment.

CHAPTER 2



*A*islinn

It felt like there was a revolving door of targets being painted on us. There used to be a point that I believed was better since we started taking over Artemis's cases. That time was long gone. I enjoyed seeing the world and being challenged, but the stakes were awfully high.

"We need to get the two artifacts to Nylah, that new Relic Keeper," I said. "At least that'll take two targets off of us."

Fiona nodded in agreement. "Let's hope her husband is stable now and she is ready to take them. We will bring them to her when we go out for Nina's birthday. But, right now, we need to figure this fiasco out before the flames wither and die. Unless you know how to keep them going, Thanos."

Thanos shook his head as he scowled at the bright white flames. "I haven't got a clue. I've never even been this close to them before."

Violet wrapped an arm through Thanos's and turned. "We need to find out more about how to cultivate and care for this fire."

Grams snorted. "It's going to take a miracle to get this sorted out. I just hope no gods stop by in the meantime."

I held up a finger. "The key is to twist the flames with Selene's ashes. At least that's what it sounded like to me."

The wind whispered through the ancient trees as we approached the backdoor to Pymm's Pondsides. The house had always represented a safe place to me, yet it had been targeted more times in the past year than I cared to count. It was where Grams and Fiona resided, and I worried for their safety. This current predicament wasn't helping any.

"Should we just try to swirl them together? Could it be that easy?" Violet

asked.

Thanos patted her shoulder. “You know nothing in relation to the gods and goddesses is that easy, right?”

My heart raced with a mix of anticipation and trepidation as Fiona, Violet, and I walked through the door and into the house. We had another mission to undertake. Thanos was right. Nothing was easy where the gods were concerned. The question this time was how the hell we connected Selene’s remains with the fire Artemis brought with her.

Violet sighed as she grabbed a biscuit from the counter. “A girl can always dream, you know.”

Fiona nodded in agreement. “This isn’t impossible. All we need to know is how the hell we bind the two together. The one thing we don’t want is the flames to go out before we get that done,” Fiona said, her voice trembling slightly. Her grey eyes darted nervously between Violet and me.

I lifted a shoulder. My nerves were running wild, as was my stomach. “You’re right. We can’t afford for the Auric Blaze to go out before we find out how to twist Selene’s remains with them to create the living flame. We need answers, Fiona. And I have no idea who might have them.”

Violet squeezed my hand reassuringly. “No matter what happens, we're in this together.”

Grams shook her head. “What we cannot do is panic. We are going to need to find a solution in the books we have on hand.” Grams scurried toward the stairs a second later with far more agility than she should have at over ninety years old. Of course, she barely looked thirty now after recently being forced to drink from the Fountain of Youth. One thing that hadn’t changed was how her blue eyes twinkled with ancient knowledge.

“So,” Fiona began as Grams disappeared upstairs, “we have flames from Hephaestus's forge burning in my family cemetery and no way to keep them going. That's quite a risk, isn't it?”

Violet's eyes glinted with curiosity, mirroring the question that had been lingering in my mind. “I would say so. Why would Artemis take such a risk?”

Thanos looked over at his wife with a loving expression. “Artemis's actions in taking a piece of the powerful flames were indeed a bold gamble,” Thanos began, his voice resonating with a hint of solemnity. “Bringing flames from Hephaestus's forge to your family cemetery was dangerous, but it serves a purpose.”

My brows furrowed as I leaned in, eager to understand the significance of Artemis's actions. "What purpose? What could be so important that she'd take such a chance? I mean, she's trying to keep the gods from coming here, yet it seems as if she led them right to us."

Thanos regarded me with a measured gaze as if contemplating the weight of his words. "As you can imagine, the flames from Hephaestus's forge are unlike any fire. They possess a unique power, a connection to the very essence of creation and destruction. By placing them here, Artemis intended to send a message and reveal the gravity of the situation you're facing. And the importance of solving this problem. Ultimately, she is worried for her lost friend more than she is for your safety."

Violet's expression shifted from curiosity to concern. "Great, so she's pinned a target on us and only gave us a partial solution."

"Artemis is warning you about the danger that lies ahead," Thanos explained, his voice steady. "The presence of the flames signifies the formidable nature of the Auric Blaze. It's a force that can shape reality, both in creation and annihilation. And then there is the power of Selene's remains. That is capable of shaping destinies, and if wielded recklessly, even threaten the divine balance."

Fiona's voice held a note of realization. "So, this is something of immense consequence."

Thanos nodded in agreement. "Indeed. Artemis knew the key to Selene's ashes and safeguarding them would best be accomplished with the Auric Blaze. It's impossible to gather all of Selene and bring her to the flames, so bringing them here is a way to ensure her protection. This measure was taken to prevent the potential consequences of misuse or misguided intentions."

"But why couldn't she use her magic to collect all of the ashes?" I asked, a hint of frustration tingeing my voice. "I get that we couldn't do a good enough job, but surely she had that ability."

Thanos's expression softened, a glimmer of sympathy in his eyes. "Gathering Selene's ashes is no simple task. It's an endeavor that involves traversing realms and facing challenges beyond mortal comprehension. Artemis understood the urgency of your situation and the need for immediate action. She believes in your capabilities and your bond as a trio. Otherwise, she would call in other gods to help her."

Fiona's voice was tinged with determination. "We won't let her down. We'll protect the Auric Blaze and Selene's ashes with everything we have."

Thanos offered a nod of approval. “She has a lot of faith in you guys. She’s left the fate of several artifacts that hold the potential to alter the very fabric of existence in your hands. As you very well know, they are not mere tools; they possess the power to reshape worlds. I know it's frustrating and a pain in the ass, but it says something about you guys that she trusts you so much.”

Grams came down the stairs as Thanos said this. “Artemis is a smart goddess for trusting these three. You’ve got each other. But you also have other powerful friends. I think it’s time to call upon Phoebe. As a Pleiades, she has extensive knowledge of ancient spells and artifacts. She might know something about stabilizing the Auric Blaze.”

“Great idea, Grams!” Fiona reached for her phone and dialed Phoebe's number.

After a few rings, she picked up. “Hello?” Phoebe's voice sounded slightly tired. I knew what it was like to be middle-aged and pregnant, so I imagined she was exhausted lately.

"Phoebe, it's Fi, Aislinn, and Violet. We need your help. We have the Auric Blaze, and we don't know how to control it,” Fiona’s eyes widened, and she smacked her forehead, then quickly added, “And we wanted to finalize travel plans for Nina’s birthday.”

“I was just about to call you guys. The plane should be there to pick you up soon. But it sounds like you’re not ready.” A pause followed, and then Phoebe's voice was laced with both curiosity and concern. "If you’re calling about the Auric Blaze, you probably aren’t able to come out. And I’m sorry to say that I don’t know much about what it is.”

“The Auric Blaze is an incredibly powerful force, Queenie. Your friends need to be prepared to handle it.” The male voice in the background had to be Phoebe’s mate and god, Aidoneus. His words sent a chill down my spine.

“We have no choice but to be ready,” I said. “We can't risk it falling into the wrong hands. And we wouldn’t dare miss Nina’s birthday.” The timing might not be right, but we had promised. Plus, the Relic Keeper was in the U.S.

Phoebe sighed softly. “I will learn more about it, but how will you be able to come out for Nina’s party?”

Fiona scowled at her friend. “We aren’t missing Nina’s party. It slipped my mind with everything going on, but we will be there.”

Grams pursed her lips. “We need to work on finding a way to put the

Auric Blaze in stasis until we can decipher more about its true nature and the three of you return. We don't want it to burn out while you are gone."

"I'm glad you're coming out. Let me gather Nina, Nana, Mom and Selene and see what we can come up with and call you back," Phoebe said.

We said our goodbyes and hung up. Argies presses a kiss to my lips. "I'm going to pack a bag for the three of us and be right back, so we are ready to go. I had no idea the party was so soon."

Fiona lifted her shoulders to her ears. "It escaped me with everything going on. Sorry."

Thanos shook his head. "Don't worry about it. I'll grab a bag for Violet and me. Be back." He and Argies left without another word while Violet and I were still reeling from shock.

Bas crossed to the desk and lifted a blue box. "I finished the necklace, so you guys can enchant it during the flight. And I have our suitcase packed already."

Grams brought some tomes to the island and set them down. "Let's learn what we can about the blaze."

We huddled around the island, poring over ancient tomes and scrolls, sifting through spells and incantations. Fiona's worry was palpable, her eyes darting nervously between the pages.

A few minutes later, I pointed to a passage in a book. "I bet we can use this spell to put it in stasis. That'll buy us some time to get the other artifacts to safety. If the Relic Keeper isn't coming to us, we can go to her while we are there for Nina."

Just as doubt threatened to consume us, the ringing of Fiona's phone broke the tense silence. Fiona answered it to reveal Nina, Phoebe's teenage daughter, looking over her mother's shoulder with a determined expression.

"Hi, Auntie Fi, Aislinn, Violet," Nina greeted with a small smile. "Mom said you might need some extra help with research."

I grinned, genuinely relieved to see her. "Nina, you're a lifesaver. We need all the information we can get."

Fiona smiled as well. "Ais is right. We just put the Auric Blaz in stasis and need to know more. But that doesn't eclipse how excited I am to get there and celebrate your birthday with you."

Nina's smile was bright. "Me, too. It's gonna be the best. The Twisted Sisters are here, and you would not believe the shelving unit they made me out of an old VW van!"

Phoebe snorted when Fiona's eyes went wide. "We can talk about that later. Let's get them what information we can so Grams isn't left holding the bag when they leave."

Grams poked her head into the shot. "I would appreciate that."

Together, we delved deeper into the mysteries of the Auric Blaze. Minutes turned into what seemed like days but were likely only an hour as we discussed different spells and theories: combining our knowledge and abilities in a quest for answers.

And then, a breakthrough.

Nina's eyes lit up as she pored over a particularly ancient and cryptic text. "I think I've found something. And a ritual that might allow us to reactivate the Auric Blaze if needed."

Hope blossomed in our hearts as we studied the ritual carefully. It was risky, but it was a glimmer of possibility in the darkness.

"We'll need to be cautious," I warned, my gaze shifting between my friends. "But if this is our only chance, we will have to take it."

Fiona nodded solemnly, her determination unwavering. "Agreed. Can you read us that passage, Nina, so I can record this information for later use?"

Nina read aloud as Fiona wrote on her tablet as fast as she could. "The Auric Blaze is a special type of flame that can be enchanted to create a powerful protective ward. When the flame is lit, it emits a bright golden light, which is said to symbolize the protective aura that surrounds it. The flame itself is usually contained in a special type of lamp or lantern, which is often made of bronze, other protective metals, or other world powers.

"To enchant the flame, a skilled practitioner must perform a ritual in which they imbue the fire with magical energy and focus their intent on creating a powerful ward. The specific details of the ritual may vary depending on the practitioner. Still, it involves the use of herbs, crystals, and other magical ingredients that are believed to enhance the protective properties of the flame.

"Once the Auric Blaze is enchanted, it can be used in a variety of ways to create a protective ward. For example, the flame may be placed in a particular location to create a barrier against negative energies or spirits. It can also be used to purify objects or spaces or to create a shield around a person or group of people.

"Overall, the Auric Blaze is a potent symbol of protection and safety and is highly valued by those who practice magic and seek to ward off harmful

energies and entities,” Nina finished.

Fiona shook out her hand. “Thanks, Nina. So now all we need to do is find that spell to put the Blaze in stasis.”

We searched for several minutes until I tapped a page I thought looked promising. Fiona scanned the information with a shrug. “It’s worth a try. Grab some belladonna and quartz, and let’s give this a try.”

Violet had the herb and crystal in hand, Fiona shoved the phone at Bas, and we were back outside near the fire in seconds. The flames were alive with pulsating energy as we gathered around the mystical phenomenon that was the Auric Blaze. Its vibrant flames danced and swirled with an otherworldly intensity, casting an iridescent glow that painted our faces with hues of gold and amethyst. Fiona, Violet, and I stood in a tight circle. A mixture of awe and trepidation coursed through our veins.

“We can’t leave with this giving off so much energy,” Violet murmured, her voice laced with concern. “It’s attracting more danger by the second.”

Fiona nodded in agreement, her gaze fixed on the mesmerizing display before us. “But we need to be careful not to disturb it further.”

I took a steadying breath, channeling the elements within me as I formulated a plan to support my two friends. I didn’t have their magic. “I believe you two can cast a stasis spell on the Auric Blaze. All you need to do is focus on freezing the flames in a suspended state, giving us time.”

Fiona inclined her head while Violet squared her shoulders. They sucked in a breath, ready to chant their spell, when Phoebe’s voice cut into the moment. “Wait! I think I found something.”

Fiona’s head swiveled, and she looked back at the phone that Bas was holding, facing us. “What? Please tell me you discovered how to do this spell.”

It was hard to tell from the distance between us, but I swear Phoebe smirked. “Nana found something in one of the books Aidon brought over a few minutes ago.”

Nana’s silver head popped onto the screen. “There’s a ritual you need to do, so it’s a good thing you didn’t go off half-cocked.”

Grams thrust her hands on her hips. “My girls never do something without a clear picture in their heads. But we appreciate knowing what we are doing.”

Nana inclined her head. “It says here to put Auric Blaze in stasis. You need to use a special incantation and a ritual. The incantation must be spoken

while being near the Auric Blaze. The ritual involves placing the flame inside a specially prepared container and sealing it with a specific sigil.”

We converged on the phone with a scowl. “How the hell do we do that?” I asked. “We can’t touch the flame.”

Aidon’s expression turned thoughtful as he focused on the flame hovering behind us. “Prepare the container and set it below the flame, then use telekinesis to lift it over the flame, maybe?”

“What kind of container? Does it say?” Sebastian said at the same time Fiona said, “None of us have telekinesis.”

“It doesn’t say what kind of container, but it needs to have a lid and a sigil put onto it,” Nana replied. “I would use glass so you can monitor the flame.”

Grams nodded and started for the house. “We have a casserole dish we can use. I just need to alter the shape with magic.”

Fiona lifted her hand. “Don’t forget to do the lid, too.” Grams nodded and waved her hand as she disappeared into the house.

Nana's voice got our attention again. “It looks like you won’t need to use Aidon’s method of telekinesis. After reciting the incantation, the flame will start to diminish in size and intensity until it becomes a small, flickering light. The container should be brought close to the flame and the sigil drawn onto the surface of the container.”

I sighed in relief. “That’s a huge relief. I was planning out how to lift the container using air.”

Grams came running back, holding up a glass jar. “I’ve got it.” Grams had clearly altered it while heading back outside. Talk about multi-tasking. Where some struggled to walk and chew gum, Grams could run, cast spells, drink coffee, and dress down an imbecile at the same time.

Fiona smiled at Grams. “Nice. That was fast.”

Fiona clasped one of my hands and one of Violet’s as we faced the Auric Blaze. “Okay, we’re ready.”

“The incantation goes as follows,” Nana said. “Repeat after me.

“Blazing light of mystical fire,
heed my call and rest in peace.
By the power of the elements,
I command you to enter a state of stasis.
Let your flames be quenched,
your energy restrained,

until the time when you are needed again.”

Despite not being a witch, I chanted the ancient incantation with my friends. The big difference was that their voices resonated like a delicate melody, weaving through the air with an aura of mystique. Mine was simply an accompaniment, although I felt no less important to the process.

Threads of magic extended from their outstretched hands, intertwining with the swirling flames of the Auric Blaze. A sensation of energy, both ethereal and tangible, pulsed through my fingertips as I lent my energy to the process. It was an invigorating phenomenon.

The flames responded, their wild dance gradually slowing as if being drawn into an unseen web of enchantment. A shimmering field of luminescent light enveloped the Auric Blaze, gradually reducing its size and encasing it in otherworldly ice. The crackling and hissing sounds of the flames faded, replaced by a hushed stillness that hung in the air like a tranquil breath.

We watched in hushed amazement as the stasis spell took hold. It slowed the once-fiery spectacle until it was a tiny version of what Artemis gave us that moved so slowly, you almost couldn't see it. Grams placed the glass container below the flames. Without having to do anything, the Blaze lowered into the container. Grams held the lid at the ready.

Fiona glanced back. “Okay, what do we draw?”

Phoebe held a drawing done in black and white to the screen. Fiona drew the sigil with her finger on the side of the container. The image glowed brightly for several seconds before it became a pulsing black image.

“Once the sigil is complete, the container should be sealed tightly,” Phoebe instructed. Grams slammed the lid down. The sigil slithered up the side to cover the lid and edge of the glass like a seal.

“We did it,” Fiona whispered, her eyes wide with wonder.

A soft breeze rustled the leaves of the surrounding trees, carrying with it the subtle scents of moss and earth. The night was alive with the gentle hum of nocturnal creatures and the distant melodies of chirping insects. It lent a harmonious backdrop to our hushed conversation.

“Now that the Auric Blaze is in stasis, we can focus on getting the artifacts to safety and celebrating Nina,” Violet suggested, her voice carrying a note of determination as we headed back inside the house.

“What if this isn't reversible?” Fiona murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. “What if Artemis gets pissed because we turned it dormant forever?”

Violet placed a comforting hand on Fiona's shoulder. "We can't think like that. We have to believe there's a way to undo what we did. We had no choice. You know that."

Nina's voice came from the phone that Bas was holding while we did the spell in the cemetery. "There's nothing to worry about, Auntie. The Auric Blaze will then remain in stasis until the container is opened and the sigil is broken. Doing that will release the flame and allow it to be reactivated so you can do what you need to do with it."

A smile broke out over Fiona's face when she spun around and faced the phone. "Thank you so much. That's going to come in handy when we return. For now, we need to get to the airfield. We will see you soon."

"You're welcome, Auntie Fi. I'll keep looking as well," Nina promised.

The air was thick with tension as we hung up the phone. My heart still pounded from the revelations that had unfolded over the call. The Auric Blaze was safely encased in a mystical stasis. But the next steps to ensure Selene's remains and the Blaze were protected weighed heavily upon us. Fiona's brow was furrowed, and Violet's fingers tapped nervously against her thigh.

"We need to get these artifacts to Nylah sooner rather than later," I said, breaking the uneasy silence.

Fiona nodded in agreement, her voice edged with urgency. "She's the only one we can trust to keep them safe." Fiona pulled out her phone, dialing Nylah's number with a sense of determination. We huddled together as the phone rang, our breaths held in anticipation.

CHAPTER 3



*V*iolet

"Hello?" Nylah's voice came through, but it was laced with weariness.

"Nylah, it's Fiona, a friend of Phoebe's," she began, her tone serious. "We need to talk. It's important."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and I could almost feel Nylah's wariness through the phone. "Fiona, now might not be the best time," Nylah replied cautiously.

I leaned in closer to the phone, my voice urgent. "Nylah, we understand that you've been through a lot. But we have several Objects of Power that we can't allow to fall into the wrong hands. And we have an emergency situation we need to resolve with the Auric Blaze, so we need to get these artifacts to you immediately." I felt like a pushy bitch, but we didn't have time to dance around the issue.

Nylah let out a heavy sigh, her hesitation palpable. "I can't promise anything, but tell me what you've got."

Fiona took a deep breath, her voice steady as she recounted the recent events – from the creation of the Godstone and the discovery of the Fountain of Youth to our encounter with the Auric Blaze. Every word she spoke carried the weight of our experiences, the urgency of our situation.

"We're in over our heads, Nylah," Aislinn admitted, her voice tinged with vulnerability. "We need your help. We need you to take these artifacts and keep them safe. We are headed to Maine for a celebration with Phoebe and can bring them to you if you're willing to meet."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. For a moment, I

feared Nylah might refuse. But then, her voice softened, her concern evident. “Alright. When are you leaving?”

It felt like a weight was lifted off of my shoulders. “Phoebe is sending a plane for us. We will be there in a few hours.”

“I’ll text you a location for a meeting tomorrow,” she finally said. “If you’re telling the truth, I’ll take the artifacts. But if anything feels off, I won’t hesitate to walk away.”

“We understand, Nylah,” Aislinn replied quickly, her tone grateful. “Thank you.”

Nylah hung up without another word, leaving us with a sense of both relief and urgency. We exchanged glances, our resolve solidifying.

“We’ve got a trip to take,” Fiona said, her expression determined.

I nodded, my heart clenching in my chest. The air was charged with a mix of excitement and tension, knowing that our mission to safeguard the Objects of Power was of utmost importance. Fiona, Aislinn and I exchanged determined glances, each of us ready to face whatever challenges awaited us.

But as I was about to join the others, Thanos arrived and gently pulled me aside. His presence was a calming anchor amidst the whirlwind of emotions that had enveloped me. “Lightning,” he began, his tone tinged with sadness, “I wish I could accompany you on this journey. You know that, right? But the length of your trip... it would mean leaving the Hellmouth without my supervision too long.”

Despite the fact that I had known he couldn’t come, I felt a pang of disappointment. We all understood the constraints that bound him to the Hellmouth and the sacrifices he made to make our world safer. Thanos had his own responsibilities to uphold, and his own battles to fight.

I met his gaze, my heart aching at the thought of being separated, even temporarily. “You don’t have to explain, Thanos. Your duty to protect the Hellmouth comes first. It’s okay.”

He reached out, his touch a reassuring warmth against my cheek. “I’m sorry, Violet. But I promise, I’ll be watching over you from afar. If you ever need me, just call, and I’ll be there.”

A bittersweet smile touched my lips as I placed my hand over his, cherishing the connection we shared. “You’re always there when I need you. I’ll carry you with me, as always.”

Our eyes locked, and in that moment, words became unnecessary. Thanos leaned down, his lips meeting mine in a tender kiss. It was a promise, a

reassurance that our bond remained unbreakable even in our physical separation.

As we pulled away, I could see the sincerity in his eyes. “Stay safe, Violet. Protect those artifacts, but remember, your safety is paramount.”

“I will,” I whispered, my voice filled with determination.

With one final, lingering touch, Thanos released me, allowing me to rejoin Fiona and Aislinn. As I walked back to my friends, my heart carried the memory of his embrace, the strength of his love serving as a guiding light in the darkness.

The journey ahead was filled with uncertainty. It was dangerous to take these items off of Pymm’s Pondsides, but we had no choice. With my friends by my side and Thanos in my heart, I was ready to face whatever challenges this journey held.

Argies had arrived at some point while I was talking to Thanos, and we were in Bas’s truck and on our way within no time. The drive to the private airport was short, and the interior was bustling with controlled chaos as we hurried through the terminals, our sense of urgency driving us forward. We had wasted no time in gathering our belongings, knowing that the fate of the Objects of Power hung in the balance.

Before long, we found ourselves on a private plane, soaring through the sky above the endless expanse of ocean. The plush seats and polished interior were a stark contrast to the gravity of our mission. As the plane ascended, a mixture of nervous excitement and trepidation settled over us.

“Can you believe we’re flying with the Objects of Power?” Aislinn’s voice held a hint of fear as she glanced around the luxurious cabin.

Fiona’s fingers tapped nervously against the armrest. “It’s unsettling. The weight of responsibility is almost suffocating. I can’t wait until we give these to Nylah.”

I settled into my seat, trying to shake off the unease that had settled in the pit of my stomach. “I can’t help but feel nervous, too. It feels like we are pushing our luck flying across the pond to the United States.” Not to mention I was waiting for Argies and Kalli to start losing their cool. As dragons, they have never been fond of flying.

My mind drifted back to a previous flight, a chaotic ordeal when Kalli had cried incessantly. We didn’t know it at first, but she’d been targeted by a tiny ice demon that had infiltrated the plane. The memory sent a shiver down my spine as I recalled the frantic moments spent warding off the creature

while trying to soothe Kalli.

“It’s going to be alright. Look, even Argies and Kalli are chill. That’s got to be a good omen,” Aislinn said,

Fiona chuckled. “Private jets are definitely the way to go. We don’t have to worry about mundies overhearing anything, and the seats are far more comfortable.” We all agreed with that sentiment.

As the plane continued its ascent, a sudden jolt sent a ripple of tension through the cabin. It had to be turbulence. My grip on the armrest tightened as I gazed out the window. My mind might have told me what it was, but my heart was still pounding in my chest. My eyes widened, and my breath caught, too. I could have sworn I saw something land on the wing. It was a fleeting shadow that vanished before I could process what it was.

"Fiona, Aislinn, did you see that?" I stammered my voice barely above a whisper.

They exchanged puzzled glances before leaning over to peer out the window. "I don't see anything," Aislinn said, her brow furrowed.

Fiona's expression mirrored my concern as she scanned the wing. "Yeah, there's nothing there."

My pulse quickened as the turbulence intensified, and this time, Fiona let out a startled gasp. "Did you see that? Something flew by!"

“It landed on the wing,” Aislinn cried out.

A sense of urgency flooded the cabin as Fiona and I exchanged alarmed glances. Without a second thought, we both reached for our magic, focusing our energy on the plane's metal exterior. We needed to fortify its defenses to prevent whatever had landed on the wing from gaining entry.

As we chanted the incantations, our magic resonated with the plane's structure, forming an invisible barrier of protection. The cabin hummed with energy, our shared intent fueling our efforts.

But then, a chilling screech cut through the air, and I turned to see a creature with wings of shadow and eyes gleaming with malice. It clawed at the metal, a maddening determination in its movements.

Fiona's voice was firm as she met my gaze. “We need to cast offensive spells to get rid of it without damaging the plane.”

“Be careful,” Argies cautioned as he held Kalli who was sitting quietly watching what we were doing.

I nodded in agreement as my heart was ready to pound through my chest as I summoned the magical energy within me. With synchronized

movements, Fiona and I directed our spells toward the creature, trying to dislodge it without causing harm to the aircraft.

The cabin filled with bursts of light and crackling energy as our magic clashed with the creature's evil intentions. A scream escaped me when the plane dropped lower.

I grabbed Fiona, who was shaking like a leaf in a storm. "Do we continue?" I asked.

She sucked in a breath and steadied herself. "We can't let it get the artifacts. Be ready to shift and get Ais and Kalli to safety should the worst happen," Fiona told Argies.

Aislinn firmed her lips. "We've got this. I'm doing what I can with my elements as well, but we are going to beat this arsehole."

The battle waged on. Each spell was a careful balance between power and restraint. Sweat poured down my back as we worked. We were going to beat this demon. I'd become a firm believer in manifestation and positive thinking impacting the outcome of events. Finally, with a triumphant surge of energy, our combined efforts forced the creature to retreat. I fist-pumped the air, and its shadowy form dissipated into the air. The cabin grew still once more, the only remnants of the encounter being the lingering traces of magic.

Fiona, Aislinn, and I exchanged a breathless glance, our expressions a mix of relief and triumph. "We did it," Fiona said, her voice tinged with surprise.

"Yeah," I replied, a mixture of exhaustion and exhilaration coursing through me. "And we didn't crash the plane, either."

We remained on alert as the plane continued its journey. My heart was still racing, but now it was with a sense of accomplishment. We had faced a danger head-on, using our magic to shield both the plane and ourselves from harm. The Objects of Power were still safe.

The remainder of the flight was fairly uneventful, with normal bouts of turbulence and no further attacks. I felt strung out by the time the wheel touched down on the tarmac. My legs were wobbly as I descended the stairs. Adrenaline gave me a boost as I realized we were vulnerable all over again, having landed. We couldn't hide the Objects of Power entirely which is why it was so dangerous to have them in our possession. Tainted witches would be able to find them and us if they tried.

Fiona had a text waiting by the time we landed in Maine. "Nylah wants to meet us in Raleigh after the party tonight."

Damn, that was a relief. Once we got to Phoebe's, we would have her and Aidoneus help mask the artifacts. It was going to be a long day until we handed these over tonight. I was glad I got some sleep on the airplane. It was the middle of the night, and I doubted we would get any rest once we arrived at Phoebe's house.

Aislinn nodded as we headed across the tarmac to the car that was waiting for us. "We should text Phoebe and have the plane waiting so we can get to Nylah in time tonight. I'd rather not keep these in our possession longer than necessary."

Fiona sighed as she sat in the back of the car. "This is the life. I'm going to have to thank Phoebe for the red-carpet treatment. Especially since I just asked her to use the plane again."

I hadn't yet met Phoebe in person, and yet she was going to great lengths for us. It spoke to the kind of person she was at heart. "Phoebe is a lifesaver," I agreed. "We should get her something to say thank you. We could also pick something else up to go with Nina's necklace." We had enchanted the gorgeous silver chain and charm that Bas had made for the teen.

The drive from the airport to Phoebe's house was even faster than on our way out. The air held a sense of excitement and mystery as we approached the front door. Anticipation coursed through me as Fiona and Sebastian climbed the stairs first with Kalli, Argies, and Aislinn behind them. I brought up the rear. The prospect of meeting Phoebe and the Six Twisted Sisters had us all curious and intrigued.

As we neared the front door, the soft strains of music and peals of laughter greeted us. It wrapped the atmosphere in a festive embrace despite it being after two in the morning. We exchanged glances of surprise, for we hadn't expected to find Phoebe or the sisters awake. I wondered what they were doing in there. Based on the strings of twinkling lights adorning the trees in the front, I'd say they had party prep well underway.

Phoebe's face lit up as she opened the door, her enthusiasm palpable. "You made it! Welcome!"

Fiona folded Phoebe in a big hug. "It's been too long!"

"Agreed," Phoebe said before she stepped aside and let us all in her house. We walked into the kitchen, where party decorating was in full swing.

Dre, one of the Sisters, greeted us with a warm smile. "We've talked over the phone many times. It's a pleasure to finally meet."

We nodded, and everyone was introduced. I would never remember all

the names. There were too many people and too much going on. Fiona grabbed an energy drink and was talking animatedly with Phoebe while Bas stood off to the side with Argies. Kalli was flitting around, telling everyone about herself.

“How can we help?” I asked as I stood next to Aislinn. I knew her well enough to know she was as overwhelmed as me. The place was chaotic. I couldn’t imagine it coming together in time for the party.

Dani, one of the sisters, had an air of authority and didn’t hesitate to give us directions. “We need to get these lights hung on the trees, and the disco balls hung on strings above the dance floor. We want this place to look absolutely enchanting.”

I nodded and grabbed Bas and Argies. “Time to get to work.” Aislinn laughed as Argies made a face. He was happy to go outside, though and helped us secure lights on the branches of trees while Aislinn, Bas, and I wrapped the trunks. We worked until we had created an ambiance that felt straight out of a fairy tale.

Fiona’s laughter rang out as she playfully adjusted a strand of lights. “I’ve never seen a more elaborate birthday party. They really did think of every detail.”

Aislinn grinned, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “It’s like magic!”

As we weaved the lights through the bushes next, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of camaraderie. It was as if the act of decorating was a metaphor for our journey together—each of us contributing to something greater than ourselves.

Phoebe’s voice carried a note of excitement as she surveyed our progress. “This is shaping up beautifully. And I’m so glad you’re all here.”

Dre nodded in agreement, a satisfied smile on her lips. “It’s amazing what a little teamwork can accomplish. It usually takes us a lot longer to transform an entire house like this.”

Dani’s commanding tone pulled us all together, her direction guiding our efforts. “Let’s make sure these lights are evenly spaced. We want it to be perfect.”

And so, under the starlit sky and the guidance of the Six Twisted Sisters, we continued to weave our magic. It was hardly any toil with everyone helping out. We created an enchanting scene that would set the stage for an unforgettable evening.

As the final lights were hung, we stepped back to admire our work. The

yard was transformed. There was a wood floor for dancing in one corner, tables and chairs in another. And yet more tables with chafing dishes waiting for food. There were personalized labels on tiny signs that would tell guests which of Nina's favorites were being served.

Phoebe's grateful smile spoke volumes. "Thank you, all of you. This means so much to me. Magic robbed Nina of her last birthday, and this more than makes up for it."

Dre's eyes sparkled as she gestured toward the glowing yard. "It's a pleasure to have new friends join in our festivities."

Dani nodded in agreement, her gaze sweeping over the scene. "Tonight is going to be magical."

The air buzzed with excitement as the party preparations continued around us. We had arrived as strangers but were now fully immersed in a newfound friendship. As the sun dipped below the horizon, it cast a warm, golden hue across the yard. We realized that in the midst of our excitement we had forgotten something important. We never found a special gift for Phoebe and Nina. Our shared glance was met with sheepish smiles, and we vowed to make it up to them.

Fiona chuckled as she glanced around at the twinkling lights. "Well, I guess our gift is adding a touch of magic to this already magical scene."

Nina, Phoebe's teenage daughter, joined us with a grin. "You know, you being here is gift enough. And besides, the real gift is all the desserts on that VW Bus shelf over there. You won't believe what they can create!"

The day passed in a flurry of activity and when the party finally began, the atmosphere was electric. I was in shock over what the Twisted Sisters had put together. It was nothing short of outstanding. And, yes, my favorite was the shelving unit they'd creatively repurposed from the end of a VW bus. It was laden with an array of delectable desserts. My mouth watered as I took in the sight, marveling at the ingenuity behind the setup.

Conversations flowed effortlessly, laughter and camaraderie binding us together. We found ourselves surrounded by a mix of new faces and old friends, the air buzzing with anticipation for the evening ahead.

Our little social butterfly reveled in the attention and Kalliopi had a blast showing off her dragon form and the diamonds studding her wings to a group of intrigued older kids. Sebastian, on the other hand, watched the festivities with an air of dignified detachment. He occasionally granted a gracious nod to those who approached him. Argies spoke to Aidon, Tsekani, and Murtagh

while sharing a beer.

As the music started and people hit the dance floor, Fiona, Aislinn, and I couldn't resist joining in. The rhythm of the music matched the beat of our hearts. We danced with abandon, the worries of our mission temporarily forgotten.

The night was a whirlwind of laughter, dancing, and indulging in delicious treats. We laughed until our cheeks hurt, danced until our feet ached, and savored each moment as it unfolded.

Hours later, a pleasant exhaustion settled over me as the party drew to a close. I watched as Kalliopi reluctantly parted ways with her newfound friends. Her joy evident in the twinkle of her eyes. Vowing to return and express our gratitude properly, we bid farewell to Phoebe, her family, and the Six Twisted Sisters.

CHAPTER 4



Fiona

As we walked away from the party, the memories of the evening echoed in our minds as a reminder of the importance of connection and celebration. With North Carolina calling us forward, we headed back to the airport. I couldn't wait for the next step and then to see my kids.

"Nylah changed the meeting spot to the airport in New Bern, North Carolina," I said as we got settled into our seats on the plane.

Violet lifted a shoulder. "At least we don't have to go anywhere once we land. Although, we should definitely check into that Air BNB. It looked super cute with all the bees."

I nodded. "We will check in for sure. I want to see the kids before going home."

My heart was racing with a mix of anticipation and anxiety as we got off the plane. The world around us seemed to hold its breath while we stood there beneath the moonlight. Nylah's arrival was marked by the soft rustling of leaves and the faint scent of pine, and we turned to see her approaching with a wary expression. It was the massive black horse with wings walking behind her that made my heart skip a beat or two.

"You made it," she said, her gaze flickering between us.

"We did. It's nice to finally meet you, Nylah," I replied, my voice steady. "And we are sorry for any part we played in the upheaval of your life. You have to understand that we needed someone we could trust to keep the Objects of Power we find safe."

One of Nylah's eyebrows lifted to her hairline. "You don't trust Artemis with them? She's got to have the most secure vault of anyone."

I chuckled. “No, we don’t trust the goddess with things that will make her more powerful which is why we asked for you. And now, we need you to take these artifacts. They're too dangerous for us to keep.”

Nylah's eyes held a mixture of skepticism and concern as she extended her hand to receive the small pouch containing the Godstone and the vial of Fountain of Youth. She weighted them in her hand which had started to glow faintly. Her power filled the air around us. “I'll take them,” she said finally, her voice firm. “But remember, if I sense any deception or danger, I won't hesitate to take action.”

We nodded in agreement, a sense of trust and understanding passing between us. The weight of the artifacts was lifted from our shoulders, replaced by a renewed determination to uncover the truth behind their origins and purpose.

As Nylah turned to leave, my voice cut through the air. I couldn’t keep the concern from my words. “How are you doing? You seem on edge. We’d like to help if you’ll let us.”

Nylah’s gaze went to Bas and Argies then Kalli. “Honestly, I’m not sure how I am going to make it now that my life has been destroyed. Arjun, my husband, was adjusting to his condition and then something happened. I’m pretty sure I’m going to lose him over this.”

A heavy weight settled on my heart. “And you blame us. We’re the ones that asked for a Relic Keeper. Please let us help both of you.”

Sebastian stepped forward. “I understand your husband is going through a rough transition. I can craft him a charm that these three might be able to enchant with a spell to help him maintain a semblance of control over himself.”

Nylah considered the offer as she leaned into the Pegasus who was nuzzling her. “I’d like that very much. I will text you my address and you can come by tomorrow.”

With a nod, we thanked her and watched as Nylah disappeared into the sky, the artifacts in her possession. Our journey was far from over, but with the support of newfound allies and the weight of responsibility shared, we were ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

The Air BNB Hive House in New Bern stood before us, a cozy haven nestled amidst a quiet neighborhood. The moonlight cast a cool, silver glow over the surroundings as Aislinn, Violet, and I stepped out of the rental car. We were accompanied by Argies, Kalliopi, and Sebastian.

It had been a long couple of days since we left Pymm's Pondsides in England. I'd lost track of time and looked forward to collapsing in one of the beds. The Hive House was one of my favorite places to stay in New Bern. It was clean, comfortable and offered everything we would need in a temporary home on our journey.

As we entered the charming abode, the scent of wood and the soothing colors of the interior greeted us, inviting us to make ourselves at home. Kalli ran right to the sectional couch and grabbed the blanket. She curled up and looked up at us. "Can I watch a show, mum?" She asked Aislinn.

"Sure, nugget," Aislinn said. Knowing how to control a TV in the U.S., I grabbed the remote and turned on one of her favorite cartoons on Netflix. She was asleep within seconds.

The others were visibly tired from the day's travels. Argies stretched out on the couch next to her, his eyes drooping with weariness, while Kalliopi's breathing was soft and steady.

Aislinn had a smile on her face as she watched her family. "I'm going to put our luggage in the room."

Violet nodded. "And I'm going to sleep. The jetlag is catching up with me."

I watched my friends walk away then took mine and Bas's things into our room. He was out walking the grounds. He came inside to settle himself near the bedroom window. He was always our vigilant protector. "I'd like to make the charm for Arjun tonight. You get some sleep. There's a fire pit I will use in the backyard."

My entire body was exhausted. I wanted nothing more than to lay down and get some rest, but I wasn't going to leave my mate to do this alone. "I want to help you. Did you bring any silver?"

Bas put his suitcase on the stand and unzipped the side. "I wasn't sure what we would need to do for Nina, so I brought a couple of bars." He pulled one out and pressed a kiss to my lips.

Beaming up at him, I threaded my fingers through his free hand. "You always think of everything."

Bas smirked at me as we headed to the backyard, where a fire pit stood. I snapped my fingers and flames started dancing over the logs the owners had stacked there for renter's use. Sebastian sat down in front of the flames and began his intricate work. He didn't have all of his equipment but that didn't stop him from transforming a small amount of silver into a charm. He

brought one of the small hammers and a pair of tongs that he used to shape the disc and add a beautifully detailed wolf etched upon it. The rhythmic clinking of metal on metal filled the air as Bas expertly shaped the silver, his movements deft and purposeful.

I watched him work, appreciating the dedication he poured into his craft and the way his muscles moved while he worked. Bas's connection to fire and metal was one of the many things that made him extraordinary, and I felt a sense of pride having him for my mate.

As Bas completed his task, we exchanged a knowing look. With a satisfied nod, he set the charm aside, and I sat in his lap by the fire pit. "Impressive work, Bas," I complimented him, my voice hushed in the quiet night.

He pressed a brief kiss to my lips. "Thank you, Fiona. This charm is meant to carry the unique magic that you cast. I designed it to hold an enchantment that will aid Arjun in finding a sense of calm and clarity."

My head went to Bas's shoulders as he wrapped a blanket around me. I meant to talk to him more about what he'd done, but my eyes got heavy. Eventually, fatigue caught up with us. Bas and I drifted into slumber, the comforting embrace of the night cradling us as we rested.

When I awoke with the gentle light of morning filtering through the windows. "When did you bring me inside?" I asked when I found Bas watching me.

One of his eyebrows lifted to his hairline. "About an hour ago. I was hoping you'd sleep more."

I sat up and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. "What time is it?"

Bas swatted my backside. "It's almost ten in the morning."

I squealed with laughter and headed to the bathroom to relieve myself, wash my face, and brush my teeth. Once that was done I changed out of yesterday's clothes and met my friends in the kitchen.

I found Aislinn and Violet already at the table. Their expressions were determined and focused. The charm lay before them on the wood surface. The sunlight glinted off of the silver waiting to be infused with magic.

Violet's voice was steady as she spoke, her hands hovering over the charm. "Arjun needs strength and resilience. We need to enchant this charm to provide him with a source of inner calm and clarity. To help him hold onto who he is when the beast takes over."

Aislinn nodded in agreement as she chewed on her lower lip. "Let's infuse

it with a spell that will act as a constant reminder of his true self.”

I clapped Aislinn on the shoulder. “You’re really getting good at this, Ais.”

We joined hands and our collective magic intertwined. I directed it out so it mixed with the charm. A web of silver energy weaved in and around it. Words of power flowed from our lips, our voices harmonizing in a chant that resonated with purpose and intent. The charm began to glow, a soft, ethereal light enveloping the silver. It pulsed with the magic we had woven for Arjun.

When the enchantment was complete, we released our hands and the charm settled before us. It radiated with newfound energy. It was a tangible representation of our bond and the collective strength we possessed.

With a satisfied smile, Aislinn picked up the charm. “I know I’m not a witch and as a Fae, I can’t cast magic like you guys. But I feel like I contribute every time we do this.”

“That’s because you do. It’s not the same without you,” Violet said. “And having the three of us do this rather than just Fiona, who is powerful enough to cast the enchantment, will also provide a reminder for Arjun that he is never alone.”

Bas inclined his head. “That reminder might be the difference between his success and failure.”

I nodded in agreement. “Should we head out and grab something to eat? She sent her address thirty minutes ago and said we could stop by anytime.”

“Let’s pick up Thai, or something we can share with Nylah and her family,” Argies said as he put his mug in the sink and rinsed it out.

“There’s a great place downtown we can grab some food. I’ll put an order in online.” I grabbed my phone and winced when I noticed I hadn’t charged it the night before. I placed the order and we loaded up in the rental. After plugging in my phone, I input directions to the Thai place and ran inside to pick up the order.

Bas had already put Nylah’s address into the GPS when I returned carrying four bags. I looked back at Violet as I stowed the food at my feet. “I might have over ordered.”

Violet snorted. “No such thing where Thai food is concerned.”

Bas nodded in agreement. “You might not have gotten enough. There are going to be three hungry men eating today.”

“Oh wow,” I blurted when I noticed the direction Bas was driving. All thoughts of food flew out the window. “This is a gorgeous area of town.

Either Arjun makes a good living or they bought early to be right on the water.”

“It’s so beautiful here,” Violet said as she sat forward. “The weather is so different from back home. It’s hot and muggy but a pleasant change. I should have brought short trousers for the trip.”

Aislinn nodded her head in agreement as Bas pulled up to a beautiful older home. We climbed out and approached the front door. I hadn’t thought to text her that we were on our way and felt terrible for that oversight now that we were standing on her doorstep. Argies knocked while Kalliopi was smelling flowers in a pot on the porch.

The door opened and a good-looking guy with blonde hair and brown eyes stood there. I smiled wide at him and lifted the bags of food. “You must be Nylah’s husband, Arjun. I’m Fiona and this is my mate, Sebastian and my best friends Violet and Aislinn and Aislinn’s mate Argies and…”

“I’m Kalliopi and my dragon is purple and shiny.” Kalli beamed up at him with a handful of the yellow flowers from the pot in her hand.

The dark circles under Arjun’s eyes lightened some as he chuckled. His muscular chest moved up and down beneath his white t-shirt. “It’s nice to meet you, beautiful Kalliopi. I assume you’re here to see Nylah.”

“We’re here to see you both,” Bas announced. “We have something we think might help.”

Nylah appeared behind Arjun and I could see tear tracks running down her cheeks. My eyes went wide and my heart skipped a beat. “Is everything okay? Did we come at a bad time?”

Nylah looked at Arjun who looked guilty as hell. He turned and walked back into the house without another word. Nylah sniffed and gestured for us to come inside. “This isn’t the best time, but then there’s never a good time nowadays.”

I introduced everyone to Nylah and her husband as we followed Nylah into her kitchen and living room. The weight of the situation pressed upon us all. Aislinn, Violet, and I exchanged solemn glances, our hearts heavy with the knowledge that we had caused Nylah’s life to be overturned. We were the reason she was facing such a challenging and distressing ordeal. That didn’t sit well with me. We’d asked for someone reliable to give the artifacts to without considering what that would mean for that person.

Argies and Kalliopi stood by our sides. Their presence offered a silent show of support, while Sebastian remained nearby.

Nylah's weary eyes met ours and a mixture of exhaustion and worry was etched across her features. "I'm so grateful you all came. I've had my hands full, and I had to take a leave of absence from the firehouse. Although I wished it was an hour earlier. Then we might have been able to save Emi."

A heavy silence hung in the air, and I offered Nylah a sympathetic nod. "We're here for you, Nylah. Whatever you need. Who is Emi and what happened?"

Nylah took a deep breath, her voice tinged with concern. "Arjun... he's been behaving erratically. Easily irritated and shifting sporadically outside of the full moon. A bit ago he got mad and he hurt our family dog, Emi."

"I didn't mean to hurt her," Arjun said as he walked into the room carrying a small ball of fluff wrapped in a blanket.

Aislinn's brows furrowed, her voice filled with empathy. "Is she alright?"

Nylah's expression turned pained as she lifted one corner of the blanket. "The cuts were deep and my healing spells wouldn't work."

My stomach lurched when Emi started foaming at the mouth. "What's happening? We need to take her to the vet."

Arjun stood there shaking as he held the dog. I crossed to the island in the kitchen and put the bags down. "There is no such thing as healing spells. A healer's powers are different. It's best that you don't take her in. This is magical in nature. Let's see if we can help her. I have a healing potion that might help. It's geared toward magical healing." I didn't tell them it was designed for people because the truth was that Fae, elves, brownies, and nymphs has successfully taken this stuff so it might help Emi.

Arjun lifted hopeful eyes to me. "You mean it? This could save her?"

I lifted a shoulder. "I can't promise anything. It's not as effective as having a healer help her. But the potion has helped many heal enough to get out of mortal danger."

"I can call Seraphina if you get her better enough to survive the wait," Nylah said.

Arjun thrust the dog at me and I took the precious bundle. Violet stepped forward and took the potion from my bag and then handed it to Aislinn. "I'm going to keep her calm while you drip this into her mouth, okay?" I told Aislinn. Together, Aislinn and I managed to get the healing agent down Emi's throat.

The foam coming from her mouth stopped immediately and she stopped whimpering long enough to look over at her dad. Emotion clouded Arjun's

face as he pressed his forehead to the dog's. "Thank you."

Nylah took Emi from me and held her close. "Seraphina will be here later to finish healing you, Em. You're going to be okay...I think." Nylah's gaze flickered to Violet, who was standing closest to her. "What do you guys know about werewolves? Can they pass on the condition through a bite, like the lore suggests? That's not something anyone has been able to answer for us."

Violet's expression became thoughtful as she considered the question. "Well, there are many variations of werewolf lore, and some do suggest that a bite can transmit the condition. But in reality, I'm not entirely sure because there never has been one before. Werewolves and their abilities can differ greatly from the stories we've heard."

Aislinn's eyes lit up with an idea. "I know someone who might have more information. Let's give Phoebe a call."

Nylah nodded, a glimmer of hope in her eyes. "Yes, please. I'll take all the help and information I can get. I've pushed all of you away for so long and refused to help you. I'm surprised you're still willing to do anything for us."

I gave Nylah a sincere look. "We will always help you. And not just because we need you to take the artifacts we find. That applies after we return to England. Even though we will be a continent away, there might be something we can do to help."

With a quick exchange of glances, I dialed Phoebe's number. The anticipation built as we waited for her to pick up.

"Hello?" Phoebe's voice came through the line, and I quickly explained the situation to her.

After a thoughtful pause, Phoebe responded. "I don't have all the answers, but I can definitely look into it. And, I'll come down to help."

Nylah smiled up at us and was about to say something when the garage door opened and two teenage girls walked inside. They stopped next to their mom and looked at the dog in the blanket and then around the room. "What happened?" one of them asked.

Nylah scowled at her daughter. "Be nice, Maisy. These witches are from England and they came to help your father. They also helped Emi who was injured." Nylah introduced us to Maisy and Amelie.

Nylah's daughters, faces etched with worry, approached us tentatively. Amelie spoke up, her voice quivering. "What happened with Emi?"

Violet addressed the girls. “Your dad had a problem with his impulses and Emi was hurt. We think we’ve healed your dog and there will be no repercussions for her. And we brought your dad a charm that we think will make it easier to suppress the urges.”

Aislinn gave the girls a reassuring smile. “It's completely normal to feel scared in situations like this. But remember that you aren’t alone. You both have each other and your mom and dad. And while you don’t know us, we are always just a phone call away.”

“Thanks,” Maisy said as Amelie merely nodded in agreement.

Nylah gave her girls a sympathetic smile. “Getting magic has been hard on all of us. And we’re doing our best to cope.”

I tilted my head to the side as I felt their magic arching beneath their skin. I could feel them holding it back. “I see that you've started showing signs of powers. I hope you are learning how to control them. For all witches, the first thing that usually manifests is their witch flames. Be careful with your emotions. My kids have had a hard time adjusting to their magic and they’re a few years older than you.”

Nylah's daughters exchanged a glance, their expressions a mix of curiosity and trepidation. "Witch flames? Can you show us?" Amelia asked.

A small blue flame danced above Violet's palm, casting a warm glow in the room. “Of course. It's all about learning to harness your abilities while maintaining control of your emotions. If you let them get the better of you then your witch fire will burn through everything unchecked.”

“I’ve been able to manage my witch fire better, but I haven’t had time to practice with them,” Nylah admitted. “I’ll find the time, I promise. We'll practice together, learn to control what we can, and support each other through this.”

I patted her shoulder. “That’s what matters. I live a continent away from my kids and talk to them as often as possible giving them advice and help on how to manage their powers.”

Nylah's voice grew serious as she shared a revelation. “You know, the first night I was back at the firehouse, my bright green flames almost burnt the place down. I was terrified. I don’t have nearly the control I need which is why I used Arjun's condition as a reason to take a leave. I couldn't risk harming anyone else.”

Maisy’s jaw dropped open while Amelie glared at her mother. “You did what?” Amelie asked at the same time Maisy said, “I thought you had all of

this mastered. You make it seem like you know what you're doing now."

Nylah's face twisted with guilt as she looked at her girls. "I should have told you how much I was struggling instead of keeping it from you. The only thing I'm good at is hiding the Objects of Power and storing them in the vault."

"Nylah, you did what you needed to do to protect yourself and those around you," Aislinn told her. "It takes great strength to make the decision to do what's necessary. And now you've told your family what you are experiencing. Guilt doesn't belong in the mix. It'll only muddy the waters and make it harder on you."

Violet nodded in agreement. "And now, we're here to help you find a way forward."

Maisy looked at the three of us. "You mentioned you live in England and that you made something to help our dad, but why exactly are you here? And who are you?"

I chuckled as I started unloading the food. "That's a conversation to have over food. And before I forget, I wanted to ask you how can we arrange exchanges in the future, Nylah? I am positive Artemis will continue to send us after artifacts."

Nylah looked out the French doors. "I've got a method of relatively fast transportation now. Give me a call and if I'm not on shift, I will get to you as quickly as I can."

Nodding, I explained who I was and how I came into my magic late in life because it had been hidden by my Grams to protect me. Kalliopi joined in the conversation as we talked and ate. This family had been through some harrowing bullshit lately and they were handling it like champs. I was glad we were able to give them what help we could.

CHAPTER 5



Fiona

The air in Nylah's house weighed me down. It was heavy with determination and tension. There was a palpable sense of urgency that hung over us like a shroud. As we gathered around Nylah's family, the gravity of the situation settled upon us like a heavy fog. Each of us wore expressions that mirrored our shared concern. Our brows were furrowed with worry and our eyes reflecting the severity of the challenge before us.

Aislinn's gaze held a mix of empathy and determination as she met Arjun's eyes, her silent promise to help evident in the set of her jaw. Violet's presence beside me was a steady anchor, her unwavering support mirrored in the resolute way she stood. And as I glanced around the room, I could feel the collective determination emanating from each person present. The love and support of his family was why Arjun hadn't lost himself entirely to his wolf.

Although, the stress of the situation was apparent in Arjun. His face bore the weight of his struggles, lines of frustration etched into his features. Nylah's eyes held a mixture of worry and love with her fierce loyalty to her family shining through. Amelie and Maisy seemed caught between concern for their father and being adrift. I understood what they were feeling. Children relied on their parents to provide protection and structure to their lives.

The feel of the energy in the room hit me like a hammer. The shared determination to find a solution, to ease Arjun's burden, and to restore a sense of normalcy to their lives made me ready to jump in despite not having any idea of how we could help. It made me believe we would find a way, despite the lack of knowledge. The way Argies, Kalli, and Bas watched us with

anticipation fueled my certainty. None of them had any doubt we would make Arjun's life better.

My heart cracked when I saw the mix of frustration and vulnerability in Arjun's eyes. His struggle was etched across his features. "I hate that I can't control myself. I hurt the people I love. Emi looks at me in fear."

"We're here for you, Arjun. We're going to find a way to help you manage this." Aislinn's voice was soothing as she spoke and her tone was filled with empathy.

Violet nodded in agreement, her eyes steady as she added, "You're not alone in this. We're a team, and we'll support you every step of the way."

Nylah shook her head. "You don't have to promise that just because you feel responsible. As mad as I was at Artemis, I admire you three for demanding an alternative to giving her access to more power. Although, I'm shocked she listened and did what you asked rather than taking the artifacts from you without your consent."

Sebastian narrowed his eyes as he came up behind me. "Don't let your guard down with that goddess. Sure, she could have taken the items and taken the power into herself and didn't. However, she's ruthless and has a reason for everything. I suspect she can't keep another god's Object of Power without absorbing its energy into herself. As for the others, she has no desire for what she considers silly mortal artifacts because their power is insignificant to her."

I threw an incredulous look over my shoulder to my mate. "It is impossible to understand Artemis's motives. All I know is I need to spell my mouth shut when I'm around her. She tends to evoke every rebellious bone in my body, and I feel my luck will run out with her one day."

Arjun shared a look with Nylah and shook his head at me. "You sound like my wife. I wonder if the reason we've faced so many life-threatening situations in the past couple of months is because Nylah stood up to Artemis and refused to cooperate for weeks."

My eyes widened with the idea. I had never considered if Artemis had a hand in the danger we faced. I simply assumed they were all related to the cases we'd investigated. My mind whirled with the possibility. I startled when Violet nudged my shoulder.

"Stop thinking. You cannot know if Artemis caused us more danger or not. And, really it doesn't matter. It's not as if we can deny to do the cases that she's given us. We can't change what she does and we can't deny the

cases that present a danger to the world, so it's useless to ask more questions," Violet said. "We will face each case just like we always have. Together."

There was a knock at the door when I was nodding in agreement. My heart leapt in my chest with the arrival of reinforcements. Phoebe entered, accompanied by Nana, her mom, Stella, and Tarja. The room seemed to brighten with their presence as a sense of hope filled the air.

"Phoebe!" I cried out as I embraced her.

A smile lifted the corners of Phoebe's mouth. "It's so good to see you, Fi. It has been way too long."

I released her and hugged her mother. "Good to see you again, Mollie, Amelia. And it's nice to finally meet you face to face, Stella." I tilted my head to the side. "Aidon."

Nylah chuckled and nudged her daughter, Amelie. "You're Amelia?" She asked Nana, who nodded. "My daughter's name is Amelie. We almost went with Amelia."

Nana smiled at Nylah. "Amelie is a good name. Not as good as mine, though." That made everyone laugh as introductions were made all around.

Phoebe's mom was a woman of quiet strength and I couldn't miss the change in her aura. There was a new strength within her. Everyone was surprised when she stepped forward and embraced Arjun. "I've been researching and while I haven't found any information on werewolves. I believe I might have a potion that can help curb the worst of your symptoms. It's something I've used on myself after a Tainted witch experimented on me."

Nylah's expression shifted from worry to hope as she looked at Phoebe's mom. "What happened to you? Were you turned into a werewolf too?"

Phoebe's mom's gaze met Nylah's and a shared understanding seemed to pass between them. "I've been through a lot, Nylah. Being made into a werewolf wasn't one of them. But I've faced my own trials and read extensively about shifters. I have some theories that I believe might help. The potion I created helps keep a person calm."

Nylah's voice trembled slightly as she spoke, her gratitude evident. "Would you teach me how to brew the potion? Arjun loses control when angry, and I don't want him to hurt himself or anyone else."

Phoebe's mom's expression softened, and she nodded in agreement. "That's why I came along. There is no guarantee with this potion, though. I

can promise that if this one doesn't work, we will continue trying other combinations."

Phoebe stepped forward and placed a hand on her mom's shoulder. "And I'll be right here to support both of you."

Nana moved to the island. "We brought food, but I can see you have some that has gone uneaten. Everyone should eat, so we are most effective when facing this challenge. It won't help if Mollie gets hangry. Or Phoebe, for that matter. She does better when she's fed regularly."

Stella laughed. "We wouldn't let her eat on the flight here because it was so short."

"Eat your food so we can get to the process of helping Arjun," Tarja interjected.

Nana didn't waste any time unloading the bags while Nylah, Arjun, Amelie, and Maisy looked in shock. "Mom," Maisy whispered. The fear in her voice was evident. I understood. It was shocking to experience a familiar talking in your mind, but I'd been around Luciana and her familiar, Zephyrus, so I was more used to it.

Nylah grabbed her girls closer to her as she looked at me. "Who was that? And how did they speak in our heads?"

I looked around for the cat and found her standing next to Aidon's feet. Phoebe beat me to the explanation part, though. She picked up Tarja and stroked the tabby's furry head. "It was my familiar, Tarja. I should have told you that she had the ability of telepathy when I introduced her. I take it for granted that everyone knows what a familiar can do."

Nylah's forehead furrowed with her confusion. "I'm sure Kaiya mentioned familiars, but I can't remember what she said."

"A familiar is essentially a magical companion for a witch," Phoebe began, her eyes alight with enthusiasm as she addressed Nylah's curious family. "Tarja is not just an ordinary pet. She's a supernatural being who shares a deep connection with the witch. Familiars have their magical abilities."

My curiosity piqued and I leaned in, eager to soak up every detail. I'd gotten bits and pieces, but because none of us had one, it wasn't a topic that was discussed much. All I knew with certainty was that familiars had been hunted to near extinction, and they were making a comeback thanks to Phoebe encouraging the other Pleiades to take swift action.

Phoebe continued in a gentle cadence that drew us in. "A familiar also

serves as a source of guidance, protection, and assistance. They can sense magical energy and even dangers that might be invisible to the witch. And that's not all. They can also aid in spell work, lending their unique abilities to enhance a witch's magic."

"So, it's like having a magical partner?" Maisy asked.

Phoebe nodded with a smile. "Exactly! It's a partnership built on trust and mutual benefit. Familiars have their personalities and can communicate telepathically. They primarily use it with their witches, but in groups, they include everyone. Tarja is my confidant, friend, and co-conspirator all in one."

Amelie's brow furrowed thoughtfully. "How does one acquire a familiar?"

I couldn't help but imagine the possibilities of having such a companion in the coven. The idea of a cat that could sense magical energy and aid in spellcasting was intriguing. We could sure use one at Pymm's Pondsides.

Phoebe's expression turned contemplative. "The familiar picks their witch while in utero. Sometimes, they have more than one they are choosing from."

Nylah and her girls looked around when Phoebe stopped explaining. I cleared my throat, picking my next words with care. "Familiars were hunted by Tainted witches until the only ones left were those paired with the seven Pleiades witches."

"What is a Pleiades witch again?" Maisy asked.

"Pleiades are the strongest among witches. To make a long story short, they were created when Pleoine and Atlas had to protect their daughters. Their power was too great for Earth, so the seven gave a little to select women, creating the witching community. Today, the descendants of the original seven carry the power and stabilize the magical world. They might be powerful witches, but they are seen as leaders among various species and play that role in helping maintain secrecy and stability," Tarja explained.

Phoebe shook her head. "I'm not from that direct bloodline. But I hold the Pleiades power within me."

Nylah rubbed her head. "I'm so confused."

Nana shoved a plate of food in Nylah's hand. "My granddaughter was selected to inherit the magic because she has a gold heart. It's too complicated to get into more details right now. We need to help your husband."

Tears welled up in Nylah's eyes as she looked around at the group

assembled before her. “Thank you all. I've felt so lost.”

Phoebe grimaced as she accepted food from Nana. “I remember what it was like after Hattie gave me her magic. She saved my life by doing that but changed it irrevocably.”

The atmosphere in Nylah's kitchen was tense as we gathered around filled plates and ate. Kalliopi climbed onto a stool to eat her dinner. Argies stood next to his daughter and glanced at Arjun. “Did the goddess tell you what she did to you? That might tell us if Mollie’s potion will work.”

“It wasn’t Artemis,” Nylah said. “Not exactly. After Artemis made me a Relic Keeper, I was left floundering. I had no idea how to use my powers or protect my family. And in the early days, I attracted demons and rogue shifters. Arjun was attacked by the latter and was dying. I had the Stone of Transmutation in my bag when I summoned Artemis and demanded she help him. She told me she couldn’t help him, but I could with the Stone.”

Arjun wrapped an arm around Nylah’s shoulders. “Artemis called what I have the Lykanthropy Virus.”

Curious, my brow furrowed. I exchanged glances with Phoebe, Aislinn, and Violet. “The Lykanthropy Virus? What exactly is that?”

Tarja's voice held a note of gravitas as she began to explain. “*It's a highly contagious, magical virus that infects humans and transforms them into werewolves. Until Arjun, it was also entirely mythical. Now that it is real, it's important you know the virus is transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids—blood, saliva, even sweat.*”

Nylah sucked in a breath, and her head snapped over to the dog bed where Emi was sleeping restlessly. “Does that mean Emi is going to become a werewolf? She’s just a tiny Pekingese.”

Tarja jumped from Phoebe's arms, and she walked over to the dog. “*The virus takes hold of the victim's body, altering their genetic makeup. Physical changes manifest—fur growth, elongated teeth, claws, increased size and strength. That should not apply to animals. I can feel healing serums running through her body. They’ve isolated the virus. Have you called a healer? It’s possible one can remove the remnants from Emi, and she won’t be any worse for wear.*”

Aislinn's expression held a mixture of concern and curiosity. “And when does the transformation occur? When will they know for sure Emi is out of the woods?”

Tarja's green cat eyes turned and focused on Aislinn. “*During the full*

moon, the virus is most active. The infected individual loses control and transforms into a fully-fledged werewolf.”

Violet's brows furrowed as I watched her process the information. “Is there a cure? Something to reverse the effects of the virus? It's probably reaching but it would be nice to have an easy answer.”

I smiled at Arjun. “Even if Tarja doesn't have an answer, we still have the charm we made you and the potion of Mollie's so there is still hope.” My gut told me there was no answer, given they hadn't existed before and I didn't want them giving up.

Tarja turned back to Emi, making it odd when she replied telepathically. “*As of now, there is no known cure. Those infected must learn to manage their transformations and symptoms.*”

Arjun's voice held a mix of frustration and desperation. “So, the safety of my family is left up to chance, a charm and a potion.”

“It could be worse,” Bas told him. “There could be nothing. As I understand it, Mollie suffered with uncontrollable urges for weeks and isolated herself in her bedroom until she discovered a potion that keeps her steady.”

Aislinn's voice cut through the tension, her words carrying a hopeful undertone. “While Bas did a great job on the charm, and we enchanted it with spells to help keep him calm, I'm wondering if we can't change it to better assist Arjun. Something that would help him manage the worst symptoms and enhance the potion's effects. It could be a way for him to regain control before he can get to the potion. I just don't feel like what we did is enough.”

Annoyance flashed through me, and my head swiveled in my friend's direction. My irritation died when I realized Aislinn was right. “As much as I would like to deny that, I agree. We just didn't know enough about werewolves for our intent to be of much help.”

Tarja prowled back over to us as she considered Aislinn's comment. “*A talisman is the best idea for someone in Arjun's condition. There will inevitably be times when he will not have the potion on him. The problem, as I see it, is that we would need to infuse it with a specific magical property. And in this case, it should incorporate a moonstone.*”

Aislinn's brow furrowed in thought. “A moonstone? Why that particular gem?”

“What significance does a moonstone hold for this purpose?” Amelie chimed in.

Tarja jumped onto a stool next to Kalliopi, who immediately started petting the cat. Tarja didn't let that stop her from explaining her thinking. *"Moonstones are known for their ability to enhance emotional balance and aid in managing turbulent emotions. They are intricately tied to the moon's cycles, which parallel the transformation patterns of werewolves. You know, because of the power the moon has over Arjun's condition."*

Nylah's eyes sparkled with hope. "So, if we add a moonstone to the talisman they made, it could potentially help Arjun maintain control and reduce his reliance on the potion?"

Tarja nodded, and I swear her cat expression was determined. *"Yes, a moonstone-infused talisman could provide a stabilizing influence, making it easier for Arjun to manage his symptoms."*

A wry smile played on my lips. "Moonstones seem to be making frequent appearances in our endeavors. Thankfully, we now have Morgana to assist us in obtaining one without too much trouble."

The room buzzed with renewed determination as we discussed the plan to alter the talisman. Our experience with moonstones was limited, but the encounter enriched our understanding and forged invaluable connections.

Arjun's gaze held a mixture of gratitude and anticipation as he surveyed the group. "Thank you all for this. I never expected to find such unwavering support from strangers in my life."

Bas clapped Arjun on the shoulder. "You're lucky to have these women involved. I've been in the magical world for longer than you've been alive, and I can say few others would have given you a second thought except to run away. Fate brought these women together and gave them magic because we needed their integrity, empathy, and determination. And I can see that your wife falls right in with them." I beamed up at my mate and pressed a kiss to his lips. I loved the man and how he saw us. I liked to believe that we were the saving grace of the magical world.

The conversation continued, weaving plans and possibilities together. With Tarja's guidance and our combined resolve, we were poised to change the talisman to one that would serve as a lifeline for Arjun. The moonstone's enchanting qualities were the key to providing him with a source of strength and stability, a beacon of hope in the face of uncertainty.

CHAPTER 6



*A*islinn

The air in Nylah's kitchen held a mixture of anticipation and concern as we turned our discussion toward the next steps. I was excited and looking forward to doing magic with Phoebe. We'd worked in the hospital for twenty years, so I knew we worked well together.

My gaze caught on Emi, the family dog, who lay on her cushion. Her breathing was shallow, and her eyes were dull. Beside me, Fiona, Violet, and Phoebe exchanged glances. They'd followed my gaze. We needed to deal with Emi before going to get a moonstone.

The sound of a gentle knock on the door broke the tense silence. Nylah quickly went to answer it. In walked a woman with long, flowing silver hair that cascaded down her back. It shimmered like moonlight. Her emerald eyes sparked with knowledge and experience. She wore a loose shirt and skirt and had her fingers filled with silver rings adorned with precious gemstones.

Nylah introduced her as the local healer, Seraphina. Seraphina's timing was perfect. Everyone was anxious to help Arjun, but I'd just been worried that Emi might not make it much longer. I was ready to put things off until we could get the healer to the house. Having her there now was another rope thrown to us in a turbulent sea.

It helped that Seraphina's presence was radiant and soothing. She carried an air of tranquility as if a calm had settled over the room simply by her being there.

Nylah introduced everyone to the healer. Her voice held a mix of gratitude and relief as she spoke. "Now that you know who's here, I have to say thank you for coming so quickly. We're really worried about Emi." Nylah

explained how Arjun, in the grip of his condition, had attacked Emi. My heart ached at the thought of the turmoil that had gripped their household.

Seraphina's gaze held a kind warmth as she approached the ailing dog. "Of course, Nylah. I'll do my best to help."

Fiona's voice was empathetic as she added, "We gave Emi a healing potion to stabilize her and hope that it was able to isolate the virus, but I'm not sure."

Seraphina's hands glowed with a soft, soothing light as she knelt beside Emi, her touch gentle and caring. Her magic flowed through her fingers, a calm energy that seemed to permeate the room.

I watched with a mix of awe and hope as Seraphina's healing magic took effect. Her hands hovered over Emi's body, the light intensifying as her focus deepened. The very air seemed to hum with the energy of her abilities. I couldn't help but be captivated by the magic that she wielded with such grace. It was different from our healer, Zreegy, but so similar at the same time.

Seraphina's voice was a soft murmur as she addressed Emi. Her words were a soothing melody that seemed to resonate with the dog on a deep level. "I can feel the virus within you, little one. It's wrapped around you like a shadow. Thanks to the quick thinking of these witches, the healing potion Fiona provided created a barrier around it. That means I can extract it completely. But I need you to stay strong and hold on for me. It isn't going to be pleasant."

A shimmering aura surrounded Emi, and I held my breath as Seraphina's hands glowed even brighter. I could feel the magic swirling around us, an intricate dance between Seraphina's abilities and the potion's power. It seemed to take forever. Emi's tiny body shuddered and shook. Tears filled my eyes as I watched and worried.

And then, it happened. Emi's body seemed to tremble for a moment, and then a soft light emerged from within her, mingling with Seraphina's healing energy. The two forces worked in harmony. I watched in awe as the virus was extruded, leaving Emi's body entirely. It was a stream of grey sludge that left through one of the wounds that remained on her side.

With a final, gentle touch, Seraphina withdrew her hands. Her expression was one of serene accomplishment. Emi's eyes blinked open, her gaze clear and bright. She looked around and jumped up from the cushion. Then she bound over to where Arjun stood, wagging her tail and a look of pure trust in her eyes.

Tears welled in Arjun's eyes as he crouched down to embrace Emi, his voice choked with emotion. "She still trusts me. I can't believe it."

Nylah rubbed her husband's upper back as he stood. "She knows you didn't mean to hurt her. We all do."

The sight was both heartwarming and poignant, a testament to the bond between humans and their companions. I was certain that Seraphina's healing magic worked its wonders in not only restoring Emi's health but also mending the fragile connection between Arjun and his faithful friend.

Arjun gave his wife a look that spoke a thousand words before he shifted his gaze to Seraphina. "Thank you for helping us. We haven't gotten to know one another all that well, but you have come to the rescue twice now."

Amelie took Emi from her father and nodded. "We owe you so much. I was certain we were going to lose Emi."

A tear tracked down Maisy's cheek. "We've had her since I was little. I can't imagine life without her. Thank you."

Seraphina smiled back as she looked around the full room. "If I'd known I was going to be meeting one of the Pleiades, I would have worn my robes. There is an impressive show of strength in this room, and I am humbled that I was able to do something to help the situation. However, I have to admit I am curious what is going on. Do you mind my asking?"

Nylah shook her head and placed a hand on Arjun's arm. "They're here to help Arjun."

"In that case, is there anything else that I can help with?" Seraphina asked.

I looked to Phoebe, waiting for her to take the lead. Her expression was the same panicked gaze she wore when she was asking me to help. I chuckled and shook my head. "It seems as if we have a plan of action, but if this doesn't work, we will call you back."

Seraphina promised she would be available should we need her before taking her leave. Tarja didn't waste any time refocusing the group. "*Obtaining a moonstone shouldn't be too difficult. Most magical markets carry them, and they're relatively accessible.*"

Fiona lifted a shoulder. "I want to visit Arcanum Treasures. I've heard it's a place of great power, and I believe it's worth a shot." I was surprised she was suggesting that. It had to be to take Phoebe to the store and give the Pleiades another resource she could rely on.

Tarja's head tilted to the side. "*Arcanum Treasures is a realm closely*

guarded by Morgana. Pleiades aren't generally allowed entry. She prefers to remain hidden. Living in her realm where she doesn't age like a normal witch, and the Tainted can't hunt her down and steal her powers."

Phoebe's gaze held an unwavering determination as she responded. "I understand the risks, but I think it's a chance worth taking. If we can convince Morgana to help us, it might be the key to getting a moonstone. Although you said most magical markets carry them, they can still be difficult to find. I'd rather not traipse all over looking for one when we have other work to do."

The room seemed to hold its breath as we considered Phoebe's proposition. The stakes were high, and the path we were embarking upon was fraught with uncertainty. Sure, I'd been there with Fiona and Violet before, but that didn't mean Morgana would welcome us this time. Especially if we were bringing a Pleiades.

Nylah's voice held a touch of concern as she addressed Phoebe. "Are you sure about this, Phoebe? It sounds like this Morgana might react badly, and I can't be responsible for you getting hurt."

Phoebe's resolve remained unshaken. "I'm willing to take that risk. If there's a chance that we can help Arjun, I'm all in."

Aidon grabbed Phoebe's shoulders. "Are you sure about this, Queenie? You're carrying our babies now. I know you wouldn't put them in danger on purpose."

My heart skipped a beat when he reminded me of her condition, and there was a round of gasps from the others. Phoebe cupped Aidon's cheeks. "You know I will never do anything to cause them harm. I'm following my gut on this one. Something tells me Morgana is curious about me. And we all know I could use another resource to buy supplies in the magical realm."

Stella nodded in agreement. "That's not a connection we've had time to foster. We've used what Hattie had in stock and gotten shit from others."

"Mother and I have gone to the market a few times and purchased random things, but I can't deny that I'm excited to go visit Arcanum Treasures," Mollie said.

Aidon sighed and wrapped an arm protectively around Phoebe's shoulders. "I can't argue with any of that. I promise you that if I get a hint of danger while you're there, I will break my way into Morgana's realm."

Phoebe smiled up at Aidon. I'd never seen her look at her ex-husband, Miles with so much love. It was great to see. With unanimous agreement, we began to prepare for the ritual that would take us to Arcanum Treasures.

Phoebe, Tarja, and the rest of us formed a circle, our energies merging in a harmonious blend of intention and purpose.

Fiona stepped forward, her voice carrying a mixture of excitement and determination as she began to relay the steps we needed to take. “Alright, everyone,” Fiona said, her eyes alight with anticipation. “We're going to need to find a quiet and secluded spot outdoors. Grams said it doesn't have to be entirely isolated, but it should be a place where we won't be easily disturbed. You have a lot of property here on the river Nylah, so that part should be easy enough.”

“Do you have a cauldron?” I asked, knowing we would need one.

Maisy and Amelie nodded. “Auntie Kaiya gave us one,” Amelie said as Maisy ran up the stairs.

“We haven't built our Sanctum yet. Or bought many supplies, but my best friend gave us enough to get us started,” Nylah explained.

Phoebe smiled at Nylah. “You don't need to worry about that.”

Bas cleared the island, giving Maisy a place to set it up. Fiona continued instructing us on the first steps of the ritual. “We need to start by lighting a small fire and placing the cauldron with water over it,” Fiona explained. “Then, we add a pinch of salt to the water and stir it clockwise with a wooden spoon.”

Nylah nodded, her attention fully on the details Fiona shared. This was a process that required precision and focus, so it was good that the others seemed determined to follow along every step of the way.

Fiona's voice carried on, guiding us through the next actions. “After that,” she said, “we sprinkle a bit of dried sage into the water and recite: ‘Spirits of the earth, air, fire, and water, I call upon thee. Guardians of the ancient paths, guide me to the mystical realm of Arcanum Treasures.’”

Violet raised her hand with a practical suggestion. “Can we walk through the steps together as we do them? It might help us stay in the right mindset and follow the instructions seamlessly.”

Fiona lifted a shoulder. “Sounds good to me.”

We headed to the backyard behind Nylah. Arjun grabbed the cauldron and set it on the table. Phoebe's Nana held up her hand. “We should shield our actions from nosey neighbors. You have a lot of property, but they will be able to see what we are doing if they look out.”

“Good idea,” I told her. The witches gathered together, including Amelie and Maisy, and they cast the spell masking their actions.

With that done, we began the ritual as a united group. Each of us performed the actions Fiona described. I hesitated at first, but Violet and Fiona pulled me in, reminding me that we needed to be together in this endeavor. I wasn't sure, given there were so many other witches this time. A smile grew in my heart when I felt my two best friends still needed me as much as ever.

With the first part of the ritual complete, Fiona continued her guidance. Her voice a soft murmur as she explained the next steps. We held our hands over the water in the cauldron. We visualized a map of our surroundings and concentrating on the image of Arcanum Treasures that we had described to them earlier.

As we held that mental image, Fiona's voice rang out again, "By the power of the elements and the ancient guardians, I now know where Arcanum Treasures can be found. So mote it be."

My heart raced as we finished the final words of the incantation. The anticipation in the air was palpable. I felt a mixture of excitement and trepidation as we awaited the outcome. The last part of the ritual involved expressing gratitude to the spirits and guardians before extinguishing the fire and pouring the water over some nearby herbs.

Time seemed to hold its breath as we stood there, the seconds stretching into moments. And then, like a dream made real, a bright green trail emerged. It lead down the driveway and off the property. My eyes widened in astonishment as I looked at the trail, my heart pounding with disbelief and wonder.

Part of me hadn't truly believed that this mystical, hidden shop could be accessed again. There were many more asking for entrance this time. But now, as the green trail beckoned us forward. I realized that even in the world of magic and mystery, the unexpected could become reality. And so, with newfound determination, we set off on a journey that held the promise of enchantment and discovery. I'd taken it before, but I was just as excited this time.

Fiona tilted her head to look at Phoebe as we walked down the street. "Did I tell you about the leap of faith we had to take last time?"

Phoebe gaped at Fiona. "No, you did not. When you say leap, you mean...?"

Fiona's expression turned sheepish. "We jumped off of a cliff."

Nylah cursed. "There are no cliffs nearby, but we are headed for a bridge."

I can't jump from a busy freeway."

"We don't have to do this," Arjun said. "We can try it with what we have."

Nylah shook her head. "We've hidden from mundies already. We're doing this, but Maisy and Amelie, you're not coming with us. We can try another time. Right now isn't the time to overwhelm Morgana."

The girls started to object, and I held up a hand. "It doesn't matter who jumps with us. Morgana le Fey only allows who she wants through the portal," I told them. "Last time, Argies had to catch Thanos and Bas before they hit the ocean."

"Is that water cold?" Phoebe asked as the trail veered to the left and through someone's yard.

"Looks like we aren't going up to the highway after all," Nylah replied. "And this time of year, it's pretty chilly."

We walked through a nicely manicured backyard and stopped at the edge of the river. The elevation was well above where Nylah's yard was situated. We stopped as a group, with Phoebe's Nana glaring at the water. "I'm going to stay here. Who else is with me? I'd rather not end up in cold water."

Bas, Arjun, Argies, and Kalliopi decided to stay with Phoebe's Nana. The rest of us gathered our hands and jumped off of the edge.

Like the last time I went through the portal, it felt as if my navel was pulling me forward as I traveled through time and space. My stomach churned, and bile rose to the back of my throat. I was disoriented when my momentum stopped, and my vision was blurred momentarily. It was the smell of incense and herbs that told me we had arrived.

The sight was the same as last time. Arcanum Treasures was a quaint yet elegant shop that stood out with its ornate Victorian style. In my mind, the exterior had colored gingerbread accents and was adorned with mystical symbols and intricate carvings, giving it an air of enchantment and intrigue.

The inside was dimly lit, with shelves lining the walls and an antique counter in the center. The shelves were filled with a variety of rare and magical items. I smiled at Fiona, Nylah, Phoebe, and her mom. Violet and Nylah's girls had made it to the store. My gaze skipped over the crystal balls, potion bottles, and ancient scrolls and stopped when I saw the three of them standing there. Violet was rubbing the girls' backs as they all bent over. I imagined they weren't feeling too well.

The atmosphere inside the shop was undoubtedly mystical and

otherworldly, along with a hint of nostalgia that transported me to a different time and place. It was a unique combination of the magical world and what homes used to look like hundreds of years ago. The tapestries on the walls had to be from the time when Morgana was born. My parents taught me that intricate brocade was how they kept drafts to a minimum in castles. The ones in the shop depicted mythical creatures and ancient spells.

Morgana le Fey walked out of the back of the store with a smile on her face. She had long, dark hair and piercing green eyes. Her trademark flowing robes were in deep shades of green and black. These, too, were adorned with intricate symbols and mystical runes.

It struck me again how young Morgana was. As a Fae, I was accustomed to long lives. I'd grown up knowing that witches might age slower, but it was nowhere near close to ours. Morgana should be wrinkled like a raisin.

Her eyes glowed in the dim light of her shop as she looked at us. "I have been expecting you, Phoebe. And you, too, Nylah. The last time a Relic Keeper visited my store was shortly after I created this pocket realm. And I have never entertained the Pleiades. But you are no ordinary Pleiades. Are you Phoebe?"

Phoebe's posture was resolute as she met Morgana's gaze. "Why did you allow us entry?"

Morgana's lips curved into a mysterious smile. "Curiosity got the better of me. A mundie who's earned Hattie's respect and isn't one to turn a blind eye to problems? That piqued my interest."

Phoebe's mom and Stella exchanged glances, a mixture of surprise and intrigue passing between them. Phoebe's voice held a determined edge. "We're here because we need your help, Morgana. We seek a moonstone, one that could aid in controlling a unique condition."

"What unique condition?" Morgana asked.

Nylah stepped forward. "We need a moonstone for my husband. He was turned into a werewolf's condition. We believe a moonstone talisman could provide the balance he needs."

Morgana's brow arched inquisitively. "A werewolf, you say? That's an interesting story."

Fiona's voice carried a note of urgency as she elaborated. "It's true. Artemis herself saved this man's life and turned him into a werewolf in the process. He needs a moonstone to help manage his symptoms."

Morgana's skepticism was palpable, her eyes narrowing as she regarded

us. "Artemis, you say? I find it hard to believe that the goddess herself would perform such an act."

Phoebe's gaze held unwavering determination. "It's the truth, Morgana. We've seen the effects firsthand."

I clasped my hands together to stop them from shaking. "Morgana, we came to you because we know of your expertise. We believe your stones hold the key to helping this man."

Morgana's smile held a hint of intrigue as she looked back at Phoebe. "Very well, Phoebe. I'll consider your request. But know this—my assistance comes with a price, and your past deeds will factor into my decision."

As the weight of Morgana's words settled over us, I felt a mixture of anticipation and uncertainty. This had not happened to us before. She'd helped us without cost. Did she do this because Phoebe had more power? Or was Phoebe not as worthy in her eyes? Perhaps it went even deeper than that. Had the Pleiades hunted Morgana in the past?

The atmosphere in Morgana's store was charged with wary anticipation. It was a caustic mix of curiosity, apprehension, and anger as we stood before the enigmatic sorceress herself. Her gaze was piercing, her eyes holding the weight of centuries of knowledge.

Phoebe nodded in agreement. "I promised I would help Arjun with his condition, and I am a woman of my word."

Morgana's lips curved into a mysterious smile. "Good. If you want to imbue the moonstone with a specific property, I suggest using my silver paint. It has unique properties that can enhance the stone's effects."

Phoebe's mom, quietly observing the exchange, suddenly spoke up with excitement. "I have an idea for how we can use the moonstone and the silver paint together."

Morgana turned her attention to Phoebe's mom, her eyes filled with interest. "What are you? I've never experienced power like yours."

Phoebe's mom's jaw clenched as she stared at Morgana. "I was tortured by an evil witch and turned into a tribred. Like Arjun, we've never existed before."

Morgana showed surprise for the second time since we arrived. "I am sorry this happened to you. I look forward to hearing your idea."

Phoebe's mom hesitated for a moment before speaking, her voice tinged with surprise and disbelief. "You're willing to hear me out, even though I'm someone's creation?"

Morgana's smile was enigmatic. "I care not for lineage or labels. If you have something of value to contribute, I welcome your input."

Phoebe's mom's eyes widened in astonishment. "You don't assume that I have nothing to add because I was a mundie until a year ago?"

Morgana's tone was matter-of-fact as she responded. "Of course not. Your heritage matters not. It is your experience, knowledge, and skills that hold worth. Those don't come from your genetics."

As the realization sunk in, a sense of wonder filled the room. We had entered Morgana's realm seeking a moonstone and had also found an unexpected ally. One who valued the contributions of all, regardless of their origins. In this realm of magic and mystery, that was rarer than a starstone.

CHAPTER 7



*V*iolet

The mystical aura of Arcanum Treasures enveloped us as we stood within its enchanting confines. I loved it the first time we visited the store. Although, this time was very different. The air was laden with curiosity and anticipation as we awaited Morgana's price. There was something different about her, and I couldn't put my finger on it. I simply didn't know her well enough to know what had changed. She'd been isolated from the world and people in general for hundreds of years. Perhaps I was sensing nothing more than her anxiety over having so many in her store at once.

Phoebe pinned Morgana with a stare. "You said my past deeds would play a part in obtaining one of your moonstones. What do you want to know?"

Morgana was an enigmatic figure with an air of power. It was like the clash of the titans when she met Phoebe's gaze. Phoebe was far more powerful, but Morgana had the knowledge and experience that would allow her to reduce any of us to ashes in the blink of an eye.

Morgana strolled toward where I was standing on the other side of the shop with Maisy and Amelie. There was a twinkle in Morgana's eyes when she met my gaze. If I wasn't mistaken, she was goading Phoebe. "You've been the talk of the magical world since you received Hattie's magic. In fact, all of you in this room have been at the top of the rumor mill since becoming witches. The only thing I'd like to know is why you think that is."

Phoebe crossed her arms over her chest and watched Morgana. "Honestly, what I think it all comes down to is fear. Witches don't understand mundies, and they assume you are weak just because you lived as

one. When you add in the fact that each one of us in here has the courage to stand up and do what's right, no matter the cost to us, and you've frosted that cake. We remind them of how Dark and twisted many paranormals can be. The magical world would rather pretend the malevolence didn't exist than be forced to face it."

I half listened to Phoebe's explanation as my mind was busy trying to figure out how Fiona, Aislinn, and I were the subject of rumors. It had to be about Artemis making us into her three newest huntresses. It was unlikely that it was about Fiona being a nicotisa or that Tainted witches would hunt her from around the globe. With the level of power she had, Fiona was like an all-you-can-eat buffet for those who have turned.

Stella nodded in agreement. "Don't forget that you've taken care of enemies that have terrorized the world for decades. No one likes to be made to look bad."

Morgana's eyes hinted at the depth of emotions their comments brought up for her. "I like how you think. You all have done the impossible. And hearing about your exploits has made me question rejoining the world. And now, it seems as if we have come to the price for a moonstone. The energies required to make one able to withstand incredible forces are significant. And therefore, the cost must match."

Phoebe's brows furrowed as she listened intently, a mixture of curiosity and caution in her expression. "I'm glad we can inspire you. But let's get to the point. What is the cost, Morgana? We're here to find a solution, and we're willing to make sacrifices if necessary. Nylah and her family have already paid enough to provide the magical world with a service that can restore lost balance."

Morgana's gaze held a mixture of seriousness and intrigue as she spoke. "For a moonstone, I ask for a favor that extends beyond the mundane. In return for this moonstone, I ask that you offer a familiar in the next batch born."

A hushed silence fell over the group as Morgana's words settled in. The weight of her request was evident, and it held a sense of gravity that left us contemplating its implications. Phoebe's voice carried a note of hesitation as she responded. "Morgana. While I understand your request, familiars are unique beings. They choose the witches they bond to. I can't make that decision for them. Ask for something else."

Morgana's expression remained thoughtful, her gaze unwavering as she

considered Phoebe's response. "A wise stance, Phoebe. Familiars indeed have their own wills and connections. I respect your commitment to their autonomy." I was right. She was testing Phoebe. The more I was around Morgana, the more I wanted to sit down and really get to know her. I'd love to pick her brain on how she created this pocket realm, why she did it, and how she has stayed young for so long.

Phoebe's jaw clenched, and a muscle ticked in the side of her face. "I can't imagine forcing those around me to do what I want them to. Not to mention, I don't want the responsibility of choosing who is given a familiar. There are so many witches worthy of one."

A moment of quiet reflection passed before Morgana spoke again, her tone carrying a hint of resolution. "I can appreciate that. I retreated from the world without being forced to do someone else's bidding. There is another way you can aid me—a way that aligns with your abilities and talents. Phoebe, I ask that you assist in warding my realm and reinforcing the spell that governs access to it. My powers aren't what they used to be. Take your group for example. If anyone else had knocked on my proverbial door with a group this large, I would have denied them outright. It is becoming harder and harder for me to refuse to select people entrance."

Phoebe's expression shifted from hesitation to contemplation as she considered Morgana's proposal. The gravity of the request was clear, but so was the opportunity to contribute to something meaningful. "Warding your realm and reinforcing the spell would be an honor, Morgana. I understand the significance this task holds. And I'm willing to take it on. You can trust me not to subvert your spell should I seek entrance in the future."

Morgana's smile held a note of satisfaction as if she had expected Phoebe's response. "Your willingness to help speaks to your character, Phoebe. With your assistance, we can ensure that my realm remains safeguarded and accessible to those who are truly worthy."

Morgana approached Phoebe and clasped her hands. My skin prickled as magic filled the space along with their intent. It was as if their will was seeping out of their pores. Phoebe's mom, Nylah, Stella, Maisy, Amelie, Fiona, Aislinn, and I converged in a circle around Phoebe and Morgana to bolster the spell they were about to cast. The atmosphere thrummed with a sense of anticipation as we prepared to witness the magic that would unfold.

Guided by Morgana's ancient wisdom, they took their positions at the heart of the store. The energy around them shimmered, a reflection of the

magic that was about to transpire. I watched with a mixture of awe and anticipation, curious to see how their combined power would shape the world around us.

Phoebe's presence amplified the magic that flowed through Morgana as they released each other. Their hands were outstretched, their gestures deliberate and graceful. The air itself seemed to respond, charged with the energy of their intentions.

Morgana's words carried a weight of centuries, her voice rich with the echoes of ancient spells. "We gather here to fortify the bounds that shelter this realm—a sanctuary of secrets and enchantment."

Phoebe's voice joined Morgana's, their words intertwining in a harmonious duet. "With elements' embrace and magic's grace, we weave protection to secure this space."

As the chant continued, a subtle shift occurred in the atmosphere. The air seemed to shimmer with a faint luminescence, colors dancing in intricate patterns that mirrored the energies they channeled. The room itself responded, vibrating with an undercurrent of magic that wove the spell's foundation.

Together, Phoebe and Morgana raised their hands. Their motions synchronized as they directed their combined magic towards the circle's heart. The air crackled with energy, an invisible web of power forming a shield that expanded outward. It looked like the electricity in one of those plasma balls, except this was white instead of blue and purple.

With a final surge of energy, their voices reached a crescendo, the words of the chant echoing with resonance. "Ward and shield, protection yield, let no harm or ill intent be admitted."

The room seemed to hold its breath as the magic reached its zenith, the culmination of their shared effort. At the center of the circle, a radiant burst of light erupted, bathing the space in a brilliant glow.

As the light gradually dimmed, static electricity made the hair on our arms stand on end. Phoebe and Morgana had succeeded in enhancing the realm's protections, infusing their magic into the very fabric of the space. A sense of awe passed between the rest of us. The magic that Phoebe and Morgana had performed was a testament to the potential that lay within each of us.

Morgana beamed at Phoebe. "That was incredible. Anyone who believes you are weaker because of your background is sorely mistaken. I've never

experienced more power in one person.”

Phoebe’s cheeks pinkened as she lifted a shoulder. “You must not have met any gods or goddesses.”

Morgana quirked an eyebrow. “Very few have ever had the privilege. In fact, I believe you all,” Morgana gestured to all of us gathered in her store, “are the first mortals in centuries. Maybe even longer.”

Our circle broke apart when Morgana headed for the side of the store. “Let me get you the moonstone you asked for. I would still like to hear what your plans are, Mollie.”

Phoebe's mom inclined her head. “Fiona's mate has already crafted a talisman, and we plan to incorporate the moonstone into it along with the Harmony Elixir. A potion I created to force my disparate parts to co-exist without all the bloodthirsty chaos.”

Morgana's gaze held a mixture of curiosity and interest as she regarded Phoebe's mom. “A moonstone talisman infused with the Harmony Elixir? That sounds like a formidable endeavor. And you believe this will help Nylah’s husband?”

Mollie's eyes gleamed with determination. “We don’t have the wisdom that you possess. From what we’ve seen with my mom, we believe it will strike a balance with the Lykanthropy Virus. This will provide Arjun with a measure of stability and control over his transformations. Right now, he has no say in when he changes and that’s when the trouble happens,” Phoebe informed her.

“I don’t know shit about being a witch and casting spells, but my gut tells me this is Arjun’s best bet. I know this might not work, but I am grateful for any relief you can give him,” Nylah said.

Morgana picked up a white rock and brought it back to our group. “Would you mind if I give you some advice on ensuring the moonstone is at its strongest?”

Phoebe waved her hand toward her body. “We welcome any information you can share.”

Morgana smiled. “I recommend cleansing the Moonstone by washing it in cool spring water and leaving it to dry in the sun for several hours. Then, draw the symbol of the moon on a piece of paper or parchment. This symbol should be large enough to cover the entire face of the moonstone. Once that is done, select the rune for harmony, calm, or suppression. Something that will encapsulate what the werewolf needs. When that is done, place the crystal on

top of the symbol and shave off some of the stone to aid in adhering it to the charm. It'll help if you mix the shavings with silver."

"What do we write the rune on the stone with?" Phoebe asked.

Morgana spun around and started looking through small vials on one of the shelves. "Use this mixture. It contains silver, mercury, and aconite."

Nylah accepted the vial while Phoebe took the moonstone. Nylah smiled up at Morgana. "Thank you for your help. I don't know how I will ever repay you."

A few seconds later, we bid our farewells to Morgana. Nylah, Maisy, and Amelie's gratitude filled the air like a tangible presence. The mystical ambiance of Arcanum Treasures seemed to echo their appreciation for the guidance and aid we had received. Everyone expressed their heartfelt thanks to the enigmatic sorceress. We acknowledged the wisdom she had shared and the magic she had allowed us to access.

With our expressions of gratitude still lingering, we made our way back through the portal. The transition from the magical haven to the mundane world was a rough one. It was like going through the spin cycle. The disorientation was made worse because we'd left shortly after dinnertime, and the sun was just beginning to rise.

Once back at Nylah's house, I was relieved to see Kalliopi playing happily with Emi, the family dog, in the middle of the living room. Emi seemed to be in perfect physical health. Phoebe's mom wasted no time, preparing her cauldron to concoct the Harmony Elixir that would hopefully provide some relief to Arjun's condition. The cauldron's contents bubbled and simmered, its aromatic essence filling the air with its potent scent.

"We'd better get to work, too," Phoebe said. Her words interrupted Fiona's reunion with Bas and Aislinn's with Argies and Kalli.

Nylah released Arjun and approached us. "What can I do to help?"

Maisy and Amelie nodded in agreement. "We want to be part of it, too," Amelie added.

This part needed to be done with precision. Too many cooks in the kitchen would be a bad thing. I smiled at them. "If you can get us spring water and keep Kalli entertained while we do this next part, that would be great," I told them.

Fiona nodded in agreement. "It's best to keep this part to a few."

Amelie hurried to the kitchen and came back with a bottle labeled spring water. "Will this work?"

Nylah pointed out the backdoors. “If not, we have river water.”

I shared a look with Fiona and Aislinn. Both lifted a shoulder. It was Phoebe who said, “I think we’d be safer using river water. It’s likely closer to spring water than this bottled stuff. A lot of companies fill those with their tap water.”

Fiona nodded in agreement. “Sounds good to me.”

We went outside and approached the river. Arjun was ahead of us and had a bucket in his hands. He walked down their pier and bent over the side to fill it up. Phoebe dropped the moonstone into the water and then instructed Arjun to carry it back to the table on the patio.

We followed the instructions Morgana gave us. With the initial steps done, Fiona, Aislinn, Phoebe, and I gathered around the moonstone. Bas was off to the side with the charm he had crafted in hand. He had a mixture of silver and stone. He worked on combining the two while the four of us worked together. Each step we executed was a meticulous dance of intention.

Using a brush tipped with silver paint, we carefully painted the rune for suppression onto the moonstone's face. The design took shape, the symbol gleaming against the stone's surface. Aislinn's delicate touch added a Fae rune to the back, infusing the charm with an additional layer of calm.

With the paint still wet, we sprinkled a pinch of the crushed moonstone onto the symbol. The fragments adhered to the paint, imbuing the moonstone with the essence of the moon's energy—an essential component for our purpose.

Once the paint had dried completely, we carefully submerged the moonstone in the Harmony Elixir that Phoebe's mom had been diligently brewing. The elixir's essence enveloped the charm, a fusion of magic and intention blending together.

With the moonstone now infused and enchanted, the final step awaited us. Bas carefully fused the moonstone to the charm, his craftsmanship evident in every detail. His work was impeccable. He managed to create a masculine design that minimized the moonstone.

Holding the finished talisman in our hands, we exchanged glances of accomplishment and hope. To complete the process, we held the moonstone charm, closed our eyes, and focused on our intentions. The power of the moon seemed to flow through our very bodies. We directed it into the crystal.

As we opened our eyes, we all gazed at the finished product. The moonstone, now activated and charged, could provide stability and control to

Arjun in the face of his lycanthropic condition.

Phoebe picked it up and handed it over to Arjun. Everyone watched with bated breath as he lifted it before his face and stared at it. “I can feel the energy humming off of this.”

Nylah’s hands were clenched into fists at her side as she looked at her husband. “Do you feel different? More like your old self?”

Arjun lifted a shoulder. “There’s less anger clouding my mind. I can’t tell if it will stop the change or not.”

“Only time will tell how effective it is,” Fiona assured him.

Phoebe’s mom placed a hand on Arjun’s arm. “Having less anger is promising. It’s a start. That alone should lead to less uncontrollable shifting.”

Arjun smiled back at Phoebe’s mom. “I can’t thank you all enough.”

Phoebe tilted her head from shoulder to shoulder. “Mom’s right. That is a start. But I think we should magically bind the moonstone to Arjun. It’ll make it more effective in stabilizing his condition.”

Nylah scowled as she glanced over at the Pleiades. “I don’t like the thought of him being through even more magic. The only reason I can see that would be a good idea is if it will prevent him from losing it.”

Phoebe sucked in a breath. “It won’t necessarily do that, but it will definitely make it harder for him to misplace.”

Fiona jumped in, offering her insights. “Alternatively, we could magically tether the charm to Arjun. It’ll create a connection between him and the talisman. That way, he will always know where it is if it is lost.”

Arjun’s voice cut through the discussion, firm and resolute. “I won’t lose something that important. I agree with Nylah. I’d rather not be the subject of more magic.”

The conversation continued, each of us sharing our perspectives on the matter. The moonstone charm was a potent tool, and its effectiveness hinged on our decisions now.

Phoebe clarified, “The binding won’t ensure it won’t be lost, but it’ll make it stick around.”

Nylah nodded in understanding, acknowledging the potential benefit. “So, it’s a safeguard of sorts.”

Fiona then offered her solution, “Tethering would create a magical link. Even if misplaced, it’ll stay within his vicinity, but it will need to be done through magic.”

Arjun’s affirmation was certain. “Alright. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Phoebe and Fiona took the lead in tethering the charm to Arjun. Phoebe's fingers danced with purpose as she channeled her magic into the charm. Beside her, Fiona's concentration was unwavering as she added her power to the mix. The air seemed to shimmer with a delicate aura. A thin chain developed and traveled from the charm.

As their efforts culminated, a faint, iridescent thread of energy emerged from the charm, extending toward Arjun. It wrapped around him like a cocoon, forming an invisible bond between the talisman and him. I watched, intrigued, as the magical tether took shape.

Arjun's reaction was swift and intense. His form began to shift, sprouting fur as he let out a deep, resonant howl. Nylah's eyes went wide, and her head went on the swivel. She didn't hesitate to grab Arjun by the arm and drag him back into the house. His howls echoed in the air, blending with the sounds of boats, cars, and music around us.

I followed their retreat, my heart pounding with a mixture of anxiety and anticipation. By the time I managed to shut the door behind us, Arjun's transformation was already showing signs of retreating. His once-agitated state seemed to be settling. The fur receded, and the howls subsided.

In the span of a few moments, the atmosphere shifted from chaotic to controlled. The tethering had done its job, and it was remarkable to witness the effect firsthand. As the tension in the room dissipated, replaced by a sense of relief. I couldn't help but marvel at the power of magic and the resilience of those willing to wield it. With Arjun's condition visibly improved, a weight lifted from our shoulders. The moonstone charm and the magic we had channeled into it had proven their efficacy.

CHAPTER 8



Fiona

Underneath the warm sun, a sense of purpose filled the air as we stood together in Nylah's backyard. Phoebe's mom, Nylah, Stella, Maisy, Amelie, Violet, Aislinn, Phoebe, and I formed a semi-circle as we waited for Nylah to show us her powers. The lush surroundings of Nylah's property lent an air of tranquility to the moment, making it easy to forget the weight of the task before us.

Nylah led the way, her gaze steady as she gestured toward the shed at the edge of the yard. "Come this way. I've set up a storage vault in the old root cellar. It's fortified with my magic."

Maisy lifted a finger. "Don't forget that there's a powerful blend of earth and river magic thrown in too. Auntie Kaiya told us that being close to the river enhances the energy, creating a stronger and more stable environment."

Curiosity and intrigue stirred within me as I followed Nylah's lead. The idea of a hidden vault in a place people used to store food seemed like something out of a magical tale. Yet, here we were, about to witness it firsthand.

"Are you sure you're okay with us witnessing this part of the process?" I asked. "I know I asked, but I realize now that it might have been inappropriate for me to do that. I understand the need for utter secrecy on your part." Warm breath hit the back of my neck as if a large creature were breathing down my neck.

A scream left me as I ducked down, spun around, and conjured a ball of witch fire in a split second. Nylah jumped in front of me with her arms up and waving maniacally. "Don't throw that. It's just Byron, my Pegasus. I

keep him concealed so my neighbors don't see him."

I stood up and noticed that Nana's eyes brightened as her gaze focused on the area in front of me. "I want to see him. We can cast a spell that keeps mundies from seeing him. That way, he's not entirely invisible."

Nylah pursed her lips. "I should have asked Kaiya if there was a better way to hide him. I'd read how making something invisible was an easy task, and I did it without talking to anyone. I'd love your help doing that. It'll help to keep an eye on him."

I patted Nylah on the shoulder. "You can do it on your own. It's all about intent. If you keep what you want clear in your mind and use the chant *celare aunda*."

Nylah turned around and ran a hand down what I guessed was the muzzle of her Pegasus. She closed her eyes, and a few seconds later, she cast the spell as Fiona instructed. I couldn't help but gasp when I caught sight of the massive black horse with wings. I'd seen it from afar at the airport. This close, it was something else.

Kalliopi came running out of the back doors shouting about the flying horse. Byron dropped to his knees and allowed Aislinn's daughter to play with him. Nylah chuckled and turned our attention back to storing the Objects of Power we'd given to her in her vault.

As we turned to face a small mound of grass-covered dirt, Nylah opened an entrance that was concealed by her magic. She revealed the hidden root cellar behind a plain wooden door. The soft glow of enchantments filled the space, casting intricate light patterns against the walls. It was a sight to behold. It was a testament to Nylah's skill and power.

Nylah's voice was tinged with pride and uncertainty as she explained, "I've done this mostly on instinct, drawing on some collective Relic Keeper knowledge buried in my DNA. I can't say if it's entirely right or if you'll want to leave anything with me."

Stella stepped forward, her gaze soft and understanding. "Nylah, we've all been where you are. New to magic and without a clue. You're lucky to have instincts to draw on. That's a huge benefit. And if it helps, we trust you. Your instincts are guided by means none of us can understand, but that doesn't make it any less effective."

Phoebe's mom nodded in agreement. "We've seen your strength and skill firsthand."

Nylah's uncertainty seemed to fade a bit, replaced by a renewed sense of

determination. With a deep breath, she stepped down into the underground vault. Violet tried to go after her and winced as she took a step. “I shouldn’t be here. Your wards are powerful and trying to repel me.”

Phoebe’s mom nodded, her gaze settling on Violet. “You’re right. If I wasn’t with you right now, I would have left already.”

Nylah grinned from ear to ear. “It’s a relief to know my spells work. I allowed my best friend and girls to come in here so they couldn’t tell me if the wards really worked. Can you cross despite them? Or do I need to take them down?” She chewed her lower lip and was clearly upset by the idea of taking them down.

I joined Violet. “I believe we can get past them.”

Violet tilted her head to me. “It’ll be easier if she gives us permission this one time. Otherwise, the chances of our magic instinctually trying to break the wards could act up before we can stop it.”

Nylah nodded and gave us permission to enter her vault. The air was cool and still, and the walls were adorned with countless shelves, protective symbols, and intricate patterns of magic. It was evident that Nylah had poured her heart and soul into creating this haven for the precious items that might need safekeeping.

As we stood within the vault, a sense of reverence settled over us. Phoebe’s voice held a note of gratitude as she spoke, addressing Nylah directly. “Thank you for taking these for us, Nylah. Your willingness to help us regardless of the cost to you means more than words can express. I have worried about my friends for weeks, knowing they had Objects of Power in their possession that painted bigger targets on their backs.”

“Having a place like this, where someone we trust will keep artifacts safe, makes all the difference,” Aislinn told her. “It makes these missions that Artemis sends us on easier to take.”

As we stood within the vault, I got caught up in the feel of the magic surrounding us. It was fluid and resolute at the same time. It reminded me of water, and I imagined it wavering around the artifacts in a way that kept any magic from settling on any of the Objects of Power.

Taking a deep breath, I spun in a circle. “I have to apologize to you, Nylah. We didn’t consider things when we asked for someone to take possession of these OOPs who won’t misuse their power. We needed to get someone who could keep them safe and store them securely to ensure that they are used for good rather than falling into the wrong hands. And that

upended your life. As bad as this makes me sound, I didn't stop to think about how this would affect you until I met you. It was incredibly selfish, and I'm ashamed to say that I kept hounding Artemis and Phoebe. All I could focus on was how soon I could offload the Fountain of Youth and then the Godstone so it removed the target from me and those I loved."

Nylah's expression held a mix of anger, understanding, and agreement. "Fiona, I appreciate your honesty. And I was pissed at first, but never at you guys. I was mad at Artemis for taking the choice out of my hands. It took time, but eventually I came to understand the importance of safeguarding these artifacts. I've seen first-hand the danger that can come from having them."

I continued looking around us and stopped at the sight of the camera in the corner. "What's that for? No one should be able to get in here, right?" I asked.

Nylah's gaze moved to the security camera. She pulled out her phone and pulled up an app. "It's for Arjun and the girls to monitor things if they feel the yard or vault has been breached."

I had to hide my wince when the screen displayed a restless and agitated Arjun. It was difficult to see him in such a state. I had hoped his struggle would end entirely after he was given the charm. He was better than before but not entirely normal.

Maisy nodded her head. "None of us wanted to venture outside after the rogue shifter attacked Dad. With Mom's twenty-four-hour shifts, she's gone several days a week."

Nylah smiled at her daughter. "The camera is more for their security. I'm just glad that it works with my magic surrounding it."

Phoebe's mom made a noise, making everyone look at her. "Sorry. It seems that our cure isn't much of a cure. Arjun is as agitated as ever. And this isn't even the day before the full moon."

I took in the scene before us, my heart aching for Arjun and the turmoil he was experiencing. Mollie's comments were a stark reminder of the urgency behind our efforts. We'd wanted to find a solution, to bring relief, and to offer hope.

"He might still look bad, but he is in a far better state than he used to be. The talisman and potion are having an effect," Nylah said, her tone holding a mix of gratitude and determination.

"Many times, the power of a charm like that has to have time to build up.

We could have him take the rest of the potion,” Violet suggested. “If you want him to make progress faster.”

Nylah’s expression was pained as she watched her husband. “We can give it to him after we secure these items. Stand back while I work. I’m not entirely sure how my powers work.”

As we all took a few steps away from Nylah, we watched Amelie hand her the bag with the Fountain of Youth. Having grown up in the magical world, I never expected to see foreign magic. What Nylah did was not something I recognized. It even felt different.

Nylah was conducting magic that had been extinct for hundreds, if not thousands of years. My chest tightened, and joy spread through me. I had played a major role in her current predicament. But I’d also been instrumental in bringing back a much-needed power to the world.

Nylah turned with a smile on her face after she secured the Godstone. “Now, no one can find these artifacts.”

I held up a hand. “What about if Selene’s power has selected its new wielder? Will it be able to leave the stone and seek that person out?”

Nylah’s forehead furrowed with her confusion. “What do you mean? Is that possible?”

I explained what we’d been told about the goddess’s magic being relocated into a new person if it ever discovers one that is fit to hold her power. Nylah lifted a shoulder. “I have no idea. However, my spells are designed to hide OOPs and keep them safe, so if the magic wants out, it should be able to leave.”

Violet cocked her head to the side. “Can you find out? Just in case we are ever asked by Artemis or one of Selene’s siblings, we can ensure them the magic is in control of its destiny.”

Nylah barked out a bitter laugh as she headed for the exit. “I wish there was someone I could call about that. I’ve been flying completely blind, but I will add it to the list of questions I have.”

Everyone’s attention was diverted to Arjun pacing restlessly across the patio. Byron stood twenty feet away from Arjun yet watched him like a hawk. Phoebe’s mom led the way to the house as Nylah locked and secured the vault.

Mollie’s voice carried as she addressed Arjun. “Why don’t you come back inside? The moon’s rays clearly affect you. There’s another dose of the Harmony Elixir. It should settle the agitation. Of course, the dose will be

temporary.”

Arjun followed behind and looked wary as Mollie retrieved the leftover potion. “What does it taste like?” He made a face of disgust as he accepted the full shot glass.

Phoebe’s mom laid a hand on Arjun’s shoulder. “It’s not going to make you sick or anything. But it will make you feel better.”

Arjun shrugged and threw back the potion like it was alcohol. “Mmmm. That’s not bad. It’s like sweet tea, only thicker.”

“How do you feel, Dad?” Maisy asked.

Arjun smiled at his daughter. “Not too bad.” Arjun staggered and dropped onto a stool. “Woah.”

Phoebe’s mom grimaced. “Are you alright?”

Arjun sighed as his head dropped to his chest. “Just dizzy. It’s not bad, though.”

Phoebe’s mom started scribbling notes in a small notebook from her handbag. “Let me know any of your symptoms so I can keep track of them.”

A surge of energy pulsed through the air as Arjun nodded and shook his shoulders. The transformation was both remarkable and heartening. Arjun’s restlessness abated, and he settled into an almost normal state. His movements became more fluid, and while his face was furrier than normal, his demeanor was markedly improved. I watched with a mixture of relief and hope as he spoke, his voice carrying a sense of clarity and gratitude.

“I feel more like myself than I have in over a month,” Arjun said, his words a testament to the impact the additional potion coupled with the charm had on him.

Nylah’s gaze held a mix of emotions as she looked at Arjun. “I can’t thank you all enough for giving him this peace. It’s been a difficult time for both of us.”

Mollie, Stella, spoke up with a thoughtful expression. “We will be a phone call away after we return home and ready to help anytime. We’re stronger together. And with this mix of skills and talent, there won’t be many enemies that will be able to beat you guys.”

As the conversations flowed, a question lingered—an inquiry about the constant search for the powerful objects we had come to possess. It was a concern that had occupied our minds and led us on this journey across the pond.

I finally voiced the query that had been on our minds. “Nylah, is there a

way for us to transport objects to you? Now that we've seen the process you use to secure them, that seems like the safest method. And, yes, I fully expect to need you again in the near future.

Violet snorted. "It seems like we're constantly having to track artifacts down. Our missions have become quite the endeavor."

Nylah's gaze met mine. "Given how many I have already gotten from your endeavors, I know you're right about that. We could explore creating a magical link between us, a way to transport these objects easily. I don't know if that's even possible, though. The best offer I can make is to meet up and conduct an exchange. Byron can get me places relatively fast."

I nodded as exhaustion settled over me. "We will investigate the possibility of forming a connection to send you OOPs while you figure out locations we could meet around the world."

"Given how many different locations these investigations have sent us, it's smart to have options, so we know based on where we might be at the moment," Aislinn added.

The possibility of finding a more streamlined solution was a glimmer of hope amidst the complexities we faced. Having a plan for how to handle the powerful artifacts once they were in our possession would make me feel a lot better. With Arjun more stable, I felt better about leaving to get some sleep.

CHAPTER 9



*V*iolet

I practically fell into the door of the Hive House. Whoever owned the place had to be magical because I swear the home embraced us in its comforting atmosphere, making it easy to relax. Not to mention how well-decorated and cozy it was. “Who’s hungry?” I asked as I looked around at our motley group. It was a good thing the house had a good-sized living room and kitchen area because there were a lot of us there for dinner.

Fiona lifted a hand without lifting her head and laid off the back cushion of the couch. “I am. I already ordered shrimp and grits to be delivered.”

Aislinn turned from the fridge, where she was getting a snack for Kalliopi. “I can’t wait to try them. I want to know how they differ here.”

Phoebe chuckled. “There’s nothing like good Southern cheesy grits. And no matter what anyone tells you, they aren’t easy to make.”

Phoebe’s mom rolled her eyes. “Are you saying you don’t like mine after all? You’ve been raving about them for months.”

Phoebe’s brow furrowed in confusion as she looked at her mom. “No! That’s not what I’m saying at all. Yours are better than any I’ve ever had.”

“*That’s because she’s a kitchen witch,*” Tarja said into our minds. “*Everything she makes will be the best of anything you’ve had.*”

Phoebe’s mom straightened, and her chin lifted. “I don’t know about that, but I would have cooked for everyone. I got so caught up with visiting Morgana le Fey that it escaped me.”

Nana shook her head as she took one of the recliners. “There’s no reason for you to do all that work, Mollie. Our time with them is limited. We need to figure out how we can help them when they find Objects of Power.”

Phoebe nodded and leaned forward. “You’re right, Nana. And I loved your idea of opening a portal or something to send artifacts to Nylah. We just need to figure out how we can accomplish that.”

My gaze skipped to Phoebe’s familiar, Tarja, who was lounging in a patch of moonlight through the large picture window. “Tarja, do you know of a way we could create a portal to send objects to Nylah? Expecting that we will always be able to meet up after we locate a relic isn’t feasible. And the artifacts we are sent after are too important to leave unattended.”

Tarja lifted her feline head, and her bright green gaze held a contemplative spark as she considered my inquiry. “*Creating a portal for object transportation is complex, and it poses significant risks. Directing the flow of magical energy across distances can be unpredictable.*”

Her response was not unexpected, but I felt a pang of disappointment nonetheless. “So, it's not possible?”

She shook her head from side to side, which looked odd on a cat. “*Not in the way you're envisioning. However, there might be an alternative. Instead of a portal, Nylah could fashion a protective box. It won't be as swift as a portal, but it would offer an added layer of security while the items are in transit.*”

That was an intriguing idea. Fiona finally lifted her head and looked down at the cat. “And how do we get the artifacts to her once they're in the box?”

Tarja's eyes gleamed with a hint of something I couldn’t decipher. “*Perhaps Artemis could involve Nylah in artifact retrieval missions. You could gather the items while she focuses on safeguarding and masking their power.*”

I pondered Tarja's suggestion. It was the scenario that made the most sense. Having the Relic Keeper go after them directly was ideal. But Nylah had a job. She was a firefighter and had already taken a brief leave of absence. She was so happy about Arjun’s progress that she called her boss and told him she would be back on shift at the end of the week. As if she heard my thoughts, Phoebe brought a dose of reality to the conversation.

“Nylah will be busy with her job. And it seems highly likely that she will also be occupied with numerous tasks elsewhere,” Phoebe cautioned.

Tarja inclined her head. “*I forget that she has a mundane life still. You and Fiona were able to transition into your new, magical lives without having to keep one foot in each world. And she will be compelled to search*

out relics. It's part of her nature. Lucky for her, there are countless artifacts scattered across the world, both light and dark. While the idea has merit, having a reliable relic keeper in multiple locations isn't something that can be achieved swiftly."

Fiona sighed and leaned into Sebastian's side. "Your idea of a box is brilliant. It will minimize the energy signature of anything we recover."

"We would need the box to alter to accommodate different sizes of objects magically," Aislinn noted as she handed some diced apples and cheese squares to Kalli, who sat next to Tarja and started sharing.

There was a knock at the door that Aidon answered. The room fell into silence as the delivery driver handed him five bags of food. I laughed when we made a daisy chain of sorts to transfer the bags from Aidon to the kitchen table across the room.

I helped Fiona get the Styrofoam containers out and set them on the table. "Shall we do this family style? I got some fried green tomatoes, okra, and barbeque to share."

Phoebe nodded. "Sounds good to me. Thanks for ordering this."

"There is Underworld magic I could use to make the box adaptable. However, I have no idea if it would interfere with her enchantments," Aidon offered as he filled his plate.

Phoebe surprised me when she put the plate she'd made in front of Tarja. It was one thing to watch Kalli share snacks and another to see the familiar being fed like that. It made me realize she wasn't a house pet that was fed cat food and used a litter box. For some reason, that idea boggled my mind. Did she use the loo like the rest of us? If so, how did she flush? Once my mind started, it continued down that rabbit hole for several seconds until it was my turn to fill my plate.

Shaking my head, I dismissed those ridiculous musings and focused on the yummy-smelling food. There were appreciative murmurs as we all dug in. Aislinn beamed at Fiona. "You are right. There is nothing like this in Cottlehill Wilds. So delicious."

I hummed as the flavors exploded on my tongue. "Yes, this is wonderful. We are going to need to visit more often. Between the people and the food, I could come regularly. Does anyone know enough about the Relic Keeper magic to know about the interaction with Aidon's power?"

Tarja lifted her head. "*I have a basic understanding of Nylah's powers and am fairly certain there would be no interference. Given that you are*

going back tomorrow night to check on Arjun before you leave to visit the kids, it would be wise to go and pick up a wooden chest and have Aidon do his work so we can have Nylah enchant it.”

“That’s a brilliant idea,” I said around a mouthful.

We continued to eat and made plans for Fiona to run to a local store in the morning. Phoebe and the others would be back before we had to go to Nylah’s house. I was happy to note that we would be carpooling to go and see Phoebe and Fiona’s kids after we checked on Arjun. I went to sleep not long after Phoebe and her crew left. I didn’t have energy to worry about Arjun losing his shit on us the next night because the lure of the full moon was too much for him.

* * *

“UGH,” I groaned as I rolled over and tried to hide beneath the pillow. The sun was burning my retinas through my closed eyelids. I just wanted a few more minutes. I’d had a nightmare about Arjun shifting and biting Bas before anyone could stop him. Of course, in my twisted dream, Bas became a rabid monster attacking us all.

“Morning, Auntie,” Kalliopi sang as she skipped into the room. I couldn’t stop the smile that spread over my face. Kalli’s joy was infectious. “Aidon is about to do his magic, so you hafta get up.”

"Good morning, nugget. Sounds like Auntie Fiona was already out this morning. You didn’t happen to make me tea, did you?" The scent of brewing coffee filled the air, making me want to get up and make a pot.

Kalli jumped on the mattress with me and laughed. “I filled the teapot with water. Mom says it’s almost ready.”

“What time is it?” I asked aloud as I kissed Kalli on her cheek before I shoved off the covers.

“It’s time to get outta bed, sleepyhead,” Kalliopi sang as she bounced on the mattress.

I jumped up and grabbed Kalli around the waist, making her squeal. Aislinn poked her head into the room with a grimace. “I’m sorry. I thought she was with Argies. We were going to let you sleep until it was time to go.”

A yawn cracked my jaw wide as I set Kalli down. “No, it’s okay. I needed to get up anyway. I’ll be out after I wash up and get dressed.” After

relieving myself, I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and put on my moisturizer.

The aroma of pancakes and bacon filled the air when I exited the bathroom. The clatter of pans and the sound of laughter blended into a harmonious melody. I was smiling when I entered the kitchen to see Phoebe's mom cooking.

"Morning everyone. You guys are extremely quiet. I had no idea you all were here," I said.

Fiona chuckled. "I cast a silencing spell at the end of the hall, figuring you needed the rest. You were restless for hours."

"You're the best." I smiled at Fiona as I poured myself a cup of tea.

Aidon clapped his hands together as he sat on the edge of the couch with the box in front of him. "I'm ready to do this. Why don't you guys fix a plate while the food is hot? This will take me a few."

Nana shot up pretty fast for an older woman. I hoped I was as spry as her at her age. If we continued aging like normal. We had no idea how different we were after Artemis made us her huntresses.

"Mmmm. Banana, walnut pancakes. You spoil me, Mollie," Nana said as she filled her plate.

It didn't take long before we all had food and were huddled around one end of the table where we could see Aidon. Kalliopi must have eaten earlier because she bounced onto the sofa next to Aidon and sat cross-legged, watching him.

Aidon smiled at her before his sapphire eyes turned back to the small wooden box before him. The box seemed ordinary at first glance. When I squinted to clear the blur, I noted there was a symbol etched into the side facing me. There was latent magic within it, waiting to be unlocked by the god's skillful touch. With a wave of his hand, Aidon began to channel his powers, his fingers dancing over the box's surface.

We ate as we watched in awe. I finished my pancakes and bacon. I preferred beans and toast or kippers to the pancake, but it wasn't awful. Truthfully, I was too mesmerized by watching Aidon work his magic to really taste much.

The wooden box began to shimmer with a faint ethereal light. Aidon's voice, rich and commanding, filled the air as he explained the intricate process he was undertaking. "I'm imbuing the box with the ability to alter its size, adapting to accommodate artifacts of various dimensions. It's a delicate

balance of magic and craftsmanship, allowing the box to expand or contract as needed.”

Everyone was captivated by the grace and precision with which Aidon worked. His powers flowed seamlessly, merging with the raw material of the box as if they were one. The wood itself seemed to respond to his touch, shaping and morphing under his guidance.

“By infusing the box with the essence of the underworld,” Aidon continued, “it gains the ability to tap into the ancient magic that binds all dimensions. This will allow it to adjust its size and proportions while maintaining the integrity of whatever is contained within.”

The box continued to undergo a transformation before our eyes. It seemed to ripple and shift, its dimensions changing and adapting as if it had a will of its own. Aidon's concentration was unwavering, his connection to the magic he wielded palpable.

A few seconds later, Aidon waved his hand with a flourish. “And there you have it. The box is now a vessel that can safeguard artifacts of any size, no matter how intricate or massive they may be. And it will not be bigger or heavier for you to carry.”

The magical display left us all in awe, and I exchanged amazed glances with my friends. The power Aidon commanded was unlike anything I had ever witnessed before. It hit me then that for a second time in our lives, we had been granted a glimpse into the realm of gods. Only this time, the power held a darker edge. Although, I was relieved to note there was no malevolence in it.

Fiona crossed the room and picked up the box. “It’s lighter than it was when I picked it out. This is incredible.”

Phoebe bent and kissed Aidon before smiling at Fiona. “Let’s test it out. What should we put inside it?”

Kalli jumped to her feet on the couch, and her hand shot into the air. “Me! I want to go inside. The magic tickles.”

Argies shook his head at the same time Aislinn gasped. I put a hand on Aislinn’s arm as Aidon shot them a look. “She won’t be harmed. We can leave the lid open so she can get out at any time.”

I tilted my head to the side to look at Argies, who was clearly more upset by the idea of his daughter going inside the box. “I think it’s actually a good idea. I can’t imagine having to recover an artifact larger than Kalli, so it will give us an idea if there are limits.”

Argies blew out a breath and closed the distance to his daughter. “That’s not a bad idea. It wouldn’t be wise to find ourselves in a situation where we are unable to take an artifact with us. Set it on the ground.”

Fiona put it down and opened the lid. Argies set Kalli on her feet. Holding onto her dad, Kalli put one foot inside the box and then the other. The second her foot touched down, the box’s opening widened, making it possible for Kalli to crouch down. Within seconds, the box covered her head and then went back to its normal size.

A dozen heads were bent over the thing, looking inside at a little girl with curly red hair laughing and running in circles. It was like looking through a peephole in a door. Kalli tilted her head back. “I wanna see if my dragon can fly in here.” True to the precocious child she was, Kalli shifted into her purple dragon. She blew out a stream of fire, and was flying in circles while her parents were still shouting, “No!”

Aislinn sagged against Argies. “At least we know it can accommodate a giant.”

We spent the day testing the box with various objects like chairs, dressers, and other things so we knew how it would work for the future. We also asked if Nina had discovered any further information about the Auric Blaze. Grams called while we were watching Kalliopi play in the large backyard. The Blaze is stable, so Fiona can visit her kids without worry eating away at her. She deserved the time with them. She didn’t get to see them nearly as often as she should.

The day was filled with food, fun, and sun. It was a nice break after the back-to-back crises we had lately. Nylah’s porch was bathed in gentle sunlight as we approached her house. I waved to a couple next door. I knew what having nosey neighbors was like, and I could imagine them wondering how loud we were going to be. There were a lot of us.

The sight of Nylah, Arjun, and their daughters smiling at us as they opened the door was a welcomed sight. We’d traded messages several times throughout the day to discover Arjun had gotten through his workday without any troubles or interruptions. And Nylah looked far less stressed than the last time I’d seen her.

Greetings were exchanged, and we went into the kitchen. Nylah gestured to the box in Fiona’s hands. “What’s this?”

“It’s a temporary solution to the issue of getting artifacts to you,” Fiona explained. “We figured we couldn’t assume we would always be able to meet

up. You have a busy life, and our cases are unpredictable. We need a way to travel safely with them once they are recovered, so Aidon enchanted this box to grow with our needs. Now we would like you to work your Relic Keeper magic on it to dampen the contents.”

Nylah’s eyes grew wide. “I’ll have to think about that. I know how dangerous these items can be when others detect them.” Nylah extended her hands, and Fiona set the box in them.

She lifted the lid and looked inside, then turned it over. Maisy stuck her arm inside when her mom set it on the island and burst out laughing when her shoulder smacked the lid. “This thing is badass. I want one.”

Nylah tugged her daughter out of the box and shook her head. “No way,” she told her before turning her gaze to Aidon. “The symbols you put on the outside gave me an idea. I can draw my runes inside the lid and enchant the interior, concealing whatever is in it.”

Fiona, Aislinn and I nodded in agreement. “We were thinking along the same lines,” Fiona told her. It was one of the topics we’d discussed that day.

Nylah didn’t hesitate to get to work. Using her finger, she drew a rune and a symbol on the underside of the lid. Her fingers moved across the surface with otherworldly grace. A soft white light emanated from the symbol, bathing the kitchen in a gentle, ethereal glow when she finished the final stroke of the rune.

Kalli clapped her hands together. “More pretty magic,” she sang as she danced in a circle, making everyone laugh.

All eyes remained on the box as the light flickered and bounced like a beacon. I prayed it wouldn’t remain like that every time we opened the thing. That would give off a distinctive energy that would undoubtedly draw attention. The air seemed to hum with a resonance, and there were currents of energy weaving together. To my relief, the light went out, and the energy vanished.

Amelie leaned closer to it. “It’s like a pocket of null energy.”

I sighed in relief. “You have no idea how much we appreciate this. We can now safely store the artifacts in the box, hiding them from prying magical eyes.”

Aislinn rubbed her arms and nodded. “It’s been terrifying traveling with such powerful relics. I swear I lose ten years off my life each time we’ve had to do it.”

“I’m happy to help. You guys have done so much for us already,” Nylah

replied.

Arjun nodded in agreement and walked over to the French doors. “I haven’t been this calm with the moon shining on me in a while. And this is a full moon.”

Phoebe smiled at them and was telling them about the need for former mundies to stick together as Fiona leaned into me, her voice calm. “Let’s hope the amulet continues to work as we intended.”

As the moon’s glow enveloped the room, Arjun’s form began to shift gradually. His features distorted, and fur sprouted across his skin. His movements were restless and agitated, his eyes reflecting the struggle within him. Argies picked up Kalli and moved closer to the pantry.

Nana’s voice was soft but concerned. “He’s not going wild, but he’s definitely struggling.”

Phoebe nodded, her eyes narrowed in focus. “Let’s see if the charm can make a difference.”

The amulet dangled from Arjun’s neck, a physical representation of the magic we had poured into it. Its glow seemed to mingle with the moonlight, the two sources of power intertwining as they affected Arjun’s transformation.

Bas whispered, “Look at the way he’s moving. It’s like the charm is helping him keep some control.”

“Maybe this is working after all.” Aislinn’s voice held a note of hope.

We exchanged glances, our collective relief evident in our eyes. Conversations fluttered between us as we analyzed every nuance of Arjun’s behavior, sharing observations and theories.

Fiona’s gaze never wavered from Arjun. “The charm seems to be keeping him from losing it completely.”

Phoebe’s brow furrowed as she observed Arjun’s movements. “He’s still agitated. I’d feel better if he had no symptoms at all.”

Nylah, Maisy, and Amelie were standing between us and Arjun. Nylah turned to look at us over her shoulder. “This is night and day different from what he has experienced.”

As the minutes wore on, Arjun’s transformation seemed to slow down, his movements growing sluggish. A sense of exhaustion emanated from him, and we watched with mixed emotions as the moon’s hold on him began to weaken. His canines returned to normal teeth, and his snout shrunk.

“I’d say the amulet is successful. He never fully transformed,” Phoebe

said.

Nylah stepped forward, her voice tremulous with emotion. "Thank you, all of you. This is more than we could've hoped for."

Conversations flowed between us as the night continued. Shortly before midnight, we said our goodbyes, promising Nylah that we would remain in touch. Phoebe's crew returned to their rental while we returned for one last night at the Hive House. We'd accomplished a lot in the short time we'd been in the U.S., and now we were going to see Fiona's kids. The stress of what we still had to do weighed on me, but I vowed to be present with Emmie, Skylar, and Greyson. They deserved our full attention, and the Blaze was stable for now.

CHAPTER 10



Fiona

I was beyond excited to see my kids, but I was battling guilt at the same time. Grams assured me that the Auric Blaze was fine and that things had been quiet. She was managing the portal to Eidothea without a problem. The last part shouldn't surprise me. She'd basically taken over the role I had inherited when Artemis saved my life and made us her huntresses.

"The kids are going to meet us at their house," Phoebe called out from the third-row seat. She and Aidon were driving with Bas and I while the rest of our group was split between two cars.

"I want to visit that cookie shop in town. You didn't bring nearly enough of Tyrael's treats home," Nana said from behind me.

I twisted in my seat as a grin spread across my face. "What's this about cookies? You know I love a good biscuit, as we say over the pond." I chuckled when Phoebe made a face at me. I was born in Cottlehill Wilds, but I lived in the United States far longer and spoke like an American versus a Brit.

Phoebe laughed and told us a little bit about the flamboyant Tyrael. He was a Fae who lived on gossip. He'd been instrumental in a case Phoebe handled a while back about a Fae forged weapon theft and mysterious deaths. It happened to be the case that led to her, Stella, and Aidon being kidnapped. Obviously, she managed to get them all out of it, but there were some close calls in there.

The butterflies returned to my stomach as we got closer to the kids' house. Greyson had nearly lost himself when he didn't keep up with collecting the energy he needed. Thankfully, Jean-Marc moved in and has

helped remind him they needed to visit ley line junctures regularly. I was surprised by how much anticipation and excitement filled me. The trail of three large SUVs pulled up in front of the two-story house, and our tight-knit group strode to the front door to reunite with the younger generation.

“Mom! Auntie Phoebe!” Emmie cried out as she opened the door. “Oh my gosh, there are so many of you here. It’s so good to see you guys.” I’d worry that she was being genuine if she wasn’t already embracing Bas.

Skylar, Jean-Marc, and Greyson filled the doorway behind Emmie with smiles. Skylar moved past her sister and bent to pick up the tabby cat walking next to Phoebe. “Hello, Tarja. My mom and Phoebe haven’t caused any trouble, have they?”

“Everyone has been so focused on helping Arjun that they haven’t had the time to cause problems,” Tarja replied telepathically into everyone’s mind. Tarja’s green eyes fixed over Skylar’s shoulder and on my son. *“You are growing in power and being responsible with it, I can see. I am so glad you learned your lesson, Greyson. You and Jean-Marc will change the way the witching world looks at wizards. Although, you might turn out to be a mage, Greyson. Only time will tell.”*

My eyes bulged when I heard that. “Sounds like we have some catching up to do. Show me what you’ve done to the house first,” I prompted as I released Emmie and went to hug my son.

A rush of warmth and familiarity flooded over me as I walked inside and saw the hall tree that used to be in our house. The home held so many memories, both old and new. It was heartening to see how it had evolved into a cozy and vibrant living space. Watching how much pride and joy our children had for their house was a balm to my soul. I worried about being so far away from them. They were young adults, and I talked to them as often as possible, but it was never enough.

Emmie, my eldest, led the way with infectious enthusiasm, showing off the various corners of their home. Her excitement was contagious, and I couldn't help but chuckle at her animated descriptions. The house was adorned with little touches of magic that hadn't been there before. I was happy to note each of them had added something. The mix of their personalities was a true representation of the coven they had formed.

As we walked through the house, laughter and chatter filled the air. Our large group filled the living room when the tour was finished. Conversations flowed effortlessly, with Emmie and Skylar sharing stories about their

studies, their friends, and the various magical beings they had encountered. Jean-Marc and Greyson both talked about their girlfriends.

Phoebe's mom picked up a textbook from the coffee table. "How has it been to live together? Jean-Marc seems to fit in like one of the siblings, which makes me wonder if you get into petty arguments."

The kids exchanged glances, and I could see a mixture of emotions in their eyes. Skylar, my youngest, spoke up with a grin. "Honestly, we were a little worried at first. We thought it might be too much, but it has turned out to be one of the best decisions we've ever made."

Emmie nodded in agreement. "Yeah, we've formed this little family, and it just works. I made a chore chart, and at first we used it religiously. Now I can't remember where I put it. No one has to ask the others to do their jobs. They get done. And we support each other in our classes."

Greyson lifted both shoulders as he rocked on his heels. "I actually got closer to Em and Sky after Jean-Marc moved in. It felt like we really were in this together. It wasn't as scary suddenly having this power unlocked. And it's a plus that I don't go back to a dorm room to a roommate who may or may not like me. I know Jean-Marc, Emmie, and Sky have my back and will be there for me."

Stella smiled at them. "Not only have you formed a family here. You've formed a coven."

"And that includes your girlfriends. They don't have to be witches to be a part of the coven," Tarja added.

The genuine affection in their voices resonated deeply within me. It was a testament to the bond they had forged, their unity as a coven extending beyond magic and into the realm of family. My heart swelled with pride and gratitude for the path they had chosen and the beautiful bonds they had created.

I exchanged glances with Violet, Aislinn, and my other friends. I could tell that they saw the same thing. As the conversation continued to flow and laughter echoed through the room, I couldn't help but feel a profound sense of contentment. In the midst of magic and family, surrounded by those I loved most. I knew it was good that we took this time amidst the chaos of our lives. These moments were few and far between. They should be cherished forever without guilt.

"You four have a wonderful house. The joy that lives here is infused into the atmosphere. Now that we're all reassured you don't live in a house where

parties are had frequently, I'm hungry." Nana got up from the recliner. "Who's ready to visit Twin Cookie with me?"

Aidon chuckled. "We should catch up with Thokrum, too."

Phoebe nodded and pulled out her phone. "I'll text him to meet us there."

Shortly after arriving we were back in the vehicles with a fourth added to our procession as we drove across town to Twin Cookie. I don't recall the bakery from when I used to live there. It made me wonder if there was an enchantment on the business to keep mundies away.

Twin Cookie was located in a strip mall across town. We parked in front of the store, and I noted the logo on the window was of two overlapping cookies with a bite out of one of them. The brown letters of the store's name popped on the sage green background, making the simple logo stunning. It would draw attention from all around. I would be surprised if there were an aversion spell to keep mundies away.

There was a drone of chatter as we entered. My gaze scanned the sage green and pink walls before passing over the recessed arches in the panels. They were all painted green with pink decorating the outline above that and to the sides. There were two counters arranged perpendicular to one another with white marble countertops.

My gaze stopped on the tall, slender man with perfectly styled dark brown hair. It was short enough to reveal his pointed ears. I wondered how he got away without using a glamour like Bas did. Those thoughts were sidetracked when I saw the twinkle in his grey eyes. "Phoebe! Stella! So good to see you both again. And it seems as if you've brought the entire town with you."

Phoebe extended her hands, and the Fae came out from behind the tall display case. "Tyrael. I brought my mom, Nana, and lots of friends." Phoebe introduced the rest of us to the enigmatic Tyrael.

"It's nice to meet you. Nana has been talking about your biscuits all morning. I can't wait to try some," I told him as I admired his dark green velvet jacket. He wore it over a skintight white t-shirt and paired it with tight black pants and black loafers without socks. He was a fashion statement and then some.

My gaze skittered back to the massive glass display case set at the end of one of the counters. My mouth watered as I looked over the variety of cookies he offered. And then, there were the two smaller glass displays set on top of the two white counters. "So many delicious choices." My gaze traveled

over a screen to check out and pay for my order. That seemed very modern and mundane for a Fae-owned bakery.

Nana nodded her head as she bent for a closer look. “You should sell him your Vitality Bliss Bites, Mollie. Those energized chocolate chip cookies would fly off the shelves. You could also teach him how to adapt your chill-out cheesecake, cheerful cherry pie, or blissed-out blueberry pancake recipes for cookies. They’d be bestsellers.”

Tyrael frowned at Nana. “What’s this about? I’ve always wanted to carry enchanted cookies but haven’t been able to find a witch I trust to help.”

Nana gestured to Phoebe’s mom. “My daughter Mollie has a talent for imbuing her food with magic.”

Phoebe’s mom shifted from foot to foot. “I was able to do that in the past. I haven’t tried since I was...changed.”

Phoebe scowled at her mom and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Your magic hasn’t changed, Mom. You’re just as powerful as ever. Your new potions prove that.”

Phoebe’s mom lifted a shoulder. “I hadn’t thought about that. I just haven’t done much of the baking like I used to.”

Tyrael looked from Phoebe’s mom to Nana. “But you truly created delicacies that gave the consumer a boost?”

Nana nodded as laughter slipped from her. “Yes, she has. My great-granddaughter even took a container of the Vitality Bliss Bites to her teacher, who ate them and was bouncing all around the school for hours afterward.”

“Mollie, my dear, you are a culinary sorceress!” Tyrael exclaimed with a dramatic flair, his hands gesticulating wildly. “How do you manage to enchant your treats with such magical potency? Is there a charm you can sell me, perhaps?”

Mollie chuckled softly, her eyes twinkling with warmth. “Well, Tyrael, I’m what you might call a kitchen witch. I have a special knack for infusing food with intention and magic. It’s all about weaving the energies of the ingredients with my intentions, so I don’t think I can create a charm for you.”

Tyrael’s eyes widened, mirroring his dramatic gasp. “Kitchen witchery! A rare power these days. Or so I’m told. And may I say that you are as enchanting as the magic you bring to your creations.”

Mollie’s laughter chimed like music. “Thank you for that. I can assure you I’m nothing so exciting. I just have a bit of intuitive magic blended with a pinch of love when I cook.”

Tyrael leaned in with an eager expression. “And how, my dear, do you infuse such enchantments into your recipes? If I could understand, perhaps we could convince one of these young witches or wizards to help me with the baking.”

Mollie leaned back with a mischievous smile. “It's in the way I stir, the whispers of incantations, and the intentions I hold. A sprinkle of courage, a dash of happiness—each ingredient becomes a vessel for magic.”

Tyrael's hands fluttered, a mimicry of a magical dance. “Truly, you're an artist of the mystical culinary arts! But tell me, can anyone master this craft?”

Phoebe placed a hand on her mom's shoulder. “No, this is not a skill anyone can master. Trust me, I've tried. As has my daughter. Imagine Emmie or Jean-Marc came over to enchant your cookies, and they ended up giving your customers a bad case of gas instead of calming their nerves. Kitchen witchery is a unique skill set.”

“Oh, dear. That would be disastrous!” Tyrael exclaimed before turning his gaze back to Phoebe's mom. “Sweet Mollie, you are nothing short of a culinary sorceress!” Tyrael said, his voice dripping with theatrical flair. “Would you consider gracing my humble bakery with your enchanted cookie dough? Only a witch of your caliber can infuse dough with such exquisite magic.”

“She'd love to,” Nana declared while Phoebe's mom said, “I'm not so sure I understand what you'd like.”

Tyrael looped his arm through Mollie's and started walking through his shop. “While I would love it if you move here and bake for me, I wouldn't dare dream of taking the Pleiades mother from her side. So, the solution would be for you to create the dough, complete with enchantments, and ship them to me. I will then bake and sell them. Of course, I'd give you credit for the creations.”

Mollie's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. “Oh! I'd be thrilled to share my recipes and enchantments with a fellow artist who truly appreciates the craft. I've always wanted to own a bakery.”

With a theatrical handshake, the deal was struck. I watched their interaction, amused by Tyrael's extravagance and Mollie's genuine enthusiasm. As their conversation flowed, my friends and I found ourselves immersed in the cozy ambiance of the bakery.

The air was rich with the scent of various cookies, each more tantalizing than the last. With a knowing exchange of glances, we each selected our

chosen indulgence from timeless chocolate chip to daring lavender shortbread.

Tyrael was a true master at multi-tasking, and he traded ideas with Phoebe's mom while boxing up our selections. Emmie and Skylar didn't waste any time as they dug into their desserts. I took a bite of the lavender shortbread and discovered each bite was a symphony of flavors.

The bell above the door jingled and opened a few seconds later. I walked a dwarf. Phoebe smiled at him. "Thokrum! So good to see you."

I didn't recall the name of the dwarf she helped recover a stolen weapon for. But I could tell what he was based on his stature and the thick beard covering the lower half of his face and chest. He had brown hair and wore clothes that practically matched the shade.

His grey eyes lit with delight as they landed on Stella and Phoebe, then widened when they moved over to Sebastian. "Hello, Phoebe. I didn't know you knew *the Hammer*. I wish you'd told me." Thokrum extended his hand to Bas. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Sebastian. I am honored."

Bas's expression remained shuttered. "Thokrum, is it?"

Thokrum nodded as my gaze bounced between them. "What's this about, Bas?" I asked my mate.

Bas sucked in a breath, but Thokrum responded first, saying, "*The Hammer* is legendary in Eidothea for his blacksmith's skills and his prowess in battle. Every dwarf yearns to become as skilled as Sebastian."

"Oh wow," I said, smiling at my mate. "I knew you were a good blacksmith. I just didn't know you surpassed everyone else. I should have."

Bas scowled at me, making me laugh. Aislinn and Violet proceeded to tease him as we ate too many cookies before taking our leave. With a new partnership in place between Mollie and Tyrael, we left Twin Cookies and went to the park. There Greyson and Jean-Marc refueled themselves and their loadstones. To my surprise, Thokrum decided to go with us.

I leaned into Violet beside me. "Do you think he would have any information about the Auric Blaze?"

Violet lifted a shoulder. "Chances are slim. Bas didn't. But it's worth asking about." I nodded in agreement.

Violet picked up the pace and paused near the dwarf. "So, Thokrum," Violet inquired with a curious glint in her eyes, "have you ever come across any tales or information about the Auric Blaze? We've been trying to unravel its secrets."

Thokrum scratched his beard thoughtfully. His brow furrowed in concentration. “Aye, lass, I’ve heard of the god fire. The topic is a puzzling one. It’s a power that defies even our understanding in the depths of the earth. To harness the essence of a deity’s flame... well, it’s a notion that escapes me.”

Having heard the discussion, Aislinn leaned forward. “But surely, you’ve heard whispers or hints of its nature?”

Thokrum shook his head, a rueful smile on his lips. “I’m afraid my knowledge is limited, my friends. The dwarves of my kind are not often privy to the dealings of the divine. We toil beneath the earth, far from the realm of gods and their fires. Perhaps, the Hammer knows about it.” There was a distinct hint of awe in the dwarf’s voice.

I shook my head, speaking before Bas could rip into the dwarf. “We’ve already asked Bas. We appreciate any insight you can provide. We’re hoping to uncover any shred of information that might aid us.”

Thokrum’s gaze flickered towards me. “And do you possess the Auric Blaze, lass?”

I hesitated only briefly, then decided on a subtle deflection. With a quick glance at my companions, I extended my hand, conjuring a small flame in my palm. “This is the extent of my flames, Thokrum. Witch fire. No godly blaze here.”

Thokrum nodded understandingly, a glimmer of appreciation in his eyes. “I see. It’s a fire worth wielding, nonetheless.”

Our conversation continued, Thokrum sharing tales of his craftsmanship loud enough that Bas could hear him. It was clear the dwarf was looking for compliments. At one point, I nudged Bas and leaned into him, whispering, “C’mon. You should tell him how talented he is.”

Bas rolled his eyes. “Why would I do that? The last thing I need is this bloke begging to come home with us so I can teach him.”

I shook my head sadly. “He’s not going to do that. Sometimes people just need validation from those they see as better than themselves.”

Bas paused and cupped my cheeks in his hands. “Thanks for the reminder. I love you.”

I pressed a kiss to his lips and returned the sentiment before we continued and caught up with the group. To my surprise, Bas clapped a big hand on the dwarf’s shoulder. “It sounds like you’re a talented weapons master. The community here is lucky to have you. Keep up the good work for the people

here.”

Thokrum’s gaze took on a look of hero worship as he looked at Bas. “Th...thank you. I always search for ways to improve my skills,” Thokrum said, making Bas throw a scowl my way. “If you have any advice, you’d be willing to share, I’d take it to my grave.”

Bas inclined his head but remained silent as we made it to our vehicles. Surprisingly, Bas exchanged phone numbers with Thokrum before we got into our vehicles and headed back to the kids’ house for dinner before we returned to Cottlehill in the morning.

My heart was heavy with the time remaining with my kids dwindling. I wanted to stay and visit more, but we had to get back and handle things at home. The Auric Blaze wouldn’t survive forever until we found a way to twist it with Selene’s remains.

“Are we ordering dinner?” Phoebe asked. “It’ll be easier than spending hours in the kitchen.”

Phoebe’s mom snorted. “As if you’d be doing the cooking. I’ve got this. I already ordered groceries to be delivered.”

“Who’s taking them into the house? The kids are behind us,” Nana observed as Bas parked in front of the house.

My brow furrowed as I looked at the young man hauling bags from the porch into the house. “I have no idea.” I jumped out of the car and ran toward the front door, demanding, “Who the hell are you, and how did you get into my children’s house?”

The young man yelped, dropped the bags, and looked up at me in fear. I stared him down, waiting for an answer. The sound of a car door slamming and footsteps running toward me broke our stare-off.

“Mom!” Emmie shouted. “That’s Evan. He and I are dating.”

I turned and lifted an eyebrow. “Since when? Why didn’t you mention anything?”

Skyler joined her sister as they walked toward me. “Because we didn’t want the third degree. I’m dating Evan’s best friend, Jake.”

My head spun as Bas put a hand on the small of my back and led me inside. Violet introduced herself to the two young men in the house first and included the rest of our large group. Phoebe’s mom went right to work in the kitchen while the rest of us stood around.

Nana took charge of the interrogations. “What are your intentions toward Emmie?”

Evan looked at my oldest, and it was obvious that he was smitten with her. “Honestly, I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I like her, ma’am. And my wolf likes her. She makes me want to be a better man.”

Nana narrowed her eyes at Evan. “Don’t go spouting what you think we want to hear. We’re witches that can see through bullshit.”

Evan paled, and Jake trembled next to him. A knock at the door interrupted that interrogation. Greyson answered it and admitted two young women. I had to guess the one Greyson had his arm around was his girlfriend, Mia. I was right and learned the other was Emlyn, Jean-Marc's girlfriend.

Skylar's boyfriend, Jake, exuded a quiet confidence and it was clear he was enamored with her. Jean-Marc's girlfriend, Emlyn, was a deep soul with a gentle demeanor that complemented his. And Greyson's girlfriend, Mia, had a sharp wit and an infectious laughter that instantly drew everyone in. My heart ached to see the evidence of how fast my kids were growing up.

Everyone gravitated to the kitchen as the smell of garlic and herbs filled the house. Mollie's culinary skills were on full display as she prepared a feast that made our mouths water. I suspected she was using her talents after being complimented by Tyrael. The clinking of utensils and laughter filled the air as the table was set with an array of delicious dishes. The warmth of the kitchen was matched only by the warmth of the company.

As we sat down to dinner, conversations flowed effortlessly. It was wonderful to visit with my kids and learn more about their day-to-day lives. It had been months since we had shared a meal. I was mostly over the fact that my daughters hadn’t told me about their boyfriends.

"What are you all studying?" Stella asked as she ate the lasagna Phoebe’s mom had made.

Evan chewed a mouthful and swallowed. “I’m majoring in business law. I’ll go to graduate school after I finish my Bachelor’s degree.”

Jake grinned. “Criminal justice for me. I plan on becoming a cop.” That made my heart skip a beat. If they got serious, Skylar was in for a lot of sleepless nights where she would worry about her husband’s safety.

Giving myself a mental headshake, I turned a smile to Mia and Emlyn. “And what about you two?”

“I’m studying philosophy,” Emlyn spoke softly.

Her answer accompanied Mia's playful smirk. “I’m not in college, actually. I’m pursuing photography independently.”

The diversity of paths represented around the table was a testament to the unique strengths and aspirations of each individual. Thanks to my friends and the example they set of support and acceptance, the conversations flowed effortlessly.

Dinner was much needed for all of us. Phoebe and Stella worked as hard as Violet, Aislinn, and I on their share of magical investigations. It almost felt normal as the house was filled with shared stories and hearty laughter.

As the meal concluded, the kids' voices rose with excitement. "We'll visit you and Grams as soon as summer break starts," Emmie promised.

Jean-Marc nodded to his mom. "And you know I'll be home with Emlyn."

Deciding to throw my children a bone, I smiled at each of their partners. "You are all welcome any time at Pymm's Pondsideside."

Jake, Evan, and Mia all promised to come over for a visit sometime. All too soon, it was time for us to go. I hesitated on the porch with my kids. "I love you guys to the moon and back. I feel like I have abandoned you, with my new magical life taking up so much of my time." There were tears burning in my eyes.

Emmie shook her head from side to side and grabbed me into a big hug. "You have done no such thing. You did your job and raised us. We're making our own lives now. It's good that you have yours."

Greyson hugged me next. "Em's right, mom. We're happy, and we know you love us."

I wrapped my arms around Skylar next, who looked up at me with a mixture of sadness and joy. "And you're there for us whenever we need you."

I smiled down at her. "Is that why you didn't tell me about Jake?"

Skylar rolled her eyes. "Stop it, mom. We're sorry if we hurt your feelings. We should have told you."

Emmie nodded in agreement. "We won't keep anything from you anymore. Stay safe, and we will see you soon."

Bas was there when I released them and turned to leave. He offered me his shoulder as I let the tears fall. I missed my kids like crazy and wished we lived closer to each other. That wasn't feasible. They were just building their lives. And I supported them in that. It was just difficult to have such a great distance between us. It helped that Phoebe offered her plane anytime we needed it. I'd have to use it more often than I had. Seeing them more would help when we had to part.

CHAPTER 11



*A*islinn

“Phoebe has it good with that private jet,” Fiona said as Bas drove through Cottlehill Wilds.

It was good to be back home. I’d missed being on familiar turf. With all the traveling we’d been doing lately, I’d come to appreciate Cottlehill far more than ever. I loved our little slice of heaven. There was no place else quite like it. The paranormal community there was bigger than anywhere else on the planet. I’d originally believed New Orleans held that honor. And then I learned how spread out their population was compared to ours. In Cottlehill, mundies were in the minority.

At least this trip hadn’t been like the ones before, where we’d barely been able to walk away. This trip across the ocean had been a good one. Sure, we encountered chaos. But there were many more good moments. We celebrated, made new friends, and best of all, we helped Arjun a little with managing his condition.

I snorted as I lifted my head from Argies’s shoulder. “You can say that again. I don’t know how we will handle it the next time we have to be crammed next to someone whose idea of personal hygiene is as outdated as my cell phone.” My friend understood enough to know I was referring to how my mate and daughter didn’t travel well on commercial airplanes.

Argies nudged my shoulder. “My next visit to Eidothea is going to come sooner than we discussed. I need to visit the family horde. How much do you think one of those planes costs?”

Fiona and Violet turned in their seats to look back at us. “Are you kidding? That would be the bomb. But there’s more to owning a jet than

buying it. We would need a place to store it, hire pilots unless one of us gets a license. And have mechanics on hand,” Fiona said.

Bas made a noise that was a cross between a growl and a hum. “There are plenty of places to store the plane. And we will only need to hire a pilot until I get my license.”

Fiona’s head swiveled, and she gaped at her mate. “Are you serious?”

Bas gave her his classic grumpy look. “I don’t say something I don’t mean. With the number of demons hunting the three of you down, it’ll be far safer for everyone involved if I get my license. Not to mention, we might have enough money from the gold and jewels Artemis has given you guys to buy a plane. It just never crossed my mind until now.”

Fiona shook her head, and she stared straight ahead. “My life just keeps taking turns. I can’t believe we are seriously considering buying a private plane.”

Violet snorted and clapped a hand on Fiona’s shoulder. “Of all the shit that has been thrown at us in the past year, why does this throw you for a loop?”

Fiona’s laugh was strained. “None of you saw me wandering around Pymm’s Pondside feeling like I was losing my mind. But all this stuff about the hidden magical world is on a different level from being able to buy a plane. I can’t wrap my mind around having that much money.”

I chuckled, in full understanding. “I know what you mean. I wasn’t afraid of facing the cases with you guys after I had Kalli. But being able to support her financially on my own terrified me and kept me up at night.”

Beside me, Argies growled so loud it rattled the window next to him. Realizing I’d upset him, I placed a hand over his. “I was only alone because of my stupidity. It didn’t have to be that way, and I know that now. You would have been there every step of the way. I’m sorry, love. I should have pulled my head out of my ass sooner.”

“What matters is that the two of you are together now. No one can change the past. Living in it only breeds resentment,” Fiona pointed out as Bas pulled down the driveway for Pymm’s Pondside.

The tension in the car dissipated as Argies nodded in agreement. “We both made mistakes. If I had followed my heart sooner, we could have avoided all of this.”

The atmosphere turned to a mix of anticipation and familiarity as Bas parked alongside Fiona’s Mustang. Kalliopi, our ever-precocious four-year-

old, couldn't contain her excitement. She jumped out of the truck the second I unbuckled her car seat. I scrambled to get out and join her. Violet and Argies were already out of the vehicle. Fiona, Bas, and I joined them in time to see Kalli's small hand waving enthusiastically in the air.

"Gwams, you won't beweeve it! We saw a dwawf wif a huge axe. And dere was a biscuit shop wif unicorn biscuits. And den we went to a park where Greyson and Jean-Marc have magic wocks!" Kalli's childlike enthusiasm was infectious, and we all chuckled at her adorable storytelling.

As her mother, I marveled at how much of her narrative was filtered through a child's imagination. Her experience was one giant adventure that didn't include any of the chaos and danger that was all around us.

Another vehicle pulled up as Kalli was telling Grams all about the trip and Nina's birthday party. It was a familiar black sedan. I wasn't surprised to see the smile spreading across Violet's face as she saw her mate climb out of the car.

Every time we returned from a trip, the reunion between Violet and Thanos was passionate. This time was no different. It was like something out of a romance novel. Their eyes locked, and it became obvious that the world faded away as they embraced. Kalliopi clapped her hands in delight while Fiona and I exchanged knowing glances. Love, even in our peculiar world, was a beautiful thing.

Heat burned my cheeks as their kiss went from simple PDA to bordering on obscene. Kalliopi had moved on from their reunion and was now busy picking flowers at the base of the fence that separated the Shakleton family cemetery and the drive.

"Has the Auric Blaze been stable, Grams?" Fiona asked, which broke Violet and Thanos apart.

I started walking toward the gate so we could check on the enigmatic Auric Blaze. We had cast it into a stasis state before leaving for our family trip, a precaution to prevent any fiery mishaps in our absence.

"Unlike other things, it hasn't given us any problems. The stasis you cast on it worked better than we had hoped," Grams replied.

As we approached the Blaze, its ethereal flames danced, encased in their protective shell. I couldn't help but marvel at the delicate balance between its destructive potential and its mesmerizing beauty. It was as if the essence of a god was trapped within, waiting to be set free.

Fiona's gaze shot to her grandmother. "Care to explain?"

Bas held up his hand. "I'm going to excuse myself. You three can't do whatever comes next without me creating the fire pit to hold the Blaze. Wish me luck that my skill is up to par."

Fiona went on her tiptoes and pressed a brief kiss to his lips. "I have no doubts you've got this. You created the pit that will house the Auric Blaze eventually."

He nodded in agreement and took off, leaving me to chew on what came next. My cautious nature couldn't help but wonder about the safety of housing something as volatile as the Auric Blaze, even in the most carefully constructed container.

"Are we sure it's a good idea to keep this thing here? I mean, it's a god's fire, after all. Can we ever be truly certain it won't break free?" I asked before I could stop myself. I wasn't certain what we would do otherwise.

Violet smiled at me, looking far more relaxed than she had since we'd left for the U.S. "The goddess gave this to us so we could keep Selene's ashes from being accessible. She wouldn't have done that if there wasn't a way to handle it. Besides, we trust Bas. That, coupled with the spells we will put in place, is the best way to keep it from being traced or stolen."

I couldn't argue with that logic. Our peculiar little *family* had a knack for blending the various forms of magic, making it our own unique style of doing things in the magical world. We'd changed how things were done in the Fae realm and on Earth. The proof of that was in the way the tiny Blaze swirled almost peacefully within the capsule Bas had created to hold it while it permanently. This wouldn't work when it was active, but it had held it safely for the last week.

"Now that you've got that settled, who's up for some pasties and tea? We can fill you in on what you missed while we eat," Grams said

Grams knew the way to my daughter's heart. Kalli jumped up and down, clapping her hands. "I want some. Did you make a tatoe pastie?"

Grams swooped down and picked Kalli up, bringing her in for kisses. "Of course, I made you some potato pasties. They're your favorite, aren't they?"

Kalli threw her arms around Grams's neck. "Yes! I wuv you, Gwams."

"I love you too, nugget."

My heart was filled to bursting as I watched the exchange. Life has blessed me in so many ways. We entered the back door of Pymm's Pondsides and the tension left my shoulders. The atmosphere in the house was as cozy

and welcoming as ever. This was the first place in my life I felt at home. Growing up, life had been about keeping the bar my parents owned open. There hadn't been much family time. No matter how chaotic things got for the Backside of Forty, it always felt like home when I was there.

Kalliopi, my little bundle of effervescence, twirled around the room like a dervish. Her energetic dance was a stark contrast to my perpetual state of concern. "Guess what, Gwams!" she exclaimed with her usual uncontrollable enthusiasm. "Nina has her own dwagon but he doesn't look like dad or me. He's got a mustache that's silly and he looks like a skinny worm."

I couldn't help but chuckle at Kalli's dramatic description of Tsekani, one of Phoebe's guards. My daughter had a flair for storytelling that could rival any bard. The rest of us joined in, sharing the highlights of our trip. Grams had already heard most of it. We were simply filling in the holes.

Just as we were settling into the conversation, Violet changed the subject. "Before we get too far down that rabbit hole, I'd like to hear what happened while we were gone." Violet looked from Thanos to Grams.

"I'm going to start by reiterating that everything turned out fine," Thanos said. His comment sent shivers down my spine.

Kalli took a pastie from Grams and continued swirling around the house while Argies crossed his arms over his chest and pinned Thanos with a hard stare. "Spit it out already."

Thanos sighed. "We encountered a Lord of the Underworld. One who decided to take a casual stroll through the Hellmouth."

I blinked at him, my mouth falling open. Snapping it closed, I asked, "Wait, what?"

Thanos continued with his storytelling, recounting how he, Hutcoth, and Roscock had to battle the hellish intruder. And they were aided by an enigmatic UIS agent named Darius while Grams remained at Pymm's Pongside.

Violet's hands immediately started roaming over Thanos's chest. "How was that even possible? I thought the gate was supposed to keep them out."

Thanos grabbed hold of Violet's hands and held them between their bodies. "I've been trying to find that out. My best guess is that when you cast the stasis spell on the Auric Blaze, the magic rippled out and latched onto any familiar power nearby."

My heart dropped to my feet, and my stomach twisted into a knot. "What does that mean? Did we weaken the Hellmouth?"

Grams waved a hand through the air. “I believe Thanos’s theory is right to an extent. My gut started going haywire, and I was reinforcing the wards here when Thanos called to tell me what was happening. I didn't go help because I suspected this Lord of the Underworld's appearance was a distraction. One meant to draw me away from the Auric Blaze.”

Fiona blew out a breath. “And you think someone directed the power there. You don’t think it was an accident, do you?”

Grams smirked at Fiona. “The chances if it being random are slim to none. There are always stray filaments of spells that linger or spread out where magic is done, like a film left behind. Not enough to travel the miles to the Hellmouth. The fact is that only someone tuned into the energy swirling around Pymm’s Pondsides could funnel it to that precise destination.”

I ran a hand through my hair and tried to slow my racing heart. “Does that mean demons can get through whenever they want now? Are we going to be overrun by them?”

Thanos shook his head. “No. The Hellgate is still secure. There wasn’t enough energy to get more than the one Lord through. His cohorts were cut off when the gate snapped back into place. We've been checking it every hour, and energy levels remain consistent at a level that only one of the gods could get through.”

I sighed and sank into Argies’s side. “Thank the gods for that.”

“We need to keep in mind how much magic can travel over the property line. I don’t want anyone using our powers for malevolent purposes,” Violet snarled.

The sliding glass door opened, and Bas walked into the room, cradling a remarkable fire pit. It was huge in his arms. Bas was the biggest guy I knew, so that was saying something. The enchanting contraption was unlike any I had seen before. It was a circular design with sides that rose like dancing flames. The top was open to reveal the starry sky above. Elaborate Fae runes were etched intricately all around the pit. Being Fae myself, I recognized that they symbolized different forms of protection, strength, family, love, and more.

“I made the sides tall enough that little nugget can’t reach the flames,” Bas explained. “And I used the silver the three of you enchanted before we left Eidothea when Kalli was born.”

Fiona, Violet, and I leaned in, our eyes locked on the stunning creation. Its mystical craftsmanship left us in awe. I pressed a finger to the side. “Silver

seems like an odd metal to choose. Aren't there tougher ones that might stand up to the amount of power in the Auric Blaze?"

Undeterred by my skepticism, Bas lifted a shoulder. "This fire pit isn't just any ordinary one. It contains magic from two different realms, plus additional enchantments. I even used some of Isidora's potions. This is literally designed to contain the godly might of the Auric Blaze safely." Grams was the best potion maker of all of us, so it was wise to choose her concoctions. I just wished we had more certainty about this situation.

Kalli skipped up to Bas. "I can use my fire to test it."

My hands flew up, and I lurched for my daughter while shouting, "No!" At the same time as Grams.

Kalli's lower lip trembled as she looked from me to Grams. I smiled down at her and picked her up for cuddles. "Remember we can't use our fire inside the house? We don't want to hurt anything in here, do we?"

Kalli shook her head from side to side as she laid her head on my shoulder. I ran a hand up and down her back as Violet brought the focus back to the matter at hand. "What do we do now?"

Thanos's gaze turned to the window with a view of the cemetery. "Our first task is to awaken the Auric Blaze. Then we shall bind it to this extraordinary fire pit. After that, Fiona and Isidora need to twist the fire with their family's magic and add Selene's ashes to the flames."

"What about the risk? How do we prevent this godly fire from drawing even more attention to us? We've had our share of trouble," I pointed out. None of what he outlined indicated how we would prevent such an occurrence.

Thanos nodded thoughtfully, acknowledging my concerns. "Aislinn, you bring up an important point. It's something we'll need to address carefully. I don't have the answer. For now, let's focus on the tasks at hand. Once the Auric Blaze is securely contained, we can delve into the finer details of its protection. It's possible that as soon as Selene's ashes are twisted with the flames, they will kick start an automatic shield. That's one of the properties of the Auric Blaze if you wield the right power."

I let out a sigh, a bit reassured by the explanation. It helped that the intricate design of the fire pit had enough runes on it to hide an army. Sure, our family had a knack for stumbling into danger, but we were also adept at finding our way out of it.

Fiona led the way through the house and to the cemetery. Fiona, Violet,

and I stood there ready to activate the Auric Blaze. The moment felt too heavy and ominous. It was making me twitchy, which was never a good thing. After bonding with Fiona, my powers had evolved from just the usual ability to control the elements into something more. I didn't want to cause even more problems than we already had.

"Are we ready to make history again?" I quipped, keeping my tone lighthearted despite the gravity of the situation.

Fiona raised an eyebrow and took a deep breath. "I've always wanted to be a Firestarter," she mused, casting a playful grin in our direction.

Violet chuckled, her eyes glinting mischievously. "Looks like today's your lucky day, Fi. Just keep your flames to yourself."

Grams held up Fiona's tablet. "Here are the directions, smartasses."

Our laughter was short-lived as Bas situated his fire pit beneath the cylinder with the Auric Blaze. Sobering up, we began the ritual, following the steps and chanting like seasoned witches. The more magic I performed with Violet and Fiona, the more comfortable I became with it.

Step one was to prepare the space, but Fiona couldn't resist making it sound like we were embarking on a renovation project. "Out with the negative energy, in with the good vibes," she declared, waving her arms as if shooing away bad spirits.

Once the area was deemed sacred enough, I lit the candle with a flourish, channeling the element to the end of the wick with care. Violet used the tip of her finger to inscribe our chosen protective symbol in the air outside the cylinder. "No evil shall enter here," she proclaimed.

Fiona walked around and added the same one on the other side. I followed suit and did one in the space between them. Our energy reached out for one another and connected with a flash of sparks.

Grams handed each of us a crystal as we faced the flame. "By the power of flame and light, I call upon the spirits of protection and might," we chanted together.

Fiona continued the spell with Violet and me adding our power to the mix. "With this Auric Blaze, we create a ward to repel all harm and danger. I call upon the elements to aid in this task."

Violet picked up where Fiona left off, "May this flame burn bright and strong, a barrier against all that is wrong." We each moved our crystals through the air with a flourish closed with, "As we will, so mote it be!"

The cylinder shattered into a thousand pieces. A scream left Kalli's lips,

and I dove into action, shielding her with my back as I wrapped around her. Argies enveloped me from behind, covering us both. Fiona and Bas moved around us, using the element of air to funnel the pieces into a cyclone.

“It’s alright. We have the glass contained,” Bas promised.

Argies and I stood straight at the same time Grams wrapped her power around the flames. I looked to Argies, who jerked his chin toward the pit. “Go help. I’ve got her.”

I joined Fiona and Violet around the fire pit Bas had crafted. “Time to light this baby up,” Fiona declared with a wave of her hand, her expression determined.

Violet cracked her knuckles as if preparing for a fight and squared her stance. “I’ve got the magic, ready to roll.”

“And I’ve got the Fae Power with you, Fi,” I added.

Fi directed me to push down on the Auric Blaze with air. I did ask for instructions and was shocked to feel the Blaze cooperate. I expected it to push back and fight us. Our communication flowed seamlessly as we instructed one another on what to do next. It was a testament to our deep connection and the fusion of witchcraft and Fae power we wielded. It was a unique blend that only we could achieve. It was like a well-choreographed dance, each of us knowing our part and when to execute it.

Fiona was in charge of setting the flames down. “Ignition in three... two... one...” she murmured, her fingers dancing in the air as the brilliant flame ignited in the pit.

My turn came next as I summoned the elemental energy needed. A gentle breeze began to swirl around us that kept the heat of the flames from burning us to a crisp. They were powerful enough to reduce us to ashes if the wind shifted directions. The magic was tangible, the air crackling with energy as the blaze merged with the fire pit. But the real spectacle happened when the Fae runes activated.

As if on cue, the symbols etched around the pit began to shimmer and glow. A vibrant kaleidoscope of colors swirled and danced, creating a mesmerizing display of power. The very earth seemed to respond, vibrating with ancient energy.

And then, in the midst of this magical symphony, Grams's voice rang out with a mixture of frustration and foreboding. “Blimey, we'd better batten down the hatches 'cause our wards just went pear-shaped!”

Fiona's expression mirrored my own as she spoke what we all felt. “Shite.

That's what I was afraid of.”

Fear clutched at my heart. Our cautious steps toward safeguarding our loved ones had just taken an unexpected detour into the unknown.

CHAPTER 12



Fiona

My heart raced a million miles an hour as I was battered with Aislinn's worry over the latest development. I could practically feel my friend's desire to grab Kalliopi and race through the portal. Her fear was understandable. She had a little one to think about. I would be the same if my kids were Kalli's age.

Violet quirked a brow at me. "How did you suspect the wards would go down?" she asked.

I gave her a wry look. "I didn't know that, in particular, was going to happen. It was more a gut feeling that something was going to go wrong."

Violet chuckled as she clapped my on the shoulder. "Our fabulous luck had me thinking the same thing. What do we do now?"

That was the question of the century. There was no way it would be as easy as recasting the protections around the property. Part of what made Pymm's Pondsides so secure were the layers of familial magic around the perimeter combined with the blood, bones and ash of my ancestors in the cemetery.

I lifted a shoulder in response to Violet as the midsummer sun cast long shadows. It told me that nightfall wasn't far off. It created an eerie backdrop to our mystical disaster. *It's not all wrong.* The Auric Blaze crackled within Bas's expertly crafted fire pit as proof we'd done something right. We hadn't finished what we needed to do, but we had a vessel that would hold the flames, and that was a huge accomplishment. Pymm's Pondsides wasn't going to be incinerated.

Grams clapped her hands together. "Artemis told us to twist the magical

fires with Selene's ashes. I've been thinking and believe we need to do it with the family magic as well. It's the best way to mask the Auric Blaze's signature. It won't make it indecipherable, but someone must expend significant energy to detect the godly fire." In reaction, the otherworldly flames danced with a chaotic energy that dared us to harness it.

I knew better than to question Grams. She was a formidable woman known for her sharp wit and sassy demeanor. "Is there something specific you had in mind?" I asked.

Grams held a worn piece of parchment that told me I shouldn't have bothered asking. With an arched eyebrow and a smirk playing on her lips, she glanced at the paper. "Did you think I would sit around pondering the mysteries of the universe while sipping tea when you were gone? Or coming up with a plan as to how in blazes we would manipulate this Auric nonsense?"

I couldn't help but grin at her snarky commentary. Grams had always approached magic with equal parts reverence and irreverence. She was a living legend in our family and the go-to expert for all things supernatural. Of course, I didn't know that until recently because she had bound my powers and hidden everything magical from me when I spent summers with her.

As Grams gave me a sidelong look. "Envision this whole situation as us trying to wrangle a particularly ornery cat into a bath. Only this cat is on fire. And the water is always moving."

Suppressing a groan, I nodded. "I've got the image, Grams. Let's try before I talk myself out of this."

We extended our hands toward the blaze, and I called up our family magic as she instructed. I closed my eyes for a second and reveled in the way it swirled around us like a protective cocoon. It felt like I was floating on my back in a pool on a hot summer afternoon. It made me want to relax and stay just like this.

Grams spoke again, her tone equal parts sass and wisdom. "Alright, kid, focus on that fiery feline." She winked. "Imagine it as the most diva-ish of cats, and we're offering it a spa day it can't resist."

Snorting, I closed my eyes and reached out to the Blaze, attempting to establish a connection. It responded with tendrils of fiery energy cautiously reaching out toward us, almost as if it were considering our proposition.

Then, in sheer audacity, the Blaze surged forth, erupting from the pit with startling intensity. Grams and I were sent sprawling, landing firmly on our

backsides with a pair of undignified thuds.

Groaning, I dusted off my clothes, trying to preserve some semblance of pride. “Well, that didn't exactly go as planned.”

“When does it ever?” Grams cackled with amusement, her laughter echoing through the cemetery. “We can safely say we aren't master cat whisperers.”

We clambered back to our feet, undeterred by our initial misstep. I grinned at Grams. “It may be an ornery cat, but we've got our wits, Grams. Let's show this Blaze who's boss.”

With a mischievous glint in her eye, Grams retorted, “Absolutely, darling. Round two, and this time, we'll make that fire kitty purr.”

Together, we steeled ourselves for another attempt, ready to face the mischievous Auric Blaze head-on. Hopefully, this time, with more success.

“Do you need us to stay here for this part?” Violet interrupted before we could go again and pointed to the pond where Kairi, the mermaid princess, lived. “Kalli is bored, and Aislinn looks like she's ready to fall over while chasing after her.”

I shook my head and waved her to the house. “Go get some sleep. We've had a long trip. Grams and I have this.”

Violet nodded and tugged Thanos with her to Aislinn and Argies. Bas pulled me into a big hug and pressed his lips to mine. “I'm going to shut down and clean up the forge before I come back. You have this. I believe in you.”

Grinning like a fool, I gazed up at my mate. “Love you.”

The midsummer sun hung low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the family cemetery as the friends I claimed as family disappeared into the house. Grams and I went right back to work on the Auric Blaze.

It turned out twisting magical fires was a lot harder than we'd anticipated and my backside felt like I'd ridden across the United States on the back of a horse without stopping. No matter how we tweaked our magic or the enchantment, nothing worked. It was a good damn thing Grams wasn't ninety anymore. She wouldn't have survived the beating we'd taken.

We had been at this Auric Blaze twisting business for hours. Let me tell you, there's only so much sassy banter and determined resilience you can muster before sweat starts pouring down your face like a waterfall. Then you want to curl up under the covers.

With every failed attempt, Grams and I would dust ourselves off,

exchange exasperated glances, and launch right back into our mission. At this point, we'd made quite the spectacle of ourselves. What with our repeated bursts of fiery brilliance and equally fiery crashes.

“Hundredth time's the charm, right?” I quipped, pushing my hair away from my face and looking at Grams, who was covered in soot from the last round.

Grams, always one to match my wit, shot me a sidelong glance. “You've got the patience of a saint, Fiona.”

I chuckled, knowing that was her way of saying I was as stubborn as a mule. “I inherited the trait from you, Grams.”

Grams rolled her eyes and clenched her jaw. I again extended my hands toward the recalcitrant Auric Blaze when she did. I couldn't help but think of the irony. It was supposed to be a source of protection, but right now, it felt more like a petulant child.

And so, we tried once more. The sun had dipped beneath the horizon, and the moon cast an eerie glow over our makeshift battleground. Our clothes clung to us with sweat, and our faces were streaked with soot and frustration. Just as I was going to suggest quitting, something unexpected happened. The Auric Blaze flickered erratically and then stopped. The otherworldly flames were calm.

“We did it!” I exclaimed, my voice filled with awe and triumph.

Grams shook her head, a frown creasing her brow. “No, Fiona, we didn't. It's not working.”

I sighed, frustration clawing at me. “But why? We did everything right!”

Grams shrugged, her expression troubled. “Sometimes, magic has a mind of its own. Maybe it's protecting itself for a reason we can't fathom.”

We fell into a contemplative silence, the weight of our failure heavy on our shoulders. Our reverie was abruptly shattered by a sudden hush that fell over Pymm's Pondsides. I held my breath and prayed it was nothing as we turned to see shadows moving in the darkness. My heart sank.

There was no mistaking the vampires with their pale skin and predatory eyes. For the first time in history, they had encroached on our haven at Pymm's Pondsides. It was as if they'd been drawn by the dancing flames of the Auric Blaze. My suspicions were confirmed when they advanced toward the fire pit. A shudder of revulsion made me shake. Their hunger and malice were palpable.

Grams and I exchanged a glance that spoke volumes. We had failed in

bending the Auric Blaze to our will, and now we faced an entirely different challenge—defending Pymm's Pondsides from the encroaching undead.

And we were without our wooden stakes and holy water. That didn't stop us. We took our positions, ready to protect our family and home. Neither of us was surprised at the unexpected turn the night had taken.

As if we were dropped off the cliff near Aislinn's house, we plunged into a fight I hadn't anticipated. Vampires were the last creatures I expected to be drawn to the Auric Blaze. And they swarmed Pymm's Pondsides like locusts.

Grams and I stood our ground and conjured our witch fire to our palms. It was better than manipulating the element of fire or calling on the Auric Blaze. They were too unpredictable. We controlled our witch flames and could ensure our house wasn't burned down with our friends inside.

The vampires moved like lightning. They were blurs of motion too fast for me to track. One lunged at Grams with its fangs bared. Adept and spry, she sidestepped gracefully. Her movements defied her chronological age.

"Oh, luv," she drawled, her voice dripping with sass. "If you're looking for a midnight snack, you've come to the wrong barbecue."

With a flick of my wrist, I sent a cascade of lime-green flames roaring toward the advancing undead. Several shrieked as they were engulfed, their limbs flailing as they ran in circles. I couldn't watch until their ashen remains fell to the ground like a macabre rain of confetti. I had a horde to fight.

It was no surprise that these vampires were relentless. In my experience, vampires killed indiscriminately. And one managed to evade my fiery barrage. A second came at me from the side, forcing my attention away. I lobbed a magical blast at the vampire. It stumbled away from me. I was advancing on it when I heard Grams scream.

I looked over and saw the one that had seen me watching as it sank its teeth into Grams's shoulder. She clawed the undead arsehole, and I saw red. Literally, flames erupted from my fingertips, forming a scorching cage around the vampire. It writhed and screamed until it crumbled into a pile of ash.

"Nobody bites my Grams and gets away with it," I muttered, my voice a low growl, my eyes blazing with fury.

Grams danced to the side and resumed fighting with magic and fire while I did the same. Vampires darted in and out of the darkness, their movements a dizzying blur. I threw punches and spells in equal measure, each strike infused with the power of the elements. But these creatures were nimble,

dodging and weaving as they closed in for the kill.

With her shoulder bleeding from the bite, Grams held her own with a mix of martial arts and well-placed kicks. She managed to pick up a branch and stake one vampire through the heart, causing it to crumble to dust at her feet.

Amid the chaos, Bas and Thanos arrived. I practically crumbled with relief to have reinforcements. Bas swung his enchanted sword with unparalleled stealth, each stroke cutting through the undead with surgical precision. Thanos was a whirlwind of destruction, his speed matching that of the vampires as he dispatched them with lightning-fast strikes.

With their help, we began to gain the upper hand. Vampires fell one by one, their hissing cries of agony echoing through the night. The air grew thick with the acrid stench of burnt flesh, and the victorious cheers of our family served as a stark contrast to the grim scene.

Grams, nursing her wounded side, cast a sidelong glance at me through the chaos. "Remind me never to get on your bad side, Fiona."

I grinned, my heart still racing from the battle. "You never could, Grams. Nobody messes with our family."

We might not have tamed the Auric Blaze tonight, but we'd shown those vampires that Pymm's Pondsides was no easy buffet. And as the dust settled, I couldn't help but think that maybe, just maybe, we were the most unconventional and kick-ass family in the supernatural world.

The battleground had become eerily quiet after our brutal confrontation with the vampires. Their ashes lay scattered like grotesque confetti, a reminder of the fierce fight we'd just endured. Breathing heavily, I surveyed the scene, adrenaline still coursing through my veins.

Then, a heart-wrenching sound pierced the stillness—a gasp, a cry of pain, and the unmistakable thud of a falling body. My heart clenched with dread when I recognized the voice. Without a second's hesitation, I darted toward the source of the sound. "Grams!" I shouted, my voice trembling with fear and desperation.

There she was, sprawled on the ground. Her normally vibrant eyes dimmed by pain. My indomitable Grams, the woman who had guided and protected me throughout my life, now lay before me vulnerable and suffering.

"Grams, what happened?" I gasped, dropping to my knees beside her. "Are you alright?"

Beside me, Bas was equally frantic. His calm demeanor shattered by the sight of Grams in distress.

Grams gasped, her voice a frail whisper. “Fate has come back to bite me in the ass.” She held up a hand that started to wrinkle. “Vampire venom and the water of the Fountain of Youth don’t mix. At least I won’t have to go through menopause again.”

The words hit me like a thunderbolt. Grams was aging? She was a powerful witch who had held our family together for generations. She had been given a second life twice over. The first time was when I inadvertently brought her back from the dead as a ghoul and then managed to give her soul back to her. The second was when she’d been forced to ingest the water from the Fountain of Youth, and she went from being ninety to barely thirty. None of us knew what would ultimately happen to her, but I had begun to believe she wouldn’t age like a mere mortal. I counted on her being around for a long time to come.

Beside me, Bas tensed, his jaw clenching as he tried to process the grim revelation. “What do we do?” he asked, his voice tight with worry.

Thanos approached with a somber expression. “I’ve never seen this before,” he admitted gravely. “It reminds me of a rare curse. One that accelerates the aging process. You should be glad that’s not what this is because there’s no known cure for it.”

Tears welled up in my eyes as I watched Grams’ once-youthful face wither before me. Deep lines etched into her skin, and her hair paled to a silvery grey. Time I seemed to warp, cruelly fast-forwarding before my eyes.

“Grams, no,” I whispered, cradling her fragile form. “This is going to stop. It has to.”

But in that heart-wrenching moment, my words felt futile. All I could do was hold her, my heart shattering with every passing second.

CHAPTER 13



Fiona

“I’ve lived a long life. This might be my time, Fiona,” she replied.

Wiping a tear from my cheek, I glared at her. “No. It’s not your time. We will figure this out.”

As Grams lay there, sassy as ever despite her condition I knew we needed help. Without hesitation, I reached for the phone in Bas’s back pocket and dialed Zreegy’s number. She was our go-to healer for magical mishaps, and this certainly qualified.

“Zreegy, it’s Fiona,” I said as soon as she picked up. “We’re in a bit of a situation here. Grams took a hit during a little vampire showdown just now and she’s aged a bit. We need your help.”

Zreegy’s voice calmed me as it came through the phone. “I’ll be right there. Keep her comfortable and relaxed. And keep the bleeding under control. I’m on my way.” She hung up before I could say anything else.

I had hoped my heart would slow down with Zreegy’s arrival imminent—no such luck. Grams shouldn’t be bleeding out on the dirt in the family cemetery. We needed to get Grams inside the house.

“Grams, we need to get you inside,” I said, trying to stand and lift her with me. When I nearly fell on top of her, Bas grabbed me and steadied me.

I offered Grams my hand with a smile. She eyed me with a mixture of suspicion and amusement. “Fiona, darling. I might have aged a tad, but I can still stand up and walk.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at her resilience. “I don’t doubt it Grams, but let’s make it a bit easier on you.”

Between Bas, Thanos, and myself, we managed to get Grams to her feet and guide her toward the back door. She moved slowly, but her spirit remained as fiery as ever. As we reached the doorstep, Grams paused and looked over at me. “You know, Fiona, I was hasty in complaining about my youth. And it seems the Fates decided to take it away. I was just starting to enjoy the flexibility and vigor of youth. It is quite refreshing. Going through monthly cycles would have been a small price to pay to move around without all the grunting and groaning.”

I grinned, giving her a supportive pat on the back. “You haven’t aged that much. You don’t look a day older than sixty. And when Zreegy gets here, we’ll return you to your sprightly self in no time.”

Just as we made it to the back door, Zreegy arrived with perfect timing. She radiated a calm and soothing presence as she joined us at the back door.

“Zreegy, thank you for coming,” I said with gratitude.

She nodded and followed us inside. Violet gasped and Aislinn got up from the recliner and ran over to greet us. “What the bloody hell happened?” Violet asked.

I quirked a brow in question as I helped Grams to the couch. “You didn’t hear the battle royal with the vampires?”

Both my friends shook their heads as I wondered where Argies and Kalli were. He must have fallen asleep with her. She had him wrapped around her little finger. “No,” Violet replied. “And Thanos said nothing. We would have come help.”

Thanos gave his mate a sheepish look. “You had both dozed off. I grabbed Bas and took off. There was no time for you two to wake up and get your bearings.”

Ignoring us, Zreegy immediately got to work. She had Grams lay down and held her hands above her aging body. As her magic enveloped Grams, a soft blue light emanated from her palms. That was new and distracted me from the conversation entirely. Giving the healer my full attention I marveled at the delicate, almost watery glow that danced around Grams.

Grams blinked in surprise. “This feels like the fountain magic to me.”

Zreegy’s voice was a gentle whisper as she continued her healing work. “In a way, it is. My healing powers connect with the body’s natural defenses and boosts them. I don’t create something out of nothing. And as you know, magic has many forms.”

I crouched next to them and held a hand out. “Do you think your powers

combined with the traces of the water in her system?”

Zreegy nodded as she continued working on Grams. “That's precisely what I believe happened. I've never experienced anything like this. It was like jumping into a cool lake when my essence combined with that of the fountain's rejuvenating abilities.”

We watched in awe as the blue light swirled and danced around Grams, its gentle caress like a soothing balm. And then, as quickly as it had begun, the light receded. Grams took a deep breath, her eyes widening in wonder. “I feel... different. Younger, but not to the point I was before.” She lifted a hand to her face.

I couldn't contain my curiosity. “What do you mean?” She'd aged to the point she looked like she was getting within a decade or two of her ninety years. Now, she didn't. My earlier comment was spot on.

She hesitated for a moment as if testing her newfound youth. Then, a radiant smile crossed her face. “I feel like I'm twenty again, but based on the crow's feet around my eyes,” she held up her hands, “and the liver spots, I'd say I'm back.”

“You're still younger than you used to be, but you won't look like Camille's granddaughter anymore,” I said with a laugh. It was a huge relief to have Grams back to her sassy, strong-willed, sprightly self.

“Can you explain what happened to Grams, Zreegy?” Aislinn asked. “Why did she age like that?”

Zreegy took a thoughtful sip of her tea before responding. “I believe it has to do with the water from the Fountain of Youth, which Grams had consumed.”

Aislinn raised an eyebrow, her skepticism showing. “You think she was in danger of being turned into a vampire?”

Zreegy nodded. “It's possible. That water has magical properties that no one understands. It's entirely possible that it can fight the venom of a vampire bite, counteracting it.”

Aislinn seemed unconvinced. “But one bite? Could it really make that much of a difference?”

Zreegy lifted a shoulder as she explained, “Vampirism is like a virus, and it is transmitted through a bite where the vamp transmits venom to the victim. If enough of it is injected into the system, the change will take hold. In this case, I believe the water in Grams's bloodstream acted as a powerful counteragent, preventing the virus from spreading. The use of the magic in

the waters to battle the virus resulted in her aging.”

Grams pushed herself upright and smirked at Zreegy. “I've always been a bit of an enigma, haven't I?”

“The vamp wasn't locked on that long before I fried him,” I pointed out. “It didn't seem like enough time to inject that much venom.”

Zreegy frowned at me. “They must have come here with the intent of turning Grams then. They had to have their glands working overtime before attacking you.”

Aislinn's eyes widened. “Why target Grams? That makes no sense. They have to know Fiona would kill them for turning her.”

A thought hit me, and I gasped. “Because they wanted a Shakleton ally. One that would give them access to the Fae portal, all the family magic, and the Auric Blaze.”

Violet leaned forward, her curiosity piqued. “But why would the vampires want Grams as an ally? What do they know about the Auric Blaze?”

Aislinn nodded in agreement. “There's no way they knew the details of the Blaze. It's a closely guarded secret.”

“I'll say. I have no idea what this Auric Blaze is, but I am going to go out on a limb and say it's the magical fire burning in the middle of the cemetery.” Zreegy said as she gestured in the direction of the fire. “The vampires may not have needed to know the specifics. The power of the Auric Blaze is unmistakable. I felt its power when I turned down the main road leading here. Even without understanding it fully, the vamps could sense its immense potential. That's all they'd need to want to control it.”

I couldn't help but chime in, the seriousness of the situation not lost on me. “Well, it looks like we've got a target on our backs, ladies. The vampires won't stop until they get what they want. And they aren't the only ones that will be drawn to it.”

Grams let out a theatrical sigh, her sassy spirit unwavering. “I suppose I should be flattered that they thought I could be their ticket to the Blaze. And I will be after I'm done being pissed about it.”

Aislinn started pacing the living room. “Did you guys happen to get the wards back up? We need to be prepared for whatever they throw our way, and we can't let them get their hands on the Auric Blaze.”

I shared a glance with Grams before we both shook our heads. “We haven't been able to twist the magical fires like we need. We will need to cast

new wards before we go back to trying,” Grams explained.

I stood up and stumbled as dizziness and fatigue hit me like a ton of bricks. Bas caught me and wrapped an arm around me. “You aren’t going to do anything right now. You need rest first.”

Shaking my head, I tried to shrug his hold off of me. “This can’t wait. We will be fighting enemies all night long if we don’t.”

Grams placed a hand on my arm. “Sebastian is right. You need to get some rest. Violet, Aislinn, and I will go out and reinforce the blood wards around the property. They weren’t eliminated entirely, just short-circuited.”

“No, I have to help. I’m a Shakleton, too,” I insisted. I wasn’t that tired. It wasn’t as if I was in danger of falling over at any moment.

Grams rolled her eyes. “Yes, you are. However, you’re more of a liability than a help at this point.”

“I will lend them some of my power, as well if that makes you feel better,” Zreegy offered. “If I was able to refill your magical coffers, I would.”

With a sigh, I capitulated. I’d come a long way with my magic in the last year, but recognizing when the core of my magical power was running on empty was still a challenge for me unless I was equally as physically exhausted. After saying goodbye to Zreegy, Grams, Violet, and Aislinn went outside to put the wards back up. Thanos followed behind.

Bas pulled me into his arms. I went to my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around his neck. “Thank you for coming to our rescue. That could have turned ugly really quick.”

Bas kissed me gently and then pressed his forehead against mine. “I’m so used to letting my guard down at Pymm’s Pondsides that I missed their incursion. I would have been there sooner if I’d been more vigilant. It won’t happen again.”

Lifting my head, I gave him a saucy smile. “You should always be able to relax in your home. We are getting the protections back in place, so you won’t have to worry.”

“That’s like asking me not to breathe, Butterfly.”

I ran a finger down his chest. “Let’s not dwell on that right now. I can think of something you’d enjoy more than fretting over things you can’t change.”

A smile spread over his face. Just like that, I felt like the sexiest woman in the world. The way Bas looked at me was intoxicating. It left no doubt about how much he wanted me. “I like the way you think,” he said as he

grabbed my hand and started up the stairs.

A giggle escaped me at his eager expression. “Shhh. We don’t want to wake Argies and Kalli.” There wasn’t much risk of waking them up since their room was down the east hall. After she died and Grams came back, the house seemed to develop an ability to make changes magically. She thinks that’s because she tied her spirit to the house so she could be around for me, and some of the of magic I used to bring her back to life went into the wood, glass, and metal all around us.

I had to bite back a squeal of delight when Bas picked me up. His steps became silent as he climbed. I wrapped my legs around his waist and started nibbling on his earlobe. My hips moved, wanting to get the pressure right where my arousal was building. Bas carried me into our room, dropped me on the bed, and then shut the door.

I removed my shoes and socks and watched as his shirt vanished and his boots were flung across the room as he prowled back to me. I went to my knees on the mattress and pulled him into me. His lips landed on mine, and things got even more heated.

I groaned and broke the kiss to catch my breath and look down at his hard cock pressing against my pubic bone. His jeans did nothing to hide the significant bulge he was packing. It was scintillating to be kneeling there with him. I reached down for the hem of my jumper and pulled it over my head.

Bas’s hands deftly unzipped my trousers before picking me up. He broke the kiss when he set me down and knelt in front of me. He tugged the fabric to my ankles, and I stepped out of them. He pressed a kiss to my panties and backed away before I could get the pressure I wanted.

I didn’t have to wait long. Bas never made me beg for what I needed. I leaned into him as one of his hands went between my legs while the other trailed up my torso to latch onto a breast. There was too much cotton between us. I reached back and unbuckled my bra. He released me long enough for me to let it fall. A giggle left me when it landed on his head.

My laughter turned into a groan when he tweaked and pulled at my nipple. Instinct made my back arch. When it pulled my breast out of his hold, I curled my shoulders and shuddered as his touch gave me intense pleasure. His fingers twisted in the fabric of my panties, and he pulled them down my legs. A second later, I found myself naked.

Looking up at me, Sebastian dipped his head and ran his tongue along my slit. I moaned when he closed his mouth around my clit. I couldn’t help it

when I grabbed his head and held him to me while his hand rose to play with my nipples. I writhed, seeking release from the building tension.

Bas released my flesh and gave me a wicked grin as he ran a hand up one of my legs. He used his finger to spread the glistening folds between my limbs. The way he licked his lips made my hips buck, rubbing my core against his chin. A growl escaped him as his hand found purpose between my thighs. The fingers of one hand delved deeper while his tongue struck the bundle of nerves aching for him.

A groan left me as my mind exploded from pleasure. He was attacking so many of the spots that he promised to drive me to climax at once. He touched a nerve deep inside while he sucked on my clit. I nearly orgasmed. As it was, my legs wobbled, threatening to give out on me. I lifted one leg, settled it on his shoulder, and rubbed my core against his mouth.

“Holy shit. Don’t stop doing what you’re doing,” I whispered.

“I think I have something else that will make you feel even better.” Bas’s blue eyes stayed glued to mine when one finger returned to my clit.

My hips surged toward him, and my hands shot down as I tried to get to his pants. Bas’s eyes darkened as he stood up. “You make it hard to keep from bending you over.”

“Is that a promise?” I’d never been more open with my wants and desires than I was with Bas. He made it easy to open up and tell him every fantasy I’d ever had.

Bas chuckled as he turned me around. Reaching around me, his palm rubbed my clit while his fingers thrust in and out of my core. His mouth wandered down the side of my neck. It was all too much, and my legs gave out. I didn’t give it a thought because I knew he would catch me before I fell in a heap.

He bent me over the side of the bed and then went back to teasing my body. With my head turned to the side, I could watch his expressions. His eyes rolled back in his head as he pinched my clit. My core immediately tightened around the finger he had inside my sheath. Mini orgasms spread through me like a meteor shower.

“More,” I moaned.

Bas withdrew his fingers and then draped his large frame over my back. His bare chest pressed into my sensitive skin as he unzipped his jeans, shoved them down, and started running his erection down my backside until he was prodding my entrance.

“Gods, you’re sexy,” I observed as I panted, unable to catch my breath.

“I love you, Butterfly.”

His shaft pulsed, pushing it inside a fraction of an inch. He didn’t go any further, so I wrapped my hand around him and pulled. “Are you going to start making me beg?” I stroked his hard flesh, trying to get him moving.

“Gods, you drive me to the edge with your touch.” His voice was low and husky in a way that drove me crazy. He shifted his body, and his shaft popped out of my body. I couldn’t help the mewl that left me. I was hoping for more, not less.

“I’m driving things this time.” Bas slid back inside and then pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth. I craned my head around so his mouth could seal more fully on mine. His breath puffed against my mouth, adding to the erotic moment.

Leaning on one elbow, Bas reached around and pressed a finger over my clit at the same time as he slid inside another inch. His lips teased mine while his tongue darted into my mouth. My entire body was alive and thrumming with pleasure as he played me like a violin.

I cried out as he slammed all the way into me in one swift move. His size stretched me to the point that only he could. The pressure from his invasion burned in the best way. I loved it when Bas lost control, and that was exactly what he did. He let go of his concern and gave in to what he wanted. More often than not, he tried to soothe any pain he caused. I lifted my hips and met his thrusts.

I broke away from his mouth to catch my breath. “I like it when you take control and don’t treat me like a China Doll. Although slow and soft are just as good,” I said, telling him how much I liked everything he did.

Bas growled and did something that made his shaft pulse and throb inside me while moving fast enough to send me into the stratosphere. He slammed into me over and over, making his flesh slap against mine. That only seemed to make things hotter. I bucked and writhed and moaned as he pushed me closer to a big orgasm.

“Are you okay?”

“So good. So, so good,” I chanted as I went from thrusting back to pushing my hips down to make his finger press my clit harder.

He pulled out and surged back in, and I spread my legs wider, allowing him more access. His thumb pressed hard on my clit, and his mouth nibbled my neck. His thrusts changed to a mix of hard and soft. I clutched the sheets

beneath me as I lost myself to the pleasure.

There was nothing gentle this time as he moved his hips like a man possessed. He gazed into my eyes, connecting with me as he drove us both to climax. Between his gaze and his cock, my desire took control, and the coil in my core tightened once again. Reaching down beneath my body, I grabbed his balls and squeezed them gently. The growl that left him was feral.

Bas lifted his chest off my back and grabbed one of my hips while leaving his other hand to tease my clit. His thrusts intensified, and I gave myself to him completely. He groaned against my flesh a second before he bit into the curve where my shoulder met my neck. He had an obsession with that spot on my body, and I'd come to love him biting it.

It never failed to send me over the edge when he nipped my flesh. My climax barreled through me as he continued thrusting deep inside. A few seconds later he stopped moving, his head went back, and he growled as his seed left him in an explosive rush. His cock jerked in my core as he filled me.

I groaned when Bas pulled out of me and climbed beneath the covers, pulling me in beside him. "Think you can get some rest now? I know your mind was racing too much before."

I sighed as I curled into him. "Definitely. You successfully settled my thoughts and exhausted my body."

"It's good to know I haven't lost my touch." His hands wrapped around my waist and settled over my stomach.

I twisted around so I could look into his eyes. "You will never lose your touch with me. You do things to me no one ever has before. And my desire for you isn't showing any signs of waning."

The smile he gave me lit up the dark room. "Gods, I love you."

"Forever and always," I replied.

Life had a knack for throwing curveballs when you least expected it. Whether it was a horde of vampires crashing your evening or dealing with the ever-increasing demands of our magical world, chaos was the name of the game. But no matter how insane things got, there was one thing that remained constant: our unwavering commitment to each other.

It might seem crazy to an outsider, but that's what you did when you loved your other half more than life itself. You found a way to make it work, no matter how chaotic or absurd the circumstances.

CHAPTER 14



*V*iolet

I took a few deep breaths as I stood in the middle of Pymm's Pondsides with Aislinn and Grams. It had been over a year since I had done magic with Grams without Fiona. It felt odd for her not to be there. We'd been through so much together. Fiona, Aislinn, and I had become as close as sisters since we formed the Backside of Forty. I couldn't help but exchange glances with Aislinn. At least she was there with me.

Grams snapped her fingers in my face. "Bloody hell! Are you going to be part of this? The stars are beautiful, but all the staring off into space isn't getting us anywhere."

My cheeks heated as she chastised me. She'd been an authority figure in my life and helped raise me despite us sharing no blood. So, I felt like I was disappointing her. Shaking my head, I smiled. "Sorry. Maybe I should have had black tea instead of oolong. It's been a long day of travel and spellcasting."

Grams placed a hand on my arm with a smile. "No rest for the wicked, as they say. I'll need you both to send power to me as I cast."

Nodding, Aislinn and I flanked Grams as she centered herself and started chanting. After Aislinn, Fiona and I had combined our magic to create new and powerful spells and potions, Grams had started using both sides of herself. She was adept at it, too. You would never know she'd just started doing it. That said more about the high level of her skill than anything else.

We watched as her fingers traced intricate patterns in the air, drawing Fae runes before she invoked the Shakleton family magic. She was the linchpin of this operation because of the three of us, she was the only one who knew how

to raise the protective wards. They were there but inactive. Because of how long the family had lived at Pymm's Pondsides, the earth was steeped with magic.

Fiona's family had been in Cottlehill Wilds since the town was established. They were an incredibly powerful family, so they were tasked with guarding the portal between Earth and the Fae realm.

"Bloody hell. A little more energy, please," Grams asked. Her voice was a mix of concentration and impatience. "I need all the support I can get."

"Anything you need. I can grab Argies too, if it would help," Aislinn replied.

Aislinn had changed considerably since having Kalliopi. She'd gone from someone who enjoyed dancing at her family's nightclub and having drinks to worrying about almost everything. The only reason she would offer to add Argies to the mix was because she was concerned about what it would mean if we left Pymm's Pondsides unprotected. It was a sentiment I understood for different reasons. It was our duty to protect Selene's remains, and the Auric Blaze was the best way to do that. However, Grams and Fiona hadn't twisted them with the Shackleton family magic yet, so they were vulnerable.

Sweat beaded on my brow, and the edges of my vision blurred. This was taking considerable energy. It shouldn't be this difficult to raise the wards. They were there waiting to be activated again. Something didn't feel right about this, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I didn't have enough energy to try and scan the area for interference.

Grams shook her head as she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "He won't be able to help like the two of you. Fiona has brought you into the fold, so to speak, so I can use your energy. That doesn't apply to any of the men." Without another word, she continued her incantations.

After what seemed like an hour, the air around us shimmered with a faint, silvery light as the wards began to take shape. Aislinn shot me a smile that I returned—no need to freak my friend out. Grams had managed to get the wards up, but they were weak. She didn't stop working on them for several more seconds.

Finally Grams sagged, and her head drooped. "They're up, yet might not keep a pack of brownies at bay. I hate to admit it, but it seems we won't be able to do this without Fiona after all."

I cringed when Aislinn cast me a worried glance. We had desperately hoped that our combined efforts, along with Grams' extensive knowledge

would be enough to fortify the wards and allow Fiona to get some much-needed rest. She'd been using more magic than the rest of us since we returned home.

"It looks like it's time to wake up Sleeping Beauty" I said with a wry smile. "Hopefully, she won't be too grumpy about it."

Aislinn chuckled, and Grams scowled up at the house. "Perhaps we should make her a latte first."

"That's the best idea you've had yet," I said before I spun around and headed for the back door.

Aislinn chuckled as we entered the house. "The smell alone should wake her." Thankfully, she went right to work on making Fiona a latte. I had no idea how to use the Nespresso machine she'd been given not long ago. Aislinn had experience with them from her time working at Mug Shots with Bruce.

As if on cue, Fiona and Bas came down the stairs before I could get to my cell to call her. She thanked Aislinn and took the mug with a smile. "Did it work?"

Grams sighed as she opened a container and grabbed a scone. "They're up, but not up to par. I need your help getting them fully active again."

Fiona frowned as she sipped her latte. "I'm not so sure focusing on the wards is going to work."

Grams waved her scone at Fiona with a scowl. "And why's that?"

Fiona lifted a shoulder and set her mug down. "Because I think when we activated the Auric Blaze in Bas's fire pit, it connected with the magic of Pymm's Pondsides. I don't think we can activate it until we do as Artemis demanded and twist it with our family magic."

"What about Selene's ashes? Do you need to blend it with them, too? Because we don't know how to do that or what will happen when you try," Aislinn said.

"You would think owning a mystical bookstore would afford us more answers," Grams replied around a mouthful of delicious pastry.

My cheeks heated again as her comment was directed at me. I held up a finger. "For the record, I only have a small section that could be classified as mystical. I don't spend my time searching for and collecting rare magical tomes. My intention was to start doing that, but life had other plans for me."

Fiona gaped at Grams. "It's not Violet's fault we don't have more information! She's done extremely well with the bookstore. Not to mention

that without her and Aislinn, you wouldn't be here right now. I would have sold Pymm's Pondsides when shit started happening and never moved here." That was why I loved my best friend. She had my back no matter what. But she didn't need to defend me to Grams.

I held up a hand. "It's not a problem..."

"Of course, it is," Grams said as she cut me off. "What I said was careless and callous. I'm frustrated and worried. My gut tells me that the worst is yet to come, and I let that stress direct my words. You are one of the best witches I know, Violet, and I love you like a granddaughter."

Tears burned the backs of my eyes. "I love you, too."

Bas looked around the group of us and gestured to the door. "You should immediately try bonding the Auric Blaze to the family magic. Fiona has the same feeling which is why she isn't sleeping right now."

Grams set her scone on a piece of kitchen paper and brushed her hands together. "Finish that latte, Fiona. It'll give you much-needed energy. And you two eat a scone. We need to stay fueled and ready."

Nodding, I put a large slice of chocolate sponge on a plate and handed one to Aislinn. The sugary bake would give us more energy than having a scone. At least, that was my theory. After all, the chocolate sponge had sugar and caffeine.

Aislinn and I walked out eating the sponge, and headed right for the fire pit that was now the focal point of the Shackleton family cemetery. Grams and Fiona were already hard at work. I finished eating and set the plate on a nearby headstone and then joined Fiona and Grams.

I started feeding the two of them some of my energy, hoping it would help the process. Aislinn finished her sponge and did the same. Grams called on their ancient family magic while doing her own unique witchcraft. I even accessed my phoenix half and tried to share the ability to withstand fire of most kinds. There was no information out there about phoenixes being able to handle godly fire, but I hoped it might help.

The Auric Blaze continued to resist our attempts to harness its power stubbornly. Much like a teenager refusing to do their chores. The Blaze flickered and danced, mocking us with its elusive nature. Grams and Fiona made another valiant attempt to twist the flames to their will, but it backfired yet again.

I couldn't help but sigh in exasperation. "Well, isn't this just a hoot and a half? The Blaze is giving us a run for our money and then some."

Grams shot me a glare that could've melted steel. "You don't say? We need to get this under control."

"We've been at this for hours, and frankly I'm starting to think the Blaze is enjoying the show," I replied as I watched the flames move like a woman dancing rather than fire.

Just as we were about to regroup and try again, a troop of brownies scurried out of the forest. They weren't necessarily mischievous little creatures, but they sure seemed like it as they ran toward us. They were chattering excitedly, their tiny eyes gleaming as if they were under an enchantment.

"Do those brownies live at Pymm's Pondsides?" I asked as I pointed to the new arrivals.

Fiona furrowed her brow. "Not that I know of. Are they recent transplants, Grams?"

Grams shook her head. "I've never seen them..." Before Grams could finish her thought, the brownies wasted no time and began swarming around the fire pit.

Aislin yelped, and I jumped as the small creatures attempted to snatch a piece of the magical fire. Grams tried to shoo them away, but they were quick and nimble. Within seconds, one of them had a few sparks of the Blaze in her tiny hands. She froze and lifted wide eyes to look at us.

"Ow, it hurts," she howled as she waved her hands, throwing the sparks off of her flesh. The portion of the godly fire flew back to the main Blaze, leaving the brownie missing a hand.

"Looks like our problems just got a whole lot smaller but no less dangerous," Aislinn observed as she crouched down. She stumbled backward when another brownie hissed at her and tried to protect the injured one.

"Stop!" Fiona shouted as the brownies continued to try and steal part of the Blaze.

One of the men pulled a tiny dagger from his ankle before he ran right at Grams. She blasted him with her magic before he could reach her. I joined Fiona and Aislinn, who had shifted gears to gathering the brownies, and was shocked to see the smile on the face of the one Grams had blasted.

The blade of his dagger swept through the Blaze and took a tiny flame with it. The brownie landed and started laughing maniacally as he swept the flames around, keeping us away from him.

The absurdity of the moment struck me. I rarely stopped to think about

how my life had gone from small-town bookstore owner with a side of witchy lineage to a witch-phoenix hybrid that was chosen by a goddess to solve supernatural crimes. Shaking off the thought, I chased after the brownies who were following the one holding a flaming dagger.

Next to me, Grams muttered irritably, “These little blighters are worse than a brood of vampires. And you know how much I adore vampires.”

I couldn't help but agree, offering a wry smile. “I seem to recall you used to host vampire socials, where you'd bring out your finest *blood-red* wine. Perhaps you need to feed these brownies something as enchanting.”

Aislinn laughed as she leaped at the brownie with the fire. “Don't forget those delightful midnight dances, Grams. You could be the Belle of a Brownie Ball instead this time.”

Grams gave us an irritated look before she broke out laughing. “Have I taught you nothing? Sometimes, you've got to indulge the immortals. Let's treat the brownies to a gilded cage.”

Fiona raced past us, shaking her head. She chanted something I didn't hear. “Don't worry. I've got this.” With a snap of her fingers, a cage of fire stopped the brownies in their tracks. Then she reached in and plucked the dagger from the irate brownie.

No sooner had she tossed the weapon into the fire pit than a swarm of pixies descended upon the property. They danced around like erratic fireflies, emitting a chorus of high-pitched voices that could send anyone into a frenzy wishing for earplugs.

Aislinn took a page out of Fiona's book and made a wall of fire right in the path of the pixies. “Help me box them in before they kill themselves by flying through the Auric Blaze.”

Grams cursed as she waved a hand, and a second wall of fire to the right appeared. “They have no idea what they're trying to steal.

Calling up my witch fire, I added a wall behind the pixies, who were now pissed. “We need another wall and a top to keep them inside.”

Fiona's lime green flames closed the box, singeing one pixie's wings. The injured one fell to the ground outside the box while her friends started flying up to get away. Hastily, I added to my witch fire in the form of a top.

Aislinn bent to scoop up the injured pixie when the hairs on the back of my neck prickled. “There's Underworld magic nearby.” My gaze scanned the forest as I spoke, looking for the enemies. They were out there somewhere.

Fiona moved closer to me while Grams took the hurt pixie from Aislinn

before she grabbed the brownie missing a hand. She raced to the mausoleum where the portal lived and set them safely in the doorway. As I watched her, I noticed a ripple of light.

Grabbing Fiona and pointing in the direction, I shouted, "That way!"

A dark portal popped into existence and uninvited, unwelcome demons walked through. Two towering fire demons glared at us. Their flames were blazing with a fierce intensity. The air sizzled as they approached, and the temperature seemed to skyrocket. We couldn't let them get close to the Auric Blaze. They were literally beings made of fire. While I wanted to hope they couldn't safely wield the Blaze, I wasn't going to assume so.

"As if it wasn't hot enough around here. These arseholes had to join the party?"

Grams grimaced. "We need to inform them they're off the guest list and send them packing."

"Easier said than done," Aislinn quipped as we stood there huddled close together.

The leader of the fire demon duo, a hulking, fiery brute with eyes that smoldered like embers let out a menacing growl that rumbled like thunder. Flames danced along his forearms, and specs flew from his fingers like molten sparks from Bas's blacksmith forge. The fire demon's partner was lithe and grinned as he thrived on being a trickster. His flames flickered like an unpredictable wildfire.

As the first fiery tendril lashed out towards us, Fiona jumped in front of me. My heart plummeted as she got a taste of their flames. I moved forward at the same time Grams grabbed me around the waist, pulling me back. Fiona's head swiveled around to face us. I would never forget the look of terror. My mind was frozen by the seeming impossibility. When Fiona tried to cast a protective barrier around herself, I jumped on the same train. But before I could cast my spell, a fiery explosion engulfed Fiona. I screamed at the top of my lungs when she went up like a pyromaniac's dream.

"Sebastian!" I called out and bumped into Aislinn as Grams pulled us away. It jolted me out of the momentary stupor, and I realized Grams was casting a protective barrier around us.

Bas rushed out of the house. I will never forget the sound of anguish that left his mouth when he saw Fiona on fire. It would haunt me for the rest of my life, but it was enough to distract me. I met Aislinn's gaze. "Douse her with water, Ais! I'm going to follow that with a shield around her body."

Aislinn nodded and turned to the side. With a flick of her wrist, the water rose from the pond and sped toward Fiona. I was already chanting when it splashed down on Fiona. Steam rose along with the hiss of a fire being put out with water. I spat the final words of my barrier and sagged when the next round of flames ricocheted off of her.

“She’s protected,” I told Bas. “Help us kill these arseholes before they hurt anyone else.” I was happy to note the pixies and brownies had stopped trying to get out of their cages.

I pivoted and chanted spells and incantations to corral these incendiary pests. Unfortunately, the demons were having none of it. Their flames roared like an inferno, their demonic laughter echoing through the air.

With a swift flick of his fingers, Bas conjured a swirling vortex of water to quench the demon's flames. It hissed and crackled, steam hissing into the air. But the fire demon retaliated with a fiery barrage, sending fireballs hurtling toward us like miniature meteors.

The low-slatted fence that surrounded the west end of the cemetery was reduced to a pile of smoldering ashes. The pondside area didn't fare any better. The shimmering water danced and sizzled as the flames licked at its edges. Kairi! I wanted to call out to the mermaid princess and tell her to get to safety, but held my tongue. She had created chambers beneath the surface that would surely keep her safe.

I shook my head, my phoenix blood boiling as I conjured a torrent of water to douse the flaming demon's fiery assault. “Honestly, can't we just have one peaceful day?”

But in the realm of the supernatural, peace was often a fleeting fantasy. The battle raged on, a sizzling dance of fire and water, a true clash of elemental titans. The fight was escalating into an inferno of epic proportions. Tombstones shattered, trees burnt to a crisp and part of the garden was damaged. Flames licked the air, sparks sizzled and the very ground beneath us quivered with each fiery explosion. Just when it seemed things couldn't get any crazier, an earth-shaking roar reverberated through the air.

All heads turned to the house. I couldn't stop from shouting out my exhilaration. I had seen Argies shift forms before. And each time, it left me in awe. The ground trembled beneath my feet as Argies's dragon unfurled from his human guise. Scales the color of dark teal erupted from his skin while wings, magnificent and shimmering like the sea, extended with a deafening flap. His transformation was a sight that left a burning impression on you.

Argies lunged toward the fire demons, and his fiery breath engulfed one. The spectacle was horrifying and mesmerizing at the same time. It was like watching a legend come to life. The roar of his flames drowned out any other sound, and the intense heat bore down on us.

Beside me, Bas watched the dragon's assault with a mixture of vindication and worry etched across his face. He knew the danger involved, and his concern for Fiona was etched in his every line. Bas clenched his fists, his jaw set and his gaze locked on the chaos unfolding before us. More than once his feet started to carry him over to Fiona only to be stopped by a column of fire.

He and I were on opposite ends of the fight, and the second I saw my opening, I rushed to Fiona's side. My heart was in my throat as I looked down at her. Her skin was marred with burns and the scent of singed hair filled the air around her. The fear that gnawed at me was unlike anything I'd ever felt.

"You know, Fi," I said, my voice trembling with unshed tears, "I thought we were just coming over for some tea and a chat with Grams. But I guess a little demon barbecue makes for a nice change of pace."

Fiona managed a weak smile, though the pain still etched lines on her face. "You always did say we should spice things up," she quipped, her humor a testament to her resilience.

Bas headed toward us, followed by Grams. The columns of fire kept stalling them. Aislinn was on the other side of the cemetery fighting one of the fire demons, so neither had an opening to reach us. As we huddled together, the clash between our friends and the remaining fire demons continued. The ground shook beneath us, and I couldn't help but wonder if our world was going to be engulfed in the fiery chaos that was unfolding.

CHAPTER 15



*A*islinn

My heart raced when Argies came running out of the house. I prayed Kalli hadn't woken when her father had run from the room. Our daughter was too curious for her own good. She wouldn't know to stay in the house, and everyone was outside fighting the fire demons.

My chest clenched for a different reason. A couple of them. One, Argies was shifting into his dragon, and two, Fiona was severely injured. I prayed Argies didn't destroy the greenhouse or the mausoleum or cause damage to the main house. He wasn't exactly graceful in dragon form. He was a huge flying reptile who was protecting his family at the moment. He wouldn't hesitate to do whatever it took to take out the enemy.

I screamed when Bas was cut off from Fiona by flames that refused to bend to my will. All Fae could manipulate the elements, and I had always been particularly adept with fire. Ducking behind one of the tombstones, I tried to dart around Thanos, who was keeping one of the fire demons busy so I could reach Fiona and Violet.

A blast of flames forced me behind a tree trunk. It's not the best choice of hiding spots. It would go up faster than a tinderbox, but beggars couldn't be choosers and all that. There was nothing else to block me from view. When Argies roared loud enough to rattle the windows in the houses for miles around, I cringed while chancing a peek around the tree.

He was barreling down on the one facing off with Thanos. His massive jaws closed around the demon's chest before he changed course right before he hit the ground. He sailed past me, knocking branches from the tree and splattering me with blood so hot it burned my skin, leaving blisters behind. I

ran from my hiding spot and hurried toward Fiona while trying to ignore the sound of crunching above me.

I'd reached Fiona and Violet when the second scream echoed around us. I collapsed next to them. At the same time, another loud crunch made my stomach churn. The trumpet that followed was that of a victorious dragon.

With the chaos of the fire demon showdown finally ending, I heaved a sigh of relief. Argies, having snapped the head off the last fiery menace, landed and transformed back into his human form. He entered the house, likely to get some clothes on. The tranquility that followed was almost eerie. The evening air hung heavy with the scent of smoke and the lingering adrenaline in our veins.

"Remind me never to invite fire demons to a barbecue," I muttered to Violet, unable to resist a touch of sarcasm. "We need to call Zreegy so she can heal Fiona." My stomach twisted as I scanned her badly burned body. Sections of her skin were charred, while others were red and raw. For the millionth time over the past year, I wished I had the ability to heal, so I could help my best friend.

Bas looked like he was ready to rip someone to shreds. When his angry gaze lifted to me, I flinched and retreated a little. "She's on her way." If looks could kill, I would be dead and turned to ashes. I shuddered and reminded myself he wasn't pissed at me, just worried for his mate.

Fiona's arm twitched, and her head turned. "Ch...Ch...check..."

Bas lifted a hand, cutting off her attempt to talk. "Thanos, Argies, and I will look around to make sure there are no other demons lurking about. All you need to worry about is staying still so you don't get worse. I love you, Butterfly."

My heart was in my throat as I watched Bas and Thanos walk away. Grams turned toward the house when the door opened. "Argies," she called out. "Can you check the scorched garden and make sure Kairi isn't floating on the surface of the pond?"

I gasped and swatted her arm. "Grams!"

Grams scowled and shook her head. "There's no time for dancing around issues. We need to know the damage."

Violet nodded in agreement. "I'm with you on that one. Let's not make this a typical evening in the Cottlehill Wilds, okay? This is our safe place."

I tilted my head to the side as I conjured a cool film of water and held it around the worst of Fiona's wounds. "We also need to figure out what to do

about the nuisance visitors.” Pixies and brownies never acted like that, so it was clear they were under some kind of thrall. The question was, whose? Were they sent as a distraction? Given the timing of the fire demons' arrival, it seemed as if they set it all up. But enthralling creatures wasn't one of their skills.

The screech of tires had me jumping to my feet with balls of fire dancing on my palms. I relaxed when I recognized Zreegy's old sedan. The healer jumped out and raced over in our direction at the same time Kalliopi came racing out of the house, calling out for me.

Relaxing, I waved to Kalli, who ran to me full of smiles. “Mum! I heard daddy. Is it time to fly?” The grin dropped off of her face like a stone sinking in the pond. With a quivering lip, she walked over and knelt next to Fiona. “Oh no, Auntie Fiona. You got a owie.”

Kneeling behind Kalli, I squeezed her shoulders. “She was protecting us. She's going to be okay now. Zreegy is here to heal her.”

Zreegy looked over from working her healing magic and smiled at Kalli. “She's going to be just fine.” Fiona's body was slowly regaining its natural hue, and the burns were beginning to heal a small section at a time. Demonic injuries were harder to heal whether they came from the venom in their blood, acid in their spit, or their flames. These injuries would take Zreegy some time to restore. And Fiona wasn't crying or indicating she was in excruciating pain, which she had to be.

With some time on our hands while Fiona recovered, I stood up to distract Kalli. “Do you want to go check on Kairi with me?”

Kalli chewed on her lower lip as she looked from my hand to Fiona. Violet got up and tugged Kalli with her. “We should give Zreegy space to work. We will be close by in case Fiona needs us.”

With that assurance, Kalli nodded her head. My chest twinged as I thought about how much of a better mother Violet was than me. Fiona too. It was another reason I loved them so much. They taught me how to be a better parent every day. The three of us wandered over to the pond, where the water's surface now reflected the stars above. The quiet night calmed down the chaos that had just unfolded.

As we approached the pond, we were met by an unexpected sight. Kairi, the mermaid princess who lived there was perched on a rock at the water's edge. Her scales glistened in the moonlight and her long, blue hair cascaded down her back. She'd already pulled on a top as she allowed the night air to

dry out her tail.

“I sure hope she wasn’t out here for that fight,” she said by way of greeting.

Shaking my head, I rubbed the ache in my chest and that worsened. “Thankfully, no. She was safely inside the house with Argies before he came out and, uh, took care of the demons. Are you alright?”

Kairi scanned the area. “I wasn’t hurt. It was a close call, though. I managed to save the fish that were too close to the surface. What the hell happened?”

Violet snorted. “Fire demons happened. They weren’t exactly on our agenda for the evening, so we were taken off guard and slow in taking the offensive.”

“Are you going somewhere?” The question came out before I could filter it. My gut told me she was getting out of dodge.

Kairi’s expression turned somber. “I’m sorry, but I can’t stay here any longer. It’s just not safe. The attacks are becoming more frequent, and I’d rather not be around when the next one hits.”

We exchanged understanding glances. The past twenty-four-plus hours had been a relentless whirlwind of magical battles, and our exhaustion was beginning to catch up with us. We all had yet to get a proper night’s sleep since leaving the United States. And we’d gotten none since the activation of the Auric Blaze.

Kalli crouched down and touched a burnt section of the ground. I could feel her elemental magic kick into gear. Within seconds, the ground cover that had been burnt away came back to life.

Refocusing on the conversation, I shifted my gaze back to Kairi. “I don’t blame you,” I said, my tone sympathetic. “Fiona and Grams haven’t been able to get the full wards back up yet. Of course, you will have none once you leave here. Be careful out there, Kairi.”

She nodded in gratitude, her tail disappearing and becoming legs. “You too. I hope these troubles settle down soon, and I will be back.” She slid her legs into jeans.

“We should check on Fiona and the others. It’s been a long night. If you would feel better inside the house, you don’t have to wait for Grams or Fiona to invite you. You can stay there, too,” Violet replied.

I turned to head back to Fiona, Zreegy, and Grams when I was stopped by Kairi grabbing me and stuffing something into my ears. “What the hell?” I

asked as I spun around and watched her do the same to Violet and then Kalli.

“Sirens are coming,” she warned, her melodious voice laced with urgency. “The seaweed is enchanted to help you withstand the lure of their song.”

Violet winced, adjusting to the unusual sensation. “Oh, wonderful. Are they here for a serenade or something?” She grabbed a wad and started walking toward Fiona and Grams. “We need to protect them, too.”

Kairi flashed a wry smile. “You don’t want them serenading you. It always ends up deadly for the receiving end.”

My brow furrowed as I picked up Kalli and started to follow Violet with Kairi by my side. “So why are they coming here?”

“They're attracted to any kind of supernatural activity. Trust me, you don't want to be ensnared by their songs,” Kairi said.

Just as she spoke, we heard the faint but eerie melody of the sirens in the distance. It was the kind of tune that lured sailors to their doom. I hadn't really heard it when Fiona's kids had visited at Christmas and were trapped by the Sirens. Even muffled, the tune sent a shiver down my spine.

Violet stumbled forward with her arms outstretched as Zreegy stood up crossed to the low fence, and handed her bag of healing supplies to the approaching sirens. Cold dread slithered down my spine. Grams approached the fence and blasted a section out of the way so the sirens could enter the cemetery.

Bas, Thanos, and Argies came running from the forest with murder in their eyes behind the sirens. A tall, lithe woman turned around, her movements as sinuous and entrancing as a river's gentle twist and meander. She drew you deeper into her seductive current with every graceful curve. A second later, Bas slowed to a walk. With an adoring gaze, he approached the beautiful siren and offered up his daggers. I stopped and gaped at the sight of him handing them over without a second thought.

Violet's face was a mix of disbelief and anger. I grabbed her hand. “Quick. Cast a spell around Argies and Thanos.” I poured energy into Violet as she shouted the enchantment to create a protective barrier around them. Argies and Thanos shook their heads before their eyes went wide. I shook my head at Argies as I held Kairi to me. We didn’t want to piss off the sirens. We couldn’t afford any distractions or Argies and Thanos could become vulnerable.

The sirens drew closer, their haunting melodies growing stronger. But

with the seaweed in our ears and a protective spell in place, we remained unaffected. The sight of our friends handing over their belongings highlighted how powerful and deadly the sirens were.

“That’s one hell of a party trick,” Violet muttered, her eyes fixed on the sirens who were looking over their ill-gotten gains.

My head started pounding as the sirens' haunting melody washed over us like a dark wave. It didn't make me want to follow their directive, but it caused a deep sense of dread to creep in. In the distance, I noticed Fiona's body jerking. Was she still struggling from the injuries inflicted by the fire demons? Or was she trying to obey the siren's song?

Zreegy was no longer treating her thanks to the sirens' enchanting melody. The newest invaders to Pymm's Pondsides headed straight for the Auric Blaze as they continued to weave their insidious spell. I was shocked when Kairi started swaying to the rhythm of the song.

I set Kalli down and wrapped her arms around my leg. I had a bad feeling we were going to be attacked. My heart sank when it was Kairi who lunged at me with her teeth bared in a predatory grin. It was clear that the malevolent force of the sirens had seized control of her, turning her into an enemy. Kalli shifted into her dragon at that moment and spewed fire at Kalliopi. Violet hastily raised a protective barrier around Kairi before Kalliopi clawed her. It also prevented Kairi from reaching me. Her claws scraped against the shimmering magic shield.

As I turned to Violet to get help, she was engaged with Bas. She was trying to fend him off. Two of our friends had succumbed to the sirens' enchantment. I was busy running for more of the enchanted seaweed as Bas advanced with relentless determination. The scariest part was how the expression on his face didn't differ much from what it usually was.

“Snap out of it, Bas!” Violet cried out, desperation in her voice. She sent a burst of magical energy towards him, trying to break the hold of the sirens' spell. But he deftly dodged it. His movements were graceful and deadly, like usual.

I grabbed the seaweed and ran back to Kairi who was circling Kalli in her purple dragon form. After stuffing pieces in her ears, she shook off the enchantment and went with me to Bas who was fighting Violet. Thanos roared when Violet cried out after being hit in the face by Bas. Violet fell on her backside, and Thanos sent a blast of his power at a grouping of sirens. Thanos's power is over memory, and when it hit that cluster they stopped

singing and stared blankly around at everything. Two of them ran away screaming while the rest backed away a few feet.

Kairi and I managed to reach Bas and shove the spelled seaweed into his ears. His fury rolled off of him in waves hotter than the fire demon's flames. He took some of the seaweed and ran toward Fiona, who was unable to help due to her injuries and was lying helpless on the ground.

That left Zreegy, who was trying to attack Fiona. Thankfully, Bas was able to subdue her with one hand and stuff her ears full. I chanced a look at Kairi. "What happened? How did they get to you?"

"No idea. I must be distracted," Kairi said as she shook her head and then waved a hand and sent the water toward the sirens who had gotten close to the Auric Blaze. Steam billowed out when the water hit the Blaze, burning the closest sirens who then started writhing and rolling around on the ground.

Zreegy lunged for her bag when the main group was distracted. Thank the gods, Bas had managed to get her out of their control. With the vital healing supplies in hand, she returned to Fiona.

Argies dispatched the siren he was fighting and went to help Bas. Together, they fought ferociously against the sirens, who had lured them into their deadly trap with their mesmerizing melody. It was a frantic clash of magic, claws, and fury. Argies wielded his fire-based powers with precision while Bas snatched his daggers back and used them to deadly effect. It felt like the tide was turning as we pushed back against the sirens' relentless assault.

As the battle raged on, help arrived from all corners of the supernatural world. Selkies, dwarfs, and griffins descended upon Pymm's Pondsides, drawn by either the commotion or the power of the Blaze. Once on the property, enough was happening to distract them from the goldy fire if that was what had drawn them. They added their own unique skills and strengths to the fray, leveling the playing field.

The selkies used their enchanting voices to counter the sirens' song, stopping the vile melody before it could ensnare anyone else. The dwarfs, skilled in the art of metalwork, brought weapons and tools to bolster our defenses. A majestic griffin swooped down to engage the sirens in aerial combat.

Meeting my daughter's gaze, I reached for her as she hovered above me. "You stay close to mum. I will make sure no one can get you, but stay a dragon for now." She was harder to hurt in this form.

With renewed determination, we fought to protect our home and one another from the seductive menace of the sirens. It didn't take long before we finally overcame the sirens. Their defeat drove them away with their tails, quite literally between their legs. Our victory was hard-fought, but the sight of the vanquished sirens retreating. The silencing of their enchanting sone was a sweet reward.

Grams turned in a circle. "Thank you all for coming to our defense. You've made powerful allies."

The griffin, a magnificent creature with feathers shimmering like polished emeralds, flapped his wings with an air of irritation. His golden eyes glinted with barely contained fury as he glared at Grams. "I didn't come to help you. The power lured me. But now that I am here, I have a bone to pick with you." The griffin's voice was high-pitched and odd, coming out of the beak of an eagle. It threw me for a loop.

Grams frowned at the griffin. "How have I upset you when we have never even met?"

The griffin landed in front of her, saying "You had the audacity to accuse my cousin, Filarion, of theft? Are you sure you're not just misplacing your things in your old age?"

Grams, never one to back down from a challenge, fixed the griffin with a steely gaze of her own. "Oh, I assure you, *young* man, I have proof. Your dear cousin thought it wise to snatch my grimoire right after I died."

The griffin blinked the eyes on the sides of its eagle head in surprise. "Your grimoire? Why on earth would Filarion want that?"

"Because it's not just any grimoire," Grams replied with a knowing smirk. "It's a powerful artifact with spells rivaling this godly fire's power. He wanted its secrets, and he took it."

After a tense moment of silence, the griffin finally conceded, "That sounds like something Filarion would want."

Grams laughed in response. "Why isn't he here with you now? This power should have drawn him to Pymm's Pondsideside."

CHAPTER 16



*V*iolet

The griffin shifted back into a man as his gaze went to the Auric Blaze. Naked as the day he was born, he walked toward the fire pit without responding. Grams shouted a spell that stopped him in his tracks. The shriek that emanated from him was worse than fingernails on a chalkboard. His fists pounded against an invisible wall. Curses left his mouth, but I couldn't pay attention because I needed to check on Fiona.

The cemetery had become a kaleidoscope of fantastical beings, and making my way through the area was difficult. Pixies flitted about like neon fireflies. At some point during the battle, Grams and Fiona lost control of their firey cage. Their high-pitched chatter reminded me of Eidothea. You couldn't go to many places in the Fae realm without coming across groups of them.

Two dwarfs stood together off to the side. Their short stature emphasized how these ones were bristling with excitement. Kalli was keeping pace beside her mom until she caught sight of the brownies running up tombstones. I watched as she darted around the marble markers with astonishing agility. It was like a treacherous obstacle course she'd mastered.

I surveyed the scene with a mixture of amusement and exasperation. "You know," I muttered under my breath to Aislinn, "Your daughter could teach us a thing or two about not getting bogged down by things like battles."

Aislinn laughed. "I'm not so sure she would be this enthusiastic if the place wasn't filled with magical creatures for her to play with."

Grams looked over from her conversation with a selkie about the remarkable properties of kelp in spell work. "The energy is intoxicating. And

I'm not talking about the Auric Blaze. This place always was a haven for the supernatural. I had to control the population tighter after dampening Fiona's magic."

I nodded in agreement. I remembered those early days. "Well, I just hope they don't get in the way when we're dealing with the less-friendly creatures."

Aislinn blew out a breath and glanced around. "I agree. Though they're all being awfully curious about the Auric Blaze."

"We need to keep them away from it," I replied as I prepared to cast a spell.

Fiona stumbled over, clutching her side. "No. We need to find a better way to deal with them. We can't punish them for being drawn to it, but we should protect them."

I gasped and reached for her to bring her into a hug, then paused when I saw the raw skin on her upper chest. "Fiona! You're looking better."

Zreegy thrust her hands on her hips. "She refused to stay put for me to continue healing her."

Fiona waved a hand through the air. "You can heal me more right here. I had to help them figure this out before everyone around us started losing their minds."

Zreegy lifted one shoulder. "Maybe you should send them away. You guys have enough on your plate."

I shook my head. "It would be easier to cage them like the griffin. Otherwise, we will be removing people and won't be able to get the wards back up and deal with the Blaze."

"The power of the Auric Blaze is increasing as the lingering effects of the siren's song fully dissipate," Grams pointed out. "But Violet is right. We can't send them away."

The decision not to send away the non-violent visitors was easy if you asked me. After all, Pymm's Pondsides had long been a sanctuary for supernatural beings, and none of us had a desire to change that. Plus, having all these magical creatures around might come in handy, especially when it comes to protecting the elusive Auric Blaze.

Grams nodded sagely as if she could read my thoughts. "We need to focus our efforts on dealing with the troublemakers, like the fire demons and sirens. Not the more curious ones."

As if on cue, a pair of fire demons appeared on the outskirts of the cemetery, their fiery forms casting an eerie glow on the aged gravestones.

Aislinn cracked her knuckles, her eyes narrowing. “Looks like we've got some party crashers.”

“Let's show them how we party at Pymm's Pondsides,” I quipped. Fiona snorted and then groaned. I pointed to her. “Stay here. You aren't in any shape to face them again.”

Aislinn and I moved while the curious creatures watched with wide eyes. Their fear had distracted those who had been drifting closer to the Auric Blaze. Argies shouted at Aislinn to remain with Kalliopi so she didn't get hurt in any crossfire. She turned back while I continued.

I conjured a magical blast and tossed it at the pair of fire demons. Bile surged up my throat when a demon's leg was blown to smithereens, making the victim howl in agony as it clutched the bleeding stump.

Grams shot a wry look my way. “That is certainly one way to stop them. Although, we're going to have to cleanse the soil after this. Imagine how hard the weeds would be to remove if their blood soaks in.”

“Oh, I don't know, Grams. It wouldn't be Pymm's Pondsides without a touch of chaos,” I said with a smirk.

Grams and I stopped a few feet away when Argies shifted for a second time and had another snack. I was about to head to the other fire demon when Thanos and Bas tackled him from behind. The guys were prepared this time and took him out before he had a chance to conjure their flames.

Grams shook her head warily. “This is getting old fast.”

A snort left me. “Tell me about it.” Focusing on Thanos and Bas, I waved them away. “I'm going to burn that spot before their blood soaks in.”

Thanos chuckled and approached me while Bas made a bee-line for Fiona. I sent a blast of phoenix fire that was hot enough to incinerate every last demonic particle. When I was done, Thanos was there and kissing me as if his life depended on it. Mine sure did. I loved that man with every fiber of my being.

When we broke apart, we turned to see that the cemetery had become a buzzing haven for supernatural beings. They were all drawn together by the irresistible allure of the Auric Blaze. It was like a surreal carnival.

And they weren't done arriving. As we headed back to our friends, I saw tiny figures flying in our direction. I tensed and watched as more pixies joined the party in a dazzling display of sparkling lights and mischievous laughter. They flitted through the air, leaving trails of fairy dust in their wake. Of course, that drew Kalli's interest and she stopped chasing the brownies to

join the sparkly fun.

“Look at them,” I said, gesturing toward the airborne revelers. “Nature's own fireworks display.”

Aislinn nodded in agreement. “Pixies are always up for a good party. Let's hope they don't turn aggressive when the allure of the Blaze takes over. I will kill them if they hurt my daughter. I won't want to, but I will.”

As we watched the pixies, another group of dwarfs arrived. These new arrivals had meticulously groomed beards and serious expressions on their faces. The first two dwarves had shaggy beards that hung to the middle of their torso and flannel shirts. Their differences didn't seem to matter as they huddled together, talking animatedly.

Fiona gestured to the dwarves with her chin. “Do you think they're talking about beard balm or the best way to dig a tunnel?”

Aislinn chuckled. “Knowing dwarves, it's probably both.”

The brownies darted among the tombstones, tiny and industrious. Their voices chimed like a chorus of bells. They picked up pieces of debris from the fight. I refused to look too closely at what they were picking up. I didn't want to know if they were pieces of flesh.

“I'm glad they're doing that,” I said as I continued watching. They would run toward the fire pit and throw what they had in the Auric Blaze. They then got distracted for several seconds until they noticed one of their friends toss debris in, and then they would get back to work.

“Brownies are the ultimate multitaskers,” Grams noted. “They'll have this place spick and span in no time.”

Fiona voiced a concern. “The godly power seems to be drawing more and more of them to its flames. We will have a mass casualty event if we don't do something. We should cast some kind of spell to keep them from getting too close to the Auric Blaze. I don't want to see anyone else get enthralled by it and blindly try to grab it. I've seen enough get maimed and killed today.”

Grams nodded, appreciating Fiona's pragmatism. “You're right. The question is what we do. We can weave a spell around the individuals or create a potion that makes them immune to the power. The potion would be the better way to go. It'll take less of our power.”

Aislinn cocked her head to the side. “Or we could cast a dampening shield around the Blaze. The potion will take too long to make, and we could have a mess of people lined up for Zreegy to heal.” Aislinn pointed to the tombstone where Zreegy was healing the brownie that had lost a hand thanks

to the Auric Blaze.

Fiona, Grams, and I all nodded at once. Grams took the lead and began weaving a protective spell. The rest of us followed her lead and added our power to the enchantment around the godly fire. As we worked, a group of men and women walked down the driveway.

“Keep an eye on the selkies,” Kairi advised.

We finished the spell around the godly fire, and I turned to her. “Why? Are they dangerous?” I hadn’t noticed how strong the signal from the Auric Blaze was until it was shielded. It left me feeling a little off-kilter.

“Selkies can’t be out of water that long, or their other half will die,” she said as she approached the group. She led them to the pond and one by one, they undressed and then slipped inside. They didn’t stay long, though. They emerged from the pond, sleek and graceful, their sealskin coats shimmering with water droplets.

I looked around and noticed that it was almost as if a switch had been flipped from before we dampened the Auric Blaze. The various groups stopped revolving around the fire pit and started other projects. The selkies had set up a little gathering of their own at the pond's edge while a troop of brownies arrived with tiny tools. They started a lively construction project near the cemetery's entrance. It looked like they were replacing the damaged fence. Seeing that, the dwarves joined to help.

Fiona smirked at the scene unfolding. “I love seeing this cross-species collaboration. Half an hour ago, I never thought we’d get to this point.”

As dusk settled in, the crowd grew even more diverse. A pair of griffins swooped down, startling us. Grams cursed under her breath and crossed to the first griffin. I leaned closer to Fiona. “I totally forgot he was in her magic bubble.”

She winced. “Me too. He’s been so quiet.”

I watched the new arrivals and how their impressive wingspan cast dramatic shadows across the cemetery. They greeted us with regal nods and went to join their friend.

“The griffin on the left is Filarion,” Grams observed. “He wasn’t happy that I locked up his cousin.”

I shrugged. “I hope you reminded him of his theft.”

She smirked at that. “Of course I did. Why do you think he hasn’t shifted forms?”

We laughed at her comment and continued watching the creatures around

us. As the supernatural gathering continued to swell, the atmosphere in the cemetery grew increasingly vibrant and eclectic.

I snapped out of it when the burly dwarfs started setting up a makeshift camp. They sat on logs and started sharing stories. The godly power might be dampened, but they had set up very close to the fire. And they seemed to be basking in the unique energy radiating from the enigmatic Auric Blaze.

“You are welcome to build a temporary shelter,” Grams announced to the gathering. “However, that does not mean you will be living here permanently. We will be dealing with the Auric Blaze and will need you to move on eventually.

As the gathered crowd booed and begged to stay, the mostly peaceful evening was shattered by the arrival of a pair of trolls. These towering, brutish creatures had mottled, mossy skin and intimidating scowls. They stomped into the cemetery as if they owned the place.

Fiona’s eyes went wide. “What’s with these guys? A couple of neighborhood bullies?”

I crossed my arms, sighing in exasperation. “You could say that. We seriously can't have one peaceful gathering, can we?”

The trolls wasted no time in living up to their reputation. They lumbered over to where a group of dwarfs was busily constructing some sort of structure. With a mixture of arrogance and hostility, the trolls tried to intimidate the dwarfs. They growled and flexed their massive muscles.

Fiona’s protective instincts had obviously been stirred because she strode over to the trolls, commanding attention. “Alright, gentlemen, I think you've made your point. Time to move along and leave Pymm’s Pondsideside.”

Kalliopi, ever the curious child, caught wind of the commotion and decided to investigate. She scampered closer, clearly oblivious to the potential danger.

Aislinn hurried after her. “Kalli, stay back!”

The trolls, however, weren't keen on taking orders from anyone. As Grams and I approached to help mediate, things quickly escalated. Harsh words were exchanged, and it was clear that the trolls were in no mood to cooperate.

Just as the situation seemed on the brink of chaos, a deep, rumbling magic surged from the mausoleum where the Fae portal resided. It pulsed with power, sending out waves of energy that rippled through the air like a stern warning to the unruly trolls.

The trolls froze mid-roar, their eyes widening in shock. They slowly backed away from the dwarfs, their gaze nervously shifting to the crypt. Whatever force had surged from within had clearly given them pause.

Grams pointed to the drive that led to the street. “Get off my property before you force me to remove you.”

Utterly shattered, the trolls began muttering between themselves. The remaining supernatural beings in the vicinity breathed a collective sigh of relief, grateful that the potential brawl had been averted. And Kalliopi continued making new friends among the selkies and griffins, seemingly undisturbed by the near-confrontation.

With the trolls gone, the supernatural gathering gradually settled back into a peaceful rhythm. They continued to camp near one another. They were united by their shared fascination with the enigmatic Auric Blaze and the rare opportunity to gather in such an auspicious place. Conversations flowed freely as creatures from different realms swapped tales of their worlds and experiences.

The atmosphere in the cemetery had truly transformed into a magical confluence of beings. I prayed we weren't attacked again by demons or Tainted witches or sirens. There were far more vulnerable lives in the immediate area now.

CHAPTER 17



Fiona

My eyes flew open with the eruption of tears from the trolls. Their sobbing shook the ground, making me reach for something to hold myself steady. I could hardly believe my eyes as these massive, brutish creatures transformed into bawling wrecks. Snot and tears flowed like a river, splattering all around them. It was like witnessing a particularly melodramatic soap opera scene. You cannot imagine the amount of thick, green goop running from their massive noses. It smelled like a dirty pond and had trapped several brownies in it like quicksand.

With my burns mostly healed, I couldn't resist wading into the chaos to see if I could help. I stood staring at these trolls, giants in their own right, blubbering like babies. I tried to come up with a game plan.

“Sweet mother of magic,” I muttered to myself before approaching them. Their wails continued unabated, but I couldn't let them flood the cemetery and kill innocent creatures.

I conjured a bolt of calming magic and blasted them with it. “Alright, you two,” I declared, arms folded and a no-nonsense tone in my voice. “That's quite enough of the waterworks. We get it. You wanted a taste of that magical fire. Everyone does. But you can't have it. And you can't throw a fit over it. You've damaged the portal to the Fae realm and caused a lot of problems.”

One of the trolls sniffled and wiped his nose with his massive, grimy arm. “We... we just wanted the magic,” he stammered.

I exchanged an amused glance with Violet and Aislinn before returning to the trolls. “Well, who doesn't, right? We're discovering the Auric Blaze is

like catnip for magical creatures. But here's the deal," I continued, pointing a finger their way, "it's not safe for you to touch it. It will burn you to ash. Now, you can stay if you promise to behave yourselves. No more wrecking our place and absolutely no more drama. Got it?"

The other troll nodded vigorously, sending more droplets of snot flying. "We promise! We won't break anything else!"

I would have laughed at their pitiful expressions if I wasn't so busy ducking and dodging the sticky phlegm. "Alright then, it's a deal. Just remember, don't touch the Blaze, and no more getting upset. You're far too big for that. And watch where you walk, please. We have people here that wouldn't survive being stepped on by either of you."

They both nodded in agreement, looking somewhat sheepish as they tried to regain their composure. I patted one of them on the leg. It was the highest point I could reach. "That's better. Now, can you stop the waterworks and make yourselves useful somewhere? Just be careful not to hurt anyone," I warned, wagging a finger playfully.

As I walked away, I couldn't help but shake my head. Wrangling trolls throwing a fit like Kalli might if she was denied biscuits had not crossed my mind of things I might do today.

I took a moment to take in the damage, and my heart sank. "Bloody hell, we have to add fixing the mausoleum. Magica spiraling out of control is never a good thing. Bas, will you gather the stones while we deal with the Auric Blaze?"

Bas crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the structure, missing most of its roof. "This could become bad fast. I can feel Eidothea when I normally don't detect a thing unless I'm inside."

Aislinn frowned as we moved closer to the crypt. "The magic of home is lashing out like an animal trainer wielding a whip. We might be looking at the merging of the two realms if we aren't careful."

My mind screeched to a halt. "Change of plans. We will fix this now. Grams, what do we need to do?"

Grams waved a hand through the air. "You and Violet fix the physical structure while Aislinn and I go make some food. We have countless hungry paranormals, and we can't repair the magic until it can be contained again."

Her comment raised countless questions, making it difficult to think straight. The one that ended up coming out was, "Why does it have to be contained here but not in Eidothea?"

“Because we control who comes and goes from Earth, we need more power on our end. When the portal was created hundreds of years ago, it was for Fae to escape Eidothea while keeping Vodor or his men from following and retaliating,” Grams explained.

I nodded in understanding. “That makes sense. So, we repair the structure first and then the magic.”

Grams inclined her head. “And I will prepare some food for everyone. Aislinn, let’s go.”

I chewed on my lower lip and snatched Grams’s arm before she could walk away. “I need Aislinn. The mausoleum will be stronger if we balance Fae magic in the mix.” I was going entirely on instinct here. I’d learned over the past year plus to listen to my gut when it told me something. “My Fae side won’t be enough with Violet’s witchcraft, and I can’t do this alone.”

Bas laid a hand on my shoulder. “I will help you two with this. Isidora is right to worry about feeding the masses. Things could take a turn if people start getting cranky from hunger. Thanos and Argies can keep an eye on things to ensure they don’t explode.”

I stared up into my mate’s blue eyes. “Life would be so much harder without all of you.”

Bas snorted. “I love you too, Butterfly.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “As if you’re Mr. Romantic.”

“Get to work,” Grams called out as she and Aislinn walked away. That was her way of keeping us on track. We had no time to waste.

Turning back, I tried to come up with a game plan. The mausoleum had seen better days, that was for sure. It was quite a mess after the magic rippled through the area. The stones were scattered all over the ground, many broken in pieces. Crouching down, I noted there were bones among the debris. My heart lurched when I saw that.

“Let’s gather the remains first so we can fix the inside and outside at the same time,” I suggested.

Violet bent and picked up one of the bones. “Are you comfortable restoring the bones? I know last time you weren’t sure or your skill with the spell.”

The corners of my mouth turned down as I considered her question. I was more adept now and had a much better handle on my magical abilities. I opened my mouth to tell her yes, but what came out was, “No. This needs to be flawless. I would feel better if you would do that part of things. I’m too

emotional when I think of my ancestors and how they're still here supporting us."

Violet started picking up the bone fragments. "I figured as much. I don't mind at all."

Kalliopi came skipping over with a bucket. "Here, Auntie Violet. It's fo da bones. Can I help?"

Violet nodded while I turned to Bas. "How about we start by restoring the broken stones? That way, we are ready to fix the structure."

Bas bent and pressed a brief kiss to my lips. "Sounds good to me. Tell me what you need me to do."

I smiled as I asked him to gather and match the pieces. When he had two sections ready to be fused, I cast a spell on them to return them to their previous condition. We worked together to get them back together.

"We need to wash the ones covered in snot first. My magic isn't working on them," I said after the third try on a pair with thick, green slime covering them.

Bas furrowed his brow. "That shite is like glue. I would use fire. That's the best way to get every trace of it."

Nodding, we started cleaning them with fire. I left Violet to deal with the bones. I didn't want to destroy them, so she would have to come up with a different way to clean them.

I discovered the fire welded the pieces better than my spell when Kalli bumped into me, and my hands slammed together. Excited, I pointed to Bas. "Use a bit more fire there," I directed. "And after you clear the other piece, use fire on the ends. After that you press them together. It works perfectly." Bas did an excellent job with his elemental powers, which was no surprise considering his lineage. His flames danced and twirled, melding the stone together as if it had never been broken.

Violet, always my go-to for advice on more complex magical endeavors, looked from us to the structure with a thoughtful expression. "Fiona, perhaps if we use a stabilizing charm alongside the stone fusion, it might hold up better against future attacks."

I sighed, realizing she was right. We have a knack for attracting trouble, and it wouldn't do to have the mausoleum fall apart again. "I like the way you think. Let's try that. Grams will have our heads if we let this place crumble."

While Bas continued to work his fiery magic, I joined Violet inside to start weaving the stabilizing charm on the bones that lined the portal. Our

magic intertwined, and we channeled it into the weakened structure. It reacted as if it was taking a deep breath, settling into place.

Grams and Aislinn had been busy in the meantime, whipping up some snacks for everyone. The delicious scent of scones wafted over to us, and my mouth watered.

“Time for a break!” Grams called, holding a tray of freshly baked scones, pasties, and tarts. “We've got clotted cream and jam, too!”

I couldn't help but grin—nothing like some clotted cream on a scone to recharge our energy. We gathered around the makeshift picnic area Grams had set up, enjoying the delectable snacks and a steaming pot of tea. I took a bite of a scone, savoring the warm, crumbly texture.

Violet leaned over with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “When are you going to share your secret scone recipe, Grams? You can let us in on the closely guarded family secret.”

Grams chuckled as she took a bite of a pastie. “Well, maybe someday, Violet. But for now, let's focus on the tasks at hand. We have enough on our plate to worry about.”

“I didn't think the Backside of Forty had limits to what they could accomplish,” Bas teased.

We all shared a laugh, enjoying our little moment of respite. After all, even when dealing with trolls and magical repairs, there was always time for tea and scones. The break was far too short for my liking, and within a few minutes, we were back in full swing on the mausoleum repairs.

I sighed as the first section of stone we tried to place on the roof tumbled inside, breaking a piece of newly repaired vertebrae. It was a dose of humble pie. Magic couldn't fix everything, no matter how powerful you were.

“This isn't going to work,” I told Bas. “We need to rebuild the mundane way.”

Bas scowled at me. “What do you mean? Just because one section fell, doesn't mean it all will.”

I sighed as I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Trust me. I felt the resistance as I was working.”

Bas wrapped his arms around my shoulders. “I believe you. And I have a theory. Your family magic has been through the wringer repeatedly over the past year or so, and your wards are down now. I think the power of the Auric Blaze is messing with the flow of energy at Pymm's Pondsides, making it difficult to do most things. I'll go grab some mortar and have Thanos and

Argies help me build an aerial work platform so we can finish this.”

I thanked him and went inside to help Violet with the bones. I didn't fuse any pieces, but I did coax the family magic out to wrap around the work she was doing. We worked quietly until Bas called out that he was ready. I went outside, surprised to see a platform that sat equal to the roof.

Bas and I used good old-fashioned manual labor, working together on rebuilding the top of the mausoleum. When we ran out of stones on the platform with us, Kalli was there handing another over before I could climb down.

Kalliopi's purple dragon couldn't smile or laugh, but I swear I could almost see and hear both. I thanked her as she darted near our heads, placing stones into our waiting hands with the utmost enthusiasm.

“Careful, Bas,” I called out as Kalliopi nearly buzzed into his nose. “Our little helper's got some serious energy today.”

Bas chuckled, his Fae flames crackling as he set the mortar to hold the stones in their designated spots. “She's always full of spirit.”

I glanced down before the interior was closed off to me and noted that Violet was working her own brand of magic on the inside of the mausoleum. She had taken on the daunting task of magically repairing the bones of my ancestors that made up the heart of the structure. These bones were not ordinary remains; they held the magic of my family, ensuring that the portal to the Fae realm of Eidothea remained sealed unless granted authorized access.

With furrowed brows and intense concentration, Violet focused on repairing the fractured bones. It was a delicate and intricate task that she was more than up to. Aislinn poked her head in the crypt with a sly grin on her face as she observed Violet's efforts. “You know, Violet, I've heard of bone-setting charms, but this is a whole new level.”

Violet chuckled, not taking her eyes off the fractured bones. “It's more complex than I anticipated, but I'm determined to restore the enchantment.”

We all nodded, appreciating Violet's determination. After all, the bones of my ancestors were not something to be taken lightly, and restoring their magic was crucial.

As we continued our efforts, Kalliopi decided to take a break from her stone-gathering duties and hovered near Violet's shoulder. She seemed to inspect the fractured bones with a discerning eye as if offering her own input.

I couldn't help but chuckle at the sight. “Looks like Kalli has become

inspector on this mausoleum makeover.”

Bas grinned, his entire face lighting up as he did. “She’s got an eye for detail. With her overseeing things, it’ll be stronger than ever.”

With a laugh, I went back to work on the mausoleum repairs. And as we worked, I couldn't help but feel grateful for my friends' and my family's support and camaraderie. The last time the structure had been damaged, it had been much easier to repair using only magic. It highlighted exactly how power could disrupt the natural flow of things.

After what felt like hours of laboring in the sun, Bas and I finally took a step back to admire our handiwork. The once-damaged mausoleum had been restored to its former glory, albeit without the aid of our magical prowess. It was a testament to the power of determination and good old-fashioned elbow grease.

I wiped the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand, feeling strangely satisfied with the work we had accomplished. “I never thought I’d be adding 'masonry' to my list of talents. Now I can build a house with my own two hands and minimal magical help.”

“This situation proves that you can’t always rely on magic,” Bas replied. “And I like knowing you’re resourceful enough to find a way without it.”

I chuckled, brushing a bit of dirt from my cheek. “True, true. Sometimes, you just have to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty. I’ve never been one to quit, and I’m not about to start now.”

Violet approached us, her face smudged with the remnants of magical efforts. “Looks like you two managed quite well without magic.”

I nodded, feeling a sense of pride. “It's amazing what you can achieve when you put your mind to it.”

Aislinn joined us, wiping her hands on her jeans. “And don't forget Kalliopi. She was the real MVP, flitting around like a stone-delivering tornado.” A mother’s pride was evident in her tone and smile.

We all looked over at Kalliopi, who was now perched atop a stone, swinging her feet back and forth as she ate a pastie. With our attention momentarily diverted, Grams approached, her expression a mixture of curiosity and excitement. “Now that the mausoleum's looking like its old self, we need to test the integrity of the portal and make sure it’s fully operational.”

I nodded in agreement, my heart swelling with anticipation. This was what we had worked so hard for...to ensure that the portal remained secure

and that our connection to the Fae realm of Eidothea remained intact. That was how Argies, Aislinn, and Kalli visited Argies's parents and how they came here to see them.

Together, Grams and I approached the entrance of the mausoleum. The ancient stone archway that housed the portal seemed to pulse with latent magic, ready to spring to life once more. That was a good sign.

With bated breath, we stepped forward and passed through the archway and inside. Violet had restored the bone structure. Grams and I activated the portal and smiled at each other when it sprang to life, and the familiar sights of Eidothea greeted us. Through the shimmering veil, we could see the ethereal beauty of the Fae realm, with its luminous flora and fauna bathed in the soft glow of twilight.

I couldn't help but smile. "It's perfect. That's one thing off of our list."

Grams chuckled, her eyes gleaming with relief. "Thank the gods for that. We didn't have the bandwidth to troubleshoot much more. But what's more important is that our family magic remains intact. Now, all we have to do is tackle the rest."

I couldn't have been happier. "I have to say, Grams, the mausoleum looks even better now."

Grams grinned, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "Who knew trolls would inadvertently help us with some renovations?"

With that, we joined the others, sharing the good news about the portal's integrity. Our hard work had paid off, making me believe we could bind the power of the Auric Blaze before it was too late.

CHAPTER 18



*A*islinn

Argies and I soared through the crisp evening air, the wind tousling my hair as I clung to his sturdy form. After fixing the mausoleum and balancing the portal to the Fae realm before it blew up. It merged Eidothea with the Earth and everyone needed a break. Fiona and Violet had exhausted their magical energy.

When Grams had said any work on the Auric Blaze would have to wait, Argies had jumped at the chance for some alone time and asked Fiona and Violet to watch Kalli. I didn't want to go because our daughter could be a handful, but both of my best friends had insisted. Which was how I found myself flying across the ocean while cradled in one of Argies's paws. We'd all discovered that it was best for us to take the time for one another any chance we could. Life was unpredictable and dangerous and not something to be taken for granted.

I loved gliding through the sky with him. His body gave off enough warmth to keep me from freezing to death. Squinting, I tried to make out what I was seeing in the distance. It took a few seconds for the remote island off the mainland to come into focus. It was bathed in the soft hues of twilight and looked uninhabited. I'd never been there and wondered what he had in mind. There were no restaurants or hotels. I let go of the thousand questions and embraced my eager anticipation. Argies had promised me a surprise, and knowing him, it was bound to be an adventure.

As we descended upon the secluded island, I couldn't help but marvel at its untouched beauty. Verdant trees and wildflowers blanketed the landscape, their colors vibrant against the backdrop of the setting sun. The beach

stretched out before us, the sand a pristine canvas marked only by the gentle lapping of the waves.

I hopped off Argies' paw, landing gracefully on the sand. "Wow, Argies, this place is incredible!" I took his clothes from the bag over my shoulder and set them out for him.

He transformed from his dragon form into his human one. His fiery energy faded in the dying light. "I knew you'd like it. I found it one night when I was out flying and thought it would be perfect as our little secret getaway."

I surveyed the scene with awe. "It's like something out of a fairy tale."

Argies grinned, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "I thought so, too, when I stumbled upon it. It's difficult to get alone time anymore. I needed to find a place hard for Kalli to reach."

I chuckled, shaking my head. "If you plan on taking me here often, you will need to build a small cabin for us. It's chilly out here."

"I can warm you up," he promised as he finished getting dressed, then slid an arm around my waist.

We strolled along the shoreline, the waves gently washing over our bare feet. There was a teepee of wood not far from where we landed. Releasing me, Argies blew a ball of fire at the kindling, setting it aflame. The bonfire crackled and sent tendrils of smoke into the dusky sky, where the first stars began to twinkle while warming me up.

I plopped down onto a blanket beside the fire, feeling the warmth seep into my bones. "Are we just here to watch the waves and relax?" It had been a long time since I'd sat with nothing to do. Especially lately. The investigations we were sent on occupied most of our time, so I was at a loss for how just to sit there.

He produced a wicker basket filled with an assortment of delectable treats. "I thought we'd have a little picnic. Some wine, cheese, and your favorite, an apple crumble."

I grinned in delight. "You certainly know the way to my heart." I'd craved the dessert while pregnant with Kalli and still loved it.

As we feasted on the scrumptious spread, we talked about everything except the Auric Blaze and laughed as we made guesses as to how many of her new friends Kalli had convinced her aunties to let inside the house with her. The island's natural beauty served as the backdrop to our conversation, enhancing every word and making the moment even more magical.

Argies reached for my hand, his touch warm and comforting. “Aislinn, I never want to get so caught up in the chaos of life that we forget to appreciate the simple joys, like a serene evening on a hidden island. These are the moments worth living for. I love you.”

I squeezed his hand in agreement, feeling a deep sense of contentment wash over me. “You're right, Argies. Moments like these remind us of what truly matters.”

We fell into silence then as the bonfire cast a soft glow around us and the night deepened. The island seemed to embrace us, offering a sanctuary of peace and tranquility.

As I gazed up at the star-studded sky, I couldn't help but feel grateful for the love and adventure that Argies had brought into my life. Sometimes, all you needed was a secluded island, a bonfire, and the company of the one you loved to make the world feel perfect.

Argies had a mischievous glint in his eyes as he turned to smile at me. “Aislinn,” he said with that devilish grin of his, “take off your top.”

I blinked up at him and shivered. I wasn't sure if it was from the cold or from arousal. I loved my dominant dragon. “What?”

“You heard me,” he said as he claimed my mouth in a heated kiss.

After a few toe-curling seconds, Argies broke the kiss and gave me a wicked grin. He went to his knees and whipped his shirt over his head. Fumbling with the hem, it took me a couple of tries to get my jumper off.

“Gods, you are sexy,” I said with an appreciative smile as I waited for further instructions. I almost kicked my shoes off to test him but decided not to waste time. We had to get back sooner rather than later.

He chuckled as he ran a finger down over one nipple. Trying for subtlety, I arched to get him to touch me more fully. With Argies, there was a fine line between teasing him just enough to get what I wanted while still allowing him to think he was in control and punishing me for not listening. Unfortunately, the latter entailed him taking it slow while turning me on and making me ache for him.

He lowered his head and kissed me. His lips were hard and urgent, and my hand went to the front of his jeans without conscious thought. My fingers were wrapped around what I could of his erection before I knew it. His low moan was music to my ears.

Without allowing me to get much further, Argies removed my hand and then my bra. I shivered as the cool evening air blew across my bare skin. My

nipples hardened from the cold, drawing Argies's eye. His mouth was on them and pushing me onto my back. His mouth suckled me, driving my desire even higher and making my hips buck from need. I tried to remove my boots to get my jeans off. If I got naked, he'd give me what I wanted.

Argies broke away from my mouth and looked down at me with a heated gaze. "Stop moving."

I lowered my gaze to his button and licked my lips. "We have too many clothes on still."

Argies lifted one eyebrow as he removed one boot, followed by the other. He moved to my jeans next and took my panties with them. With a moan, I writhed and grabbed my breasts. He watched as I pinched my nipples. He was close to caving.

"On your knees," he told me as he unzipped his pants.

Without hesitation, I turned over and got into the position. It left my ass facing him. Something that had him groaning. I looked over my shoulder to watch what he was doing.

My arousal flooded between my legs when he shoved his pants and boxer briefs to the ground. He grabbed himself and stroked several times. I was transfixed by the sight of his cock glistening with his desire for me. Knowing it would spur him on, I slipped my hand between my legs and ran a finger over my clit. He groaned and stopped moving his hand.

"You don't make it easy to go slow," he said as he leaned forward, slid one finger between my folds, and rubbed over my clit.

My body tightened with need as I wiggled, trying to get him in position. When he didn't budge, one hand roamed south and tightened around the hard shaft of his cock. His hips moved, thrusting his erection in and out of my tight hold. I let go when the head went inside me.

Argies's moans filled my ears, sparking my need. He made me tingle in the best way as his hand increased speed between my legs. In no time at all, I was reaching for release. He played me so expertly that it didn't take long for him to push me to the edge. My toes curled, and my hips pushed back. Argies moved behind me without removing his touch from my clit. He was a hot presence surrounding me, blocking out the chilly air.

"Just a little more," I told him.

He chuckled and moved his knees between mine, making me widen my stance. When his big palm landed on one ass cheek, my core clenched as an orgasm barreled down on me. I couldn't breathe and didn't care. A cry

escaped when Argies pinched my throbbing clit. He knew how much I loved when he did that. His dragon steam bathed my back in warmth, making the moment erotic in a way that nothing else could. He pressed his cock further inside me.

Stars exploded behind my closed eyelids as my orgasm erupted from me. Argies exhaled a heavy stream of his steam and grunted as my head swam. I was chanting his name as I rode through the pleasure. My head turned and Argies held my gaze as he thrust into me until his shaft hit my cervix and his balls slapped me. My hips pushed back to meet his as he pulled out of me. The slide back in was heaven. He did that a few times before I bit my lower lip. "More, dammit."

He chuckled as he started moving in and out of me in that fast and furious rhythm I loved. My arousal spiraled higher, and within seconds, I was right back on the edge of another climax. Argies wrapped his hands around my hips as I continued to meet his movements with my own.

"Need more," he panted above me. Sweat dotted his forehead as he pounded into me. Words were beyond me. Our connection flared like the mid-day sun, warming me throughout. It was the only thing that matched the pleasure coursing through me.

"You have all of me," I promised. He twisted his hips and pressed them into me hard. The next second, I was once again coming apart at the seams.

"I love you," he muttered as his movements remained urgent and hard. Argies groaned. He slammed into me and then bit my neck where he'd marked me months ago when we mated.

He reached between us and rubbed my sensitive clit with each harsh thrust, drawing out my pleasure. My back arched into his chest. He licked and laved my marking. The added pleasure sent me higher into orbit.

Argies continued to move in and out of my body, and before I came down from my orgasm, he pressed his hips to mine and groaned long and loud. His cock pulsed inside me. The scalding heat of his seed seared my womb a second later. I collapsed against the blanket while he finished. He held himself above me and looked into my eyes. "That was incredible."

I chuckled. "Do you feel better now?"

He growled as he pulled out and grabbed a cloth to clean me. "Not by a long shot, but we need to get back. We will be picking up where we left off."

"Promises, promises," I teased as I made myself get dressed rather than tempting him back into a second round of sex.

CHAPTER 19



*V*iolet

I relaxed against Thanos as we sat by the Auric Blaze, roasting marshmallows with Kalli. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a godly fire used like this before,” Thanos said with a laugh.

I tilted my head to look back at him. “That’s because it’s never been given to mortals like us before.”

Thanos shook his head with a laugh. “True. If anyone other than Kalli used the flame to toast a treat, Artemis would have a fit.”

“Let’s not tempt Fate by saying that,” I replied.

After Argies had whisked Aislinn away, the rest of our little family gathered around the Blaze’s warmth. The gentle crackling of the flames provided a soothing backdrop to our evening. It had been a chaotic day, and we were savoring the tranquility of the evening while recovering energy for the next step.

Thanos leaned his mouth to my ear. “It’s our turn to escape next. I’ve got some pent-up needs. That quickie in the bathroom while Fiona was sleeping wasn’t nearly enough.”

A shiver traveled down my spine from the promise in his voice. I loved this man and could never get enough of him. I looked at Fiona and considered ducking inside the house, but I didn’t want another rushed encounter with my mate.

I nodded in agreement as I focused on what we were doing. As the marshmallow on my stick turned a perfect shade of golden brown, I lifted it from the fire. I admired the scene around us while I let it cool, so I didn’t keep thinking about sex with Thanos. Countless creatures had set up camp in

the area, creating a mosaic of tents and structures that sprawled across the landscape. It was as if the family cemetery had as many tents as tombstones, yet it was oddly comforting.

“Just look at this,” I said as I focused on Fiona. “Your family cemetery has turned into a full-fledged campground.”

Fiona chuckled, her eyes twinkling in the firelight. “Well, it seems our home is quite the popular spot these days. Although, I look forward to getting things back to normal.”

Kalliopi giggled, her marshmallow dangling from a stick. “I like it, Gwams. All da cweatures are nice.”

Just as we were about to enjoy our s'mores, the night's tranquility was shattered by an unexpected arrival. Several men dressed in dark clothing stalked from the surrounding forest. Their grand entrance was almost theatrical. I exchanged a glance with Fiona, and we couldn't help but roll our eyes.

“Bloody hell,” I muttered. “Of course, demigods had to be next. And based on that entrance, these arseholes are full of themselves.”

Fiona stifled a growl as she pushed Kalli behind her body. “They do have a flair for the dramatic, don't they?”

As even more demigods landed with a flourish, they began throwing magic at the structures around us. I quickly cast a protective spell around the mausoleum to keep it from being destroyed again.

Thanos shot up from his seat and raced into the melee, followed by Bas. I looked over at Fiona and Grams, who were hiding Kalli. I jumped up and pointed to the house. “Grams, take Kalli inside and block access. Aislinn will not be happy if anything happens to her.”

Kalliopi's smile was gone, and her smores smashed beneath her shoe. She clung to Fiona and was shaking like a leaf. Grams nodded to me and scooped the little girl up before running away from the approaching demigods.

I leaned toward Fiona and muttered, “Are they here for the tea party, or did they hear about Grams's famous meat pies?” I hoped the levity would alleviate some of the burden I felt on Fiona through our bond. She felt responsible for the lives of every creature present and would throw herself head-first into the fray.

Fiona stifled a laugh and shook her head. “They could just be lost tourists.”

I shook my head and readied my magic. The demigods are not there for

tea or pasties. “We’re here for the goddess’s remains. And while we’re at it, we will be taking the god fire,” one of them said, clarifying their intentions.

They wanted our power, and they were willing to fight for it. I smirked at Fiona. “Well, they do say that sharing is caring.”

We stood our ground as the demigods charged at us with swords and daggers gleaming. Magic crackled in the air as we prepared to defend what was ours. I threw a magical bomb at the group, barely managing to stun them. They had a shield. A whirlwind of spells and blows followed, with Bas and Thanos showing off their impressive combat skills.

I faced off against one of the demigods, a burly brute with a wicked-looking sword. With a flick of his wrist, he sent a wave of energy hurtling toward me. I summoned a protective barrier, the shimmering shield of energy deflecting his attack. This guy had far more power than the last ones we’d encountered.

I sent a bolt of energy to his feet and darted around a tall tombstone. My new position gave me the perfect view of Fiona and Bas, both engaged in fierce combat with two other demigods.

I called up my phoenix powers and sent waves of fire rippling toward my opponent, forcing him to dodge and weave. Fiona did the same with her witch fire. On the other hand, Bas was a whirlwind of speed and precision, his Fae elemental powers bending the air around him. He parried blows effortlessly and countered with a grace that left his opponent stumbling.

Thanos was a force to be reckoned with. His massive, imposing presence alone sent shivers down anyone's spine. He wielded his twin daggers with deadly skill, dancing through the battle like a tornado. I sensed my mate call up his innate powers, ready to rip through the demigod’s mind. Turning someone’s brain into mush was harsh, but that’s what they got for attacking us.

Unfortunately, the demigods weren't pushovers. They were skilled fighters, and the tranquility of our magical campfire had been abruptly replaced by the chaos of battle. Sweat dripped into my eyes as I raced past the demigod I had set on fire. A screech from above made me look up. Argies and Aislinn had returned just in time.

Argies was a massive dragoon and swiftly swooped down to drop Aislinn and rake his claws across a demigod’s torso. Aislinn landed with a grace that matched her beauty and got right to fighting.

It was much harder for Argies to help us in his dragon form because too

many innocents were running around. Most of the supernaturals camping out around us had escaped their tents and were scrambling for what to do.

These demigods were a relentless bunch, arrogant and brimming with self-importance. They showed no fear if they'd heard the whispers of our magical abilities. Only a few who had heard the rumors of the backside of Forty and the incredible power we held faced us so readily. These arseholes were like entitled children who had to have every toy in the store. They were determined to seize Selene's powers and the Auric Blaze for themselves.

Amidst the chaos, I couldn't help but roll my eyes at their dramatic posturing. Demigods were always over the top, weren't they? They paraded around as if they were gods, expecting everyone to be in awe of their existence. Thanos was the exception to that rule. He and his UIS friends respected others and didn't try to become more powerful.

"Your defenses will fail!" one of them proclaimed in a booming voice, brandishing a ridiculously ornate sword. "We will have Selene's power along with the godly fire."

I exchanged an amused glance with Fiona, who had her hands full dealing with a particularly boastful demigod. "Honestly, these guys and their delusions."

Fiona let out a chuckle as she deflected a lightning bolt by erecting a shield around herself. It took a lot of work to keep it up while throwing spells around. "It's like they read too many books on war and decided to become walking clichés."

Aislinn was holding her own against a pair of demigods who had made the mistake of underestimating her. She sent a burst of flames in their direction, singeing their bodies. "Where's Kalli?" she shouted.

"Safe with Grams," Fiona shouted back as she jerked her chin in the direction of the house. Aislinn visibly relaxed. Her eyes stopped scanning the area and really focused on the two in front of her.

Argies let out a triumphant screech as he clawed at another demigod who had foolishly tried to grab his tail. "Never mess with a pissed-off dragon," Aislinn called out.

In the heat of battle, we refused to back down. Fiona, Aislinn, and I knew that our power together was our greatest weapon. It was our duty to protect the Auric Blaze and Selene's essence. And we weren't about to let some arrogant demigods waltz in and take them. No, if they continued, we'd give them a show they wouldn't forget.

Fiona, Aislinn, and I fought our way to each other's side. Once we were closer, our powers intertwined. It made each of us more powerful. As if they could sense our determination, our eclectic group of visitors transformed into an army of lesser creatures...fairies, goblins, and even a couple of cantankerous trolls. It was a sight to behold, like something out of a fantastical storybook.

The demigods, however, were caught off guard by this unexpected attack from beings that would normally run from them. They hesitated for a moment, their eyes widening as they took in the sudden surge of reinforcements on our side. But hesitation didn't seem to be in their vocabulary. They renewed their efforts, charging toward us with all the grace of a bull in a China shop.

The battle that followed was nothing short of absolute chaos. Spells clashed with swords, and the air crackled with magical energy. Our lesser creature allies darted and weaved around the demigods, causing utter confusion on the battlefield.

One particularly angry troll had taken a liking to using a demigod's shiny helmet as a makeshift drum, pounding away merrily as he chanted in a language only he understood. It was a sight that had the demigods tripping over their own feet.

I found myself grinning as I cast spell after spell, watching as the demigods struggled to keep up with our combined might. "Who knew playing host to a motley crew of magical creatures would be useful?" I asked.

Fiona, her body glowing with power, unleashed a torrent of flames that sent a group of demigods scrambling for cover. "I suppose we should send out invitations more often!"

Aislinn sent a wave of scorching wind that knocked several demigods off their feet. "Next time, we'll throw in a magician for entertainment!"

"Let's kick them off of Pymm's Pondsides once and for all," Fiona shouted. "Follow my lead."

The three of us stood together, with Aislinn and me chanting incantations after Fiona that shook the ground beneath the demigods' feet. The earth trembled, and the air crackled with our combined magic.

The demigods were strong, but they were not prepared for the sheer force of our power. One by one, they fell to the ground, defeated by our strength and the army we had at our backs. It didn't take long for the demigods to realize they wouldn't win this one, and they began retreating. Argies

continued picking them off individually while Bas and Thanos drove them on.

With the battle won, Fiona, Aislinn, and I stood victorious. We looked out at the battlefield, surveying the destruction that had been wrought. We had won this battle, but we knew we couldn't let our guard down.

Amid the chaos of the aftermath, Fiona looked at me and then Aislinn. Her determination shone like a beacon. She raised her hand, summoning the fire within her. "I'm going to figure out the Auric Blaze once and for all!"

We had no choice. The danger would keep coming. We couldn't continue battling enemies like this and defending the Auric Blaze and Selene's essence. We needed real sleep and soon.

CHAPTER 20



Fiona

Over the last few days, Pymm's Pondsides had become a center of both magical wonders and chaotic showdowns. With Grams, Kalliopi, Aislinn, Violet, and I being huntresses for the goddess Artemis, you never quite knew what to expect. But that's what made life exciting, right? I would normally agree, but we couldn't deal with this much crap being thrown at us constantly. We hadn't had a real meal or more than a few minutes of sleep at a time in far too long.

We needed to figure out how to twist the Auric Blaze with Selene's essence and our family magic. As the thought hit, I decided it was time to have a heart-to-heart with Grams. After all, she was key to developing a solid plan to get this situation under control finally.

"Grams," I began, "It's time we bring Aislinn and Violet into the Auric Blaze twist. They might not be blood, but they're family, and that's what matters. I don't think we are going to be able to do this without them. I think that's where our mistake is."

Grams nodded. Her eyes were bright with agreement. "You're right, Fiona. They've stood with us through thick and thin. Of course, the magic wants them involved. But there needs to be more than what we were trying before."

Just as we were deep in conversation, a couple of demigods decided to come late to the party. I swear, even in the most mundane moments, the universe has a twisted sense of humor.

Kalliopi shifted into her tiny purple dragon and looked at the unfolding chaos before deciding that discretion was the better part of valor. With a flit

of her dragon wings, she hovered safely out of harm's way. Smart little girl.

I had barely moved when Thanos, Bas, and Argies jumped into action. Elements zipped around, spells fizzled, and claws ripped into flesh. The whole ordeal had a whiff of desperation on the demigods' part.

Grams and I exchanged a knowing glance as the guys took care of the newest incursion. "They're going to keep coming. Think fast, Fiona," Grams instructed me.

I was used to her taking the reins, so this threw me for a second. "Alright, we need to think this through," I began, taking charge of this magical endeavor. "We need to twist the Auric Blaze with our family magic and Selene's ashes. We need to determine what supplies are needed. And I'd like your input at each step. We're making this up as we go, so listen to your gut."

Violet tilted her head to the side. "We should gather a black candle, a white candle, a piece of obsidian, a sprig of fresh rosemary, and a vial of our blood."

Grams nodded approvingly. "Good start, Violet. Those elements will help direct our energy. Now, let's move on. Once we have the materials, we must create a sacred space. Find a quiet, secluded area where we can concentrate without interruption."

Aislinn frowned. "Proximity to the Auric Blaze will be important. Can we cast a bubble around us? That is, set up our ritual space by lighting the black and white candles and placing the piece of obsidian and sprig of rosemary on either side of them."

I lifted a hand. "I agree with Aislinn. We stay out here. And we must ensure the area is properly cleansed of any negative energy. We don't want any interference during the ritual." I continued, "Now, here's where it gets tricky. We'll call upon the power of the Auric Blaze. Close your eyes and visualize it in your mind's eye. Ask it to lend its strength to our spell."

"Maybe you can add a bit of Selene's favorite song to set the mood?" A wood nymph suggested. She'd joined the group sometime during the night.

"Good thinking," I replied with a grin. "You can select something. Just have it softly in the background." It wasn't necessary, but I didn't want to refuse her when her suggestion wasn't going to hurt anything.

"Now, the next step is a bit more... literal," I said to Aislinn, Violet, and Grams. "It will be more effective if we cut our finger with an athame and drip our blood onto the obsidian."

Aislinn raised an eyebrow. "You know, Fiona, our life is becoming

increasingly...unconventional.”

I chuckled. “That's one way to put it. Alright, blood on the obsidian. Next, we hold the obsidian and rosemary in our hands and begin to chant the following incantation.”

I went first so I could organize my thoughts. When the others were done, I led them in the chant. “Auric Blaze, a flame of might. Hear our plea on this moonlit night. With our family's strength, we now align thee. By blood and magic, with the goddess of moonlight, Selene.”

Violet dipped her head as she held her hands out to her sides. “Now, place the obsidian and rosemary into the flame of the black candle. And form a circle around the fire pit.” We spread out and held our arms out to our sides until our fingertips touched, forming a complete circle.

Grams leaned forward. “Remember, everyone, focus your intent. As the smoke rises from the obsidian and rosemary, concentrate on the power of the Auric Blaze. Visualize it twisting and contorting, blending with our family's powers.”

I nodded, appreciating her wisdom. “Exactly, Grams.”

With the rest of our plan laid out, we set to work, ready to finish this magical challenge together. We went through it for a second without having to stop to develop the plan.

I looked up and blew out the candles. “Can you feel how the energies have blended?”

Everyone nodded while Grams pursed her lips. “I have a feeling that this twisted Auric Blaze may be unstable and unpredictable, so we should only use it with caution.”

I frowned at Grams. “I don't expect ever to use it. We are only keeping it and Selene's ashes safe.”

Violet lifted a shoulder. “You never know when we might need...” Her comment was cut off when the Auric Blaze produced a powerful, intense golden flame emanating a brilliant aura.

My hand flew up to shield my face as it radiated a warm and protective energy that extended outward. I opened my magical senses and watched as it created a circular shield around the area where it was activated. The shield was impervious to most forms of physical and magical attacks. The power the Blaze was putting off also disappeared. I bet it would repel malevolent entities that tried to enter the protected zone.

The golden flames of the Auric Blaze flickered and danced, creating a

mesmerizing and calming effect on all of us watching. The intensity of the flame gradually subsided while the protective shield remained active.

As the twisted Auric Blaze crackled and transformed, there was a collective cheer from the visitors who had gathered around. Their eyes sparkled with excitement, but the cheers quickly turned into frowns when they realized they couldn't claim a piece of the godly fire for themselves. It was like watching kids at a candy store who'd been told they couldn't have any candy. They immediately began packing up their things.

I couldn't help but chuckle at the sight. "Well, that's one way to get them out of our hair," I muttered under my breath.

The mass exodus of disappointed creatures was a welcome sight. They shuffled away, grumbling and muttering about the injustice of it all. It was like the aftermath of a failed treasure hunt, but at least we had peace and quiet again.

I turned my attention back to my friends, who were really more like family. Someone had brought out food and drinks. Bas shoved a glass of wine in my hand. "You did good Butterfly."

I clinked my glass to his and nodded. "It's a relief to have that taken care of. But we need to put up the wards again before we are under another siege."

Grams set down her cocktail. "You're right. We shouldn't wait."

I grabbed Grams's hand, who reached for Aislinn and Violet. The four of us concentrated on activating and reinforcing the protective wards around Pymm's Pondsides. This time, when I sent my power to them, they danced and came alive. It was as easy as breathing to pull them into place. I felt the moment they locked in overhead. I practically collapsed, knowing we were once again safe and secure at home.

Just when it seemed like we were going to get back to normal, a woman stumbled up the driveway. She looked disheveled, her clothes torn, and her eyes filled with desperation. She collapsed at our feet, gasping for breath.

Without hesitation, I rushed over to help her up. "Hey, are you okay?" I asked with concern in my voice.

She looked up at me with tear-filled eyes and whispered, "I've been cursed to die, and you're my only hope."

Well, isn't this just another day in the life of our magical family?

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EXCERPT FROM DODGING THE
MAGICAL CURSE BOOK #16



Fiona

I rubbed my eyes, certain I was seeing things. The wards hadn't been up long, so it shouldn't be a surprise that we had another visitor, but I thought we were going to get back to normal. Fate had other ideas if the woman stumbled up the driveway was any indication. She looked like she was homeless. Her clothes were torn, and her eyes were filled with desperation. She collapsed at our feet, gasping for breath.

Without hesitation, I rushed over to help her up. "Hey, are you okay?" I asked with concern in my voice.

"Don't touch her," Thanos cried out. Thanos was a powerful demigod and rarely gave us any warnings. He suddenly leaped into action. His hand clamped down on my arm, halting me in my tracks as though I had bumped into an invisible wall made of his alarm.

"Thanos!" Violet's shout was laced with concern as she called out his name. It echoed the bewilderment that surged through all of us. However, Thanos didn't immediately respond to her plea. Instead, he kept his striking black-ringed grey eyes on me as though trying to convey something important through his intense gaze.

"Just don't touch her," he repeated in a voice tinged with gravity that amplified the uncertainty in the air.

I blinked at him, puzzled and caught off guard. "What's wrong, Thanos? What's happening?"

Thanos's sense of urgency hadn't lessened, but he released my arm and leaned into Violet's side. He leaned in closer, and his posture showed a noticeable tension. "I can't explain it. There's just something about her that

screams danger to me. And I'm taking the kind you don't walk away from."

It had to be the uncanny sixth sense he'd inherited from his mother. More than once, Thanos had saved our asses by issuing warnings. Being a son of the goddess of the River Lethe in the Underworld, he was more attuned to death than most. It would have been nice if he magically got the answers to things. We would be able to avert disaster and injury more often if he could tell us what we needed to do in situations like this.

I exchanged a bewildered look with Violet and Aislinn, who had been observing the unfolding scene with the same growing unease. They looked as wrung out as I felt at the moment. We'd been up for days dealing with the Auric Blaze, and now it didn't look as if we were going to get to bed anytime soon.

"She might be... contagious," Thanos continued cautiously, his voice brimming with a sense of foreboding.

Just as he uttered those ominous words, Starla shuddered so violently that I was worried she was having a seizure. She remained on her knees, and her back was stiff as her body shook. All of us lurched forward only to stop short of helping her. I hated feeling helpless. And it was horrible to watch her suffer without being able to do anything to help her.

Her condition seemed to be deteriorating at an alarming rate. Panic and concern surged through our small group as we huddled together, faced with this sudden and unexpected crisis. It was a good damn thing we were used to running on little to no sleep.

Starla looked up at me with tear-filled eyes and whispered, "I've been cursed to die, and you're the only one that can help me."

The scene shifted, and suddenly, it had an air of both curiosity and uncertainty. It was like a suspenseful plot twist in one of the mystery novels I loved to read. I didn't need a reminder that I wasn't reading a book. One look at Starla and reality refused to abate. Her pained expression nearly gutted me. It was clear she was desperate and in rough shape. It went against everything in me to stand by and not do something to make her feel better. Her words confirmed Thanos's warning. I'd have to ask him how he knew.

"It seems as if you know us, but I am at a disadvantage. Who are you?" I asked as the others moved closer.

"Starla Dupree?" Grams and Violet muttered simultaneously, making it obvious they knew who the woman was.

Her lower lip wobbled as she turned her head and tried to look over my

shoulder. “Um, yeah,” she began hesitantly. “This is Pymm’s Pondsides, right? You must be Isidora’s granddaughter. I’m... well, I didn’t know where else to go. Isidora helped everyone. Since she died, I need you to help me. She would have saved me.”

Violet cocked her head, concern creasing her brow. “Of course, we will do our best to get rid of this curse you said you have. But first, we need you to elaborate on what happened. Okay?”

Starla took a deep breath, her gaze shifting among all of us before she stopped on Grams, who had walked out from behind me. The way Starla breathed a sigh of relief showed how much faith she had in Grams. I understood that. Grams had always been there with answers for me. I might not have known about magic until recently, but I could always count on her.

As if the sight of Grams strengthened Starla, she slowly straightened on her knees and uncurled her fist. She turned her hand and held it palm up. The move revealed a gleaming silver star embedded in the middle of her flesh. That was not normal in more ways than one. The charm held a surreal allure. It both beckoned me to touch it and gave off a vibe that made my skin crawl.

Aislinn leaned in her expression a mixture of curiosity and worry. “How did that get there? Did someone shove it into you?”

“Did you enchant it to sit in your flesh? Is it a talisman of some kind?” Violet asked nearly simultaneously.

My gaze was frozen to it while my mind whirled a million miles a second. “What’s happening to it?” I blurted before I could stop myself. I had never encountered an object inside someone’s body that morphed and changed before my eyes.

Starla’s voice quivered slightly as she replied, “This is what they call ‘The Curse of the Crimson Moon.’ At least that’s what the note inside the box said. The deadly enchantment is changing my body and this star along with it.”

An aura of fear and uncertainty emanated from Starla as she explained her situation to us, leaving us with a shared sense of horror, intrigue, and apprehension about her enigmatic predicament.

There was an exchange of hushed whispers in the background. I noticed the visiting creatures sharing curious glances from the corner of my eye. They were likely trying to make sense of this unexpected turn of events as well.

My heart started racing as pixies fluttered close to Starla. Their tiny wings

buzzed with intrigue while the pair of trolls scratched their mossy heads. It didn't take much to figure out they were perplexed. Seeing that none of them seemed to be familiar with the name of the curse made the knot in my gut tighten.

I opened my mouth to tell all of them to stick to their evacuation plans, but Bas and Thanos beat me to it. They walked around, warning the visitors that hadn't left yet to move along for their safety while Argies kept Kalli next to him.

As my attention settled fully back on Starla, several swear words traveled through my mind. We'd all been hoping for a longer break this time. Unfortunately, we'd barely made it sixty seconds since we finished twisting the Auric Blaze. That had to be a new record for us. It took a lot of effort for me not to run away and bury my head beneath a pillow. I wanted nothing more than to go inside and make a hearty dinner before sleeping for twelve hours.

I tried to give Starla a reassuring smile as I asked, "The Curse of the Crimson Moon? Sounds like you're in danger of becoming a vampire. Is that what's happening?"

Starla shook her head as her gaze remained glued to the spine-chilling star in her palm. "I'm not becoming a vampire. That's a virus and works differently. This has been spreading slowly," she explained, her speech more than a bit slurred. "It would consume me entirely unless I found help." A tear slipped down her cheek as she whispered, "Of course, it also said it was unlikely I would survive long enough."

My stomach churning made me jumpy, so I started pacing a short circuit in front of Starla while my mind processed what she was saying. Grams didn't have as much trouble thinking this through. She moved forward and told Starla, "You don't have to worry about us not figuring this out in time. This problem is right up the Backside of Forty's alley. We are a kickass coven, and we find answers that most believe aren't there. Now, do you know who did this?"

I wished I had Grams's conviction. This was a new one. We hadn't dealt with a curse like this before. Phoebe had, and I tried to recall everything she said about it. All I could remember was that she had to locate the witch who had done it to remove it before her pent-up magic killed her. None of that applied here.

Starla wiped the tear from her cheek, and the effort seemed to take it out

of her as her hand abruptly dropped to her lap. “I have no idea. The note wasn’t signed. The only person I’ve ever even fought with was my mom. And a boyfriend in high school, but we’ve been broken up for years.”

Grams sighed. “I know, Starla. You’ve always been a good kid.”

Zreegy moved closer to us with her flowing cerulean skirt swirling around her ankles. “Do you mind if I use my powers to get a feel for what’s going on?”

My eyes shot to Zreegy’s face, and a smile spread over my lips. “Please do. Any information at all will help us with where to start.” Without Starla having an idea of who had done this, it felt like we had nowhere to go.”

Turning to Violet, I leaned close to her ear. “Do we need to know who did this to dismantle all curses?”

The shake of Violet’s head was subtle. “Usually, but not necessarily. Like most magic, the witch leaves her unique signature on her spell. A curse is no different except when you are trying to pull apart the enchantment thread by thread. The likelihood of it blowing up in your face is practically a hundred percent, which is why you need to get the one responsible. If we know more about the Curse of the Crimson Moon, then we can determine if it would be safe even to try.”

I smirked at her. “But it’s unlikely to be that easy.”

Violet nodded as Zreegy’s piercing green eyes zeroed in on Starla. The healer crouched a few feet away and focused intently on the woman. Zreegy’s brows furrowed in concentration as she tried to discern the nature of the curse or affliction that plagued Starla. After a few moments, Zreegy stepped back. Her frustration was palpable.

“I am sorry to disappoint you guys,” Zreegy sighed. Her voice wasn’t melodious like a woodland stream as it normally was. “I can’t get a clear read on her condition. It’s like trying to see through a shroud of darkness.”

Violet, usually quick with a sassy quip, wore a solemn expression. “So, what’s our move now? Do you have any idea where we can start researching this curse? We can’t just leave her hanging.”

Zreegy tilted her head to the side, her eyes never leaving Starla. “You’re right, Violet. But before we do anything else, I will try one more time to get a read on her. It’s a long shot, but I won’t forgive myself if I don’t at least give it another try.”

She closed her eyes, her hands hovering less than five inches from Starla’s trembling form. The air around us seemed to be still as we watched in tense

silence. Zreegy's brow furrowed in concentration, but after a few moments, she opened her eyes, her expression one of frustration.

"I'm sorry, everyone," she said. "I still can't clearly understand what's afflicting her. Her system is clouded with darkness and death, but I can't pinpoint the spell's structure."

I exchanged glances with my companions, a sense of unease settling over us. The situation had taken an even more ominous turn, and our path was uncertain.

Kalliopi chose that moment to break ranks from her father and come skipping in our direction. Luckily, Argies was faster than Kalli, and he swept her into his arms before she got close to Starla. Kalli watched us over his shoulder until they disappeared into the house, leaving the rest of us to grapple with the enigma before us.

"I need to get going as well," Zreegy said. "Call me if there is anything else you need."

I nodded and embraced the healer tightly. "Thank you for coming. I know we're a pain in your arse, but we really appreciate it.

Zreegy chuckled as she let me go. "You guys keep me on my toes. Thanks for sure." Violet and Aislinn thanked her, as did Grams.

Zreegy's departure was a light moment amidst the depressing discussion. Zreegy's ethereal presence vanished down the driveway. We were back to square one, faced with the enigma that was Starla and the sinister Curse of the Crimson Moon.

Grams was an indomitable force of nature on the best of days. And thankfully, she took charge at that moment. She turned to the dwarves, who had set up a structure near the edge of the forest and cemetery. It was as if they'd been planning for a longer stay.

Grams lifted a hand and said, "Lads, leave the hut. We're going to need it."

Both dwarves nodded, and the one in the dressier clothes asked, "Do you need us to do anything else?"

Grams shook her head. "No, thank you. It's time to pack up your gear and move on. We're deeply grateful for your help, but lingering here is not safe."

The dwarves grumbled good-naturedly, exchanging looks for a second before ultimately obeying Grams. It was clear that they respected her authority and trusted her judgment. As they started gathering their belongings, I couldn't help but smile at the sight of these fantastical beings

cooperating with my formidable grandmother.

While Bas and Thanos assisted the various creatures in leaving Pymm's Pondsides to prevent any inadvertent infection, the rest of us gathered around Starla. I leaned forward and tried to smile at her. "Starla, we need to know everything you can tell us about that pendant and the circumstances surrounding its appearance in your life while we figure out next steps."

The woman's shoulders slumped, and her gaze dropped to her cursed hand. "I really don't know much. It came in a package in the mail. The small, star-shaped pendant was sitting inside another, smaller box. I didn't order it, but when I saw the folded note at the bottom, I reached for it at the same time I grabbed the charm."

Violet cocked her head to the side and looked at Starla. "And what happened when you touched it? How did the curse activate?"

Starla shuddered at the memory. "The moment my fingers brushed against the pendant, it felt like an electrical shock traveled up my arm and through my body. The currents moved through the star and into me. And the smell, oh gods, it was like dead fish fermenting in the sun. And I can't get it out. I can't pry it out, and magic doesn't work, either."

"Do you have any enemies? Someone who might want to hurt you?" Aislinn asked.

Starla shook her head, her blonde hair swaying as she did so. "No, I don't have any enemies. I work as a secretary in a mundie dental office. My life is as ordinary as it gets. The only new thing is a guy I started dating a few weeks ago. An Elf named Kiirion. But he's been nothing but sweet, and I can't imagine him doing something like this. We get along great. In fact, I think he's falling for me. I know I like him more than I should this early on."

I exchanged glances with my companions. The mystery deepened, and it seemed like we were delving into uncharted territory. The Curse of the Crimson Moon had ensnared an innocent woman with no apparent motive, leaving us with more questions than answers. It felt like we were wading through murky waters. Aislinn, Violet, and I huddled together, our faces reflecting a mixture of bewilderment and concern.

Violet leaned in closer, her blue eyes sharp and discerning. "As much as I hate to blame the victim, we're going to need to dig deeper into Starla's life. It's our best best at getting to the bottom of who might have done this to her."

I nodded in agreement. "She might not be aware of any enemies, but that doesn't rule out the possibility that someone from her past or present harbors

ill intentions.”

Aislinn added thoughtfully, “Should we begin by investigating Kiirion? We should ascertain if he's hiding something or if there's any link between him and the cursed pendant.”

I lifted one shoulder. “It's worth a try, but I would bet the answer is closer to Starla.”

Things were as clear as mud with this new case. The only certainty we had was that we couldn't afford to take anything at face value, especially when it involved curses.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Reviews are like hugs. Sometimes awkward. Always welcome! It would mean the world to me if you can take five minutes and let others know how much you enjoyed my work.

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XOXO,

Brenda

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